

# Rural Development Sub-Committee

RDC(3)-04-08 (P1): 13 March 2008

## Annex G

Extract from Petitions Committee meeting, 21 February 2008

### Powys Community Schools Action

Val Lloyd

I welcome Kirsty Williams to the meeting. It is a great pleasure to have you here, Kirsty. I also welcome the petitioners. This is a petition on Powys community schools. Before we start, please introduce yourself.

Ms Garratt:

My name is Ros Garratt, and I come from south-east Radnorshire, which is a deeply rural part of the county of Powys. I would like you to note that we are all parents, some of us are governors, and we all live in rural communities in Powys and understand the issues that affect them. We all believe—

Val Lloyd:

At the moment, I just need your name; this introduction will not be coming from your allotted time. I apologise if I did not make myself clear. Just give your name and tell us if you are a parent, or whatever.

Dr Blunden:

I am Roger Blunden. I am from the far north of Powys, and I am a school governor.

Mr Smith:

I am Bob Smith. I am also from the north of Powys, and I am a parent and a governor. We are all ordinary citizens; we are not experts in politics, education or anything. In other words, we do not have all the answers.

Val Lloyd:

Thank you, it is a great pleasure to welcome you. I will outline the procedure for you, so that you are aware of it. You have up to 15 minutes, from when I say 'Please start', and how you divide that time between you is entirely up to you. As your Assembly Member, if she wishes to contribute, Kirsty has up to five minutes. We have set up this procedure for all petitioners, with the aim of ensuring that everyone gets their fair share, so to speak. After that, there will be up to 15 minutes of questions or comments, and then we will ask you to adjourn to the public gallery. We will not begin our deliberations until you are in the public gallery, so that you will be able to hear everything. Do you have any questions on procedure? No, I see that it is clear. It is up to you to begin when you are ready.

Mr Smith:

We thank you for accepting our petition and for giving us the opportunity to present our case in person. We have already introduced ourselves, but I should say that, although I am playing centre forward today, that does not make me the captain. As a group, we try to do everything by consensus—we do not have a leader as such, but someone's name had to appear on the petition, and it just happened to be mine.

In the time available to us, we will not be able to do more than outline the bare essentials of the many points that we have made in our two written submissions. You should have in front of you a summary of those essentials as a set of bullet points. We had hoped that we might get some brownie points by giving you a piece of paper, rather than inflicting another PowerPoint presentation on you.

Our starting point, as it says in the first bullet point, is the belief in the importance to Wales of its rural communities. The worth and importance of those communities is sometimes underestimated, as is the importance to those communities of rural schools. The problem is that both the communities and the local schools are under attack.

In Powys, we have been faced by an inept and damaging approach to primary school reorganisation from the council. The casualties of that approach will be the children and their families, the communities in which they live, the environment, and the language and culture of Wales. Given that the organisation of education provision is a local responsibility, the question arises of why we are bringing this to the Assembly. There are four reasons. First, Powys County Council consistently claims that it is being forced into its programme of closures by the Welsh Assembly Government and Estyn. That is not our claim, it is the county's; we are merely repeating what the county is saying. It is also important to understand that pressure can come from several different places.

We have seen the recent letter from Jane Hutt, and she has made it clear that the guidance that has been issued includes no pressure to close particular schools. However, pressure can arise from a number of different sources and in Powys, in particular, a lot of that pressure has come from Estyn. We do feel that that is most inappropriate for our national inspection body. Rightly or wrongly, the blame is being placed firmly on national bodies.

Secondly, the Welsh Assembly Government is in a position to create a national vision and to communicate that in the form of guidance to local authorities. It is its responsibility to provide a national context for local decisions. Thirdly, many of the issues that I mentioned, such as community, the environment, the Welsh language and culture, are issues of national, not just local, concern. Finally, what is happening in Powys is also happening in other counties, although the timing and the approach may differ. Again, it is a national issue.

Why is the closure of a community school a problem, particularly if it helps to balance the budget, which seems to be the main, or even the sole, motivator for this activity? Educationally speaking, community schools are as good as their larger cousins and, very often, they are actually better. In Wales, the best results at A-level and beyond generally come from those counties with the highest proportion of small rural schools, and we do not think that that is a coincidence. There is also a lot of evidence that the particular atmosphere in community schools helps to give children more confidence and greater personal and interpersonal skills. Also, children who are in some way different are often teased or bullied at larger schools, but within their own community, they are accepted without question. Also, in a small school every child gets to participate in every activity.

Close its school and a village becomes just a place to sleep, so that the young and the economically active are discouraged, leading to an ageing population, which brings its own problems. The school means life and future to the community and the school itself is greatly enhanced by the community's intimate involvement in it. Area schools are not without their merits, but they necessarily destroy the rich and valuable two-way relationship.

Most Welsh-medium schools are community schools and they are doing a brilliant job of nourishing the language and culture of Wales, not only for the traditional needs of the indigenous population, but in encouraging incomers to integrate fully. In my case, my own children are fluent Welsh speakers and I am an enthusiastic Welsh learner only because our local school happened to be a Welsh-medium school. We would not have gone looking for one. If these schools are allowed to close, the language and culture will suffer enormously.

When a school closes, the inevitable response is school transport and, in our view, the widespread bussing of young people about the countryside is little short of an abomination. It is not a solution; it is a problem. In fact, it is a series of problems: it brings out the worst in many children, to the detriment of all; it is a poor and unhealthy substitute for walking or cycling; it prevents participation in before-school and after-school activities; it removes parents' informal contact with each other and with the school; and it is simply disrespectful to treat young children as a raw material to be carted around the countryside. On top of that, of course, transport is no longer cheap. As we now know, to our cost, it never was good for the environment, but with peak oil approaching and climate change already upon us, bussing as a solution is a disaster, both economically and environmentally. Even in the past, when transport costs were lower, studies have shown that costs are such that only marginal savings accrue from closing schools. There is also the point that sustainability is enshrined in the Welsh constitution, and we look to the Welsh Assembly Government to demonstrate leadership by rejecting such backwards steps as this one.

Community schools are already delivering much of what you, as politicians, look for, such as small classes, personal attention, local and global citizenship, a relative absence of problems relating to drugs, truancy and exclusions, community viability, promotion of the Welsh language and culture and local service delivery as a plank of sustainability. Why throw away something that is already working well?

From all points of view, the community schools of Wales should, we believe, be nurtured and not attacked. We ask the Welsh Assembly Government to take the lead on this. I will now hand over to Roger to develop that theme.

Val Lloyd:

You have around seven minutes left.

Dr Blunden:

I will press on straight away. I want to cover two issues to develop the relationship between local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government and to summarise what we would like to happen as a result of our petition.

Bob has just spelled out how the future of education in small communities is too important to leave to individual local authorities. We believe that Jane Hutt's letter to you, Chair, illustrates or supports our view that there is confusion between what the Assembly Government says and how local authorities interpret that. Again, as Jane Hutt acknowledges, there is a need for some updated guidance. The current guidance is circular 23/02 and, of course, it is right to tell local authorities to be cost effective, but the emphasis on surplus places in the absence of broader community issues enables authorities to claim that they are under pressure from the Welsh Assembly Government to close schools. Powys is a case in point.

We would have expected Powys, in its plans, to have done its homework and, as Jane Hutt said, to strategically review provision. She also said that it should look at local knowledge and local needs. In fact, it did neither of those. Powys

County Council drew up a list of schools in order of size, picked off the six smallest and said that those were the schools to be closed. Three of those schools happened to be Welsh-medium schools, because, as Bob has already said, they often serve small, local communities.

Powys claims that it is under pressure from the Welsh Assembly Government and I have three one-line quotations from a recent public meeting that illustrate that. A highly placed representative of Powys County Council said that,

'One of the big drivers from the Welsh Assembly is to reduce surplus places.'

It was also said that,

'The Welsh Assembly Government is saying that it is really hard to make a school of 24 or 25 viable, so why are you going ahead with plans for that?'

and that

'The Assembly are saying that you have to deal with surplus places or you will not get funding.'

We could argue the correctness of that interpretation, but our point is that Powys claims that it is under pressure from the Assembly Government to close schools and it is blaming you for doing so.

So, we think that there is a need for issuing updated guidance to local authorities, which Jane Hutt has recognised; she said that a review of current guidance was under way. We welcome that, but hope that it will be wide-ranging and will include the relationship between schools and local communities. We also welcome the commitments in 'One Wales' and in 'The Learning Country', but these focus on narrow, educational issues and we are looking for joined-up thinking, looking at the relationship between schools and communities.

In England, there is a presumption against school closure—that is an official policy. In Scotland, the Scottish Government has made several decisions to overturn the proposed closures of schools, interestingly, partly because of the effect on community regeneration.

We also think that there is a strong case for a rural education policy in Wales. We are surprised, in a way, that such a rural country does not have a rural education policy. There are many constructive ideas to build on. Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg has proposed some innovative ways of funding school buildings and we were interested to see the Assembly Government do some work on a rural health plan and commissioned research on that. Our argument is that rural education deserves equal attention. The guidance to local authorities does need to be strengthened, and we believe that there is a strong case for a rural education policy for Wales.

We are asking for action at the national level, and that is needed urgently; Powys is not only closing six schools at the moment—we have heard that it is proposing to add, astonishingly, a further 42 to the list for closure. So, we want your help to achieve three things. The first is the immediate clarification of policy and good practice guidance. Ideally, we would like a moratorium on school closures until there is a proper policy. If not, we would certainly like a statement of presumption against closure, as in England. We hope that the review of the circular 23/02 guidance will encourage authorities to acknowledge the benefits of community schools.

Secondly, we would like a comprehensive review of education in rural communities. We have had various conversations with Alun Davies over the last few months, and we understand that the Rural Development Sub-committee would be more than happy to undertake such a review, probably in conjunction with the Enterprise and Learning Committee. So, that is one possible avenue.

Val Lloyd:

Your time is up; you need to wind up.

Dr Blunden:

Okay. The third point is to develop a rural education policy for Wales. We would like to see some work on the development of such a policy. We think that there is a tremendous opportunity for the Welsh Assembly Government to show leadership and joined-up thinking in doing this.

Val Lloyd:

I am terribly sorry, Mrs Garratt, but the 15 minutes is up.

Ms Garratt:

That is fine; everything has been said.

Val Lloyd:

I am pleased to call Kirsty Williams to address us.

Kirsty Williams:

I thank you and the committee for extending the courtesy of allowing me to attend this meeting to speak in support of the petition and the presentation given by Bob, Roger and Ros.

Members of the committee will be more than aware of the huge amount of public concern expressed during the Assembly election with regard to the reconfiguration of community hospitals. As a result of that concern, the Government recognised the need to step in and take a look at how these policies were affecting rural communities. It initiated an immediate moratorium on all potential closures of rural community hospitals. It understood that the delivery of services in rural areas is often very different to the delivery of services in the more urban areas, and that access and other issues of that kind can have a huge impact. It therefore decided to embark on research and consultation to develop a rural health policy. I share the petitioners' concerns that education in rural areas deserves nothing less than what is being done for rural health services.

In urban and rural constituencies alike, local authorities are under huge pressure to tackle the issue of surplus places. I believe, however, that many councils are implementing their policies in the absence of adequate guidance from the Welsh Assembly Government, with insufficient sharing of good practice and research in this particular area. In rural areas, we need a look at how education can be delivered in what would, perhaps, be very different ways to how education needs to be delivered in urban areas. I therefore impress on the committee the points made by the petitioners, in that we need a moratorium on all proposed closures that are objected to. I acknowledge that, in some communities, closures are proposed without objection, but there should be a moratorium on closures where significant objections have been made.

We need to work with the Government to produce more up-to-date guidance. The Minister has acknowledged, in meetings with us, that the guidance is lacking and is in need of updating, and in her refusal to support Mike German's motion, the need to improve guidance was mentioned. Also, work is needed to spread good practice. The Welsh Local Government Association has done some work in this regard, particularly in Pembrokeshire, but there is no evidence that that has been taken up by other local authorities. We would like to

see that developed. All this adds to the development of a rural schools policy.

As you have heard, we understand that the Rural Development Sub-committee is quite willing to undertake this work. In the forward look of the Enterprise and Learning Committee, some consideration has been given to the need to carry out a review of schools and the implementation of schools reorganisation policy in rural and urban settings. So, both those committees recognise the need to further develop policy in this area. We hope that the recommendations that your committee could make to those committees and to the Welsh Assembly Government will give us the space to create policy that will ensure that school closure programmes in the future are carried out on the basis of sound evidence rather than on knee-jerk reactions to tight budgetary pressures.

Val Lloyd:

We now have 15 minutes in which Members can question the petitioners.

Michael German:

I will address the issue of the 23/02 circular, which you raised with us. What do you believe are its principal deficiencies, and what do you think should be in it?

Dr Blunden:

I think that it focuses too narrowly on budgetary and educational issues. It does not give space for issues around community regeneration and the place of the school in the local community. Those issues get a sideways mention, but they do not feature very strongly in that guidance.

Michael German:

So, it does not talk about the non-educational issues. Would you expect a Minister for education to talk about things that are not to do with education? Perhaps part of the problem is that this is a circular from the Minister for education, which is not about rural regeneration and communities, which come under the portfolio of another Minister. Do you agree?

Dr Blunden:

Yes. The phrase 'joined-up government' comes to mind. I think that education and rural communities are broader than just the narrow educational focus.

Andrew R.T. Davies:

Thank you for your evidence; it is much appreciated. The one thing that I would highlight from your evidence, Roger, is that you state that we have the divine power; we do not—the Welsh Assembly Government is separate from the Assembly. It is a common occurrence for petitioners to think that when they come here, but the committee only takes evidence, and the Assembly Government delivers policy and is the Executive. You seem to think that there is a chain of command that emanates from this building, or the Assembly Government's building, to shut small schools in Powys, and that Estyn, the executive body, is conspiring with that policy. Why do you think that Estyn is involved in this?

Dr Blunden:

Perhaps Bob can answer that. We are not saying that there is a conspiracy, but local authorities—Powys, in particular—are telling us that they are under pressure from the Welsh Assembly Government to close schools on the basis of surplus places and that they will be financially penalised if they do not. We understand that that might not be correct, but that is what they are saying.

Andrew R.T. Davies:

So, that is what councils are telling you. It is a problem across all areas—Cardiff supposedly has 8,500 surplus places—so it is not just happening in rural areas. I concur with your sentiments that we should look at it more closely. If you go to a school, it is not necessarily empty desks that is the key problem; it is the use of that building within the community. However, there is that budget problem. You can look into it all that you want, but schools are expensive to run, and when you are faced with difficult challenges, how do you reconcile the budgetary aspect with the community aspect? That is what you have to balance. Unless you are prepared to put money into it, how are you going to secure the long-term future of these schools?

Dr Blunden:

It may require some additional money, but closing small schools that have a relatively small number of places does not make a huge budget saving. If it is just being driven by money, I do not think that this is a particularly effective way of saving money.

Val Lloyd: I will bring Kirsty in on this point, but I wish to say that I support Andrew's comments; it is not only happening in Cardiff, but in Swansea and other places too. It is down to the falling birth rate—I know that it has improved slightly this year, but it is continuing to fall. So, it is a problem across the whole of Wales.

Kirsty Williams:

I will assist Andrew in terms of the questions that he asked. On Estyn, Powys County Council was subject to a local education authority report by Estyn—rather than providing individual reports on its schools, Estyn looked at how Powys County Council dealt with education, corporately. The Estyn inspectors made it clear to Powys County Council that, unless they saw immediate action on surplus places, it would be given a lower grading than would be the case if it demonstrated that it was doing something. There was what I would describe as genuine panic in the council about the need to be seen to be doing something quickly, to report back to Estyn prior to the publication of its grading. I am in no doubt that Estyn put a huge amount of pressure on the council to move in this particular direction, with the threat of a less-than-glowing report on the performance of the education authority. As we have seen in other areas, that can have dire consequences for an education authority.

On the issue of financing, work done by the WLGA notes that anticipated savings as a result of school closures are often not accrued. I point the committee to that evidence in that regard.

Val Lloyd:

May I clarify the Estyn point? Was that clear in the report? I understand that Estyn examined the local authority, because all our local authorities have the same inspection in their turn, but was it spelt out in the report? I ask so that we can access that evidence and review it; we have not yet had it.

Kirsty Williams:

No, you cannot access it, because the report was published after the council made the decision to go ahead with the consultation on the closure of the six schools. However, I am sure that, if you write to councillors in Powys, they could corroborate what I said. It is a well-known and understood fact within the council that it was under huge pressure from Estyn, and I can supply you with the names of councillors who will support what I have just said.

Val Lloyd:

I do not doubt a word that you said, Kirsty, you know that. It is just that the committee has to look at the written evidence, if there is any.

Kirsty Williams:

I know, but that demonstrates how difficult it is for parents, teachers and constituents, who are not party to these discussions. They are not party to Estyn saying to the council, 'You will get this grade, unless we see you do something, in which case you will get this grade'. That is what is so frustrating for the petitioners. They cannot engage in that kind of debate. That is why the Welsh Assembly Government's needs to address guidance and to develop policy in this particular area that will allow ordinary people, up and down Wales, to contribute. At the moment, they cannot contribute to what Estyn is saying or to what the Welsh Assembly Government is saying, because we are not subject to a wholesale policy review, which would allow communities and individuals to participate and help shape policy in this particular area.

Bethan Jenkins:

I have just a few questions. Thank you for your report today. During the meeting with the Minister, did you raise these concerns? Did you say that you would like to see an expansion of the policy on a rural education plan initiated by the Welsh Assembly Government?

Dr Blunden:

Yes, we did. The response that we got was, 'Thank you, we are very interested. Thank you and goodbye'. Certainly, the Minister did not reject what we were saying, and remained open to our offer to contribute to a new review.

Bethan Jenkins:

Has there been any correspondence since then, beyond what was received at that meeting?

Dr Blunden:

We have had a report of the meeting—there were minutes of the meeting.

Bethan Jenkins:

Have you been in discussion with other campaign groups in other parts of Wales that are having similar problems? Perhaps there would then be evidence in Estyn reports that you could compare with your experience.

Mr Smith:

We have certainly been in touch with organisations with similar interests, and we named those organisations in our original submission; the National Association for Small Schools is obviously interested in this and has a wealth of information and detail about the worth of small schools, which we would call upon if necessary. We have also talked to the Association of Communities in Wales with Small Schools, which is a partnership of large organisations, such as the Farmers Union of Wales and the Women's Institute and so on, that are very concerned with these issues. We have been in touch with people in Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Gwynedd, so we are reasonably aware of what is going on elsewhere.

We have not specifically spoken to any of those organisations about the Estyn issue. I think that we would not want to make too much of that, in one sense. If I had had a chance—if the 15 minutes had not elapsed—in my summing up, I was going to say that we would like to see the process that we have initiated being co-operative and constructive rather than confrontational. We would rather start from where we are today and look for creative solutions to national and local problems, rather than picking over what has happened in the past and pointing the finger of blame. Equally, it has to be said that we are concerned about the role of Estyn, particularly, as Kirsty has said, because it is going on behind closed doors and people are not aware of what is happening and the pressures that are being applied. We think that that is something that the Welsh Assembly Government would be well advised to look into.

Val Lloyd:

I have a quick question for you. Could I just clarify something? Have you engaged directly, or in any other way, with your local authority on this issue? I am not certain from your evidence whether you have had any direct discussions with the authority.

Mr Smith:

The answer to that, I think, is 'no'. The reason for that is a practical one. Several of us are involved with schools that are directly affected by the council's proposals, which makes it very difficult for us to swap hats. Also, some members of the group, by their position and perhaps their relationship with the council, would not be able to engage in that kind of dialogue. It is not an ideal situation, but, to date,

the opportunity has not really arisen for us to engage the council in a way that would be useful.

Andrew R.T. Davies:

I understand that you are asking for a moratorium, which is clearly not in the gift of this committee. The only person who has that in her gift is the Minister, as it is a governmental decision. You talked of six schools that are under threat of closure now, with the possibility of a further 42 or 46 being under threat—I cannot remember the number. So, without that moratorium coming into place, a proportion of those schools will close, irrespective of any review that would be undertaken by any committee of this institution. Would I be correct in saying that?

Dr Blunden:

Yes. That is our fear.

Andrew R.T. Davies:

That would mean the six schools that you mentioned, with the potential to move on to the 42 or 46, or whatever you said that the number was.

Dr Blunden:

Plans for the closure of the six schools are now well under way.

Andrew R.T. Davies:

Would that be for the new academic year, in September?

Dr Blunden:

Yes. I think that two of them will close in the next academic year.

Kirsty Williams:

My understanding is that notices for closure have already been issued for two of the schools. They have been objected to and will be determined by the Minister, but there is the potential for closure at the end of the summer—they would not reopen in September. The other four schools are subject to further discussions at county level. As they are Montgomeryshire schools, I am not so aware of their exact fate, but for the two schools in Brecon and Radnorshire, official notices have already been issued.

Andrew R.T. Davies:

That gives me a feel for what you are talking about. Two different parts of this institution are involved in this: there is the Government side and then there is the scrutiny side of this institution that could shine a light onto what you are asking for, if we were so minded.

Val Lloyd:

We have a little time left. Do you have any direct evidence that the local authority is, as you say, simply following orders? The meeting that you had with the Minister and the letter that we have had from the Minister—

Ms Garratt:

We do not suggest that the local authority is following orders, but we do suggest that our local authority—it is probably the case for other local authorities in Wales too—is interpreting Welsh Assembly guidance to enable it to take the easiest route to deal with its budgetary constraints. That is how I would put it.

Val Lloyd:

Thank you; that is a very clear answer.

Andrew R.T. Davies:

On evidence that we have had from Estyn, it is clear, through its report, that it believes that schools must be closed, otherwise there will be consequences.

Ms Garratt:

Kirsty has told us that she knows that that has happened—that Estyn has told our local authority to close schools and to reduce surplus places. My argument is that it interprets that instruction in its own way. It immediately looked at its list of the smallest primary schools in the county in the remotest areas—the ones that several generations of officials have probably been wanting to close because they do not have much interest in them. It is a historic approach by local authority officials.

Val Lloyd:

We are out of time, Kirsty, but I will allow you to make one last comment.

Kirsty Williams:

While trying not to belittle the problems that face the council, the petitioners are saying that the way in which the council has gone about choosing the schools to close is not, perhaps, as robust and logical as it could be. However, from my perspective and that of the petitioners, this is not necessarily about saving individual schools. It is, ultimately, about developing policy in a way that means that robust decisions can be made. We understand, collectively, the problems that it faces. We cannot do much about the birth rate—although some of us have done the best that we can to do something about it—but any future reorganisation of schools should be done on the basis of good practice and strong guidance and it should be set in the context of Welsh Assembly Government policy.

Val Lloyd:

Thank you. I must now draw this discussion to a close, because we have run over by two minutes. I thank Mrs Garratt, Dr Blunden and

Mr Smith for the presentation. We will await your arrival in the gallery before we begin our discussion, so that you can hear it in its entirety.

The petitioners have now reached the gallery, so we will resume our discussion.

Michael German:

I am trying to work out where we would want to take this and how far we should go. It seems that there are several strands to this. First, if Estyn is giving that strong and powerful advice to local authorities, we need to be clear about Estyn's role and how it views its role as an interpreter of the current circular. So, there are questions for Estyn that need to be answered.

The nub of this seems to be a desire for a policy and, subsequently, a new circular. As was the case with the post offices issue, this is about the relationship with communities as well as with the education sector. They tie together. I do not know how much of an offer was made, but it may be that both committees could conduct a review—whether that would be just a quick, sharp and short one, I have no idea—of rural education policy and its impact on communities. We would want to see and encourage that. Should we write to the Chairs of those committees, to ask whether they are content to work together to produce guidance on these issues, or to review them, with the aim of leading to a strengthened circular? I do not know what the timescale is for the Minister to tell us when she will produce a new circular, but—

Val Lloyd:

It is under review.

Michael German: So, it might be useful to have that go from one to the other. I would favour having a rural education policy and some sort of review of the impact on the communities that a school serves, if that can be achieved by the two committees. I would also like some answers from Estyn as to how far it interpreted the current circular in what it says to local authorities, and how far that affects its scoring of them. It does not seem to be the best approach to policy for local authorities to be told that they will get a black mark for not doing something, but if they do it, it is fine and they will not get a black mark.

Val Lloyd:

I agree that we ought to concern ourselves with that aspect of Estyn. It is not really how you would expect a public body to conduct its business, if that is the case.

Andrew R.T. Davies:

The wording of the petition clearly refers to the pressure on Powys council. We heard the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire refer in graphic terms to the pressure applied via an Estyn report. If it is within this committee's remit, would it be opportune to invite Estyn here to talk to that report? Let us have sight of that report, because it is quite an accusation to make about Estyn's conduct. It might be that Powys is not an isolated case, but we can look at only the one petition at a time. I think that you, madam Chair, and my good self have school place issues in our constituencies, but that is a wider issue. However, this petition specifies that pressure is being brought to bear on a local authority. We heard that that is contained in a particular report that interprets Government policy, and I would like the opportunity to address the matter with Estyn. I think that a hearing would be beneficial in that regard.

I concur with Mike German that there is benefit in seeking the approval of the Chairs of the relevant committees to take the matter forward, because there is a wider issue to be addressed, and good scrutiny, jointly or by either committee, would be beneficial. We saw yesterday in Plenary what can happen when two reports are presented on similar problems; in that instance, it was to do with the fallout from the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. Many of the issues were diluted or lost, and so a joint report from the relevant committees looking at the rural and urban aspects of educational establishments would be beneficial.

Val Lloyd:

Thank you. Are there any comments on that?

Bethan Jenkins:

I agree that the committee should perform that, but I am concerned about the timescale. This is taking place now across Wales, and is not just affecting Powys. I am also concerned about whether this will bear fruit with regard to the consultation that the Minister is due to undertake on the circular. We may want to raise that concern if we do write to the committees.

On the back of Andrew R.T. Davies's request that someone from Estyn come in, the petitioners have told us that they have not really discussed the matter directly with the local authorities. Is Estyn then able to give an overview of the authority's opinion, if we were to write to it, or if it were to send a representative to the committee?

Val Lloyd:

I do not think that Estyn could give an overview of the authority's opinion; that would have to come from the authority. Estyn can speak only on behalf of itself and its own actions. I think that we need to approach Estyn seriously, but perhaps we should first send a letter outlining what we have heard today, and offering it an opportunity to reply in writing or to come to talk to us, rather than just saying, 'Come to talk with us'. That would be its choice, but I think that we do need to give it the opportunity to clarify the issue. So, are we agreed on that point? I see that we are. It is quite clear that the committee feels that it should ask the rural affairs committee and the education committee—

Michael German:

They have posh titles now.

Val Lloyd:

I was going to say the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee, but that was its title in the second Assembly.

Kirsty Williams:

It is the Enterprise and Learning Committee.

Val Lloyd:

I will use the shorthand version, as it is quite clear for this purpose. We will ask them to conduct a joint inquiry into the issues that have been raised. Bethan, we can write to the Minister to ask her for the timescale for the revision of this guidance. Her letter was very helpful.

Michael German:

It depends on the replies from the two Chairs. If you receive quite a quick reply from them saying that they are prepared to have a go at this, it would be useful for the Minister to know their timescale, so that she can take on board what is said, rather than issuing a circular before the report comes from the committees only to have to revise it again. We should try to get the timing right, if we can.

Val Lloyd:

Out of courtesy to the Minister for education, we will write to her to say that we are asking for that inquiry, and that we will write to her again once we have the timescale, so that everyone is fully in the frame.