



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
The National Assembly for Wales**

**Yr Is-bwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig
The Rural Development Sub-committee**

**Dydd Mercher, 4 Mehefin 2008
Wednesday, 4 June 2008**

Cynnwys
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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynndi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal,
cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee.
In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Alun Davies	Llafur (Cadeirydd yr Is-bwyllgor) Labour (Sub-committee Chair)
Michael German	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru (yn dirprwyo ar ran Mick Bates) Welsh Liberal Democrats (substitute for Mick Bates)
Alun Ffred Jones	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Brynle Williams	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Lorraine Barrett	Llafur Labour
Dr Roger Blunden	Grŵp Gweithredu Ysgolion Cymunedol Powys Powys Community Schools Action
Bob Smith	Grŵp Gweithredu Ysgolion Cymunedol Powys Powys Community Schools Action
Kevin Stephens	Grŵp Gweithredu Ysgolion Cymunedol Powys Powys Community Schools Action

Swyddogion Gwasanaeth Seneddol y Cynulliad yn bresennol
Assembly Parliamentary Service officials in attendance

Joanne Clinton	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Claire Morris	Clerc Clerk

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 11.16 a.m.
The meeting began at 11.16 a.m.

**Ymchwiliad i Ddarparu Addysg yng Nghefn Gwlad Cymru ac Ad-Drefnu
 Ysgolion Gwledig**
**Inquiry into Provision of Rural Education in Wales and the Reorganisation Of
 Rural Schools**

[1] **Alun Davies:** Galwaf y cyfarfod i drefn. Dyma ein sesiwn tystiolaeth gyntaf fel rhan o'n hymchwiliad i addysg ac ad-drefnu ysgolion yn y Gymru wledig.

Alun Davies: I call the meeting to order. This is our first evidence session as part of our inquiry into education and the reorganisation of schools in rural Wales.

[2] Fel y gwyddoch, mae'r ymchwiliad hwn o ganlyniad i ddeiseb a dderbyniodd y Pwyllgor Deisebau gan Grŵp Gweithredu Ysgolion Cymunedol Powys. Gofynnodd i ni ymchwilio'r materion a godwyd yn y ddeiseb. Yr ydym eisoes wedi cytuno ar sgôp a maint yr ymchwiliad, a dyma'r sesiwn casglu tystiolaeth gyntaf.

As you know, this inquiry is the result of the Petitions Committee receiving a petition from Powys Community Schools Action. It asked us to look into the issues raised in that petition. We have already agreed on the scope and size of the inquiry and this is our first evidence-gathering session.

[3] Dechreuaf drwy groesawu Bob Smith, Dr Roger Blunden a Kevin Stephens i'r cyfarfod i gynnig eu tystiolaeth. Gofynnaf i chi dreulio dwy funud ar wneud sylwadau agoriadol gan esbonio rhai o'r materion sy'n codi yn eich papur. Mae'r Aelodau wedi cael cyfle i ddarllen eich papur ac y maent yn ymwybodol o'r materion, ond gofynnaf ichi drafod rhai o'r materion yr hoffech eu codi gyda ni yn gyntaf. Bydd yr Aelodau wedyn yn gofyn cwestiynau i chi ar eich tystiolaeth.

I start by welcoming Bob Smith, Dr Roger Blunden and Kevin Stephens to the meeting to provide their evidence. I ask you to spend two minutes on making opening remarks by explaining some of the issues that are raised in your paper. The Members will have had an opportunity to read your paper and they are aware of the issues, but I ask you to discuss some of the issues that you would like to raise with us first. The Members will then ask you some questions on your evidence.

[4] Felly, gofynnaf i chi gyflwyno eich hunain ar gyfer y cofnod a gwneud rhai sylwadau agoriadol er mwyn esbonio cefndir y ddeiseb a'r materion yr hoffech i ni eu hystyried fel rhan o'n hymchwiliad.

Therefore, I ask you to introduce yourselves for the record and make some opening remarks in order to explain the background of the petition and some of the issues that you would like us to consider as part of our inquiry.

[5] **Mr Smith:** Thank you, Mr Chairman. I am Bob Smith and it was my name on the petition, which I suspect makes me the lead speaker today.

[6] **Dr Blunden:** I am Roger Blunden. I am a school governor and a parent of a child who has been through the Welsh-medium education system, starting off in a small primary school.

[7] **Mr Stephens:** My name is Kevin Stephens; I am chair of governors in another small school. However, we are not here today to discuss our individual schools, but to cover the wider issue in relation to small schools.

[8] **Mr Smith:** I will ask Roger in a moment to go through the main points in our evidence, as you have asked. However, I will take a moment to welcome this inquiry and the opportunity that it gives us all. We are pleased that our petition has been taken as seriously as it has by the Assembly. We are pleased that this inquiry has been convened and that we have been invited to give evidence.

11.20 a.m.

[9] We are a little concerned that the inquiry was not given a slightly broader scope and more time but, nevertheless, we are very pleased that it is happening and we see it as a great opportunity. It is an opportunity for us to give evidence and a way into an important, very topical and complex subject. In our written evidence, which I am glad to hear that you have studied, we have suggested a number of outcomes, which we hope that the committee will endorse and take forward. Of those, the most important is that this committee's inquiry should not be the end of the subject. We feel that there is a great deal of work to be done. We are proposing the development of a rural education policy—something that is suited to the needs and conditions of twenty-first century Wales and that takes full account of sustainability and the complexities of community issues. We feel that this committee could have a key input to this issue. We see this as being your opportunity to contribute to an extremely valuable policy, and we urge you to embrace that opportunity.

[10] One thing that we did not cover very fully in our written evidence—I just thought about this on my way here this morning—was the reasons that brought us here, namely the problems in Powys and the haphazard nature of the school reorganisation that was developing

there and elsewhere. I think that we were assuming when we wrote the paper that the fact that the committee has convened this inquiry means that those problems are accepted. However, if you have any doubts about that, please ask us to clarify what the issues and occurrences are that brought us to this point.

[11] I will now hand over to Dr Blunden to make the key points from our submission.

[12] **Dr Blunden:** I will briefly summarise them. We make four points in our submission. The first is that there is a great deal of evidence on the benefit of community schools, which are largely rural primary schools, such as those that we are governors of, with small numbers of children and that serve the local community. You will hear later from the National Association for Small Schools about the wide range of studies that show the benefits of such schools. There is certainly no evidence to show that community schools do worse than other schools.

[13] The evidence that is given for the closing of schools, which is very much in vogue at the moment, really does not stand up. We have pointed out a number of ways in which that evidence is pretty dodgy, including some of the financial arguments that are made. There is also a strong argument that closing community schools is bad for children, families and, importantly, for communities. In fact, we include a quotation from Stephen Byers, when he was the Minister of State for School Standards in 1998, who said:

[14] ‘Closing a village school can be a death-blow to the community’.

[15] Again, we have evidence that supports that. As Bob has said, we feel that the best way forward is to have a national joined-up rural education policy, which treats community schools as assets and looks for ways of trying to preserve them. We have some very valuable assets in the community, and it is almost an act of vandalism to start taking them away on very flimsy evidence.

[16] In conclusion, we are saying that community schools are not a problem but a part of the solution of providing good education in rural areas. They are already delivering good education and helping to sustain communities and, as Bob has said, we see this inquiry as a major opportunity to start building on rural education and moving things forward for the future rather than demolishing it.

[17] **Alun Davies:** Thank you for being so succinct in your opening remarks. I call on Brynle Williams to ask the first question.

[18] **Brynle Williams:** Good morning, gentlemen. I am very pleased that you have come here to speak on such an emotive issue. Will you please clarify your definition of a rural school?

[19] **Mr Smith:** We deliberately chose to talk about community schools for the simple reason that, if you start to talk about small schools, there is inevitably going to be an argument about what is meant by ‘small’. Rural Wales is characterised by its communities, hamlets, villages and small towns. We are talking mainly about education where the school is of commensurate size to the community that it is serving. We could use the term ‘village school’; that is another good term, but it is also an emotive one and it gets misused. With regard to size, we do not think that there is any figure at which you can draw the line and say, ‘This is a viable school, but this one in the next valley is not a viable school.’ In Scotland, I believe that there was a case of a school being kept open with just two children in it. I cannot see that happening in Wales, but we would certainly not want to be drawn to a particular figure and say that 20 children is fine, but 19 children is not—it depends on the context.

[20] **Brynle Williams:** I am not sure how to pose this question—and I will be told in a minute by the Chair whether you made reference to this, but it is not in our brief—but looking at your evidence and listening to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the radio this morning, neither of you made reference to the planning of affordable housing, which has a major bearing on this issue. Have you any comments on that? Is that allowed, Chair?

[21] **Alun Davies:** I will allow it because I am intrigued by it.

[22] **Dr Blunden:** We did not hear the Joseph Rowntree Foundation item on the radio this morning because we were travelling down here, but I will just highlight the experience in my own village where the school is under threat of closure. The numbers are dwindling, and it just struck me that it would have been a good thing if, a few years ago, when numbers were beginning to dwindle, the council had come to us and asked, given that the numbers were going down, how it could help us. It would have been good if it had said, 'Perhaps we need to look at housing and transport links in the area; let us get together and see how we can work this out.'. Instead, it rubbed its hands saying, 'Oh, good, your numbers are going down, we should be able to close you soon.'. It is that interrelationship between housing, transport, employment and education that we see as really important.

[23] **Mr Stephens:** I will just add a couple of words to that. The argument for affordable housing is for young people and young families. If there is no school, why would they want to be there in the first place?

[24] **Michael German:** I know that you met with the Minister who told you that she was thinking of providing new guidance to local authorities in respect of the reorganisation of schools. Do you have any thoughts on what you would like to see in that guidance as the headline issues?

[25] **Dr Blunden:** Presumption against closure and recognising the value of small schools so, as I believe is the case in England and possibly Scotland, you start with the assumption that small schools are valuable and will stay open unless there are overwhelming educational reasons to close them. That would be the first thing I could think of.

[26] **Mr Stephens:** That is the most critical thing that springs to mind. It goes on from there in the sense that, taking presumption against closure as a starting point, if you get to that point, there is the question of how you progress to a closure, if necessary, and adopt a structured approach to it, as opposed to the situation that has been our experience over the past 12 months, which seems to have been a bit haphazard.

[27] **Michael German:** Your main emphasis is on community schools. What is the difference therefore between the characteristics of a school for its community in a rural area and a school for its community in an urban area? Is there a distinction to be made?

11.30 a.m.

[28] **Mr Smith:** I know that our colleagues in the National Association for Small Schools would argue very strongly that the evidence in favour of small schools and community schools is such that they would press for the re-establishment of small schools in towns. We are perhaps not going quite as far as that today but we believe that the benefits should be portable into an urban setting.

[29] To come back to your previous question about guidance, one of the key issues is that what we have seen is councils taking certain actions and then claiming, as justification, that they have been forced into doing such and such because of pressure from the Welsh Assembly Government to reduce surplus places and so on. This friction between local

government and central Government has arisen, we think, because the guidance has hitherto been rather weak. If the pressure to address surplus places exists, we would expect to see at least some guidance as to what might be good practice for local authorities in addressing the issue. What we have seen instead is that pressure has been applied and there has been a knee-jerk reaction on the part of councils such as Powys County Council, which has meant the closure of small schools and the loss of those schools to their communities.

[30] **Michael German:** On what you said previously about the principle of the benefits of small schools being portable from rural to urban locations, am I right in presuming that you think that an all-Wales guidance document would be equally relevant to urban schools as to rural schools?

[31] **Mr Smith:** I see no reason why a document should not be written in such a way that it applies both to large schools in cities and small schools in villages. There needs to be a recognition that there is a place for both kinds of school and that it depends on the local context.

[32] **Michael German:** The question that I was asking was about rural versus urban locations, and whether a small school in an urban context should be covered by the same document and treated in the same way.

[33] **Dr Blunden:** Our concern in Powys is with regard to rural schools, so I guess that we have not given the question a great deal of thought, and we are not particularly concerned about it or qualified to talk about it. What we see in Powys is the very close interrelationship between the school, families and the community. That is what seems to be working so well, and you may well be able to replicate that in urban areas too, but my experience is of the village school, which is an essential part of village life. The village contributes to it and it contributes to the village. Children learn to be good citizens because they are part of the village school and community, and there is just so much going on in that whole package of school and community. That is what we are keen to preserve.

[34] **Mr Stephens:** In many rural communities, there is not a great deal else going on, so the difference between an urban setting and a rural setting is that, if you take away the small school and then take away the young farmers' club, all you have left is a few houses.

[35] **Alun Davies:** Before I bring in Alun Ffred, I would like to bring in Lorraine Barrett.

[36] **Lorraine Barrett:** I was going to come in on the first question, but you answered my point. You have spoken about community schools, and I represent a very urban, inner-city area, which covers this area here where we are sitting, but we also have community schools. For me, the issue is small schools. I was going to ask you whether there was a point at which you would say that you would have to accept that a school was no longer a viable educational facility—a minimum number of pupils in a school—but you answered that by saying that you did not want to be drawn into the question of a minimum number.

[37] I found your paper very interesting and useful, particularly with regard to the concept of a school being the last community focal point for a village, but I suppose that that has to be balanced against the educational facilities. That leads me into my proper question—the Chair will shout at me now for rambling. Your paper refers to the Estyn report, which says there is no direct link between how well pupils do and the size of the school that they attend. You say this proves that bigger is not better, but, conversely, I suppose that you could say that it means that smaller is not better either. I wondered whether you thought that that was a fair comment, and that we could read that Estyn report both ways. What evidence or views do you have on that?

[38] **Dr Blunden:** We are not saying that smaller is better, and that Wales should be filled with small schools. We are saying that, by and large, small schools work pretty well, and there is no evidence that they are underperforming, so there is no reason for closing them on educational grounds, and we think that there are a lot of arguments for preserving them because of this relationship between the school, families and the community, which has some educational advantages. We are not saying that you should have a policy of small schools throughout Wales.

[39] To come back to your question about numbers, we are saying that, when you talk about the future of a school, that has to be a consideration. However, what constitutes a viable number in a particular area would depend on the local situation, the community, the prospects for the future, and so on. We are not dodging the numbers question—we are saying that it is not the only criterion, and it needs to be considered along with other things.

[40] **Lorraine Barrett:** I suppose that I should read the Estyn report, but I am interested in the attainment issue. As you say, it is not just about exam results—it is about achieving a rounded citizen, life experience, and so on. I suppose that I need to go away and look at the figures on attainment, concentrating on pupils in primary school initially, and then at how they develop. Do you have any information or evidence on that—a comparison between the academic attainment of youngsters who started in small schools and those who started in larger schools?

[41] **Dr Blunden:** You will get a lot of detailed evidence when the National Association for Small Schools comes in. It has masses of information. There is one bit of evidence. If you look at A-level results in Wales, the biggest proportion of good A-level results comes from those parts of Wales with small, rural schools. That is not direct proof, but it is an indication that those schools are doing pretty well.

[42] **Lorraine Barrett:** When we talk about small, rural community schools, are we talking about primary schools?

[43] **Dr Blunden:** Yes.

[44] **Lorraine Barrett:** The pupils then have to go onto secondary school. Do you have any evidence of them experiencing problems in integrating at a much bigger school? There are issues for those of us who have schools with 200 or 300 pupils in our constituencies—it is still a bit scary for the pupils to go up to the big school. Is that more of an issue for the smaller schools, or the rural community schools—moving up to the bigger school when they have been used to a more homely setting, as it were?

[45] **Dr Blunden:** I do not have research evidence, but the experience at the school where I am a governor is that there have not been any major problems. One of the things that help is that there is a small group of children from the community going on to the big school, and so they have a built-in support group. The evidence in Llanfihangel, where I come from, is that the children from our village school are reported to do well when they go on to the secondary school, with reports of good behaviour, and so on.

11.40 a.m.

[46] **Mr Smith:** You asked whether we were arguing that small schools were better. There are some areas where we feel that small schools have an advantage. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence in relation to behaviour, for example. When my local school went to the National Wool Museum, the lady running the workshop said, 'You must be a small school', and we said, 'Yes, we are. Why do you think that?'. 'Oh', she said, 'It is always obvious because those from small schools are always so much better behaved.' It is anecdotal, but

there is wealth of that kind of evidence. We see maturity and confidence being engendered in young children in these community schools. I think that that maturity and confidence, and a willingness to mix with other age groups, which you tend not to get in stratified schools, helps when they go up to secondary school. The school may be a lot bigger and distant, but the children have some qualities that they can use to help them in that transition.

[47] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yr wyf am fynd yn ôl at un pwynt. Yr ydych yn cyfeirio o hyd at ysgolion cymunedol. Beth yw eich diffiniad chi o 'ysgol gymunedol'?

Alun Ffred Jones: I want to go back on one point. You have made several references to community schools. What is your definition of a 'community school'?

[48] **Mr Smith:** I guess that I was trying to define it when I was talking in terms of a school being commensurate in size with its community. Again, I think that we are trying to avoid being dragged into an argument that would pigeon hole particular kinds of schools. We are talking about schools in a context where the school gives a lot to the life of the community and the community gives a lot to the life of the school, and where there is that kind of interaction. It is that interaction that is key. We see that happening a lot in the villages and smaller settlements, but we do not see that happening to anything like the same degree in towns. Perhaps, as has been remarked before, that is because in rural areas, there are fewer distractions—the school may be the only focus that the community has left. I think that the nearest that I could come to a definition, if you were to push me into a corner here and now, is that we are talking about a situation where there is that high level of mutual benefit for the school and the community.

[49] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Mae'r sefyllfa yn amrywio o ardal i ardal ond o ran llawer o ysgolion gwledig neu ysgolion llai, mae rhieni yn mynd â'u plant iddynt o du allan i ddalgylch yr ysgol. Mae enghreifftiau yn sicr yn yr ardaloedd yr wyf i'n gyfarwydd â hwy lle mae hanner y plant yn dod o du allan i ddalgylch yr ysgol. A ydych yn credu bod y rhieni hynny yn gwneud cam â'u plant, drwy eu symud i mewn i ardal nad yw, mewn gwirionedd, yn gymuned naturiol iddynt?

Alun Ffred Jones: The situation varies from one area to another, but in terms of many rural or small schools, parents take their children to them from outside of the school's catchment area. There are certainly examples in the areas that I am familiar with where half the children come from outside of the school's catchment area. Do you think that those parents are doing their children a disservice by moving them into an area that is, in reality, not their natural community?

[50] **Dr Blunden:** There are advantages for parents living in the area that arise from having daily contact with the school, being around when after-school events take place and being part of the community when the school takes part in concerts and other events. So, those parents who are taking their children in from outside the area are under a certain disadvantage.

[51] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yr wyf yn credu mai'r pwynt yr ydych yn ei wneud, sy'n ddigon teg, yw mai ysgol gymunedol yw ysgol lle mae plant yn byw yn y dalgylch o gwmpas yr ysgol, lle mae cydweithio rhwng y teuluoedd. Fodd bynnag, mewn llawer o ardaloedd mae llawer iawn o blant yn cael eu symud i mewn i ysgolion am wahanol resymau, ac mae hynny'n cynnwys rhai ysgolion bach. Efallai nad yw hynny'n wir am Llanfihangel, ond y mae'n wir mewn ardaloedd eraill. Gofyn yr wyf a ydych yn meddwl bod y rhieni hynny yn gwneud cam

Alun Ffred Jones: I think that the point that you are quite rightly making is that a community school is one where children live in the catchment area around the school, where there is co-operation between the families. However, in many areas many children are moved into schools for various reasons, and that includes some small schools. It might not be true about Llanfihangel, but it is certainly true in other areas. I am asking whether you think that those parents are doing their children a disservice by moving them from one area to

â'u plant drwy eu symud o un ardal i ardal arall, efallai am eu bod yn credu bod yr ysgol yn well ysgol. another, perhaps because they think that the school is better.

[52] **Dr Blunden:** I think that what I am saying is that there are some disadvantages to them doing that. Whether they are doing their children a disservice overall I do not know, because there may be other advantages. I am not giving you a straight 'yes' or 'no' answer; I am saying that there are pros and cons to that situation.

[53] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Os yw'r rhieni hynny yn gallu symud eu plant i ysgol arall, a bod y plant yn gwneud yn iawn, pam ydych yn erbyn bod plant yn symud o un ysgol bentref i ysgol bentref arall? Pam fod cael eu dysgu yn eu pentref mor bwysig i rai plant ond nid i i blant eraill? Dyna sut mae'n ymddangos. **Alun Ffred Jones:** If those parents can move their children to another school, where the children perform well, why are you against children moving from one village school to another? Why is being taught in their village so important for some children, but not for others? That is how it appears.

[54] **Mr Smith:** I think that you are asking us to make a judgment on the parents; while it is a tempting avenue to go down, I am not sure that it is a fruitful one. We have parental choice, which is a double-edged benefit. In my area, I have observed choices being made about schools for reasons of convenience—a certain school happens to be on a parent's route to work, so that school is chosen. We conducted a survey in our local area, and I was utterly horrified to discover that fewer than 20 per cent of parents visited the primary school to which they sent their children. I find that absolutely extraordinary and a real indictment of parenting. If parents cannot be bothered to go to look at the school in which their children will spend six years, their decisions can be questioned. However, I am not sure whether that is a proper subject for an inquiry such as this.

[55] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Symudaf ymlaen. Yr ydych yn dweud yn eich tystiolaeth mewn perthynas â chau ysgolion bach: **Alun Ffred Jones:** I will move on. You state in your evidence regarding the closure of small schools:

[56] 'such closures are detrimental to children, families and communities'.

[57] Dyna yr ydych yn ei ddweud yma. Mae nifer o ysgolion ardal wedi eu sefydlu yng Nghymru dros y 30 blynedd diwethaf. A oes gennych dystiolaeth nad yw'r ysgolion ardal hynny yn gweithio cystal? Pa dystiolaeth sydd fod cau ysgolion bach wedi cael effaith niweidiol ar y bröydd hynny? A oes gennych dystiolaeth—o Bowys, efallai? That is what you say here. A number of area schools have been established in Wales over the last 30 years. Do you have evidence that those area schools do not work so well? What evidence is there that the closure of small schools has had a detrimental effect on those areas? Do you have evidence—from Powys, perhaps?

[58] **Mr Smith:** There is certainly anecdotal evidence. In fact, a comment was made to me fairly recently with respect to a group of villages that lost their schools a few years ago, when an area school was established. That area school has done well and it has a good reputation, but the rather wistful comment that was made to me about the villages was, 'They are building a lot of new houses there now; if the school had still been there, it would have been viable'. In other words, population trends are cyclical. We have seen in Powys any number of schools that were vulnerable 10 or 20 years ago bursting at the seams now, and we have seen the same thing in the reverse.

[59] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Felly, mae gennych dystiolaeth o bentref sydd heb ysgol **Alun Ffred Jones:** Therefore, you have evidence of a village that has no school,

lle mae pobl yn codi tai o'r newydd.

where new homes are being built.

[60] **Mr Smith:** That is happening where I live. I live on the outskirts of a small village that is no longer a community, because its school was closed some 15 years ago. It is now a place where people go to sleep; it is not a community any more. They are building new houses there.

[61] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Felly, mae pobl yn fodlon symud i fyw i bentref sydd heb ysgol. Dyna eich tystiolaeth chi.

Alun Ffred Jones: Therefore, people are willing to move to a village that does not have a school. That is your evidence.

[62] **Mr Smith:** It depends on the cost of the houses. Very often, we are not talking about the affordable housing that was mentioned earlier. It is affordable housing that is required to maintain the viability of communities. If people are happy for them to turn into dormitories, that is the trend that is happening.

11.50 a.m.

[63] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Hoffwn gyfeirio at un neu ddau o bethau eraill yn eich tystiolaeth. Yr ydych yn nodi:

Alun Ffred Jones: I want to refer to one or two other points in your evidence. You state:

[64] 'In Wales, the best results in A-levels and beyond tend to come from those areas with the highest proportion of small schools'.

[65] A fyddech yn derbyn bod tystiolaeth addysgol—sef y dystiolaeth yr wyf yn ymwybodol ohoni—yn cysylltu llwyddiant academiaidd fel arfer â chefnidir cefnogol i blant, gan gysylltu cyrhaeddiad addysgol isel fel arfer ag ardaloedd difreintiedig?

Would you accept that educational evidence—at least that of which I am aware of—usually links academic success with a supportive background for children, linking low educational attainment more usually with deprived areas?

[66] **Mr Smith:** That kind of question would be better directed at Mervyn from the National Association for Small Schools. I think that his response to that would be that, indeed, it is the supportive atmosphere and the partnership between parents and schools that makes community schools so effective.

[67] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yr wyf yn cyfeirio at y pwynt am ei fod yn eich tystiolaeth. Mae eich tystiolaeth yn dweud bod cyraeddiadau lefel A yn well oherwydd bodolaeth llawer o ysgolion bach. Mae'r dystiolaeth yr wyf yn gwybod amdani—ac efallai fy mod yn anghywir—yn dweud bod y cysylltiad mewn gwirionedd yn ymwneud mwy â chefnidir y disgyblion nag â maint ysgolion.

Alun Ffred Jones: I am referring to the point because it appears in your evidence. Your evidence states that A-level attainment is better because of the existence of a high proportion of small schools. The evidence that I know of—and I may be mistaken—states that the link has more to do with the background of pupils than with the size of schools.

[68] **Mr Stephens:** You hear that hypothesis quite a lot about rural communities, which goes: if you can afford to live in the country, then you must be well off, so your kids are going to do better. In terms of academic achievement in small schools, you can find a range of people who will tell you that small schools are better, and you will find a range of people who will put together an argument that says that it is just because of factor x or factor y, the financial status of the parents being one such factor.

[69] One of the points that came up earlier is that people go outside their village to select schools; personally, I would not argue against people opting for the schools that they think their children can do best at. The question that I would pose is this: if you give parents the choice of a large or a small school, where do they choose and what is their reason for that choice? There is a popular conception that small schools provide a better education. We can find a great deal of anecdotal evidence of the kind that runs, ‘All the people in my class went to Oxford’, or they went on to some university from a small school, but we are not professionals in the educational field, and I would feel very nervous about going into serious numbers with you. I will just repeat that a lot of anecdotal evidence suggests that people believe this to be true.

[70] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Gwnaethoch ddau sylw yna. Wedi dweud yn gynharach nad ydych yn dadlau bod ysgolion bach yn well nag ysgolion eraill, yr ydych newydd ddweud bod tystiolaeth bod ysgolion bach yn well. Ai dyna yw eich safbwynt? **Alun Ffred Jones:** You made two points there. Having said earlier that you are not arguing that small schools are better than other schools, you have now just said that small schools are better. Is that your position?

[71] **Mr Stephens:** I said that there is a lot of anecdotal evidence. Many people hold that view, but I prefer quantitative evidence.

[72] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Dyna yr wyf yn chwilio amdani. **Alun Ffred Jones:** That is what I am seeking.

[73] Yr ail fater ichi gyfeirio ato yw'r ffaith bod pobl yn mynd â'u plant heibio i un ysgol i ysgol fach. I droi yn ôl at y mater canolog, mae'r rhan fwyaf o'ch tystiolaeth yn ymwneud â'r cysylltiad rhwng ysgol a chymuned. Eto, yr ydych yn dweud ei bod yn hollol iawn i blant gael eu bysio i ardal bellach, ac na wnaiff hynny ddrwg iddynt, ond, am ryw reswm, mae'n gwneud drwg i'r plant os ydynt yn mynd y ffordd arall. A ydych yn deall beth sydd gennyf? The second issue that you referred to is the fact that people take their children past one school to get to a small school. To return to the central theme, most of your evidence deals with the link between school and community. However, you are saying that it is perfectly fine for children to be bussed to an outlying area, and that it does them no harm, but for some reason, it is detrimental to children if things are done the other way around. Do you understand what I am getting at?

[74] **Mr Stephens:** I come back to Bob's point about the community school being about the interaction with the school, families and children, and that is better, as Bob said, if you can get the parents into the school to visit. My reason for being here is not to presume to dictate to people where they should send their children. My concern is that we are not experiencing a debate about education; we are experiencing a debate about the economics of paying for education. As money is tight, we are seeing a knee-jerk reaction—to close small schools. In a few years' time, we will reach a point where we think that we should have smaller schools, local schools, community schools, more sustainable schools and less travelling, but the schools will be gone, because we closed them. Hence our request at this stage to look into that future and come up with a sustainable policy, rather than just hit the finances now and, possibly, make the wrong decision.

[75] **Mr Smith:** I am not sure which of us is on record as condoning the bussing in of children to other schools. I do not think that any of us said that.

[76] **Alun Davies:** I am aware of the time constraints upon us and there are three issues that I would like to cover before we conclude this session—we are due to finish in four minutes. That is a request for succinctness.

[77] **Michael German:** I will be very brief and talk about surplus places. This is an issue on which there is guidance, and it is also one that local authorities have to manage. What do you think should be the role of local authorities in managing surplus places? Do you think that Estyn has a role in this process as well?

[78] **Mr Smith:** Clearly, local authorities have a role, because it is their statutory duty to provide for education in their areas. I have already made the point that there is insufficient guidance to local authorities on how they should be treating surplus capacity. We have also made the point that we do not feel that surplus capacity, which is purely a measurement of the building's capacity, is an appropriate measure. When you look at schools with two teachers, it does not matter how many or few pupils you have, or how big or small the building, the cost remains fixed at the cost of those two teachers' salaries. Therefore, at that end of the scale, surplus capacity, as measured by the Welsh Assembly Government formula, is not a useful criterion, but it is what local authorities are expected to use.

[79] **Michael German:** Surplus places affect the numbers of teachers, eventually, when you get to a position where you have too few pupils for more than one teacher. What would you say is the criteria that we should use?

[80] **Mr Stephens:** Before we get to that question, there is one point that I would really like to make. In Powys, we have x number of surplus places according to the Welsh Assembly Government formula. If someone decided that the capacity per pupil should increase by a certain amount, all those surplus places disappear. So, who is to determine how much space is right for a child? That is a spurious argument.

[81] **Michael German:** I am asking you what measure you would use.

[82] **Mr Stephens:** I would rather have a debate about how we fund schools than a debate about hypothetical square footage.

[83] **Dr Blunden:** What we are saying is that the debate about whether or not the school stays open is not just about simple surplus capacity. A whole range of criteria need to be taken into account, including the impact on the community and the potential for new housing and transport links. That is why we see the major opportunity for a proper joined-up rural education policy, so that these decisions are not just taken in terms of simple, fabricated numbers.

[84] **Alun Davies:** We will take one more question from Alun Ffred, and then Brynle Williams.

12.00 p.m.

[85] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Mae gennyf un cwestiwn byr: ai eich safbwynt chi, yn sylfaenol, yw na ddylid cau un ysgol byth eto? **Alun Ffred Jones:** I have one small question: is it your fundamental opinion that no school should ever be closed again?

[86] **Dr Blunden:** No, that would be an untenable position. We ask that school closures be part of a measured and thoughtful process. It is the very fact that that has not happened in Powys that has brought us here.

[87] **Brynle Williams:** We have heard compelling evidence from you, but what specific measures would you put in place to assess the impact of school closures in rural communities? That is basically batting the question back to you, and saying, 'Right, come

on'. [Laughter.]

[88] **Dr Blunden:** I come from a background of research, but not in education. I would put a range of measures in place, some of which would be difficult to carry out, so I would want to look at the academic achievements of children, the behavioural impact on children, the impact on the community and the extent to which the community is able to sustain itself. I would also want to look at the longer term impact on things such as law and order. There is a range of things and it would be an interesting research study for someone to carry out.

[89] **Brynle Williams:** Thank you. That is exactly what I wanted to hear.

[90] **Alun Davies:** If there are no further questions, I thank you all for your evidence. We will probably wish to contact you to clarify other issues as part of our inquiry. I would be grateful if you would agree to write a note to us on those issues, if we have additional questions for you that are raised as part of this inquiry.

[91] The next meeting of this sub-committee will be on 11 June, when we will continue with this inquiry. That brings the meeting to a close. Thank you.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 12.02 p.m.
The meeting ended at 12.02 p.m.*