

# Rural Development Sub-committee

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## Cymdeithas yr Iaith's Opposition to the Statutory Notice to Close Ysgol Llanddeusant

### (1) Fundamental Case

Cymdeithas yr Iaith is opposing the intention to close Ysgol Llanddeusant because

there is no educational case for taking such a step and closing the school would actually be detrimental to the children's education.

closing the school would cause serious problems for a Welsh-language community.

the consultation process has been totally defective in that the Council has ignored the National Assembly's guidelines and its own objective as a council. No effort was made to evaluate possibilities other than to close the school. We believe the process has been so defective as to discredit the whole procedure if a decision is to be made based on this process.

### (2) Educational Case

2(1) The Council published a thin 4 page document in January 2008 as the basis for barely a month of consultation. In this paper, the only reference to education is made in point (9) where it is said that an Estyn inspection report in 2005 states that Ysgol Llanddeusant achieves high standards. The Assembly's guidelines note that the main consideration should be the standard of the education provided. The Council's document includes only one paragraph referring to education, and no effort is made to establish an educational case for closing the school.

2(2) The document says "there are also disadvantages in such small schools, particularly in the opportunities for group activities and in developing relationships with peers". Where there is a need to gather together a more substantial number of pupils of the same age for educational, social or sports purposes, this can be achieved through co-operation between schools. Structured collaboration can also offer educational advantages in terms of pooling resources and staff expertise.

2(3) If Ysgol Llanddeusant was to close, there is a real danger that a proportion of the community's children would be deprived of foundation phase education, which the Assembly Government considers a priority. Ysgol Llanddeusant is situated in the heart of the village and a vast proportion of the pupils walk to school. Children under 5 years are prohibited from using public transport. Therefore, unless parents have the means (2 cars in the family) to transport the children to and from another school on a daily basis, they will be deprived of foundation phase education, thereby placing the children under a disadvantage at the beginning of their education.

2(4) It is obvious that it would be more difficult for parents to participate fully in the life of the new school in another area – in terms of evenings, visiting teachers, applying to be governors and giving full support to their children. This would be detrimental to the children's education as parental and community support is vital in children's education.

2(5) If the school was to close, resources would not be available for community education, and the school profile composed by the Council itself refers to the library/Information Technology room as an important resource.

2(6) The Council recognises that Llanddeusant's children – if the school was to close – would be dispersed in different directions and to different schools, dividing the learning community amongst the children. This goes against good practice according to the Assembly's guidelines.

2(7) The entire document, and the Council's case for closing Ysgol Llanddeusant, is based on the perceived cost of the education. It is alleged that savings could amount to £90,000 a year. This is nothing more than a blinkered view of the education budget. There is no financial analysis of the effect of "decommissioning" a section of the building and using it for another public purpose rather than it being a part of the school or as an addition to the school, and receiving an income as a consequence. What effect would this have on the accounts? In point (1.9) of Assembly Circular No. 23/02, it is said that the LEA should consider "whether other use of the premises (an addition or part of the premises) would be an effective way of utilising the accommodation to the full". The Council has not considered this at all and the perceived loss of £90,000p.a. could be significantly reduced as a result. The library/IT room could be put to community educational use, the report states that there is a need to create a room in the area for basic education, some council officers could be located within the building rather than having to travel to Llangefni - the list of potential uses is vast and they could all generate income from other sources or save expenditure from other budgets. Because the Council recognises that Ysgol Llanddeusant offers the pupils a good education and bases its entire case on the cost, it has a particular responsibility to make such detailed analyses and adopt a holistic approach. It has failed in its responsibility and the Authority has not established any case for closing the school.

2(8) Also, closing the school would bring no benefits to the education budget in terms of capital. The building cannot be sold as the ownership of the site is unclear. We refer to the example of Ysgol Llanfihangel-ar-arth in Carmarthenshire. The school was closed 6 years ago, but the rights regarding the ownership of the building are far from being established.

### (3) Effect on the Community

3(1) Section (1.11) of the same Assembly Circular on school organisation, including school closures, states that consideration should be given to “the overall effect on the community of closure”. The school is situated in the heart of the village and is the single most important resource in a Welsh-speaking village community. In terms of a holistic approach to public accounts, it makes no sense that one council department is trying to save a moderate amount of money by closing a school whilst other public agencies are spending public money trying to renew our Welsh communities.

3(2) The Council’s only mention of this aspect is to note that there is a hall in the village, which means the formal use of the school for community purposes is limited. It is very superficial to try to measure the value of a school to a community by counting how many formal meetings are held in the building. A school – situated in the heart of a village such as Llanddeusant – is a beacon of hope for the future of a local community, and closing a school often has a detrimental effect on such a community. The young and active elements of a community are lost. Parents would not choose this school for their children because of its ethos as a “village school”, but rather because it is their village community’s school and they feel ownership of the school. According to the experiences of other villages whose schools were closed, parents in Llanddeusant would send their children to a number of different schools, depending on family convenience, if their school was to close. The children would be dispersed in different directions, and their parents would follow them to activities in the various schools as much as possible or stay at home if they couldn’t. The sense of community amongst the children and young parents would be lost. As a result, it would be more difficult to sustain any other centre or services in the village. There would be an increasing decline through the consistent phenomenon that young adults are less likely to buy houses in a community where there is no school.

3(3) There is also no analysis of the effect on the Welsh language, and this is the most Welsh-speaking school in the area. It is true that other schools in the area are also Welsh-medium schools, but the children of incomers to the village would then consider the Welsh language as an educational medium only rather than the key to the local community. If there was no school in the community, the parents would be less likely to identify with their children and try to learn Welsh. Above all, there would be a decline in the social life of a Welsh-speaking community. Because the school is situated in the very heart of the village, its importance in terms of maintaining a Welsh-speaking community is more important than in a school serving a more scattered area.

#### **(4) The Total Failure of the Consultation Process**

4(1) The results of the inspection of Bodedern and Holyhead catchment primary schools are in complete contrast to the objective the Council set itself at the beginning of the “rationalisation” process. As a result of its investigation into the future of schools in the area, the Council has decided to close Ysgol Llanddeusant and, in the case of the neighbouring schools in Ffrwd Win and Cylch y Garn, continue to maintain them but consider establishing an area school in the future after the completion of a whole-county review. In the same way, the Council has decided to close Ysgol Aberffraw and continue to maintain the neighbouring schools for the time being before deciding on the creation of collaboration structures at a later date.

These results are in complete contrast to the objective set in the first section of the Council’s consultation document (October 2007) Rationalisation of Holyhead and Bodedern Catchment Primary Schools which states that changes to the status quo should be sustainable in the long term. The Council recognises that its proposed changes for the Llanddeusant, Ffrwd Win and Cylch y Garn schools’ area are not sustainable in the long term as it intends to re-examine the schools within two years to consider establishing an Area School. There is also uncertainty regarding Ysgol Llanfachraeth, which has been omitted from the current consideration because the number of pupils is slightly above the arbitrary limit of 50. This is also totally unfair for the other schools as the Council’s existing recommendations do not give them any long term certainty. Therefore, the proposed change does not achieve the objective the Council set itself in terms of creating a sustainable answer.

4(2) The way in which the decision to close Ysgol Llanddeusant was taken is also in breach of the Assembly’s guidelines in terms of undertaking a fair consultation process before recommending the closure of a school. Section 2 of the Assembly’s circular on school organisation (and school closures) – no. 23/02 – lists some of the factors to consider –

“Whether alternatives to closure have been actively considered, in particular whether a federation, clustering or collaboration with other schools have been looked at (taking account of the scope for use of ICT links between schools) and the reasons for not pursuing these as an alternative to closure? Whether the possibilities of making fuller use of the existing buildings as an educational resource in the community have been explored? The simple answer is “No” – the Council did not even consider these possibilities, let alone evaluate them and offer reasons why these options were not chosen. The short document distributed in the statutory consultation period in January 2008 does not mention any options other than the problems related to maintaining the school as it is and the benefits of the Council’s proposal to close the school and send the children to any other school willing to accept them in the short term until those schools are also forced to close!!! The possibility of organising Ysgol Llanddeusant in a section of the existing building and using the remainder of the building for other educational purposes (a nursery or a foundation phase or community education room) or other community or administrative purposes has not even been mentioned, let alone evaluated. By “decommissioning” a section of the building as a school, the problem of surplus capacity and receiving income from sources other than the statutory primary school budget would be solved overnight.

**Because the authority has not analysed any of these alternative answers, and because it has also ignored other assembly guidelines such as studying the effect of school closure on the local community, the assembly government must now maintain the credibility of its own guidelines and sanction the appeal against the council’s intention to close the school on these grounds.**

Alternatively, the consultation and democratic process itself will lose all credibility.

4(3) It is true that the Authority has generally referred to other models in a previous consultation paper which discussed all the schools in the area, Rationalisation of Holyhead and Bodedern Catchment Primary Schools which was published some months earlier in October 2007. But this cannot be considered a serious analysis of other options in the context of the specific consultation period on the intention to close Ysgol Llanddeusant. Indeed, the Authority has completely misunderstood the nature of its responsibility in terms of analysing other options other than closing Ysgol Llanddeusant. In the final Section (5) of this document, the Authority quotes ESTYN's description of the general advantages and disadvantages of the different educational models – 5.1-independent school, 5.2-formal cluster, 5.3-informal federation, 5.4-formal federation, 5.5-Area School. The Council adds a general analysis of the typical costs of different federation models (but not in the context of any particular schools) and adds "it will be necessary to cost carefully any clustering or federation proposals, weighing to what extent the specific model under consideration is cost effective over the longer term". Yet there is thorough analysis of these options in the context of Ysgol Llanddeusant. The Council believes it is sufficient to refer to Estyn's general arguments for different educational models. Therefore, in the document published in October 2007, in referring to the options for Ysgol Llanddeusant, 3 short paragraphs are provided giving a rationale for closing the school but, in terms of the option to "continue to maintain as an independent school", it simply states "Considerations – see Section 5.1", thus referring to Estyn's general arguments. In the same way, the only mention of clustering with nearby schools is "see Section 5.2", and the only mention of each model and variation of federalisation with nearby schools is "see Section 5.3 / 5.4". The Council is under the illusion that it has met its statutory duty to evaluate alternatives by referring to general educational models. The Assembly's guidelines state clearly that "each case is judged on its merits" (2.1) – i.e. specific clustering/federalisation models must be evaluated alongside every other possibility. No effort was made to this end, and a conclusion to close a school cannot be reached based on "cut and paste" work from Estyn's website. The County Council has not evaluated the alternative answers according to its responsibility or provided such information to the people consulted. The process itself is therefore pointless.

4(4) The County Council made another basic mistake by dismissing a number of potential answers before starting. In its original consultation document on rationalising the area's schools, the different schools are listed according to size: A – Schools with 90+ pupils, B – Schools with 50-90 pupils, C – Schools with 20-50 pupils and D – Schools with fewer than 20 pupils. Only the two smallest school categories are discussed in terms of reorganisation, although Ysgol Llanfachraeth is brought in from category B for geographical convenience. This instantly excludes the possibility of creating a cluster/federation between a category A school (e.g. Bodedern) and smaller nearby schools. According to such a model, there would be potential savings in terms of pooling a number of resources and capital developments on the central site whilst maintaining education (and parents' interest) in the surrounding villages. It is certainly a model worth evaluating, and it was decided beforehand, for educational dogma reasons, not to do so. This is another step which made the consultation invalid. The only evaluation made in October 2007 of any other models was one table of the comparative costs of only four options 1) keeping Ysgol Llanddeusant, 2) amalgamation of Llanfachraeth and Llanddeusant and also amalgamation of Llanrhuddlad and Llanfaethlu, 3) amalgamation of Llanddeusant and Llanrhuddlad, and 4) Area School for the four. These analyses are limited to an office exercise in perceived financial savings and accounts, with no explanation for the figures or why it was decided to look at these arbitrary options and without considering the educational and community advantages and disadvantages of the different models. And there is no evaluation of clustering or federation models.

## **(5).Conclusion**

5(1) Why has Anglesey Council's attitude been so defective towards the consultation and offering real options for the people consulted? In our opinion, the answer is to be found in the minutes of another consultation meeting held in Ysgol Llanddeusant. Official minutes were recorded of a statutory consultation meeting with Ysgol Llanddeusant staff on 17.1.08. Here is the key section of the minutes:

Teacher – "If you decide to close the school – is there any point in us complaining?"

Cllr John Meirion Davies (ex-holder of the education portfolio) answering on behalf of the County Council – "The Assembly is putting pressure on us to close small schools. Despite this, they are not telling you not to oppose." He goes on to say that there is a need to look at the example of Denbigh Education Authority. "They did not agree with the way the Education Department was operating, so they run the Department themselves now".

Anglesey Council therefore believes that the Assembly Government is forcing Local Education Authorities to close schools but allowing those opposed to go through the motions to legitimise the consultation process and to give the impression that there was a choice. Because the Council is convinced the Assembly is insisting schools are closed, it sees no point wasting too many resources going through the motions of investigating different options because they will not be accepted.

The Assembly Minister for Education – through her verdict on this Appeal – must show whether or not there is a serious consultation process.

5(2) These documents on behalf of the Council, which form the basis for the case for closing Ysgol Llanddeusant, are completely openly and shameless exercises in accountancy with hardly any reference to education. This can in no way be reconciled with the Assembly's declaration that the first consideration should be children's education. According to the recommendation, the children will be taken from a school that is succeeding educationally and their parents and the community feel ownership towards, and sent to a variety of other schools with the clear possibility that it will again disrupt their education when these schools are forced to close to make way for an Area School. It is likely that the children of the future will be deprived of basic education and local people deprived of an important resource for community education in the heart of their village. It is argued that this disruption will save £90,000p.a. but this does not consider other methods of generating income by using the facility or extra costs in terms of tackling the resulting educational, community and cultural problems. We oppose the notice of the intention to close Ysgol Llanddeusant.

Cymdeithas yr Iaith 3.5.08