

Rural Development Sub-Committee

RDC(3)-11-08 (p1) Annex D: 25 June 2008

Opposition to the Notification to Close Ysgol Mynyddcerrig by Cymdeithas yr Iaith (The Welsh Language Society)

1(1) We challenge the validity of the whole "consultation" process since it is obvious throughout the original consultation document that the intention is to act upon the Council's wish to close the school. There is no further attempt by the Council to follow any process of real and honest consultation. The overwhelming response of parents, governors and villagers is to believe that the Council will not listen to any other opinion.

1(2) We object to the Council's effort to limit consultation to the minimum number of people by giving just one month to consider the future of the school and by sending their document to the statutory bodies only (see Section 5) – rather than attempting to lead an open and honest discussion in the local community which is what has occurred in Ceredigion and Gwynedd. We do not believe that the decision, under pressure, to extend the period for another month has been a wise one since this is a period which stretches to the end of July/ into August when schools are closed and governors are not able to meet.

1(3) We challenge the validity of the consultation because the Council rushed into considering the school's future (in contravention of the Time Limit within its own strategy) when pupil numbers were at their lowest. The Council knows full well that this is an unusually low number of children at the school, and that the forthcoming plans to build affordable homes in the village will lead to a sustainable increase in the numbers of pupils. By acting now the Council is attempting to gain the short term advantage rather than looking at the long term sustainability of the school.

1(4) We oppose the reasoning behind seeking to decide on the future of Ysgol Mynyddcerrig in a void. According to the time limit within the Council's own strategy the future of primary education in Pontyberem/Bancffosfelen/Mynyddcerrig needed to be examined. It does not make sense to consider the future of Ysgol Mynyddcerrig separately to the other two schools since alternative solutions to closing the school concerns considering the relationship between Mynyddcerrig and the other two schools. This document really highlights (section 4.2) the nonsense of discussing Ysgol Mynyddcerrig separately. How can we have a reasonable discussion on the relationship between Mynyddcerrig and Bancffosfelen if the future of Bancffosfelen is to be discussed in a few months' time? It is completely unreasonable to discuss the future of Mynyddcerrig in a void, separately, a few months prior to the discussion on the future of primary education in the whole area.

1(5) We challenge the validity of the consultation document because there is no fair and balanced approach in terms of any of the 9 alleged options, apart from the Council's own preferred option, option 9 which is given so much space and consideration. Sections 4.2, 4.3 and 4.5 really also invalidate any consultation exercises in the future because they attempt to undermine schools that have not been discussed and have not been subject to any decision on their future and where governors are trying to fulfil their statutory duties despite this undermining by a Council which should be supporting them.

1(6) Disbelief – on the part of Cymdeithas yr Iaith and the local community – about the way the Executive Board considered and handled the thousands of words of response received on the consultation document. A summarised response was produced by the Education Officers to the opposition to the Council's obvious wish to close the school, and then the Board received the recommendation from officers at a meeting "without any discussion whatsoever", and without giving the full Council the opportunity to discuss the matter. This approach to the consultation process has brought serious discredit to the whole democratic process locally. If the Council is given licence to take the serious step of closing a school on the basis of this outrageous practice, there will be a lack of faith in the consultation processes of the future. It is obvious that the officers believe – rightly or wrongly – that they have a 'carte blanche' from the Welsh Assembly Government to close tens of Welsh village schools, and that they can take make light of any consultation process. It is really obvious that part of the officers' strategy is to raise awareness amongst parents that participation in a consultation process is to no avail because the schools are bound to be close anyway. As a result, the officers hope that parents will move their children voluntarily from the schools, which will be forced to close, and therefore the need for what the officers see as a consultation "nuisance" will be avoided. It is time that the Welsh Assembly Government puts an end to this "cavalier" approach of the County Council towards local democracy, and attempts to restore people's faith in the consultation process.

2(1) We declare that that the best way to safeguard a sustainable and successful future for primary education in Mynyddcerrig is by promoting co-operation between Mynyddcerrig, Bancffosfelen and Pontyberem schools in order to create a federalised, sound, multi-site school.

2(2) We believe that the Council has further invalidated the consultation process by ignoring any professional analysis of the option, and choosing to depend – where reference is made to it at all – on a few derisive comments.

2(3) There is no mention that all the educational advantages in option 9 – pooling the expertise of more staff, more interaction between the children – are also in option 7. Again, in section 2.3 there's reference to the educational limitations that exist for a small number of children in a school and no attention at all is drawn to the potential interaction with children from nearby schools.

2(4) Not only has the Council invalidated the consultation process by not analysing the federalisation option, but it has also contravened the National Assembly Guidelines (in terms of examining all the options before closing a school) by denying its full responsibility to lead

such a discussion. The Council provides 5 short sentences only (4.7) to analyse the option and it states that it is the school's responsibility to establish a relationship with partners and to create such a scheme. The Council does not intend to lead any such investigation and governors are expected to volunteer to complete the task within the consultation period of one month. The Council's response, and its denial of all responsibility is laughable and it sheds a shadow of contempt onto the whole consultation process and the Assembly's own guideline to look into every alternative to school closure is undermined. The Council believes that it is sufficient to list other solutions without analysis. This is a case of serious maladministration on the part of officers. We believe that it is the Council's responsibility to lead such an important discussion. The County Council has either misunderstood or chosen to ignore its role in this matter. The role of the County Council is not to wait – as alleged by themselves in their response to comments on the Consultation Document – for governors within a month or two of consultation to produce a detailed Business Plan looking at creating a federalised school. No, the Council's role should be to lead the discussion and to examine the options in a professional manner. The only exception to this, is if it is obvious from the outset that federalisation would not be a viable option. But Mynyddcerrig/Bancffosfelen is a historic unit of 95 children on average, and the numbers have dropped to below 60 only due to the current uncertainties. Creating a federalisation of 3 schools is an even stronger unit. We must therefore come to the conclusion that it was a mistake in terms of the process not to examine the option in detail, and the Council cannot deny this responsibility in 4 clichéd sentences in a consultation document without doing a discredit to the exercise as a whole. WE DECLARE THAT THE WHOLE PROCESS IS INVALID DUE TO THIS FAULT.

2(5) Not only is the Council not leading such a discussion, but the officers state in the introduction to the Consultation Document (4.9) that federalisation would not solve the basic problems. If officers do not believe that federalisation is a solution to educational requirements and utilisation of buildings, what is the purpose of raising it as an option? Officers have refused federalisation as an option in each case for the last decade, and it is very obvious by now that the objection is dogmatic, not based on individual circumstances. The Council is not then qualified to make an objective options assessment in this case.

2(6) We believe that creating a federation of Mynyddcerrig, Bancffosfelen and Pontyberem schools will create a strong educational unit whilst keeping an educational presence in all the villages and therefore keeping the all-important attachment of the parents and the community to the children's education. In similar communities evidence was seen that this attachment soon deteriorates when a school is closed in a village by parents' unwillingness thereafter to serve as governors. By pooling the expertise of the teachers of the 3 schools we could present wider educational experiences to the children. The schools are in close proximity for children to get together for specific activities and therefore to receive a wider variety of experiences than in conventional one-site schools.

2(7) There would also be considerable financial savings made by creating an integrated staffing structure under one headteacher, and a lot of capital developments could be centralised on one site. Because the building at Mynyddcerrig is in such good condition (Section 2.2) with all the basic facilities, no significant capital investment would be needed. There would certainly be excess capacity from the creation of such a federation. There should be a positive and corporate response to this and the Council and its partners (in community education, community development, social services, culture and health) should study how they could use the capacity available at Mynyddcerrig and Bancffosfelen to deliver their services in the villages and therefore promoting social inclusion. To do this, and using the buildings for wider purposes than statutory primary education only, further financial sources could be sought to achieve improvements to buildings without it being too taxing on the Statutory Education Budget.

2(8) We oppose the allegation made – in the consultation meetings rather than in the document – that a federation cannot act successfully between one large site and two smaller sites. On the contrary, this is a model which has great potential for the federation. Rather than there being a risk of a culture of competition between fairly even sites, there would be one central site with 2 marginal sites, and with the flexibility to organise year on year and to centralise developments.

3(1) We strongly object to the officers' preferred option(9) of closing the school and sending the children to Pontyberem. Past experience in the county in terms of centralising education has shown that there is reluctance amongst parents to take their children to the school that's pushed on them by the Authority and the bad feeling created locally is harmful to education in the area and also to the central school.

3(2) No good educational reason was given in the document for closing the school and transferring the children to a central school. On the contrary. The school was seen to be emerging following Special Measures and succeeding in terms of education. It is very cynical of the Council to close a school which has put so much effort into improving successfully. Of course a temporary measure with another school cannot last – this is why we are asking for this arrangement to be given a permanent basis, which would be fair to all parties, and would be a reason for co-operation between the schools rather than a reason for cutting short this co-operation.

3(3) Our argument is that sending very young children out of their community to obtain their nursery education is harmful to their early education. There is sufficient data available these days from village communities that have lost their school. The educational achievements of these children could be compared to similar children who attend schools in their own villages. It is unpardonable that the Council is rushing ahead with this plan without knowing the impact it would have on young children.

3(4) Closing Ysgol Mynyddcerrig would deprive 3-4 year old children in the area in the future of an all-important foundation phase education if their parents do not have the resources to take them to a central school. Children are not permitted to travel on a school bus until they are 5 years old.

3(5) It is unpardonable also that the Council proposes to close the school without undertaking any impact assessment on the local community. This cannot be inkeeping with the Council's corporate objective of "safeguarding Welsh communities". Again, there is plenty of data available from other communities who have lost their school to assess the impact this had on them – in particular on the children's interaction with each other and the influence that young families have on local community life.

3(6) There has been no analysis either of the effect of closing a village school on the Welsh language. It is a fact that Ysgol Pontyberem is also a category "A" school but, to lose the local school, it is inevitable that some parents will take their children to other schools, in towns close to their places of work, and they may be lost to Welsh medium education as a result.

3(7) Most importantly, we oppose the option to close the school since it so obviously goes against the wishes of parents, governors and the local community. A responsible Authority must co-operate with parents and governors, otherwise it will accumulate problems for itself for the future.

4(1) Finally we return to our complaint that this is not a valid consultation document. The first 8 options in the alleged Consultation Document are dealt with in 4/5 sentences each in the format of an amateur template and there is then an extensive piece on the Council's preferred option 9.

4(2) When outlining these options, what we see are facts and arguments that strengthen the Council's viewpoint in favour of option 9. Every argument apart from those which back up the Council's opinion is left out e.g. 1 – section 2.3 does not refer to federalisation as a possible answer for the small number of pupils at the school, e.g. 2 – Section 2.5 does not refer to the development of a significant number of affordable housing in the village when referring to the excess capacity in the school, e.g. 3 – there is a discussion on how the learning opportunities could be extended for the children by transferring them to other schools only, rather than presenting a case as to how this could be achieved at Mynyddcerrig. Unbelievably, this section even suggests that closing the school would reflect the wishes of parents!

4(3) We cannot accept that there is any professional effort being made to assess different options to inform open and meaningful consultation, and the lack of discussion in the Executive Board meeting confirms that the future of the children and the future of the community has not been dealt with seriously. If opposers of the move had the financial resources, the validity of the whole process would be successfully challenged in a court of law. It is apparent that the Executive Board's only intention, as soon as possible is to sell the buildings and grounds of many of our schools as part-payment for their development plans. This document shows that the officers are not at all interested in honest consultation.

4(4) We cannot accept that it was appropriate for the Executive Board to reach a decision (particularly without any discussions!) on such a serious issue, which fundamentally effects the children's education and the future of the local community, without referring the matter to the full Council meeting. This is particularly true when there is significant opposition to plans to close a school. The fact that the Council has had one general discussion on the Educational Provision Modernisation Strategy means that the Executive Board has a mandate to close any school that was referred to for 4 years without discussion by the Council. The circumstances of schools and groups of schools will always be different and there will be developments over a period of time. The full Council must have the opportunity to discuss each case where there is significant opposition to the closure. This is once again a serious flaw in the consultation process.

For all these reasons, Cymdeithas yr Iaith objects to the Notification to Close Ysgol Mynyddcerrig and considers that closing the school under these circumstances and without valid discussion puts at risk the pupils' education. The move would be detrimental to the Welsh language and would make a mockery of the professional standards of officers who should make voluntary options assessments, and would undermine the public's trust in the consultation process.

We call on the County Council to withdraw the Notification of Closure and to return in the autumn this year to their original intention to have an open discussion on primary education provision at Mynyddcerrig/Banffosfelen/Pontyberem. If the Council refuses to withdraw this Notification of Closure, we appeal to the Minister for Education to instruct them to withdraw the notification and to begin a meaningful and open discussion on the future of primary education in this locality.

Cymdeithas yr Iaith/The Welsh Language Society
November 3, 2006