

Rural Development Sub-committee

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

Annex E

Evidence for Consideration by the Rural Development Sub Committee: Scrutiny inquiry - Reorganisation of Rural Schools

Context

My name is Matt Dix and until July of last year I had two children in Ysgol Mynyddcerrig, our village school. I was also a parent governor, and through my work both on the governing body and as vice chair of the Carmarthenshire Primary Schools Forum I have significant first hand experience of both the process of 'reorganisation' of primary education in rural areas, and its impact on the wider community. I welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to this committee and would respectfully assert that the status of small schools in rural areas represents one of the most significant issues facing rural communities at the present time.

Ysgol Mynyddcerrig was closed by the local authority in July 0f 2007. I now send my children to the school nearest to us in a neighbouring village a few miles away. This school is also under threat of closure.

Notes on Mynyddcerrig; the Role and Function of the Village School as a Positive Community Presence

Mynyddcerrig is a small rural village in the Gwendraeth Valley at the edge of the South Wales anthracite fields. This predominantly Welsh-speaking village has traditionally been an extremely close knit community that has a strong sense of collective values and an ethos of 'self-help'.

However, as with so many other communities in Wales, the wide ranging socio-economic changes of the last thirty or so years have had a profound effect upon the village and have significantly eroded many of the institutions necessary to maintain social cohesion within rural communities. These can be summarised as follows:

The Loss of the Coal Mining Industry: in the 1980s had a profound impact upon the people of Wales in terms of increased unemployment, decrease in wages levels and an erosion of the social and cultural patterns of living. The closure of Cynheidre Colliery deprived many of the inhabitants of Mynyddcerrig of both employment and the mechanisms for social engagement and cohesion that surrounded it.

Loss of the Village Post Office: The closure of the Mynyddcerrig Post Office removed a fundamental instrument of social support from the people of the village, particularly the more vulnerable within the community.

Loss of the Village Shop: The closure of the village shop had an equally negative impact upon the village, adding to the concern that the community was in danger of loosing its sense of collective identity.

Within this context the role village school attains a specific resonance that extends well beyond its primary educational function. It represents a focal point for social cohesion, binding all elements of the community together and promoting a sense of collective identity.

Like many other villages in rural Wales, Mynyddcerrig has been subject to extensive development and demographic change. From a personal perspective and as a relative newcomer to the Gwendraeth Valley, the village school undoubtedly played a pivotal role in my ability to integrate into the local community. It also provided instant exposure to the Welsh language, positively encouraging us as parents to begin learning the language initially as a means of supporting our children's development and learning, but later as a product of the relationships we had formed with those in the village and beyond. Thus the village school, far from being archaic and outmoded, has a vital and positive role to play in managing change, acting as an instrument for inclusion and language promotion. I regret to say that the absence of the village school brings the prospect of newcomers living in isolation from the those around them a little closer, with all the attendant dangers in terms of cultural/linguistic erosion and social friction and disharmony.

Consultation and Reorganisation

Following consultation with the local authority and subsequent appeal to the Minister, Ysgol Mynyddcerrig closed in July 2007. I would like to submit evidence both on the nature of the consultation process, and some of the underlying assumptions upon which it was based.

Consultation Process (1):

The authorities commitment to face to face meetings within the consultation period was extremely disappointing, amounting to successive one hour long meetings with governors, staff and parents. I would respectfully suggest that this does not allow time for an adequate examination of the position of those invited to attend.

Consultation Process (2):

Members of the wider community who did not have a child at the school were excluded from these meetings. I would therefore further suggest that the authority adopted an extremely restricted definition in relation to 'stakeholders' affording significant sections of the community little public voice.

Consultation Process (3):

The authority deliberately confined itself to a very narrow educational remit, focusing upon the schools ability to deliver the curriculum and perceived organisational and financial difficulties to the exclusion of its wider community function. No study was ever conducted into the impact of the closer on the wider community.

Consultation Process (4):

The authority chose to communicate decisions of import via press release rather than communicating directly with the governing body. This was true of both the decisions to commence the consultation process and the decision of the executive board to issue a section 12 notice. Most of the governing body learnt of these decisions via journalists seeking our responses. This significantly undermined confidence in authority's commitment to genuine constructive dialogue.

Consultation Process (5):

It remains an unfortunate fact that the emphasis upon surplus places within rural schools, particularly within the context of statutory consultation, acts as a self fulfilling prophecy with parents legitimately concerned with the potential for disruption opting to send their children to larger schools. This compounds the difficulty in attracting resources and teaching staff and reinforces the popular misconception of small school = failing school.

Consultation Process (6):

The insistence of the authority of only examining their preferred option meant that opportunities for alternative methods of management were never adequately examined. Opportunities presented by the extraordinary range of IT equipment that were available at the school and the possibilities presented by federation and/or clustering never received the scrutiny they warranted.

Many of these arguments have been made before and policy makers are familiar with their content and character. However, I would strongly suggest that the current situation in Mynyddcerrig is of interest in that it can be seen as a reasonably typical Welsh speaking rural community that has lost most of its amenities; an examination of which allows for reflection and broader policy evaluation.

Impact on Community one year on

I would begin by acknowledging that some of the statements I am about to make are essentially subjective and immeasurable in a quantitative sense. I make few apologies for this and would further assert that since the impact of the loss of our school greatly concerns the feelings of those involved, it warrants far closer qualitative scrutiny that it has hitherto received.

Educational Provision Post Closure:

With one exception, none of the children previously educated at Ysgol Mynyddcerrig have gone to the authority's preferred option of Ysgol Pontyberem. They now attend a multitude of different schools and have little if any social contact. This should not be trivialised or reduced to simply a question of childhood friends moving away. It represents a further assault on our collective identity as a village in as much as the next generation are growing up devoid of any sense of their community.

Demographic Change:

I am aware of several parents, particularly those on low incomes who experience transport difficulties, who are actively seeking to move out of the village in order that they can be closer to their new 'chosen' school. One of these families has sent their children to Ysgol Mynyddcerrig for five generations. I am sure I do not need to emphasise the sense of loss and injustice this family are feeling. It is equally worth mentioning that this represents another local family being priced out of their community.

Impact upon Other Community Institutions:

As previously stated, many of the institutions that previously maintained the social fabric within Mynyddcerrig have ceased to be. One of the remaining exceptions is the Welfare Committee, that can trace its roots back over 50 years and is a registered and active charity working for the benefit of the community. Unfortunately, the closure of the school has had a detrimental effect upon this organisation. Much of the activities, events and income generation that the committee engaged in were previously for the benefit of the children of the village and naturally revolved around the school as the hub. The extent to which the school acted as a unifying force to the committee has become all too apparent and debate as to role and purpose has split the committee. A breakaway group has been established, taking with them a significant proportion of the committee's funding stream.

Adjustment of Children:

Whilst entirely subjective I would like to emphasise how happy my children were at Ysgol Mynyddcerrig. The small family atmosphere that was actively encouraged was not only an extension of their community, but was also instrumental in the ability of the children of two ostensibly English speaking parents to become fluent Welsh speakers. There is an old African saying along the lines 'that it takes a village to raise a child'; a sentiment I would entirely endorse. The relationship between language acquisition and community is self evident in the case of our children. I'm very much afraid to say that irrespective of the undoubted qualities of their new school, it is a

transition that they are still struggling to come to terms with, with my 9 year old daughter in particular deeply unhappy. This is obviously amplified by their awareness that this school too is on the closure list, and that at any time the authority deems appropriate they could be having to go through the whole thing again.

Environmental Impact:

It remains a lamentable fact that no environmental impact study was ever carried out prior to the closure of Ysgol Mynyddcerrig. The small rural road have no paved areas and are completely unsuited to use by small children leaving parents (with the financial ability to do so) no option other than to drive their children to school thus increasing traffic and associated pollution.

Erosion of Confidence:

One of the more disturbing consequences of the closure lies in the extent to which it has eroded confidence in local democracy. Many who feel that local opposition to closure was all but universal are dismayed by the lack of representation they were afforded, and have concluded rightly or wrongly that there remains little point in trying to engage within established democratic forums. This conception of the 'tyrannical majority' able to act against those with little economic, social or electoral power ought to be of concern to policy makers asking the perennial question as to why people feel so disillusioned with politics.

Conclusions

What ever the intention of policy makes in Cardiff may have reasonably been, the experience within Mynyddcerrig of school closure suggests strongly that inadequate focus has been employed in terms of the impact upon the wider community. This inadequacy is multidimensional in character and has undermined other policy objectives of the assembly government, notably the desire to promote the use of Welsh, the espoused commitment to rural communities, and the need to propagate inclusiveness in decision making.

I would respectfully suggest if the drive to eliminate surplus places within educational provision in Wales is to be viewed as appropriate and just, then significantly more effort needs to be employed to cultivate an honest and open dialogue with those upon whom it most impacts. As such I welcome this opportunity to submit evidence, and would welcome the chance to engage further should you wish to learn more of our experiences in Mynyddcerrig.

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