

Minutes of Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

Date: Thursday 14 December, 2000

Time: 2.30pm

Venue: Cyfartha Castle, Merthyr Tydfil

Cynog Dafis, Chair	Plaid Cymru	Mid and West Wales
Jane Davidson, Assembly Minister	Labour	Pontypridd
Janice Gregory	Labour	Ogmore
Pauline Jarman	Plaid Cymru	South Wales Central
Huw Lewis	Labour	Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney
Jonathan Morgan	Conservative	South Wales Central
Owen John Thomas	Plaid Cymru	South Wales Central

Committee Secretariat:

Delyth Thomas	Committee Clerk
Stephen Thomas	Deputy Committee Clerk

Apologies:

Gareth Jones

Christine Humphreys

Alun Pugh

Lorraine Barrett

Substitutions:

Owen John Thomas for Gareth Jones

Declarations of Interest:

Cynog Dafis	Registered Teacher
Jane Davidson	Registered Teacher
Pauline Jarman	Leader of Rhonda Cynon Taf Council
Huw Lewis	Registered Teacher
Owen John Thomas	Qualified Teacher

The Chair explained that this meeting was the second oral submission session arranged for the Committee’s policy review on the supply of school places. The Committee took evidence from 3 organisations.

1. The Welsh Language Board (WLB)

Representatives:

Meirion Prys Jones, Chief Education Officer

Andrea Miller, Higher Education Officer

1.1 The following points were made in the WLB’s presentation:

- WLB’s representatives asked Committee members to put themselves in the position of a first-language Welsh parent of a four year old child whose local bilingual school is 20 miles away and full, while the local English school is only two miles away and has places available.. This is the stark choice faced by many parents in Wales.
- Demand for education in Welsh medium and bilingual schools is growing and needs to be catered for. When new Welsh medium schools are opened they quickly fill.
- The number of children receiving bilingual education is now approximately 25% of children attending school in Wales.

- Welsh medium provision has developed in an ad hoc fashion over recent years and has often been the result of parental pressure exerted at local level. Parents should not have to fight for places at Welsh medium or bilingual schools. Each LEA should have in place an agreed strategic plan for Welsh medium education.
- WLB highlighted the plight of many Welsh medium schools, who continue to occupy sub-standard buildings, often previously vacated by English medium schools.
- It was acknowledged that LEAs face a difficult task in providing the right number of school places in the right locations. The Committee's initial paper showed that across Wales 14% of primary places and 13% of secondary places are unfilled, but the picture for Welsh medium schools could not be separated out to show whether they too had surplus places or whether demand exceeded supply. LEAs are required to refer in their schemes and plans to Welsh language provision, but often the supporting data is inadequate.
- A first step would be a common definition of the term "bilingual education". No agreed definition currently exists and this makes collation of accurate data very difficult. The Assembly must have the relevant statistical evidence in order to support its policies, but WLB do not have the statutory right to collect such information.
- Data which the WLB had collated indicated that 16 LEAs have designated Welsh medium or bilingual schools that operate at or above capacity.
- At least 7 LEAs are in the position of having to seek provision out of county in order to provide Welsh medium or bilingual education, resulting in many pupils having to travel long distances to access this education.
- 9 LEAs have recently opened new Welsh medium schools or have moved their Welsh medium schools into larger premises.
- 4 LEAs have made successful PFI bids to facilitate the opening of new Welsh medium secondary schools.
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- Over 70% of LEAs face over-subscription at Welsh medium schools
- The Board also noted that the birth rate is falling nationally but demand for Welsh medium or bilingual education continues to increase.
- All this points to a need for Welsh medium and bilingual school places to be planned for in a more strategic way and as an integrated part of the mainstream of educational provision.

1.2 The Chair thanked the WLB for its presentation. He said that these issues were ones that the Culture Committee might consider when it begins its review of the Welsh language in the spring.

1.3 The Minister agreed on the need for better data collection. She suggested that a working group of officials, the WLB and the Welsh Local Government Association might be established to look at the strategic development of Welsh language provision in schools, although clearly the responsibility for taking action remained with the LEAs.

1.4 The following points were made in the subsequent question and answer session:

- The WLB would welcome the opportunity to discuss data collection with Assembly officials and the WLGA. Its representatives accepted that it is a matter for each LEA to meet

demand for local provision, but also said that there was an urgent need for some central strategic plan. The Assembly should take an overview and establish an inclusive strategy for developing Welsh medium and bilingual education.

- The 1992 Welsh Language Act enshrined the right that anybody wanting to receive Welsh medium education for their children should be able to do so, but problems in delivering this should not be left solely to the LEAs. WLB believed that the LEAs would welcome a strategic approach and guidance from the Assembly on this matter.
- WLB accept that it is difficult to define what constitutes a "reasonable" distance for a child to travel in order to attend a Welsh medium school. Individual LEAs have differing views on this.
- WLB estimate that the average class size in a Welsh medium school is about 30, but again the lack of available data places some doubt over this figure.
- Where there is uncertainty about the supply of places at Welsh medium secondary schools, this inhibited the take up of places at primary level and hindered growth of the language..
- There was a need for greater co-operation between LEAs, particularly where there was cross border provision. Where schools had surplus capacity the option of utilising this for Welsh medium provision should be considered, even if this resulted in a school with both Welsh and English medium streams.

1.5 The Minister commented that problems over the definition of Welsh medium education and collection of useful statistics needed to be resolved. She was also interested in the Board's view that Welsh medium streams might be developed within existing English medium schools, with the balance changing over a gradual period if the demand was there.

1.6 The Chair thanked WLB representatives for their informative presentation.

2) Diocesan Schools Authority

Representatives:

Liam Affley, Director of Schools, Archdiocese of Cardiff

Peter R Williams, Director of Education for the Diocese of St Asaph

Rev. Canon Dr Graham Loveluck, Director of Education for the Diocese of

Bangor

Dr Keith Denison, Diocesan Director of Education for the Diocese of Monmouth

2.1 The Chair said that both the Catholic and Anglican Churches in Wales were represented by the Diocesan Schools Authority.

2.2 Mr Affley, on behalf of the three Catholic Dioceses of Wales, gave a brief presentation of which the following were the key points:

- The Catholic Church in Wales views the supply of school places as an important issue. It supports the concept of "value for money" strategies, but would not subscribe to solving problems by application of simplistic formulas.
- Catholic Church schools are located in three dioceses: Cardiff, Wrexham and Menevia. In total, they provide for 77 primary schools and 15 secondary schools and serve the needs of around 17,000 pupils. All these schools are voluntary aided, so their legal basis is different from voluntary controlled church schools; each governing body being an admissions authority in its own right.
- Mr Affley suggested that any attempt to remove surplus places should be underpinned by a degree of caution. Some unfilled places should not be removed, in case of future increases in demand.
- 3 major factors should be taken into account when discussing the supply and rationalisation of school places:
 - the provision of transport to the nearest appropriate school,
 - the options for alternative constructive use of surplus accommodation, for instance as resource rooms or nursery provision;
 - and perhaps most importantly, the issue of parental choice. At some Catholic schools, governors are facing increasing demands for admission. Although some schools have surplus capacity, many are over-subscribed and the number of admission appeals is also increasing.
- The Catholic Church feels that close collaboration with Local Education Authorities on the production of School Organisation Plans and on forecasting pupil numbers, is vital in the future. In terms of the Cardiff Diocese, it is in the process of establishing a diocesan review panel which look at the totality of Catholic schools in the city. The review, to be completed by 2002, will include a study of the supply of school places.

4. Peter Williams, on behalf of the Diocesan Directors of Education, Church in Wales, made the following key points:

- The provision of a significant number of denominational schools in Wales, in addition to offering diversity and choice, also contributes in a positive way to the stated aim of the National Assembly to raise standards.
- There are 178 Church in Wales Schools, 175 primary and 3 secondary. These schools are distributed between the 6 Dioceses in Wales, but the pattern of provision across the LEAs is patchy.
- A review of Church Schools is currently being conducted by Lord Dearing and a report is expected shortly. Its interim report, published this week links the distinctiveness of Church Schools with their effectiveness and calls for a growth in their number, especially in the

secondary sector.

- The vast majority of Church in Wales schools are local village community schools. As well as serving the local community they often have pupils from outside the catchment area where parents have expressed their preference for denominational education. Church Schools tend to be popular and suffer from over-subscription resulting in frequent admissions appeals.
- The Church in Wales works closely with most LEAs in their responsibility for managing school places. Effective partnerships are found especially in local authorities where Diocesan representation, with voting rights, is provided in the decision taking structure of those authorities. It works less well in the minority of LEAs which fail to consult the Diocesan Authorities on their School Organisation Plans.
- Regarding the issue of surplus places in small schools, the Church in Wales does not accept that there is an inevitable link between small schools and inadequate delivery of a broad curriculum. Many of the very small schools deliver very high standards.
- In conclusion, Mr Williams was confident that the Church in Wales can continue to work with LEAs and the National Assembly to provide a first class education within a Christian framework for a large percentage of Christian children in Wales. It welcomed the re-enforcement of denominational education in the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 and is grateful for the encouragement and support received from officers and members of the Assembly.

2.4 The following points were made in the subsequent question and answer session:

- The Assembly shared the view that it was essential for local authorities to fully consult Diocesan Authorities on their SOPs and officials were checking this aspect of all draft SOPs currently being produced.
- The availability of finance is a key issue in the creation of a new school. The Dearing report encourages every diocese to create one secondary school within its area. If the number of voluntary aided schools increase (following the adoption of new Change of Category Regulations), the Church in Wales hope to see a corresponding increase in voluntary aided capital grant.
- Mr Affley accepted that there are Catholic schools with surplus capacity, but he favoured a gradual approach to this problem, rather than biting the bullet immediately. The solution indeed needs to take account of many things: the community aspects of education, lifelong learning and the need for an increase in nursery education.
- Mr Affley refuted the suggestion that some Church schools operated an admissions policy of selection by ability.
- The Chair wondered whether, in this day and age, there was an anomaly in non conformist families or parents with no particular religious beliefs, sending their children to Church in Wales schools. He also wondered whether rationalisation of small rural schools would be hampered if one was a church school.

4. The Chair thanked the Diocesan Schools Authority for an informative session.

3) ESTYN

Representatives:

Mike Haines, Head of Inspection Division: Early Years and Pre-16 Education

Gareth Adams, HMI

Bob Swain, HMI

4. ESTYN commented on the 3 strands of the policy review. Firstly on "establishing what is the optimum level of unfilled places, allowing for flexibility:

- LEAs usually know the changes they would like to make to rationalise provision of school places. Progress however is uneven and in some authorities there is not the political will to make hard decisions.
- The challenges for LEAs are complicated by a range of factors and it is often difficult to convince those with vested interests of the benefits of change. Parental wishes are often a key factor, indeed the effects of parental choice often create unfilled places.
- ESTYN support the good educational use often made of unfilled places. These uses include curriculum enhancing and the strengthening of links within the community. Overcrowded schools did not provide good working conditions for pupils or staff.

4. Secondly, determining the costs of retaining surplus places

- Financial savings mainly accrue from closing whole schools or sites, or from clearly redesignating accommodation for community or other use.
- ESTYN believed that the calculation of capacity and thus of the surplus which might be costed needed to be done flexibly: the current formula did not recognise for instance that mixed age classes might need more space than single year group classes.
- In determining the financial costs of surplus places, special consideration should be given to small rural schools, Welsh-medium schools and denominational schools.
- However, given the need to protect some of these schools, LEAs in some rural and predominantly Welsh speaking areas do have plans for further reduction of unfilled places.

4. Thirdly, identifying the actions local authorities need to take to effectively manage their stocks of school places:

- The need to produce coherent School Organisation Plans was a spur to all authorities to

consider their management of their stocks of school places strategically. LEAs need to take account of good practice, this includes a regular review of class sizes, the value of wide consultation, improving the quality of educational provision and challenging traditional perceptions of school catchment boundaries.

- ESTYN believe that LEAs should press on with plans for further rationalisation of primary provision. The closure of secondary schools is more contentious, but there may be a case for it in urban and valley areas. Small sixth forms were a problem which needed to be addressed.
- In the primary sector small schools performed as well as larger ones, but in the secondary sector, larger schools seemed to do better. There was a vicious circle in some urban areas of schools with falling standards leading to parental drift, falling rolls and further performance problems. Merging two such small and struggling schools was not always an effective solution. The small schools that have made most progress in recent years have been those that have prioritised the development of community links and harnessed talents of a wide range of partners.

4. The following comments were made in the subsequent question and answer session:

- ESTYN is about to publish a report about the emerging post-16 provision.
- It supported comments regarding the potential of schools to bring together disadvantaged communities, but imaginative solutions are needed in some areas; one such solution could be to amalgamate successful and less successful schools so that the success of the one rubs off on the other.
- The strongest factor influencing pupil attendance at school is parental concern about truancy.
- In reply to a question from the Minister ESTYN agreed that federation of several small schools could work well, also less formal co-operation such as sharing specialist teachers (eg in music).
- ESTYN did not have a set view on the minimum viable size for a primary school. There were a handful of schools with only one teacher, nearly a quarter of primary schools had three teachers or less. The challenges for these teachers were great, particularly teaching a wide age range in one class, but often they rose to this challenge and delivered good results. However ESTYN would not positively recommend mixed age classes. The more year groups there were in one class the harder it was to manage. Head teachers would probably say that their ideal size for a primary school is about 210 pupils and 900 for secondary. Sixth forms of about 80-100 pupils are economically viable.

ESTYN is aware of the pressures on teachers in small schools and try to ensure that they do not place the same expectations upon them. There were fewer applicants for these pressurised and isolated posts in small schools.

4. The Chair thanked ESTYN for attending. He concluded that some important questions had been highlighted at the meeting. These included the need to establish a common of Welsh medium education, not least so as to collect the appropriate

data. Eliminating wasteful surplus places yet striking the right balance of supporting small schools, rural schools, denominational schools and schools in deprived areas was an exceptionally important and difficult question, which the Assembly needed to grapple with.

4. The next steps were that the Clerk would produce a draft report of the discussions to date for the Committee to consider in the New Year. The Audit Commission will also be conducting an audit of statistical information on the supply of school places; their report will be available in March, and before the Committee comes to any conclusions it should have the opportunity to consider this. The Chair asked the Clerk to include this as an item on a spring agenda and to liase with the Audit Commission as to the exact timing.

The meeting concluded at 16.40hrs.

Committee Secretariat

December 2000