

P-06-1244 George Thomas Hospital

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 7 Chwefror 2022
Petitions Committee | 7 February 2022

Reference: SR22/1904-1

Petition Number: P-06-1244

Petition title: In remembrance of Aberfan, rename the George Thomas Hospital

Text of petition: History now shows the full extent of the culpability of George Thomas in the light of his misuse of funds donated to survivors and bereaved relatives following the Aberfan disaster. That this man should be honoured with the naming of a hospital is a calumny that needs to be corrected.



1. Background

Ysbyty George Thomas is located in Treorchy, Rhondda Cynon Taf. It is managed by the Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board.

The facility was officially opened in 1991 by the Labour politician former Speaker of the House of Commons, George Thomas (later Viscount Tonypandy), after whom it was named.

In 1966, at the time of the Aberfan disaster George Thomas was the Welsh Secretary. The disaster, a catastrophic collapse of a colliery spoil tip, cost the lives of 144 people, 116 of them children at Pantglas Junior School.

The Tribunal of Inquiry into the Aberfan Disaster (the Aberfan Disaster Tribunal), chaired by Lord Justice Edmund Davies, was established in 1966 to inquire into the causes of and circumstances of the disaster. The report of the tribunal placed the blame for the disaster on the National Coal Board (NCB), naming nine of its staff as having some degree of responsibility. The NCB, which ran British coal mines and was responsible for the coal tip, refused to pay for the removal.

Although having agreed to remove the spoil tips above Aberfan after the disaster, George Thomas was party to a decision by the Wilson Government to take £150,000 from the Aberfan charity fund - raised to help the victims of the disaster and their families - as part payment for the removal operation. Historian Martin Johnes wrote that George Thomas initially objected to the decision but "his lone voice in the cabinet was not sufficient and in the end he acquiesced in the plan and placed strong moral pressure on the disaster fund to ensure it too gave in."

In 1997, 30 years after the disaster, the money was paid back to the charity fund by the newly appointed Secretary of State for Wales Ron Davies, who was quoted as saying: "It was a wrong perpetrated by a previous government - a Labour Secretary of State. I regarded it as an embarrassment. It was a wrong that needed to be righted."

2. Welsh Government action

The letter from the Minister for Health and Social Services states that the renaming of the hospital is not a matter for the Welsh Government, and should be taken up with Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board. She also says:

...the petitioners should be aware that any discussions about a change of name would need to include the cost implications for health board; for example, changes to signage (for both buildings and vehicles) and stationery, and implications for IT and contracts. There would also be considerable staff time involved in meeting and planning to decide and incorporate the new name at a time when the NHS is understandably focused on addressing and recovering from the ongoing pandemic.

The Welsh Government commissioned an audit of statues, street and building names to address Wales' connections with the slave trade, led by Gaynor Legall. In November 2020 the Legall audit identified 209 monuments, buildings or street names, located in all parts of Wales, which commemorate people who were directly involved with slavery and the slave trade or opposed its abolition. This report did not look at broader historical issues – such as are raised by this petition – but as part of its response the Welsh Government has said that it will issue guidance on resolving disputes about acts of historical commemoration.

3. Welsh Parliament action

In 2020, the previous Senedd's Culture, Welsh Language and Culture Committee carried out an inquiry into public acts of commemoration, in the wake of the toppling of Colston's statue in Bristol and widespread discussion about the appropriateness of historic monuments.

The report's recommendations included that “The Welsh Government should create a comprehensive “one stop shop” guidance document for local authorities and public bodies relating to acts of commemoration in Wales”.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.