

Number: WG16972



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Consultation Document

Good practice guide to the use of surplus school accommodation

Date of issue: **21 November 2012**

Action required: Responses by **13 February 2013**

Good practice guide to the use of surplus school accommodation

Overview This consultation document seeks your views on draft guidance to the use of surplus school accommodation.

How to respond Responses to this consultation should be e-mailed/posted to the address below by **13 February 2013**.

Further information and related documents Large print, Braille and alternate language versions of this document are available on request.

The consultation documents can be accessed from the Welsh Government's website at www.wales.gov.uk/consultations

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Data protection

How the views and information you give us will be used

Any response you send us will be seen in full by Welsh Government staff dealing with the issues which this consultation is about. It may also be seen by other Welsh Government staff to help them plan future consultations.

The Welsh Government intends to publish a summary of the responses to this document. We may also publish responses in full. Normally, the name and address (or part of the address) of the person or organisation who sent the response are published with the response. This helps to show that the consultation was carried out properly. If you do not want your name or address published, please tell us this in writing when you send your response. We will then blank them out.

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Summary

This consultation document seeks your views on a draft Good Practice Guide to the use of Surplus School Accommodation. The document gives information on best practice in the use of surplus school capacity, when it is unlikely that this will be removed as a result of reorganisation. It gives details of potential alternative uses for accommodation and summarises benefits identified and lessons learned by those who have made such changes.

The consultation ends on 13 February 2013.

Responses should be sent to:

Schools Management and Effectiveness Division
Department for Education and Skills
Welsh Assembly Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

Or completed electronically and sent to:

SchoolsManagementDivision3@wales.gsi.gov.uk

It should be noted that responses to the consultation document will be made public. Normally the name and address (or part of the address) of the author are published along with the response. If you do not wish to be identified as the author of your response please state this expressly in your response.

1. Introduction

1.1 This guide aims to inform local authorities of best practice in the use of surplus school capacity, when it is unlikely that this will be removed as a result of reorganisation.

Background

1.2 The number of surplus places in schools has grown rapidly over the past ten years and although, more recently, higher numbers of pupil numbers at primary level are beginning to move through the system, surplus secondary places will continue to grow for the foreseeable future.

1.3 In 1996 the Audit Commission report 'Trading Places – The Supply and Allocation of School Places' recognised that having a higher number of school places than is needed ties up resources that could be better used to improve the quality of education provided for learners. Since this report was published local authorities have been acting to remove surplus accommodation. However, until recently this has not been at an overall rate that matches falling pupil numbers. The report identified that value for money in the supply of school places would be achieved by avoiding the provision of too many or too few places. It also recognised that it is unrealistic and probably undesirable to aim for a perfect match of pupils and places at each school as not all unfilled places are surplus and not all surplus places can be removed in a cost-effective way.

1.4 The review into the costs of administering education in Wales¹ recommended that local authorities should aim to retain no more than 10% surplus places overall and the Welsh Government has accepted this recommendation. However to date no local authority has achieved this recommended level of surplus places across primary and secondary schools.

1.5 Estyn has recently carried out research on how surplus places affect the resources available for expenditure on improving outcomes for pupils; their report was published in May 2012². In this report Estyn reported that the removal of surplus places in some schools may cost far more than the revenue savings achieved by their removal. In other cases, they found that removal of a 'surplus' school generated far more savings than the removal of the surplus places within it. Estyn noted that school closures and amalgamations secured the largest savings for re-investment to raise standards but noted that such schemes often need financial investment and political commitment. Estyn also emphasised that it was important for local authorities to use data effectively so as to maximise efficient deployment of their assets – recommendation 9 of the report states that local authorities and local authority consortia should 'improve officers' use of all available data to drive strategic developments and evaluate their impact'.

¹ The Structure of Education Services in Wales, Vivian Thomas – March 2011

² How do surplus places affect the resources available for expenditure on improving outcomes for pupils?

1.6 The effective use of data could include:

- Ensuring that information on school capacity, usage of accommodation and take-up of places is up to date and accurate so as to inform the school organisation process and to enable accommodation to be used to the best effect.
- Improving techniques to project the number of pupils who will take up primary and secondary schools in the future, thus enabling timely action to be taken in the case of increasing or falling demand.
- Ensuring that admission policies are applied effectively to avoid some schools becoming oversubscribed at the expense of other, less popular schools.

1.7 Although the Welsh Government sets the overall policy and legislative framework for school organisation, local authorities have responsibility for the planning and management of school places and must secure provision efficiently so as to focus resources on improving educational outcomes for young people. They should review provision where there are excessive numbers of surplus places and where feasible make proposals for reorganisation or alternative use of school premises so that the assets provide the best possible value for money. Local authorities must also ensure that accommodation is being used effectively, challenging schools as to the usage of rooms where appropriate in order to maximise the value of the property.

1.8 The management of places can be a balancing act for local authorities: while it is unreasonable to expect them to remove all surplus capacity – because they have a duty to provide sufficient school places and need to be able to manage fluctuations in future demand as a result of demographic change and parental preference – excessive places need to be tackled as they can tie up resources that could improve educational provision. However, it is important to note that any strategies used to reduce surplus places must focus on improved outcomes for learners and better management of the local authority's school estate and other resources, as the removal of surplus places should not be an end in itself. As Estyn noted 'Any school reorganisation strategy should set out to improve standards. School re-organisation programmes should be primarily about school improvement rather than a resource management exercise that is separate from the interests of learners.'

1.9 The Welsh Government's 21st Century school building programme supports strategic planning by local authorities in order to provide new or improved school buildings, while reducing surplus places. Local authority proposals for investment which have been approved by the Welsh Government will address surplus capacity and poor condition of school buildings and will help to deliver sustainable, cost-effective schools that are fit for the 21st Century. However, for those areas which are not included in the 21st Century Schools programme a pragmatic, more creative approach needs to be taken to address uneconomic use of school accommodation.

1.10 While the Welsh Government recognises that a reasonable amount of surplus accommodation needs to be maintained across the whole school estate to allow for future fluctuations in pupil numbers or demand for specific schools, for example Welsh medium provision, we expect local authorities to take timely action to secure effective use of school buildings while maintaining or improving outcomes for learners. Such action would often involve school re-organisation for which statutory procedures might be required. However, Estyn recognised that even where unfilled places are genuinely surplus to requirements it may not always be cost effective to remove them. 'The nature and layout of the school building may not lend itself to closure of surplus classrooms; or if there are no alternative schools within reasonable travelling distance, closure of a whole school may be unrealistic.' It is therefore important for local authorities to think creatively about their estate so use of resources can be maximised.

1.11 The Welsh Government recognises that some local authorities are already looking at their school estate innovatively and considers that it would be helpful for all local authorities to recognise the good practice that is taking place across Wales. As a consequence, we have drawn together within this guidance document strategies which are currently in place to make better use of surplus accommodation. It is hoped that this document will stimulate debate and encourage action to improve the effective management of the school estate.

Identification of good practice

1.12 As a first step local authorities were asked to provide good practice examples of alternative uses for school accommodation, with feedback on those elements which worked well and those which were less successful. The initial responses were drawn together in a draft document which was discussed in depth by a working group comprising representatives of a number of local authorities drawn from the Association of Directors Wales (ADEW) Planning of School Places group and the Welsh Local Government Association. As a result of these discussions amendments were made to the draft guidance prior to its being circulated for consultation.

Findings

1.13 Local authorities have used surplus school accommodation for a wide variety of purposes. For ease of reference these have been placed within 4 categories: enhanced educational provision, community use, other services and school re-organisation. Benefits and lessons learned from making alternative use of school accommodation are included in boxes following each category.

2. Enhanced educational use

2.1 There appear to be 3 types of enhancement which local authorities have made to educational provision – facilities for pupils with additional learning needs, facilities for early years pupils and improvements to accommodation.

Facilities for pupils with Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

2.2 A number of local authorities have used surplus accommodation to provide enhanced accommodation and facilities for pupils with additional needs; this includes separate specialist provision or developmental facilities which enable pupils to develop with a view to their effective integration into the mainstream. Identified uses include:

a) Provision for children and young people with ALN, including withdrawal areas, specially equipped facilities and support rooms for such pupils.

b) Creation of a specialist teaching facility (STF) for pupils with ALN. In one local authority provision has been made for children with a range of special educational needs (SEN) in STFs located in mainstream schools. The local authority believes that this developmental programme has contributed to its positive record for inclusion and its commendation by Estyn during the most recent inspection of the local authority.

c) Provision of a nurture group for children who are experiencing difficulties in a large busy classroom. One local authority reported that children were identified by their school and endorsed by the school Educational Psychologist or the Behaviour Support Team. In the group children are helped to develop, grow and learn in 'small steps' whilst receiving additional reassurance and support. There is a carefully structured day with a balance of learning and teaching and a routine within a homelike setting, supporting the emotional needs of pupils. The curriculum is accessed through the Foundation Phase following similar topics to the mainstream classes. The focus is on developing social and communication skills, building confidence and self esteem and encouraging independence. The nurture group also reduces the chance of exclusions as children are able to identify problems and are given strategies to help them deal with issues such as anger management. Children are taught in a small group but integrate with the mainstream school for all social activities, lunchtimes, outdoor play and when ready, for larger group activities. The local authorities who have such groups have reported very positive outcomes have been achieved with pupils either rejoining mainstream classes or returning to the family school. Care is taken with the transition process to monitor and preserve links with the receiving class.

d) Creation of Hearing Impairment Resource which is fully inclusive, with children with other forms of ALN working alongside hearing impaired children. One local authority reports that support at the Resource has been very effective, with hearing impaired children attaining level 2 at the end of key stage 1 and level 4 at the end of key stage 2. Using this facility for additional

support ensures that all children can progress academically throughout the year.

- e) Creation of sensory rooms.
- f) Provision of a classbase unit for those who do not attend school or have difficulties accessing the curriculum, where this has resulted in behavioural issues. A local authority reports that mainstream staff develop and support the curriculum content of the unit's classes while unit staff prepare and support the students and liaise with the mainstream staff to develop differentiated approaches to the curriculum.
- g) Special school outreach.

Benefits of facilities for pupils with ALN

A number of local authorities have found that this type of provision has resulted in:

- Improved pupil attainment.
- Increased school attendance.
- Increased time spent in mainstream lessons.
- Pupils following General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) courses of study and the Prince's Trust programme where otherwise they would not have been able to do so.
- Unit staff developing vocational and social programmes for named students.
- Successful joint training of Teaching Assistants.
- Improved health and safety, with lower risk of accidents.

Lessons learned

- Adding provision for pupils with ALN often requires statutory procedures for school re-organisation.
- Provision of additional facilities can involve capital investment and ongoing revenue support.

Facilities for early years pupils

2.3 With the growth of early years provision and the impact of the Foundation Phase, a number of local authorities have taken the opportunity to use surplus accommodation to enhance facilities available for early years. Identified uses include:

- a) Letting accommodation to private playgroups in an area where there is a shortage of these facilities.

b) The extension of the school's age range where appropriate to admit 3 year olds. This change will require statutory procedures, including consultation with interested parties and the publication of a statutory notice.

c) Remodelling to make or enhance Foundation Phase facilities.

d) Provision of a family / integrated children's centre which provides accommodation and training facilities for a number of key local authority teams that are delivering Welsh Government initiatives, including:

1) Early education for 3 year olds.

2) Sure Start, which provided targeted support for children and young people from disadvantaged families in order to improve their life chances.

3) Flying Start, which provides free quality part-time childcare for 2-3 year olds, an enhanced Health Visiting service, access to parenting programmes and access to Language and Play sessions in the most disadvantaged communities. In the medium term the initiative aims to make significant savings through earlier identification of needs, the avoidance of reception into the care system, and the avoidance of other crisis remedial systems such as youth offending teams or substance misuse services. The long term aim is to reduce the number of people with very poor skills, reduce the rates of criminal behaviour, truancy and drug use and foster higher employment, increased earnings and better qualifications at the end of schooling.

4) Chatterbox Playtimes hold sessions in local schools and parent and toddler groups which focus on giving parents ideas and information to develop their children's learning through play. Craft, baking and play activities take place which give parents guidance on how to develop language and number activities with their young children. The sessions also provide support for parents who have concerns for their youngsters.

5) Parent Partnership services (PPS) are statutory services offering information, advice and support to parents and carers of children and young people with SEN. PPS put parents in touch with other local and national organisations and have a role in making sure that parents' views are heard and understood and that these views inform local policy and practice.

6) Parents' links class are run by a teaching assistant to develop parental skills. Activities include: preparing holiday activities for school age children; making books to support stories and writing in the early years; developing memory skills by making games and resources; there are future plans for this group to cover 'Heart Start', numeracy resources, and healthy living skills.

7) Nursery plus (childcare), before/ after school and holiday childcare.

8) Rooms used by the Foundation Phase Team to deliver training to schools and non-maintained settings on the national training modules for the Foundation Phase, enabling the local authority to take forward the Welsh Government's Families First Agenda.

Benefits of enhanced early years provision

- Local authorities have reported that schools that have brought playgroups on site have been able to generate revenue through rental agreements historically and now through Transfer of Control Agreements. The provision can bring in income rather than being a drain on resources. Parent and toddler groups and other early years provision have been shown to lead to increased numbers on roll at the schools concerned.
- Schools that previously have not had a pre-school setting on site have reported a benefit in terms of forging closer links with their communities. The schools affected also benefit from building links with parents who could potentially send their children to the school when they reach the appropriate age, bringing additional funding with them.
- One local authority found that the number of pupils applying to join a school has increased since the introduction of Flying Start within the school and that this has further helped address surplus places at the school, albeit on a more minor scale. The number of children who have elected to come to the school with Flying Start provision, as opposed to schools in the area where there is far less surplus space, has helped level the playing field in terms of availability of places in the area, thus affording parents more likelihood of having their first preference of school.

Lessons learned

- Local authorities need to look carefully at pupil number trends and consider the effects of school organisation before establishing a Flying Start Unit at schools. In one school surplus capacity was removed by establishing a Flying Start unit but subsequently pupil numbers in the area increased due to a separate school organisation proposal, which meant that the school was not able to take all of the pupils that wished to attend.
- In another instance Flying Start provision was established at a primary school that may close in future as part of the School Organisation Programme.
- Schools cannot legally subsidise third party use of a school site.
- Flying Start can attract families back to a school but the removal of surplus capacity to accommodate the provision can mean that it is not possible to accommodate a consequent uptake in demand.

Improving facilities

2.4 Some local authorities have taken the opportunity to provide additional or improved facilities to meet the changing needs of the curriculum or best practice guidance, such as Building Bulletins 98 and 99. Work has included:

- a) Remodelling to provide improved accommodation and additional facilities to enhance the curriculum e.g. provision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) suite, libraries, art, music, science practical areas, other resource and support areas.
- b) Provision of vocational teaching areas, for example hair and beauty facilities, motor mechanics workshop.
- c) Provision of a Canolfan Iaith for language immersion courses and a base for teachers who promote/ assist with the use of Welsh in all school in the local authority area.
- d) Creation of an observation class.
- e) Remodelling to bring small rooms up to Building Bulletin recommended size and to make more usable accommodation, for example more regularly sized or bigger classrooms.
- f) Remodelling to ensure that a school has facilities recommended in Building Bulletin guidance.
- g) Provision of improved reception, office or meeting accommodation.
- h) Provision of archive and storage facilities.
- i) Facilities for planning and preparation activities.
- j) Accommodation for school counselling service.
- k) Accommodation for health services to advise young people at secondary school.

Benefits of improving facilities

- Local authorities report that evidence has shown that there have been improved Inspection scores in schools that have had major building improvements.
- One local authority has reported improved pupil health and wellbeing, including healthier eating with an increase in number of pupils eating the 'appetite for life' menu.

Lessons learned

- Local authorities also need to be alert to any changes in policy in relation to the curriculum at primary or secondary level, and consider what impact these may have on the way schools use space and resources.

3. Community facilities

3.1 Schools which have community facilities often benefit from greater local community involvement. One local authority which provides community facilities in all new school builds aims to replicate these resources at existing schools which will not be replaced. Community facilities provided include:

- a) Providing cookery sessions has raised awareness of healthy eating and supported families to cook with a variety of healthy ingredients. Parents have also gained qualifications and it has facilitated a closer relationship with the school.
- b) Adult learning and use by Community groups in the evening.
- c) A local Communities First base. In one local authority the Communities First team worked with the school to engage not only families but also the wider community by running adult learning classes, Learning and Play and Number and Play sessions.
- d) Community meeting or conference space.
- e) Youth centre.
- f) A community room which is used to deliver Language and Play, Number and Play and accredited courses to members of the local community. Parents / carers on the accredited courses carried out their work placements in the school - this provided extra support for teaching staff and created a closer relationship between parents and the school. Parents attending the courses also achieved a Level 2 Teaching Assistant Qualification which has enabled them to gain employment in local schools.
- g) Transferring ownership of assets to the community so that the premises can be used by a local community group.

Benefits of community facilities

- All schools that have had community facilities move on site have reported positive outcomes. In particular, the schools have much closer links with their communities, with the school taking on a greater role in the community as a hub. The schools tend to hold a greater level of respect and support from their communities. They also benefit from increased levels of parental engagement.

Lessons learned

- A school cannot subsidise non-school use and there is often no full cost recovery.
- Care must be taken to ensure pupils' security.

- Sometimes schools and communities do not welcome joint use of school/ community halls.
- There can be consequent costs and administrative burdens, such as legal requirements, insurance and electrical testing costs.
- Long term viability of community use needs to be considered. For example, a new-build replacement primary school also incorporated a new state of the art public library, 4 rooms dedicated to community use, sport changing facilities and a multipurpose hall, as well as school and community access to the playing fields. Since the school opened there have been issues regarding splitting the running costs fairly between the school, and the Leisure and Library Departments of the County Council. The usage out of school hours has led to increased caretaking costs. In addition, the Leisure Department has recently decided to pull out of the premises leaving the school to manage the Community Centre which will lead to an increased administrative burden and cost to the school.
- It is important to audit an area to determine what facilities are available before designating school accommodation for community use; duplication of facilities can prove counter-productive and possibly lead to closure of some venues.

4. Other services

- a) Redundant school buildings are offered to other departments of the Council.
- b) The library service uses part of a school as a local library.
- c) A base / centre for Community Police Officers in partnership with South Wales Police. In one local authority the community activities organised by the Police Officers both during and out of school hours on the school site supported school staff in developing closer links with both parents and the wider community.
- d) Use by doctors' surgeries, integrated children's authorities and health boards may be possible.
- e) Bridging the Gap employment support.
- f) Genesis Cymru project, which aims to increase labour market participation by identifying and providing support to individuals who are furthest away from the labour market, for example female lone parents.
- g) Family information service, which provides information and advice on local services for families and carers, offer free help and support to anyone bringing up children.
- h) Use by members of the National Childminders Association.
- i) Space let or given to charities/ the third sector (for example one local authority gave two mobile classrooms to Barnardos who were working closely with schools and families in a disadvantaged area on early intervention projects).
- j) Multi-agency working.
- k) Step Ahead Education Centre and other Education staff.

Benefits of providing other services

- The use by other bodies might attract additional income for the school.

Lessons learned

- A local college used part of a nursery school to provide accredited educational courses. This arrangement worked well for several years but the college withdrew suddenly due to falling course numbers and the school was left with the costs of maintaining the recently refurbished classrooms.
- Sometimes the governing body is not supportive of the school building being used for alternative purposes.

- Setting up local management agreements can prove difficult.
- Parents at a primary school petitioned the local authority to remove community courses from the school as they felt that there was a risk to children on site from members of the public, although the children were supervised at all times. Since that time, any community facilities built or provided within schools have had additional security measures put in place, for example, they usually have their own toilet facilities and users cannot gain access to other areas of the school.
- There have been minor problems associated with leasing/ rental arrangements or relationship breakdown between school and user.

5. School reorganisation

5.1 Local authorities and school governing bodies have adopted the following re-organisation strategies, which often fall short of statutory procedures, to address surplus accommodation:

- Removal or demolition of redundant accommodation or the relocation of temporary classrooms to other schools which have increasing demand.
- Sharing of premises by more than one school, sometimes as a precursor to statutory procedures. One local authority found that they were able to extend a growing Welsh medium primary school within a secondary school which had a significant number of surplus places.

Benefits of sharing premises

- A local authority found that the sharing of premises between two schools enabled disposal of a building which was surplus to requirements; there were also resulting savings in running costs and efficiencies of scale.
- Another local authority moved a Junior School into a nearby Infant School building prior to the pupils relocating to a new build primary school. Initially there was some uncertainty amongst parents and the community regarding the move but the bringing together of the two schools on to one site proved very successful. The schools were able to work more closely and mirror elements of what would happen in an all-through primary school. Transition links were improved between Key Stages 1 and 2, with knowledge / best practice sharing between staff becoming more organic across both schools; this led to improved outcomes for pupils. In addition, the local authority reports that the move prepared pupils for the transition to the newly built primary school and allayed parents' fears regarding the transition.
- The local authority was able to make significant financial savings as one building could be closed. The arrangement has also given freedom for the other site to be developed. The local authority recognises that the move has also contributed positively to parental, community and other stakeholders 'buy in'.
- The parents and community have had time to acclimatise to the pupils being in an all through primary environment.

Lessons learned

- Care should be taken when considering such arrangements as such situations may require statutory procedures if the change constitutes a prescribed alteration to either of the schools.
- Removal of temporary accommodation can be expensive.

6. Contacts

6.1 If you would like further information about some of the topics covered in this document, the following local authority officers are prepared to give feedback on their experiences.

Topic	Contact name	Local Authority	Contact details
Flying Start	Jacqui Morris	Monmouthshire	
Using surplus school accommodation for other purposes	Joyce Slack	Merthyr	
Specialist Teaching Facilities	Kelly Small	Swansea	
Intensive Welsh language facility	Emrys Bebb	Anglesey	

Annex: Related documents

- The Structure of Education Services in Wales.
- How do surplus places affect the resources available for expenditure on improving outcomes for pupils?
- Measuring the Capacity of Schools in Wales – Welsh Government Circular No: 021/2011.
- School Organisation Proposals – Welsh Assembly Government Circular No: 021/2009.