

# **Rural Development Sub-Committee**

## **Inquiry into the Reorganisation of Schools in Rural Wales**

**November 2008**

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## **CHAIR'S INTRODUCTION**

As a Committee, and from our own lives and experiences, each one of us was aware of the strength of feeling and emotion at the outset of this inquiry. Few political issues have the same resonance and power to arouse very real and passionate debate as the debate on the future of small, mainly rural, primary schools. We have witnessed this, not only in the rural communities that are the focus of this inquiry and this report, but throughout the whole of Wales.

We were asked to take forward this inquiry as a result of a petition from a group of parents in Powys. I am not sure what they will make of our conclusions. Whatever their feelings, I hope that they and others will recognise that this inquiry and resulting report demonstrates how people throughout Wales now have the power to shape the agenda of the National Assembly and the work programme of its Committees.

This is an issue that has, and will, continue to receive significant local and national media coverage. The inquiry has given us the opportunity to consider the evidence and discuss the issues with a range of interested parties in a more thoughtful and deliberative fashion.

The main difficulty facing the Committee was a lack of strong and convincing evidence, particularly on the impact of past school reorganisations or closures on different communities. Whilst we received a wealth of anecdotal evidence, there appears to have been little or no research carried out in this area and few published reports or reviews. This is something that I hope will be addressed by subsequent work and inquiries.

Whilst it is right and proper that Government uses information, evidence and hard facts to inform its policy, it is also right that we rely on principle to guide our decision-making in public policy.

The Committee is firmly of the view that the primary purpose of any school is to provide the best possible education for the children that it serves. It is the responsibility of the local education authority to provide world-class education for all of the children in its area. Any additional benefit derived by the community is an advantage. However it is not, and never can be, the primary purpose and main driver of policy in this field. The needs of the children come first.

At the same time it has to be a fundamental role and responsibility of Government to safeguard the quality of life of its citizens and to promote the well-being of society and all of our communities – irrespective of geography, size or wealth. There has to be recognition of this in public policy-making.

Finally I would like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who took the time to provide written or oral evidence to this inquiry. The Committee was particularly struck by the evidence it received from a number of schools and communities who had clearly spent some considerable time in preparing evidence for our work. We are grateful to everyone who contributed to this inquiry and their comments and observations formed an important part of our discussions and deliberations.

In addition I would also like to thank Alun Ffred Jones AM, Lorraine Barrett AM and Mike German AM for their valuable contribution to our inquiry and, of course, our thanks also go to the staff who serve the Committee and without whom we would not be able to complete our work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alun Davies'.

**Alun Davies AM**  
**Chair, Rural Development Sub-Committee**

# **1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

## **Origins of the Inquiry**

1.1 The National Assembly's Petitions Committee received a petition from Powys Community Schools Action, on 20 September 2007, which stated:

“We call upon the Welsh Assembly Government to sustain the communities of Powys, the most rural of Welsh counties, and to halt and reverse the pressure on Powys County Council to close the schools which are the heart of those communities.”

1.2 The Petitions Committee subsequently invited the Rural Development Sub-Committee to undertake an inquiry into the issues raised.

## **Terms of Reference**

1.3 At its meeting on 13 March 2008, the Committee agreed to conduct a short focused inquiry into the provision of education in rural Wales and the reorganisation of schools in rural Wales.

1.4 The inquiry focused in particular on the following issues and themes:

- the educational provision in rural primary schools;
- whether there are any wider social and educational issues associated with primary school reorganisation, such as the impact on communities, families and children and how this is taken into consideration as part of the decision-making process;
- examples of reorganisation in rural Wales and elsewhere to understand the experiences and learn from any innovative approaches;
- existing and proposed Welsh Assembly Government policy and guidance and whether they adequately deal with the wider issues that may be associated with the reorganisation of rural primary schools; and
- the role of Estyn in reporting on schools and LEAs.

1.5 It is not the purpose of this report to provide a commentary on the debates currently taking place in individual local authorities. Neither does it seek to discuss the whole national policy framework in which such decisions should be taken. This report attempts to take an overview of the experience available in Wales and makes recommendations, comments and observations based upon the evidence we have received.

1.6 By their very nature, small schools tend to be primary schools, and whilst some of the issues discussed in this report may also affect secondary schools, the majority of the evidence received by the Committee has related to primary education. This provided the focus for the inquiry and this report.

1.7 The report covers the main issues raised by the evidence. In the first section, we examine the reasons why small schools may face the threat of closure and discuss the arguments both for and against them. The second section of our report covers the process which has to be followed when a closure is proposed. It discusses the roles of all the agencies involved and the views of people who have gone through the process. We received a great deal of evidence from parents and pupils on their views on the impacts of the closure of small schools which we discuss in part three of the report. Finally, we consider alternatives to the closure of schools, look at existing examples of good practice and discuss possible ways forward for the process.

## 2. SETTING THE SCENE

2.1 Since the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, 35 small rural schools have been subject to reorganisation proposals. 31 of the proposals were approved, 12 of them at a local level and 19 by Welsh Ministers. We discuss the reasons for closure and the decision making process in subsequent chapters.

2.2 These closures have taken place against a background of a growing number of surplus school places and the growing costs of maintaining school buildings.

2.3 There are currently almost 51,000 empty places in primary schools in Wales – 18% of the total capacity and, despite attempts by some local authorities to remove places, levels of surplus places carry on rising<sup>1</sup>.

2.4 Between January 2000 and January 2006 the number of pupils in nursery and primary schools in Wales fell by more than 23,000. Overall, total pupil numbers are forecast to fall from about 470,000 in 2005/06 to around 433,000 by 2013/14, a reduction of about 8% over 8 years. Even though birth rates have increased recently, this varies between areas, with rural areas often experiencing lower rates. If no action is taken to reduce surplus, it is projected that there could be over 100,000 empty school places by 2014 – more than 20% of the total.

2.5 In parts of rural Wales many of the school buildings date back to the 19th century. They are expensive to run and maintain and many lack some of the basic facilities, such as school halls and dining facilities. Major refurbishment would be required to many rural school buildings to deliver the modern curriculum and it is estimated that investment of £2.2bn would be needed to make all schools fit for purpose.

2.6 Since 2002-03 to 2008-09 the Welsh Assembly Government has provided additional funding specifically for small and rural schools totalling £24.8 million. The purpose of this funding is to provide community facilities and engage people more effectively with schools, to provide support to teaching heads and promote joint working between small schools.

2.7 In Wales, about a third of primary schools have less than 90 pupils, and 15% have under 50 pupils, although not all of these are in rural areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Welsh Assembly Government - Rural Development Sub-Committee, 9 July 2008, [RDC\(3\)-13-08 \(p1\)](#)



### 3. REASONS FOR CLOSURE

3.1 The Committee identified a number of drivers for change in terms of the future provision of small schools:

- educational attainment;
- surplus places;
- condition of school buildings;
- delivering the curriculum;
- size of schools;
- the resource consequences of small schools.

#### Surplus places

3.2 Surplus places are the most commonly quoted reason for school reorganisation. The issue of surplus school places is a growing problem, not only in Wales, but also in the rest of the UK. As evidenced in the figures above, this issue is forecast to become more problematic over the coming years, especially in rural areas where many small schools are situated.

3.3 Current Welsh Assembly Government policy on the reorganisation of schools is contained in National Assembly for Wales Circular 23/02: School Organisation Proposals<sup>2</sup>, (although a revision of this document is currently out to consultation<sup>3</sup>).

3.4 The guidance recognises the need to retain some spare capacity to cope with a fluctuation in numbers but emphasises that:

“It is important that funding for education is used cost effectively. ....Where there are excessive numbers of surplus places, LEAs should review their provision and, where feasible, make proposals for their removal, especially where a school has significant levels of surplus places”

3.5 In their oral evidence to the Committee, Powys Community Schools Action said they believed there was insufficient guidance to local authorities on how they should be dealing with surplus capacity. They also felt that surplus capacity, as measured by the Welsh Assembly Government formula, was not a useful criterion, but it is this formula that local authorities are expected to use in evaluating the surplus places in their schools.

3.6 This point was also picked up by Professor David Reynolds, who suggested that further research was needed on the cost of a surplus place and how that cost is calculated.

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<sup>2</sup> Welsh Assembly Government Circular 23/02, [School Organisation Proposals](#), July 2002

<sup>3</sup> Consultation on Circular: School Organisation Proposals, [Consultation document No: 060/2008](#), October 2008

3.7 The WLGA claimed that local authorities felt significant pressure from the Welsh Assembly Government, Estyn and the Wales Audit Office to address surplus school places. They claimed that it is this perceived pressure that often leads local authorities to develop a policy of school closures.

3.8 Estyn, in its last annual report, noted that local authorities serving rural communities had been slow to tackle the issue of surplus place schools and unfilled places. The situation was made worse because they were also maintaining a relatively large number of small schools that were very expensive to run and maintain.

3.9 The Minister disputed the claims of some witnesses that the Welsh Assembly Government, Estyn and the Wales Audit Office, had agreed on a uniform approach to surplus places, arguing that the three bodies have distinct and separate roles within the process. The Chief Inspector also reassured the Committee on Estyn's independence in this area. The Committee accepts this reassurance.

3.10 The Committee recognises that surplus places are clearly an additional cost for local authorities and that this will inevitably lead to additional and unnecessary costs for council tax-payers. In addition this may lead to a diversion of funding and an uneconomic use of resources.

**Recommendation 1: The Committee recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government:**

- **provides clearer guidance to local authorities on how surplus places are to be defined and addressed;**
- **commissions further research on the actual cost of a surplus place.**

**Recommendation 2: That the Welsh Assembly Government, in any new guidance on surplus places, states clearly that it is the responsibility of each individual local authority to deal with issues of resource use and surplus places within their overall budget and education policy.**

**It should be made clear that local authorities take these decisions and that the Welsh Assembly Government guidance is not designed and should not be taken to be pressure on individual authorities.**

**Condition of school buildings**

3.11 Many small rural schools have been in existence for many years and their buildings likewise. Whilst the exterior of many of the buildings may add to the character of a small community, the age of many small school buildings means that they can be expensive to maintain and to bring up to the standards expected in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### 3.12 According to Estyn,

“too many pupils are receiving education in poor quality buildings that were fit for purpose for the end of the Victorian age and the start of the last century, but they are not suitable for the education that we want to deliver for our children in the twenty-first century”.

3.13 Estyn also claimed that, in all schools, better buildings contribute to improving a range of outcomes, including achievement, behaviour, attendance and teaching. The Committee recognises that this is particularly true for children who come from more deprived backgrounds.

3.14 The WLGA expressed concern as to the condition of some school buildings, a problem which was particularly pronounced in rural areas. In Gwynedd, where over half the school buildings are at least a hundred years old, the local authority also questioned the extent to which the location, nature, size and facilities – although suitable for the needs of communities a century ago – still provided the best service.

3.15 The WLGA also raised concern over the use of the term ‘fit for purpose’ by the Welsh Assembly Government. Whilst the Welsh Assembly Government had been clear that it wanted school buildings to be fit for purpose, no specific guidance had been provided on what a twenty-first century school or a school for the future would constitute.

3.16 According to Professor Reynolds, local authorities face pressures to physically improve the resources and fabric of the school buildings to make schools better and fit for purpose, however, there is not the capital resource to do it in every school. A local authority may have sufficient capital budget to support taking one school of 100 pupils and making it fit for purpose, but it would not support three or four schools of 20 or 30 pupils being made fit for purpose. Therefore school closures and amalgamations may be seen as the only means of achieving the targets set by the Welsh Assembly Government.

3.17 Not all the evidence received by the Committee supported the view that new school buildings were most appropriate to meet the demands of modern education.

3.18 Stakeholders at Ysgol Rhiwlas, saw their school building as an important asset:

“The school is a classic Welsh stone construction, extremely solid and well-maintained. It has withstood the climate for well over a century and its stone construction further contributes to energy efficiency, as stone is an unparalleled insulator. The buildings can easily be made more energy efficient through further insulation”.

3.19 Whilst Mervyn Benford of the National Association of Small Schools maintained that the quality of teaching was independent of buildings. The Committee rejects this view.

3.20 Whilst we received no evidence that small schools are likely to have worse buildings than large ones, the Committee believes that the condition of school buildings is an essential element in the delivery of a high quality education. The availability of excellent resources and a high quality teaching and learning environment is essential for all children – but particularly for those from more deprived backgrounds.

3.21 The Committee recognises that substantial additional resources have been invested in school buildings across the whole of Wales over the past decade, however there continues to be an imperative to maintain high levels of investment. The Committee believes that the continued investment in both resources and buildings is essential if we, as a country, are to meet both the expectations and ambitions of parents and communities and also the needs of children in the future.

**Recommendation 3: The Welsh Assembly Government should publish a clear vision for Welsh primary schools:**

- To include a definition of what “fit for purpose” means;
- To define and describe a “School Standard for Wales”.

**Recommendation 4: The Welsh Assembly Government should carry out a comprehensive audit of the school estate to establish how many school premises would comply with the standard and the amount of investment that will be needed in order to bring all Welsh schools up to this standard.**

**Recommendation 5: That the Welsh Assembly Government establishes a clear strategy to ensure that all schools in Wales reach this standard within an agreed and published timescale.**

### **Delivering the Curriculum**

3.22 The ability of small schools, particularly the very smallest, to deliver the curriculum is a key and fundamental requirement. If a school is unable to deliver the curriculum then all other aspects of its performance will be undermined and compromised.

3.23 The Committee received considerable evidence on the pressures faced by teachers and head teachers in very small schools.

3.24 The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) Cymru claimed that teachers in small schools can face more pressure than in larger schools due to multiplicity of specialisms. It also argued that the areas of leadership, management, staff development and curriculum planning often suffer in small schools, particularly where a head teacher has a substantial teaching commitment. Estyn supported the view that small schools, generally, face greater pressures in the areas highlighted above.

3.25 Gwynedd County Council suggested that teachers are often deterred from applying for head teacher positions in small schools, by the pressure of a teaching commitment along with the management role. They also raised concerns that not enough candidates from small rural schools were gaining places for the National Professional Qualification (NPQ) for Headship on the basis that the process placed significant emphasis on formal management experience.

3.26 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Cymru also believed there was difficulty in recruiting suitable candidates for headship vacancies in many areas and argued that potential candidates were less likely to apply for a post in a school with an uncertain future. They suggested that considerable uncertainty around reorganisation, with frequent changes of policy in the face of protests, also had an impact on staff morale.

3.27 According to Estyn, a relatively high proportion of primary schools causing concern are small schools. Common difficulties found in these schools include:

- weak leadership
- staffing volatility and instability
- difficulty in delivering the national curriculum and common requirements to an adequate standard.

3.28 They also reiterated concerns regarding the NPQ for Headship and suggested a radical change in the structure of schools in Wales and alternative methods for leading schools would have to be looked at in the near future.

3.29 Many respondents listed the difficulties that small schools will face in terms of leadership and delivery of the curriculum as well as other issues such as extra-curricular activities and the social interaction of children. However at the same time as listing these difficulties, respondents and witnesses failed to prove that these were anything except challenges which could be overcome by motivated and able staff. The Committee is not persuaded that these issues are in themselves reasons to rationalise or to close small schools.

3.30 However the Committee recognises the validity of these concerns. The Committee also notes that there was little argument or disagreement that there are significant additional pressures faced by smaller schools. The Committee expects local authorities to provide the support necessary to ensure that schools, their staff and governors, are able to overcome these challenges.

3.31 The Committee believes that this is an issue that local authorities need to consider and review regularly to ensure that all small schools receive support that is tailored to their needs.

## The size of schools

“With regard to size, we do not think that there is any figure at which you can draw the line and say, 'this is a viable school, but this one in the next valley is not a viable school.’”

Powys Community Schools Action, Rural Development Sub-Committee, 4 June 2008

3.32 There is a great deal of debate about what constitutes a small school and what effect pupil numbers has on the effectiveness of the educational experience they receive. The perception of what is a small school can also be linked to their location. For example, whilst a school in Wales of 100 pupils may not be considered as being small. The same school in England would, in many areas be regarded as a small school.

3.33 The Assembly Government does not have its own definition of what constitutes a small school. This is considered to be a matter for individual local education authorities to determine. However, in 2001, the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee of the National Assembly undertook a review of the supply of school places. In doing so they adopted the Audit Commission’s view that a school which has less than 90 pupils on roll for a primary school, less than 600 pupils on roll for an 11-16 secondary school and less than 700 pupils on roll for a secondary school with a sixth form may be considered as a small school. The Committee recognises that this definition is imperfect and is related to the increasing costs of maintaining the school rather than its educational successes.

3.34 In his evidence to the Committee, Professor Reynolds said that his research indicated that, in Wales, it was more appropriate to view school reorganisation in terms of very very small schools and very small schools being reorganised into small schools of around 100 pupils. He went on to say:

“We need to get a sense of proportion in this debate. We are not talking about creating big schools—we are creating schools that are bigger, but we are talking about schools that are still very small, from communities that are still very small, by all international and English standards. I do not believe that that has been fully understood.”

3.35 Estyn's report - “Small primary schools in Wales<sup>4</sup>” highlighted Estyn’s belief that there is a clear need for a definition of what constitutes a small school in Wales. The Committee recognises that there is this demand for certainty amongst many educationalists, providers and others.

3.36 According to Gwynedd Council, there was confusion as to the Welsh Assembly Government’s position on the ideal size of a school. They argued that the Audit Commission suggested at least 90 pupils; whilst Welsh Assembly Government administered grants such as RAISE (Raising Attainment and Individual Standards in Education in Wales) suggested a minimum of 50 pupils.

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<sup>4</sup>[Small Primary Schools in Wales](#), Estyn, February 2006

3.37 ATL Cymru also suggested that a common, clear, nationally agreed definition of what constitutes a small school was needed.

3.38 During the oral evidence sessions there was also considerable debate as to whether a definition would aid policy-making or the delivery of education.

3.39 Professor Reynolds argued that there was currently insufficient evidence to justify giving a baseline figure. He went on to suggest that the very small schools should be reorganised into a size of around 60 to 80 pupils. “

3.40 The Committee agrees with Professor Reynolds that a sense of proportion is needed in considering this issue. The Committee also supports his view that:

“the ballpark figure of 60 to 80 pupils, maybe 100 - that is, schools with four or five teachers - would be an acceptable compromise between the benefits of size and the benefits of smallness without being tiny.

3.41 However having reviewed the totality of evidence available the Committee is not persuaded that there is a requirement to define in absolute terms what constitutes a small school in terms of numbers of pupils enrolled at any one time. The Committee believes that in terms of decisions about closure, school size should be considered on a case by case basis by local authorities in terms of the local community and the local context. However, the Committee is persuaded that in the case of a small school remaining open, additional support will be necessary for schools where the head teacher has significant teaching duties.

**Recommendation 6: That the Welsh Assembly Government does not need to define a small school in terms of enrolled pupil numbers at any one time – but does define a small school in terms of staff and the teaching load of its Head in order to provide and focus support on those schools where such support is most needed.**

### **The resource consequences of small schools**

“As a sub-committee, you need to remember the areas of Wales other than the small villages and the bigger schools that may not have the money that they should have, because it is spent disproportionately on very small schools.”

Professor David Reynolds, Rural Development Sub-Committee, 11 June 2008

3.42 There is inevitably a finite resource available for education in Wales and many demands on local education authorities to prioritise expenditure. This dynamic will lead to different debates and discussions for local authorities. It is important that local authorities have this debate with the communities they represent and serve.

3.43 A number of respondents drew attention to the disproportionate amount of money spent on small, rural schools in Wales, to the detriment of pupils in larger schools. According to ASCL Cymru, the dilemma for local education authorities was that funds were limited and, as parents and community groups pressed to avoid the closure of any school, the consequence was that other sectors had fewer funds available to meet the educational needs of their students. They also highlighted research undertaken by the ASCL Financial Consultant, on behalf of 40 LEAs in England<sup>5</sup>, that demonstrated small schools and isolated schools were inherently more expensive.

3.44 Parents and governors believed that, although smaller schools could be shown to cost more per child compared to larger schools, they offered good value to the local authority when the costing took a wider perspective of the school within the community.

3.45 The National Association of Small Schools believed that measuring by unit cost was an unfair way to measure, because other factors should be taken into account, for example, the school was often the only return that rural council tax payers got for their money. It also suggested that small schools often saved money in terms of reducing levels of later educational failure and more enduring success, although was not able to provide any evidence to substantiate this claim.

3.46 ATL Cymru referred to research by Professor Reynolds, which suggested that reorganisation of rural schools in Wales could help enable a more equitable distribution of funds to all schools to make significant improvements, because

“larger schools often provided efficiencies of scale and a critical mass of resources that enabled one-off expenditure of a scale that would not be possible in a smaller setting”.<sup>6</sup>

3.47 Professor Reynolds suggested that ring-fencing any savings from school reorganisation within the local authority’s education budget, as had happened in Pembrokeshire, could help demonstrate to those opposed to school closure that the purpose of the policy is not to reduce expenditure on education but to re-focus that expenditure.

3.48 The Committee recognises that the provision of public services in rural and sparsely populated areas is considerably more expensive than the provision of those same services in urban areas. However the Committee believes that the Government and local authorities have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that all people and all communities have access to the highest possible quality of services irrespective of geography or wealth.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.assemblywales.org/rdc\\_3\\_rrswa2\\_ascl.pdf](http://www.assemblywales.org/rdc_3_rrswa2_ascl.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-third1/bus-committees-third-rd-home/inquiries-3/rdc\\_3\\_inq\\_rural\\_schools/rdc\\_3\\_rural\\_schools-responses/rrswa3.htm](http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-third1/bus-committees-third-rd-home/inquiries-3/rdc_3_inq_rural_schools/rdc_3_rural_schools-responses/rrswa3.htm)



3.49 The Committee also believes that this must be balanced with the need to ensure that all children are treated equitably. The Committee recognises the very real danger that if a disproportionately large resource is being used to support some very small schools then some schools and pupils may not have the money that they should have because it is spent disproportionately on very small schools. However the Committee believes that this is a political decision that should be taken by local authorities based upon the wishes of the local electorate.

### **Educational attainment**

3.50 The whole purpose of the education system in Wales is to equip our young people with the tools they need to achieve their potential throughout their lifetime. The ability for each child to realise its best educational attainment must be the key and fundamental purpose of any school, whatever its size or location.

3.51 Throughout the inquiry, the Committee heard conflicting views as to whether educational attainment in small schools was better, worse, or the same as in larger schools. Very little of the evidence presented was either consistent or clear and much of the evidence was contradictory.

3.52 Estyn reported that “there is no clear link between class size and pupil attainment across the piece in primary schools; there is very ambivalent evidence on that point, and there is certainly no clear link”. It also argued that it can be easier to teach 25 to 30 pupils of a similar age than teaching a group of 15 to 20 pupils of mixed ages, as it is extremely difficult to meet the learning needs of a very wide age range of pupils.

3.53 Professor Bramley argued that the largest single cause of low attainment was social deprivation, including poverty, and that this is more prevalent and concentrated in some urban areas and the Valleys. He further argued that the priority for resources should be moved to schools in what are termed ‘deprived’ communities to raise the educational attainment of the pupils there.

3.54 In its written evidence, ATL Cymru suggested that breaking the link between poverty and low educational attainment was as much of a challenge for rural schools as it was for their urban counterparts. It claimed that, whilst urban poverty was highly visible and well-documented, social exclusion in rural areas was rarely captured in official statistical data. The Committee recognises and understand this argument since it formed a major part of the Committee’s recent report on deprivation in rural Wales.

3.55 In their written submission, the parent governor of a small school claimed that children from disadvantaged and impoverished backgrounds actually make better progress in the smallest schools because they receive individual care and attention.

3.56 Other witnesses gave evidence that a smaller school gave children a more rounded education. A great deal of this evidence was anecdotal and some of it may have been based on a more romantic view of a past age than hard facts and evidence.

3.57 In their written submissions, parents, teachers and governors of small schools argued that, due to small class sizes, pupils in small schools benefit from more attention and support than in larger schools. They further claimed that children in mixed age classes go on to perform better at A level and beyond than children in larger schools and that they benefited from sociability and learning through interaction with others.

3.58 Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg argued that those counties that, on the whole, have the best academic results tend to be those that have a substantial number of small rural schools, therefore

“there is a *prima facie* case for claiming that village schools are very successfully educationally”.

3.59 The petitioners considered that

“In Wales, the best results in A-levels and beyond tend to come from those areas with the highest proportion of small schools.”

3.60 The Committee does not accept this evidence. There has been little research carried out which substantiates this point of view and, where such evidence does exist, it confirms that where attainment is higher it tends to be because of the social background of pupils rather than the size of schools.

3.61 Notwithstanding the above, the Committee did not receive any clear and compelling evidence at all that small schools are inherently an inferior option. On the other hand, neither we did hear any substantiated evidence to suggest that all small schools provide a higher standard of education either.

3.62 The Committee found no convincing evidence that small schools are underperforming although we believe that much of the rhetoric that small schools provide an inherently better educational experience is also misplaced – the Committee does not believe that a small school provides an inherently better education than a larger school – simply because it is small or smaller.

3.63 The Committee therefore concludes that whilst small schools can achieve good and excellent results, the pressures on the very smallest schools mean that there is a far greater risk to the educational standards and achievements of pupils at these schools.

## **4. THE CLOSURE PROCESS**

4.1 The roles and responsibilities of all the agencies and stakeholders involved in the process are set out in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and associated regulations, and National Assembly for Wales Circular 23/02: School Organisation Proposals (currently being revised).

### **The Role of Local Education Authorities**

4.2 The organisation of educational provision is the responsibility of local education authorities (LEAs).

4.3 Each LEA must prepare, consult on and adopt a School Organisation Plan for its area and review it annually. The Plan should assess the supply of, and demand for, school places within the LEA area during the five year planning period; identify any excess or shortfall in the number of primary and secondary school places and draw conclusions about how these should be dealt with. It must also set out the provision which the authority proposes to make for children with special educational needs. The Plan thus sets the context for the public, the LEA and the Minister to consider proposals for opening, closing or changing the character of individual schools. The Minister must have regard to the School Organisation Plan in reaching any decision on a statutory proposal for change which comes to her for determination.

4.4 In their evidence to the Committee on 4 June, the Petitioners claimed that one of the key issues was local authorities taking certain actions and then claiming, as justification, that they had been forced into doing it because of pressure from the Welsh Assembly Government to reduce surplus places.

4.5 The Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills disputed such claims. She maintained that her role was to lay out the framework which would enable LEAs to take their responsibilities and ensure they faced up to the economic realities of their education provision.

4.6 The Committee believes that the management of education is a complex and difficult issue. It is the role and duty of local authorities to manage their budgets and to set their spending priorities. It would be better managed if local education authorities initiated an honest and frank debate about education in their areas which could be positive rather than play a blame game where the education of children appears to matter less than escaping the blame for unpopular policies.

### *The Consultation Process*

4.7 The Committee received mixed views in relation to the effectiveness of the way in which local authorities carry out consultations on school reorganisation proposals. Some witnesses felt there was an element of 'tokenism' to the whole process, although that wasn't true in all cases as was demonstrated in the Committee's visit to Nanternis.

4.8 ATL Cymru suggested that the current consultation process was not designed to aid communities to participate in such an important debate as the potential closure of their local school. They believed that consultations often appeared to be seen by local authorities as a hurdle through which they must jump on the way to a pre-determined conclusion.

4.9 Rosalind Garrett, parent of a primary aged child who attended a small rural school in Radnorshire, claimed that local authorities were glib with regard to their 'consultation processes'. She suggested that consultation by local authorities on the issue of individual school closure was never long term enough to yield any useful information.

4.10 During a fact-finding visit to Hermon in Pembrokeshire, the Committee met parents who felt a strong dissatisfaction with the process. They felt that they had been ignored by the local authority during the consultation process on the closure of their local school. Some parents felt that the authority had merely been going through the motions. The parents had been involved in a protracted campaign to reverse the local authority's decision to close their local school, which ended with an unsuccessful appeal to the High Court. This view from a group of parents was directly opposed to that of Estyn, who cited Pembrokeshire as the leading authority in Wales for effective school place planning.

4.11 In her written evidence to the Committee, Dr Christine Jones, Chair of the Governing Body at Ysgol Gynradd Gymunedol Llansadwrn said that inhabitants of rural areas, such as Llansadwrn, are aware that many village schools are not financially viable and that reorganisation is sometimes inevitable. It is the means by which it is done that is the real issue. She believes that if a new area school with improved facilities for all would receive the support of the community just as long as the consultation process was inclusive and open.

4.12 The Dwyfor Meirionnydd Constituency Labour Party made a similar point, claiming that Gwynedd Council focused on consultation with "governors and parents" instead of involving the whole community, demonstrating "the narrowness of the consultation process that Gwynedd Council undertook when formulating the consultation document."

4.13 This was not the case in every area though. The Committee was presented with an entirely different picture during a similar visit to Nanternis in Ceredigion. Here, parents recognised that the three small local schools could not be sustained in the long-term and sought to ensure that parents were at the heart of the process to establish a new local area school in their place and were involved at an early stage. Officers from the local authority education department worked closely with the campaign group to try to achieve the best possible outcome for the local community.

**Recommendation 7: The Committee recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government develops a code of practice for consultation and meaningful community engagement which should be followed by local authorities in managing this process.**

**Recommendation 8: The Committee recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government guidance includes the need for openness and transparency by LEAs when consulting on school reorganisation proposals. The Committee expects that active informed and meaningful consultation is at the heart of this process.**

### **The Role of the Welsh Assembly Government**

4.14 The Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government, has a role to:

- provide a framework for local authorities to reorganise their schools when they have identified a need to do so, to provide guidance on the approach they should normally take;
- decide on disputed statutory proposals.

4.15 In a Plenary debate on small schools closures in December 2007, the Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills outlined the support that the Welsh Assembly Government is providing for small schools:

“In demonstrating the balanced policy that we have in place for small schools, we must recognise that local authorities must be strategic about managing school places. In rural areas in particular, some small schools will continue to exist and be supported, but how small they are and how many there should be is a matter for local authorities. Quality is much more important than size: how well schools cater for the children, how well they are able to meet the needs of the modern curriculum and how well they can continue to do so for the future...

I would only agree to the closure of a small school if doing so would secure better outcomes for learners. “

### *The Welsh Assembly Government Guidance*

4.16 Current Welsh Assembly Government guidance on school closure proposals<sup>7</sup> states,

“The Welsh Assembly Government is concerned to ensure that rationalisation proposals reflect the need to maintain and improve standards; to cater for parental preference; and to provide access to reasonably local schools. The Minister would not normally be prepared to approve closure of a popular and effective school unless there were evidence that the alternative proposed would offer at least equivalent quality and diversity of education at lower total cost than would have been available had the school remained open.

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<sup>7</sup> Welsh Assembly Government Circular 23/02, [School Organisation Proposals](#), July 2002

In the case of rural schools particular considerations include:

- the educational challenges faced by small schools;
- the home to school transport implications and increased journey times;
- the overall effect on the community of closure and the extent to which the school is serving the whole community as a learning resource

This does not mean that rural schools should always remain open but the case for closure has to be robust and the proposals must be in the best interests of educational provision in the area.”

4.17 As previously noted, a revision of this guidance is currently out to consultation<sup>8</sup>.

4.18 Consultation has also recently taken place on draft regulations to enable governing bodies of any number of maintained schools, including nursery schools, to formally federate under a single governing body, whilst maintaining their individual identity and character. The Committee welcomes the Welsh Assembly Government’s willingness to make changes to such regulations which will actively help small schools to work more closely together where possible.

4.19 The petitioners argued that:

“the guidance [on school reorganisation] has been found wanting in terms of breadth and clarity and has not been taken seriously by local authorities or by the Welsh Assembly Government itself. The result has been an unhelpful approach, with the Welsh Assembly Government and local authorities blaming each other for the ‘necessity’ to close community schools”.

4.20 Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg claimed that the Welsh Assembly Government was perceived to have a back-door policy of enforcing local authorities to close many schools. They also argued

“it is frustrating to see the guidelines of the Welsh Assembly Government being completely ignored, with no proper study in any instances of the effect of school’s closure on the children’s education, on the local community, or on the Welsh language. In all honesty, everyone realises that the local authorities are just going through the motions”.

4.21 They went on to suggest that there should be a methodology for measuring the impact of a school closure on a community and its language and on standards of education.

4.22 The National Federation of Women’s Institutes Wales urged the Welsh Assembly Government to update its guidance to reflect the need for a detailed and meaningful consultation to be undertaken with communities in relation to any proposed closures and for the findings to be made public.

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<sup>8</sup> Consultation on Circular: School Organisation Proposals, [Consultation document No: 060/2008](#), October 2008

**Recommendation 9: The Welsh Assembly Government in their revised guidance should clarify and formalise the roles of all stakeholders in the closure process. The revised guidance should be clear in expecting local authorities to proactively inform local communities and then to help those communities to participate in a debate on the future configuration of primary education in any given area.**

*Presumption against Small School Closure*

4.23 The petitioners argued for a presumption against closure of small schools, maintaining that small schools were a valuable resource and should stay open unless there were overwhelming educational reasons to close those schools.

4.24 The Minister stated that the existing guidance did not contain a presumption against the closure of small rural schools, but neither was there a presumption in favour. Each proposal which required Ministerial determination was judged on its individual merits. The arguments for and against were carefully weighed before a decision was made. To be approved, the case for closure had to be robust and clearly in the best interests of pupils, and this was true irrespective of whether the context was a rural or an urban one. The Minister also sought further advice from Estyn on each proposal brought forward.

4.25 In considering this issue the Committee looked to the policies being followed by other UK Administrations.

*England*

4.26 The UK Government has stressed that rural schools play an important part in maintaining the viability of the countryside, and has made it clear that the case for closure of rural schools has to be strong.

4.27 A presumption against the closure of rural schools was introduced in 1998. Revised guidance, which came into effect from 1 October 2004, strengthened the presumption by requiring LEAs or governing bodies proposing a rural school closure to provide evidence to show that they have considered a range of factors (i.e. the transport implications, the impact on the community and alternatives to closure).

## *Northern Ireland*

4.28 A draft document on *Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools*<sup>9</sup> sets out six criteria for helping to assess the viability of schools. They cover the educational experience of children, enrolment trends, financial position, school leadership and management, accessibility, and strength of links to the community. The document states that the consideration of sustainability criteria and indicators does not mean that where problems are identified, closure or amalgamation needs to be pursued, but difficulties with one or more factors should draw attention to the need for a more detailed review and evaluation.

4.29 It is also recognised that local circumstances need to be considered in determining what action may be appropriate e.g. the remoteness of the area may be important. When considering options such as potential amalgamation or closure options, educational, economic and community issues will need to inform decision-making. There will therefore need to continue to be a case by case evaluation of the circumstances, to ensure that the children have access to the best educational experiences possible and attain the highest possible standards.

## *Scotland*

4.30 Between May and September 2008, the Scottish Government consulted on the issue of rural school closures<sup>10</sup>. The Scottish Government propose to enact legislation to introduce a presumption against the closure of rural schools, not to prevent any or all such closures in future, but to seek to ensure that a closure decision is only taken as a last resort and not until all the alternatives have been explored and the potential impact on the community fully considered.

4.31 The Committee considered the action taken by other administrations but did not feel they had received enough evidence to support making a recommendation to the Welsh Assembly Government in favour of the introduction of a presumption against closure in Wales. The Committee also noted that the presumption against closure in other administrations tended to protect schools that are far larger than the average in Wales.

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Education Northern Ireland, [Schools for the Future - A policy for sustainable schools](#), 2007

<sup>10</sup> Scottish Government, [Safeguarding our rural schools and improving school consultation procedures](#), May 2008



## **5. THE EFFECTS OF CLOSURE**

5.1 Any change in a young person's life can have a profound effect and needs to be handled in a sensitive and sympathetic way. There are many issues surrounding the closure of a school and its effects may be far reaching, affecting not only those directly involved but also the wider community. As with any process, there will be negative as well as positive outcomes. The way in which these outcomes are anticipated and dealt with can have a great bearing on the perceived success of the process.

### **Impact on Pupils**

5.2 Other than anecdotal evidence from parents who suggested that small schools were better and that children were happier in them, the Committee received little quantifiable evidence on the detrimental effect on pupils resulting from school reorganisation.

5.3 In fact, evidence from Professor Reynolds suggested that pupils in the schools in Pembrokeshire that were recently reorganised did better after the reorganisation than those in the non-reorganised schools. He argued that the children preferred the bigger schools, because they had more friends, there were more sports teams, and there were more facilities. He also argued that there are substantial advantages for teachers and head-teachers in a school of three or four teachers, as opposed to one or two teachers, in terms of specialisation and an opportunity to focus on new initiatives and projects. However, he also recognised the limitations of his study on small schools, and suggested that the Welsh Assembly Government should commission wider and more in-depth research into the academic achievement of pupils once they have moved to a larger school, adjusted for background.

5.4 According to Estyn

“there is no evidence that small schools have better outcomes than large schools or that when small schools close and children transfer to larger, merged schools, that standards decline”.

5.5 This view was shared by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) Cymru, who argued that there was a lack of evidence to support many of the claims made about the benefits that smaller schools can bring to pupils. Estyn also suggested that small schools limited the range of sporting, social and cultural interaction and activities that depend on large groups or team-playing.

5.6 A number of respondents also highlighted the importance of extra-curricular activities as a means of raising self-esteem and increasing participation in education.

5.7 Cymdeithas yr Iaith Cymraeg, however, argued that it was possible to overcome disadvantages, such as not having enough children of the same age to form a football team, through more positive means of bringing schools together to co-operate.

5.8 A number of respondents highlighted the effects of increased travel time on young pupils as a result of school reorganisation, but research carried out by Professor Bramley which included an examination of whether the average distance to schools for pupils had any impact on educational attainment, proved inconclusive. The Committee recognises that many children in rural Wales already travel quite long distances to school every morning with little or no negative impact on their educational attainment or social development.

5.9 The Committee is of the view that there is little doubt that larger schools provide a greater range of opportunities for children to participate in activities both within the curriculum and in terms of extra-curricular activities. The Committee further notes that there is no demand from either parents or pupils from newly-reorganised schools to go back to the former provision and former school configuration. The Committee does believe that this in itself demonstrates that where local authorities get both the process and the education model right that it is appreciated by communities.

**Recommendation 10: The Committee recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government commissions research into the academic and social effects on children after they have moved to a larger school.**

### **Impact on the community**

"Closing a village school can be a death-blow to the community".  
Stephen Byers, Education Minister, 1998

5.10 A large number of respondents expressed concern regarding the impact of school closure on local communities and made the case that this issue was not given sufficient consideration within the decision-making process. Whilst, the Committee acknowledges that there is a strong sense of ownership of small schools within rural communities, most of the evidence received on the impact has been largely anecdotal.

5.11 In Northern Ireland a recent report by the Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (Striking the Balance: Towards a Vision and Principles for Education in Northern Ireland: A Rural Proofing Study<sup>11</sup>) attempts to 'rural proof' small schools policies in Northern Ireland. This report attempted to use case studies to give an analysis on the potential effect on rural communities of school closures and school amalgamation. Interviews were held with parents to understand their views on the effect of these developments on factors such as the 'sense of community' on the community and pattern of social capital (i.e. relationships within the community). This provides some qualitative analysis of the role of a school in a rural community.

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<sup>11</sup> Rural Development Council, [Striking the Balance](#), July 2008

5.12 The Committee noted that this study sought to investigate the extent of the linkage between a small school and its local community, and its contribution to local social capital. This report described some of the norms, social networks and inter-personal relationships that contribute to a child's growth and that the impact of social capital on children extends beyond the school gates, pointing therefore to the wider linkages with families and then the local community.

5.13 The report concluded that the relationship between closure or indeed opening of a school and sense of community is not clear cut. On the one hand, it does not seem to automatically follow that closure will reduce sense of community – much depends on what else is there. On the other hand, opening of a new school does not guarantee sustaining sense of community because new housing developments, which could be associated with the attractiveness of a new school facility, may bring an influx of incomers and with it a dilution of sense of community. Either situation will, it seems, need a degree of community development support to sustain sense of community.

5.14 According to Estyn, the school was often seen as the last remaining focal point of rural communities, which

“tends to heighten their emotional appeal and the school's continued survival can come to be seen as the survival of the community as a viable entity”.

5.15 They further argued that, in most cases, this argument was an “over-statement”, whilst at the same time conceding that the school does provide a means of interaction between parents and the wider community that cannot be easily replaced.

5.16 In referring to his report on small school closure in Wales, Professor Reynolds stated,

“the recommendation that I would attach the most importance to is ensuring that school buildings are available for community use and that they are not derelict or handed on to others”.

5.17 Further research by Professor Reynolds described the changes associated with schools reorganisation as a positive thing for children and parents and not as a negative. After reorganisation, Reynolds claimed that the parents probably saw their community as being larger, but not sufficiently large to be disorientating or anomalous in any way. In no sense did the parents think that the community was suffered, whilst for the children it meant more friends in the sense that their world had grown, but they still had the resources of a small village and community and even this new larger world was still in real and relative terms quite small.

5.18 The Association of Communities in Wales with Small Schools highlighted the need to integrate community schools and other public sector buildings as physical resources for the community to stimulate community and social activities and sustainable social enterprises and promote asset transfer of school buildings to become community co-operatives. This was a view supported by the National Federation of Women's Institutes Wales, in their written evidence. The Committee believe that such an approach is important to ensure that communities have spaces where people can interact.

5.19 The Committee was struck by the evidence of parents during the visit to Hermon. There was clearly a great deal of anger and frustration with the local authority. There was also a great deal of concern about the impact of the closure of local schools on the community. However it was striking that none of the parents spoke about local organisations or community groups such as Merched y Wawr or the Young Farmers Club. The Committee believes that this is a very limited vision of the community and probably does not represent the vitality of the villages and communities in the surrounding area.

5.20 The National Federation of Women's Institutes Wales suggested that, with local services such as post offices, small shops, hospitals and banks closing, the local school was often the only remaining social network in communities. They further argue that school closures impact on the vibrancy of communities and contribute to social exclusion, affecting language and community spirit. This view was shared by Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, who claimed that,

“once you lose the school within your immediate community, the whole community feeling among the children and their parents is lost”.

5.21 The Committee recognises that this feeling and perception exists in many communities but is concerned that at times this argument is used without the evidence to sustain it being demonstrated. In fact, on their visit to Nanternis, the Committee encountered a very different outlook. There, parents believed that the school was only one element of the community and, although an important one, its closure would not result in an end to the vitality of that community. The people here saw the community as being the sum of a range of different interactions between different people, groups of people and others in very different ways. The Committee sees this as a far more positive vision of a vibrant community.

5.22 Some witnesses described the place of the community in providing a supportive learning environment for pupils in terms of a supportive atmosphere and the partnership between parents and schools. The Committee recognises this exists in some communities but is not convinced that it is a defining characteristic of small schools alone.

5.23 Dr Alexandra Plows, on behalf of Ysgol Gynradd Rhiwlas, argued that there was little research which defined and assessed the contribution of local schools to rural village and community life and to broader national policy targets, and even less on the impact of removing such resources.

5.24 One Voice Wales claimed that it was extremely difficult to measure the wider benefits that accrued to a community from the presence of a school. They believe that a school can be an important factor in influencing movement into an area and stem an outflow of young people from local communities; therefore maintaining a school in a rural area can be seen as an investment in the future viability of a community.

5.25 In some cases the loss of a school building as a community space is a clear example of how a school closure will impact a community far beyond the loss of an educational resource. This is an understandable and demonstrable loss and one which will clearly have an impact on the ability of the community to function and to promote community events and activities. However, this fact alone should not guide the provision of educational resources. It is unacceptable that young children could potentially be provided with a lower standard of education simply in order to provide a hall in which community groups may meet from time to time.

5.26 The petitioners argued that, without a local school there was no reason for families with young children to move in or stay, so the population would age, exacerbating demographic trends and placing ever greater burdens on care services.

5.27 The Committee does not accept this evidence. The Committee recognises that the availability of, and access to, local educational facilities is a key issue for parents however the Committee also notes that the greatest issue facing young families in rural Wales at the present is the availability of affordable housing and jobs.

5.28 The Committee is concerned that to some extent and in some cases the concept of the community described by some witnesses is rooted in an emotional reaction rather than the reality of human interaction – and changes which take place in any community over time. It has been disappointing how little solid compelling evidence on the impact of a school closure on a community has been presented by those groups opposing the closure of local primary schools.

5.29 The Committee recognises that the loss of their school will be seen as a devastating blow to any community, be it rural or urban, but is firmly of the view that this not sufficient reason to retain unsustainable, outdated premises. The principal purpose of a school must be to provide the best education possible for the children it serves. Any further community benefit is an additional advantage but cannot be used as a reason to support the retention of a school where that school may not be delivering the best educational opportunities for its pupils.

5.30 The Committee understands that the proposed revision of the Welsh Assembly Government guidance on school reorganisation will contain a recommendation to LEAs to consider the overall effect of a closure on the community. The Committee welcomes this development.

**Recommendation 11: The Welsh Assembly Government should commission research to assess and to fully understand the impact of school closures on communities in rural Wales.**

**Recommendation 12: LEAs should carry out robust community impact assessments prior to the closure of any small school. The Welsh Assembly Government should provide guidance to LEAs on undertaking such community impact assessments based upon its research.**

### **Impact on the Welsh language**

5.31 Many respondents argued that the presence of a school which promotes the Welsh language can contribute substantially to sustaining the language within the community. However, Estyn claimed that there was no evidence that standards in Welsh decline when small schools in areas of Wales where Welsh is spoken by the majority of people close and pupils are transferred to larger schools.

5.32 Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg believed that where Welsh language medium schools were closed, the Welsh language was increasingly seen as the language of the classroom rather than the language of the community. It further argued that community schools were particularly effective in assimilating the children of in-migrants to Welsh-speaking communities, as they were able to offer the language as a key to accessing the community.

5.33 One respondent suggested that one of the main threats to continuation of the use of Welsh was non-Welsh speaking families moving into Welsh-speaking areas, and that,

“effective teaching of Welsh in primary schools was the main antidote to this”.

5.34 In his evidence, Professor Reynolds said he had been surprised that the results of his research had indicated that the Welsh language had not been weakened, in the views of the respondents, but suggested that it might have been picking up the fact that the Welsh language can benefit from critical mass. He suggested that further research was required as to whether closure has a linguistic effect in weakening of the Welsh language.

**Recommendation 13: That the impact on the Welsh language be considered as a major determinant when local authorities take decisions in school closures.**

## 6. ALTERNATIVES TO CLOSURE

6.1 This report has discussed and examined the process of school closures and the reasons for such decisions. The Committee has not examined in any detail alternative structures and models of governance for schools.

6.2 However, in taking evidence, the Committee has been given a number of suggested options and alternatives to closure.

6.3 Clearly, some of these alternatives will be more relevant to some areas than to others. The Committee acknowledges that different communities will seek different solutions. The Committee believes that it is the role of local authorities to facilitate this debate and to lead an honest and frank discussion with local communities.

6.4 Outlined below are the most common types of small school organisations and examples of the innovative and creative practice that is in evidence in Wales to try and overcome the challenges faced by small schools.

### *Alternative Models*

6.5 Estyn stated that, currently the most successful types of small school organisation, in terms of educational standards and quality of provision, included:

- area schools,
- schools in a federation (through amalgamation), organised to have pupils of the same age located together;
- schools in an informal federation, i.e. with shared headship.

6.6 The following are the definitions used by Estyn in their report *Small Primary Schools in Wales*<sup>12</sup>:

#### ***Area school***

In this type of organisation, two or more schools may be closed and replaced by a single larger school. This may be located on a new site, or on one of the old sites with refurbished buildings. Such developments require statutory reorganisation proposals .

#### ***Federation***

Federation occurs when two or more schools are closed to create a single 'split - site' school with one head teacher and governing body. The head teacher and governing body can still choose to operate each site as a relatively independent unit covering the whole age range.

#### ***Cluster***

**Informal cluster** - consists of exchanges between headteachers and teachers of neighbouring schools to discuss current issues.

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<sup>12</sup> [Small Primary Schools in Wales](#), Estyn, February 2006

**Formal cluster** - This type of organisation involves more formal collaboration and co-operation, between schools.

6.7 The Committee understands that the success of clustering small schools depends substantially upon the relationships established between the collaborating schools. Collaborative arrangements are generally more effective when staff willingly enter into these agreements as equals. When fewer schools are involved in a cluster arrangement, it is more likely that the level of collaboration will remain at an informal level.

6.8 The Chair of the Governing Body of Ysgol Gynradd Cymunedol Llansadwrn suggested that federalisation only really works successfully when the federalised schools are similar in size, otherwise budgetary concerns will mean the small units always suffer. She argued that many rural schools already work closely together on an informal basis and this should be more actively acknowledged and encouraged at a higher level.

6.9 However, in their evidence to the Committee, Estyn suggested that “the solutions that are open to urban areas in terms of dealing with pupil numbers simply do not exist. Transport costs are a significant issue for them, but solutions such as clustering schools or federations and so on are simply not practical, because of the distances involved.

6.10 Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg suggested that different patterns needed to be found to fit local circumstances. Children from different schools could be brought together to undertake different activities, such as sports day, and teachers who had a certain specialism within a catchment area could visit all the schools in that catchment. They maintained that there are creative ways of solving any such educational problems, and went on to say that, “it would be better if we were able to create systems based on collaboration rather than competition, where everyone could collaborate to ensure the future of our schools and communities, and that those schools were the best that they could be.”

## **Examples of alternative provision**

### **Case study 1<sup>13</sup>**

#### **Ysgol Y Dderi, Ceredigion - area school**

This primary school of 121 pupils in rural Ceredigion was opened as an area school in 1976 following the closure of six village schools. The school has a long history of working as a community focused school through providing facilities for the community to use and hosting a range of community learning activities. It saw the Welsh Assembly Government community focused schools grant as a way to develop this approach further and in particular to employ a community co-ordinator. The co-ordinator carried out an audit in the six villages to identify existing provision and gaps. This resulted in the production of a calendar of events which is now produced four times a year. Informal monitoring suggests that more people, and more new people, are attending various classes and events in all communities. A relationship

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<sup>13</sup> Case Study 1, [Ysgol y Dderi](#) - Taken from written evidence submitted by ContinYou Cymru



has developed with a history group - made up of people from the local communities - which is currently researching the Victorians and will produce a booklet which the school can use as it will tie in with its History curriculum. Other plans include developing an organic garden with local people with gardening skills, teaching assistants and children and young people. The co-ordinator has been successful in securing £14,000 from the Assembly's Local Environment Quality grant to add value to this development.

## **Case study 2<sup>14</sup>**

### **Ysgol Carreg Hirfaen – federation**

Ysgol Carreg Hirfaen Federation (Coetmor, [sic]) in Carmarthenshire. This federation was created a decade ago through uniting 3 schools – one with 9 pupils, one with 19 pupils and the other with 55 pupils. This federalised school grew to reach the number of pupils it has today, which is the number quoted in the draft scheme. The smaller sites are in very close proximity, therefore the KS1 children of both villages are on one site, and the KS2 children are on the other. One of the sites opens and closes 10 minutes before the other in order to enable parents to collect children from both sites. The headteacher (not non-contact) of the larger site is the headteacher of the whole federalised school. I give these details in order to demonstrate how flexible a successful federation can be. The success of the concept is actually in its flexibility, as it responds to local needs and circumstances. The scheme was created by the communities rather than officers, who facilitated the process. The governors of a federalised school can amend the arrangements as circumstances change.

6.11 Although cited in their written evidence as an example of good practice, at the meeting on 25 June representatives of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg expressed concern that the Carmarthenshire County Council was now considering changing the arrangements at Ysgol Carreg Hirfaen.

6.12 The Committee acknowledges that there are examples of creative and innovative collaboration already taking place across Wales and believes that the Welsh Assembly Government should do more to support such arrangements.

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<sup>14</sup>Case Study 2, [Ysgol Carreg Hirfaen](#) - Taken from written evidence submitted by Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg

## **7. THE WAY FORWARD**

7.1 The Committee believes that the role of the Welsh Assembly Government and its partnership with local government in delivering primary education should change to better reflect the experiences and local knowledge and understanding of the local authority.

7.2 The Committee would like to see the balance tilted towards local authorities and away from the Assembly Government. The Committee believes that this would empower local communities and would allow a more intelligent and honest debate to take place in different communities than is currently the case.

7.3 The Committee believes that there is widespread public scepticism in the processes followed by local authorities in both discussing schools modernisation and reconfiguration. This scepticism in some parts of Wales is so great that it could be better described as cynicism or even outright distrust.

7.4 There is a need to win back public trust in the system and processes.

7.5 There is a need for clarity and honesty in the public debate. Councillors and council officers should face up to the issues of school reorganisation, surplus places and the investment in the school infrastructure without blaming either the Welsh Assembly Government, Estyn or anyone else for hard and difficult decisions that have to be taken in public administration and local government at any level.

7.6 If local authorities are to remain in charge of schools in Wales then they must win back public trust and confidence in their processes and engage in an honest debate with local communities.

7.7 In order to achieve these objectives the Committee believes that the Welsh Assembly Government Education Minister should lose her right to take decisions on school closures. At present the fact that the Minister is able to intervene and take decisions out of the hands of the local authority and the local community means that all too often the process (and the decisions) are seen as being “imposed” on communities rather than being the result of informed and intelligent debate.

7.8 In the future the Committee sees the role of the Welsh Assembly Government and the Minister as being that of guarantor of the process rather than a participant in the process. The Committee sees the Minister’s role as ensuring that all communities have access to a full and meaningful consultation process. If the process is good and robust then it should be the role of the local authority and the local authority alone to determine the configuration of primary education in the areas they serve.

## 8. CONCLUSION

8.1 The Committee has found this a difficult inquiry to undertake, partly due to the lack of research and quantifiable evidence available and partly because of the passionate response school closures generate in communities.

8.2 The Committee believes that the closure of some very small schools is inevitable; in some cases pupil numbers and the condition of their school buildings may be considered just too low for the school to be considered as being sustainable. We believe that children in Wales are entitled to the best education and facilities available in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we also believe in equality for all; the education of one child should not be at the cost of another's.

8.3 During our evidence taking, we have seen and heard of examples of good practice, where local authorities are fully engaging with the community and others where communities feel ignored and let down. A recurring theme throughout the evidence has been, even if a community disagrees with the final decision they are more likely to accept it if they feel they have been truly involved in the process.

8.4 We therefore conclude that local education authorities need to be more open and transparent in dealing with proposals for school reorganisation and build on the examples of good practice we have seen during the course of this evidence, and the Welsh Assembly Government need to support them in doing so.

**Recommendation 14: The Committee recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government reviews the process for reorganising schools to strengthen the role of local education authorities, supports them in their responsibilities in the reorganisation process and gives consideration to transferring the right to hear appeals against school reorganisation proposals to an independent arbitrator.**

## Summary of Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** The Committee recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government:

- provides clearer guidance to local authorities on how surplus places are to be defined and addressed;
- commissions further research on the actual cost of a surplus place.

**Recommendation 2:** That the Welsh Assembly Government, in any new guidance on surplus places, states clearly that it is the responsibility of each individual local authority to deal with issues of resource use and surplus places within their overall budget and education policy. It should be made clear that local authorities take these decisions and that the Welsh Assembly Government guidance is not designed and should not be taken to be pressure on individual authorities.

**Recommendation 3:** The Welsh Assembly Government should publish a clear vision for Welsh primary schools:

- To include a definition of what “fit for purpose” means;
- To define and describe a “School Standard for Wales”.

**Recommendation 4:** The Welsh Assembly Government should carry out a comprehensive audit of the school estate to establish how many school premises would comply with the standard and the amount of investment that will be needed in order to bring all Welsh schools up to this standard.

**Recommendation 5:** That the Welsh Assembly Government establishes a clear strategy to ensure that all schools in Wales reach this standard within an agreed and published timescale.

**Recommendation 6:** That the Welsh Assembly Government does not need to define a small school in terms of enrolled pupil numbers at any one time – but does define a small school in terms of staff and the teaching load of its Head in order to provide and focus support on those schools where such support is most needed.

**Recommendation 7:** The Committee recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government develops a code of practice for consultation and meaningful community engagement which should be followed by local authorities in managing this process.

**Recommendation 8:** The Committee recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government guidance includes the need for openness and transparency by LEAs when consulting on school reorganisation proposals. The Committee expects that active informed and meaningful consultation is at the heart of this process.

**Recommendation 9:** The Welsh Assembly Government in their revised guidance should clarify and formalise the roles of all stakeholders in the closure process. The revised guidance should be clear in expecting local authorities to proactively inform local communities and then to help those communities to participate in a debate on the future configuration of primary education in any given area.

**Recommendation 10:** The Committee recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government commissions research into the academic and social effects on children after they have moved to a larger school.

**Recommendation 11:** The Welsh Assembly Government should commission research to assess and to fully understand the impact of school closures on communities in rural Wales.

**Recommendation 12:** LEAs should carry out robust community impact assessments prior to the closure of any small school. The Welsh Assembly Government should provide guidance to LEAs on undertaking such community impact assessments based upon its research.

**Recommendation 13:** That the impact on the Welsh language be considered as a major determinant when local authorities take decisions in school closures.

**Recommendation 14:** The Committee recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government reviews the process for reorganising schools to strengthen the role of local education authorities, supports them in their responsibilities in the reorganisation process and gives consideration to transferring the right to hear appeals against school reorganisation proposals to an independent arbitrator.

## Annex 2

### Organisations and individuals who gave evidence in person to the Committee

#### Those giving evidence

#### Representing

##### 4 June 2008

- Bob Smith
- Dr Roger Blunden
- Kevin Stephens

Powys Community  
Schools Action

##### 11 June 2008

- Professor David Reynolds, Professor of Education
- Professor Glen Bramley, Professor of Urban Studies

University of Plymouth

Heriot-Watt University

##### 25 June 2008

- Ffred Ffransis
- Matt Dix, Vice Chair and previous Parent Governor of Ysgol Mynyddcerrig

Cymdeithas yr Iaith

Carmarthenshire  
Primary Schools  
Forum

##### 2 July 2008

- Steve Thomas, Chief Executive,
- Dr Chris Llewelyn, Director Lifelong Learning, Leisure and Information
- Daisy Seabourne, Policy Officer Lifelong Learning
- Mervyn Benford,
- Dr Bill Maxwell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales,
- Ann Keane, Head of Directorate: Education Providers
- Arwyn Thomas, Her Majesty's Inspector

Welsh Local  
Government  
Association

National Association  
for Small Schools

Estyn

## **9 July 2008**

- Jane Hutt AM, Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills
- Mary Davies, Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills
- Paul Williams, Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

Welsh Assembly  
Government

## Schedule of Committee Papers Provided to Inform Oral Evidence

Date	Name of Paper	Paper Number Reference
4 June 2008	<u>Powys Community Schools Action Written Submission to Inquiry into Provision of Education in Rural Wales and Reorganisation of Rural Schools in Wales</u>	RDC(3)-09-08 : Paper 1
25 June 2008	<u>Village Schools - The Case for Positive Rationalisation</u>  <u>Opposition to the Statutory Notice to Close Ysgol Llanddeusant</u>  <u>Response to Gwynedd's Primary Schools' Reorganisation Scheme</u>  <u>Response to Gwynedd County Council's Education Reorganisation</u>  <u>Opposition to the Notification to Close Ysgol Mynyddcerrig by Cymdeithas yr Iaith</u>  <u>Evidence for Consideration by the Rural Development Sub Committee Scrutiny Inquiry - Reorganisation of Rural Schools from Matt Dix</u>  <u>Report on Governors' Visit to Ysgol Mynyddcerrig</u>	RDC(3)-11-08 : Paper 1  RDC(3)-11-08 : Paper 1 Annex A  RDC(3)-11-08 : Paper 1 Annex B  RDC(3)-11-08 : Paper 1 Annex C  RDC(3)-11-08 : Paper 1 Annex D  RDC(3)-11-08 : Paper 1 Annex E  RDC(3)-11-08 : Paper 1 Annex F
2 July 2008	<u>Submission from Welsh Local Government Association to inquiry into education provision and school reorganisation in rural Wales</u>  <u>Submission from National Association of Small Schools to inquiry into education provision and schools reorganisation in rural Wales</u>	RDC(3)-12-08 : Paper 1  RDC(3)-12-08 : Paper 2



	<u>Submission from Estyn to inquiry into education provision and the reorganisation of schools in rural Wales</u>	RDC(3)-12-08 : Paper 3
9 July 2008	<u>Paper from the Welsh Assembly Government on Inquiry into Rural Schools</u>	RDC(3)-13-08 : Paper 1

## List of Respondents to Call for Written Evidence

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Committee Reference</b>
<u>A1. Association of Communities in Wales with Small Schools (ACWSS)</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA1
<u>A2. Association of School and College Lecturers (pdf 128KB)</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA2
<u>A3. Association of Teachers and Lecturers</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA3
<u>A.4 ContinYou</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA4
<u>A5. Dwyfor Meirionnydd Constituency Labour Party (pdf 435KB)</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA5
<u>A6. National Association of Small Schools</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA6
<u>A7. National Federation of Women's Institutes - Wales</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA7
<u>A8. One Voice Wales</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA8
<u>A9. Powys Radnor Federation of Women's Institute</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA9
<u>A10. Ynys Môn Education, Health and Welfare Policy Overview Committee</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA10
<u>A11. Gwynedd Council</u>	RDC(3) RRSWA11
<b>Schools (Teachers/Governors etc)</b>	
<u>B1. Kate Bull, Parent Governor, Gladestry Church in Wales Primary School</u>	RDC(3) RRSWB1
<u>B2. Bethan Evans, Teacher</u>	RDC(3) RRSWB2
<u>B3. Dr Christine Jones, Chair of Governing Body, Ysgol Gynradd Gymunedol Llansadwrn</u>	RDC(3) RRSWB3
<u>B4. Dr Emma Posey, Parent Governor</u>	RDC(3) RRSWB4
<u>B5. Dr Alexandra Plows, Governor, Ysgol Gynradd Rhiwlas</u>	RDC(3) RRSWB5
<u>B6. Eirwen Thomas, Chair of the Board of Governors, Ysgol Llanedi</u>	RDC(3) RRSWB6
<u>B7. Nick Tuffnell, Head Teacher, Franksbridge CP School</u>	RDC(3) RRSWB7
<u>B8. Jessica Lewis, Headteacher, Ysgol Gynradd Maesybont (pdf 181KB)</u>	RDC(3) RRSWB8
<u>B9. Sue Williams, Parent Governor, Ysgol Llwyngwriil</u>	RDC(3) RRSWB9
<b>Individuals</b>	
<u>C1. Hattie Budd</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC1
<u>C2. Dr Ann Marie Courtney</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC2
<u>C3. Dr Joanna Crawshaw</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC3
<u>C4. John and Patricia Duffy (pdf 23 KB)</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC4
<u>C5. Tricia Evans</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC5
<u>C6. Ros Garrett</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC6
<u>C7. R.I. Gunn</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC7
<u>C8. David Jones</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC8
<u>C9. John Milsom</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC9

<u>C10. Paul Penrose</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC10
<u>C11. Glynis Shaw</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC11
<u>C12. Dr R.S. Terry (pdf 127 KB)</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC12
<u>C13. Jane Whittle (pdf 61 KB)</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC13
<u>C14. Anne Bull (pdf 97 KB)</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC14
<u>C15. Richard Bull (pdf 90 KB)</u>	RDC(3) RRSWC15