

Estyn response to the proposal by Powys County Council to close Builth Wells and Llandrindod High Schools and open a single bilingual dual stream 11-18 school from September 2017

This report has been prepared by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education and Training in Wales.

Under the terms of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and its associated Code, proposers are required to send consultation documents to Estyn. However Estyn is not a body which is required to act in accordance with the Code and the Act places no statutory requirements on Estyn in respect of school organisation matters. Therefore as a body being consulted, Estyn will provide their opinion only on the overall merits of school organisation proposals.

Estyn has considered the educational aspects of the proposal and has produced the following response to the information provided by the proposer and other additional information such as data from Welsh Government and the views of the Regional Consortia which deliver school improvement services to the schools within the proposal.

Introduction

This is a consultation proposal from Powys County Council. The proposal is to:

- Close Builth Wells High School and Llandrindod High School and establish a single bilingual category 2B/C ("dual-stream") 11-18 secondary school operating across two sites as an interim measure whilst further feasibility work is carried out to establish the viability of a new school occupying one site in Builth Wells in the future.

Summary/ Conclusion

The proposer has provided a clear rationale for the proposal.

Overall, many aspects of the proposal receive appropriate consideration. However, the proposal does not sufficiently consider standards currently achieved at both schools or demonstrate how the changes will lead to improved standards or provision or the impact on teaching and curricular arrangements or the leadership and management of the new school. In addition it does not consider fully all the risks involved in the proposal and the consideration of both the longer-term vision and interim solution does not aid the proposal's clarity.

As a result, it is Estyn's opinion that it is not possible to establish whether standards will be at least maintained by the proposal.

Description and benefits

The proposer has provided a clear rationale for its longer term proposal to establish a single dual stream school in Builth. The proposer appears to base its case for change primarily on the need to address the decline in pupil numbers at both schools, particularly when set in the context of the projected pupil numbers to 2021. It considers appropriately the impact of low pupil numbers on provision and the ability to provide a viable English and Welsh medium curriculum across the county, and sets out its view that a larger bilingual school in mid Powys would provide economies of scale that would effectively address these concerns. The proposer identifies appropriately the need to raise standards at both schools and to improve the condition of school buildings at both schools. The proposer also identifies how the proposal would produce annual revenue savings.

The proposer sets out clearly the expected benefits and disadvantages of the proposal when compared with the current situation. The proposer sees the main benefits of the proposal accruing from a reduction in surplus places, cost effectiveness, and the ability to provide a broader curriculum range at key stage 4 and 5, with particular attention given to the potential of broadening Welsh medium provision if its plans to remove the dual stream from Brecon High School are achieved. The proposer acknowledges the disadvantages of the proposal in terms of loss of community links and increased travel times for pupils in the Llandrindod catchment area affected. However, overall, it considers that the benefits of the proposal outweigh the disadvantages it has identified.

In many respects, the proposer appears to provide a fair and balanced appraisal of the risks associated with its proposed interim solution of operating across two sites. However, in a few instances, the proposer does not identify or discuss its risk management measures in sufficient detail. For example, although the proposer identifies the risk that some parents may arrange for their children to attend schools other than the new school, it does not identify sufficiently well how it will engage positively with parents to reduce this risk. Similarly, it does not specify clearly enough how it intends to address the difficulties some pupils from the Brecon area may face with accessing after school activities due to transport constraints, other than a vague assurance that it will look into options. Significantly, the proposer does not consider sufficiently well the impact on provision and outcomes of a reduced budget given that one of the two schools is projecting a significant budget deficit over the next three years.

Moreover, there is insufficient consideration of the risks associated with its longer term vision of opening one school – one site in Builth, given that the proposal's main benefits can only be materialised if this longer-term vision is in fact realised.

Most significantly, however, it does not consider the possibility that the proposed new school will fail to improve standards, or identify any measures to address this.

The proposer has considered the impact of the changes on learners' travel arrangements. It correctly identifies that there will be no additional travel for pupils already at the two sites. However, it has not provided sufficient information on current school to school or home to school travel arrangements to support its conclusion that the distance of 8 miles will pose minimal problems for sixth form travel arrangements if sixth forms are maintained on both sites.

The proposer acknowledges the increase in travel arrangements for pupils aged 11-16 who live in the Brecon catchment and who wish to attend Welsh-medium provision in Builth. However, it does not analyse the impact of the proposal on these pupils in this consultation but in its concurrent consultation on the closure of the Welsh medium stream at Brecon. Reference is made therefore to our opinion contained in our response to that proposal.

The proposer considers in suitable detail the impact of the proposal on Welsh-medium provision within mid- and south Powys. The proposer has carried out a separate Welsh Language Impact Assessment, which clearly assesses the impact of the proposal on provision for pupils at both schools and within this area of the local authority. Given the declining and very low numbers of pupils currently accessing Welsh-medium education at Brecon High School, the proposer's view that the proposal provides benefits for the provision of Welsh-medium education and progression appears reasonable.

Educational aspects of the proposal

Overall, the proposer has not sufficiently considered the impact of the proposal on the quality of outcomes, provision and leadership and management. The proposer makes appropriate reference to the outcomes of both schools' most recent Estyn inspections. It identifies correctly that current performance and prospects for improvement at both schools were judged to be unsatisfactory at the time of the core inspections and that both schools are in special measures. The proposer also refers briefly to the schools' categorisation within the National School Categorisation System. However, it provides no explanation of the context or detail for these judgements.

Significantly, the proposer provides no analysis of the standards achieved by pupils at either school in terms of attainment at key stage 3, 4 or 5.

In terms of Welsh-medium provision at key stage 3 and key stage 4, the proposer suggests that the increased number of Welsh-medium pupils at the Builth Wells site of the proposed new dual-stream school in Mid-Powys would enable the school to set pupils according to ability for some subjects. The proposer argues that this could have a positive impact in terms of outcomes for Welsh-medium pupils. However, it does not provide evidence for its view that setting improves standards.

Overall, the proposer does not demonstrate how the reorganisation would have a positive impact on the standards achieved by pupils at any key stage.

In terms of provision, the proposer sets out reasonably that the increased number of Welsh-medium pupils at the Builth Wells site of the proposed dual-stream school, will allow greater choice and access to the curriculum, particularly at key stage 3 and key stage 4. Similarly, the proposer's view that the proposal for post-16 education could lead to increased access for post-16 pupils to both academic and vocational subjects seems sound. However, the proposer does not demonstrate how the proposed reorganisation would lead to improved standards of teaching, or how these potential benefits would link to improved outcomes for pupils. Moreover, the proposer does not consider the impact that the reduction in overall funding to a single school will have on the school's ability to deliver its curriculum, given that Llandrindod High School is projecting significant budget deficits in the future.

The proposer identifies appropriately that the transition to the new school will provide substantial additional workload for the shadowing governing body and appointed leadership team, and how the council aims to support this process. However, the proposer is less clear about how the proposal will result in improvements in the quality of leadership and management once the new school is established.

With regard to the new school in mid-Powys, the proposer acknowledges that the sudden increase in Welsh-medium pupils in individual year groups may cause initial difficulties for the new school, as it may require them to introduce a second Welsh-medium class in some year groups. However, it considers reasonably that as larger numbers of pupils move through the school, this will improve the school's ability to offer a more comprehensive curriculum to Welsh-medium pupils, particularly at key stage 4 and post-16.

With regard to post-16 provision, the proposer asserts reasonably that the increased number of Welsh-medium pupils on the Builth Wells site of the new school in mid-Powys would lead in time to an increase in the number of available subjects at the school post-16. However, there remain questions about equality of opportunities for post-16 pupils choosing to study through the medium of Welsh in terms of the range of courses available to them.

The proposer has considered fairly the likely impact of the interim proposal on a range of pupils from low-income families, Welsh-medium pupils and on the community. It identifies correctly that funding and provision to meet pupils' special educational needs will transfer to the new school and thus continue unchanged. It acknowledges appropriately that support plans will need to be put into place to support pupils to mitigate any negative impact on pupils' feelings of wellbeing. However, the proposal does not contain information on a community impact assessment of its longer term vision of a single school in Builth in this proposal.