

Extract from the Draft Minutes from the Council Meeting of 7 March 2017

County Councillor GW Ratcliffe declared a personal and prejudicial interest in this item and left the meeting.

Council considered the report of the Portfolio Holder for Education on responses received to the formal consultation to close the Welsh-medium stream at Brecon High School from the 31st August 2017, with Brecon High School becoming an English-medium school from the 1st September 2017. The Portfolio Holder advised that a total of 237 written responses were received to the consultation, including responses submitted using the online response form and other written responses. 71 responses were received from one individual respondent, and another 26 were received from another individual respondent. In addition, during the consultation period, individuals were encouraged to e-mail the council with the statement 'All I want for Christmas is for the Welsh stream to stay open in Brecon High School'. 39 responses were received which only included this statement. In addition to the written responses, a copy of an online petition was received, which was signed by 236 people and included 67 written comments. The issues raised during the consultation period, including those raised in written responses and those raised in the consultation meetings were listed in the Consultation Report (Appendix B), along with the authority's response to these issues.

County Councillor David Meredith said that two previous consultations had not helped pupil numbers at the school, not had the decision to grant free transport to pupils wishing to transfer to Builth Wells High School. He noted that it cost £38,000 to transport pupils to Pontypool, money which could have been used to fund the school properly. He said that pupils from Ysgol y Bannau would prefer to go to Brecon and that removing the Welsh stream from Brecon High school would have a negative impact on Ysgol y Bannau and on the Welsh language in the area. He said that the timing of the consultation had been unfortunate as it had come about as the school had come out of special measures. He noted the projected £58k saving was outweighed by the current £116k cost of transporting pupils when the school only needed £47k to bring it up to Category 2B status.

County Councillor Matthew Dorrance agreed that there was a need to reorganise schools but said that it should be done fairly. He asked where the 173 pupils from Sennybridge and Ysgol y Bannau would go and said it was their right to be educated in their own community. He said that there was no evidence that Builth Wells was better placed to deliver Welsh-medium education and he asked the Cabinet to explain how the proposal would meet the goals of the Well-Being and Future Generations Act.

The Portfolio Holder for Education advised that pupil number at Ysgol y Bannau had not increased over the last ten years and he reminded members that Brecon offered 4 subjects in the medium of Welsh compared to 12 at Builth Wells. The transport appeal granted in 2011 had set the precedent when provision in Brecon was judged to be insufficient. He argued that children were being failed by not being sent to a school with a wider range of subjects.

County Councillor James Gibson-Watt argued that the decision to have a Welsh-medium stream in Brecon was made when Ysgol y Bannau was sited next door. Pupil number had been stable until 2014/15 when the actions of the Council had contributed to a fall in numbers and he warned that the proposal would impact on Ysgol y Bannau and Sennybridge. The proposal would mean no Welsh-medium secondary education in the county south of Builth Wells which made it look like the Council was not interested in promoting Welsh-medium education. He also warned of the impact on the budget of Brecon High School.

County Councillor Liam Fitzpatrick argued that this was an issue for the whole area and that it was wrong that there would be no Welsh language secondary education in the south of the county.

County Councillor Melanie Davies said that this was the wrong way forward for the Council and that it was important to keep the Welsh-medium stream in Brecon High School.

County Councillor Timothy Van-Rees said that this issue had been debated for years. He referred to the report and said that the evidence presented in the report made an overwhelming case to have the Welsh-medium stream based at Builth Wells High School. He noted the strong Welsh language stream at Builth Wells CP School and in Llandrindod Wells and Rhayader.

County Councillor Sandra Davies said the Labour group supported Welsh-medium education in Brecon and throughout the county and referred to the two key priorities in the Corporate Improvement Plan, Supporting People in the Community and Learning.

County Councillor Gillian Thomas said that the flawed consultation in 2014/15 had resulted in pupils opting to go to Builth leading to lower numbers in the Welsh stream in Brecon. She agreed with having one high school providing Welsh language secondary education in Brecknockshire but said that with Ysgol y Bannau in Brecon it made no sense to have it at Builth. She noted that pupils would be travelling 30 miles one way from Sennybridge to Builth Wells. She noted the duties placed on the Council to promote the use and development of the Welsh language and provide services and education locally and said that the proposal would have a detrimental impact on the Welsh language in the area. She noted that the report referred to a saving of £58k but did not mention the additional costs of over £100,000 transporting pupils from Brecon catchment to Builth and £20,000 to Ystalyfera. The report also took no account of Estyn ratings with Builth Wells being in special measures and Brecon out of special measures.

County Councillor Paul Ashton also referred to the distance that pupils would have to travel and to the fact that Ysgol y Bannau was situated next door to Brecon High School.

County Councillor Aled Davies supported the comments of local members. He argued that the Welsh language was being treated less favourably and that it was wrong that the multi million pound investment in Brecon High School should just be

for English language pupils. He said that uncertainty over the school had driven pupils away but that it had now turned the corner coming out of special measures which would attract more pupils. He said that the Council must play its part in meeting the ambition of the Welsh Government to have a million Welsh speakers by 2050.

County Councillor Evan Morgan said that had Powys fulfilled its promise to provide the funding to bring the school up to Category 2b status, 30 pupils from the Sennybridge area would not have left to go to Ystalyfera. He said that the provision of a new building was the opportunity to create a centre of excellence and provide a wider range of subjects.

County Councillor Gwilym Vaughan said that a decision on this issue should have been taken years ago. He argued that 4 subjects did not constitute a Welsh language education and said that if Brecon High school was to have a Welsh language stream pupils must have access to a full complement of subjects.

It was proposed by County Councillor Matthew Dorrance and seconded by County Councillor Aled Davies that Council should vote on the recommendation in the report. Council was reminded that this would be an advisory vote and that Cabinet members would not be voting as they would be deciding the issue on 14 March.

There were 8 votes for the recommendations in the report and 32 votes against.

RESOLVED not support the recommendation to close the Welsh-medium stream at Brecon High School from 31st August 2017.