



Gweledigaeth Ysgolion
Powys
Schools Vision

Transforming Education in Powys

Case for Change
January 2020



Introduction and Background

During the summer of 2019, Powys County Council's Education Services were inspected by Estyn. The inspection identified concerns regarding school organisation work that had taken place in Powys, noting that 'Despite making modest progress in reorganising primary schools over time, the authority has been unable to deliver on a few key proposals in recent years, particularly following consultation to reorganise secondary schools in south Powys.'^[1]

Estyn identified that the Council's Education Services were causing significant concern and provided recommendations for improvement. One of these was to 'Ensure that the organisation of provision for non-maintained, post-16, Welsh-medium education and secondary education meets the needs of the children and young people of Powys.'

In response the Council has embarked on a strategic review of school provision in the county, focussed on the needs of learners, developing a vision for the Powys schools' infrastructure, to ensure that the education provision in Powys provides the best possible opportunities for future Powys learners.

This work has included an extensive engagement exercise which took place between October and December 2019. Key stakeholders, including county councillors, headteachers, governors, school staff, staff working in the council's schools service and town and community councils, had the opportunity to contribute to developing the initial case for change through face to face engagement sessions.

This greater focus on engagement will continue throughout this review, with numerous opportunities for these stakeholders and others to contribute to the transformation work.

The Powys Schools Infrastructure

The Powys Challenge

Powys is a large, rural authority. Covering a quarter of the landmass of Wales, it contains only 4.2% of the population[2], making it the most sparsely populated county in Wales.

Delivering services across such a large, sparsely populated area is challenging and expensive. This is particularly true for education.

Whilst there has been some school reorganisation activity over recent years, this has mainly focussed on rationalisation of primary provision and establishment of alternative governance arrangements in the secondary sector, through the establishment of all-through or multi-sited provision.

Over the last ten years, the authority has carried out catchment or area reviews in Ystradgynlais, Gwernyfed, John Beddoes, Machynlleth, Llanidloes and Welshpool town. In most areas, this led to a reduction in the number of schools with significant capital investment in improving the schools' estate. However, reorganisation on a similar scale has not taken place across the remainder of Powys. The county's schools' infrastructure remains similar to that in place 20 years ago, for secondary it is largely unchanged for the last 45 years.

Data Exercise

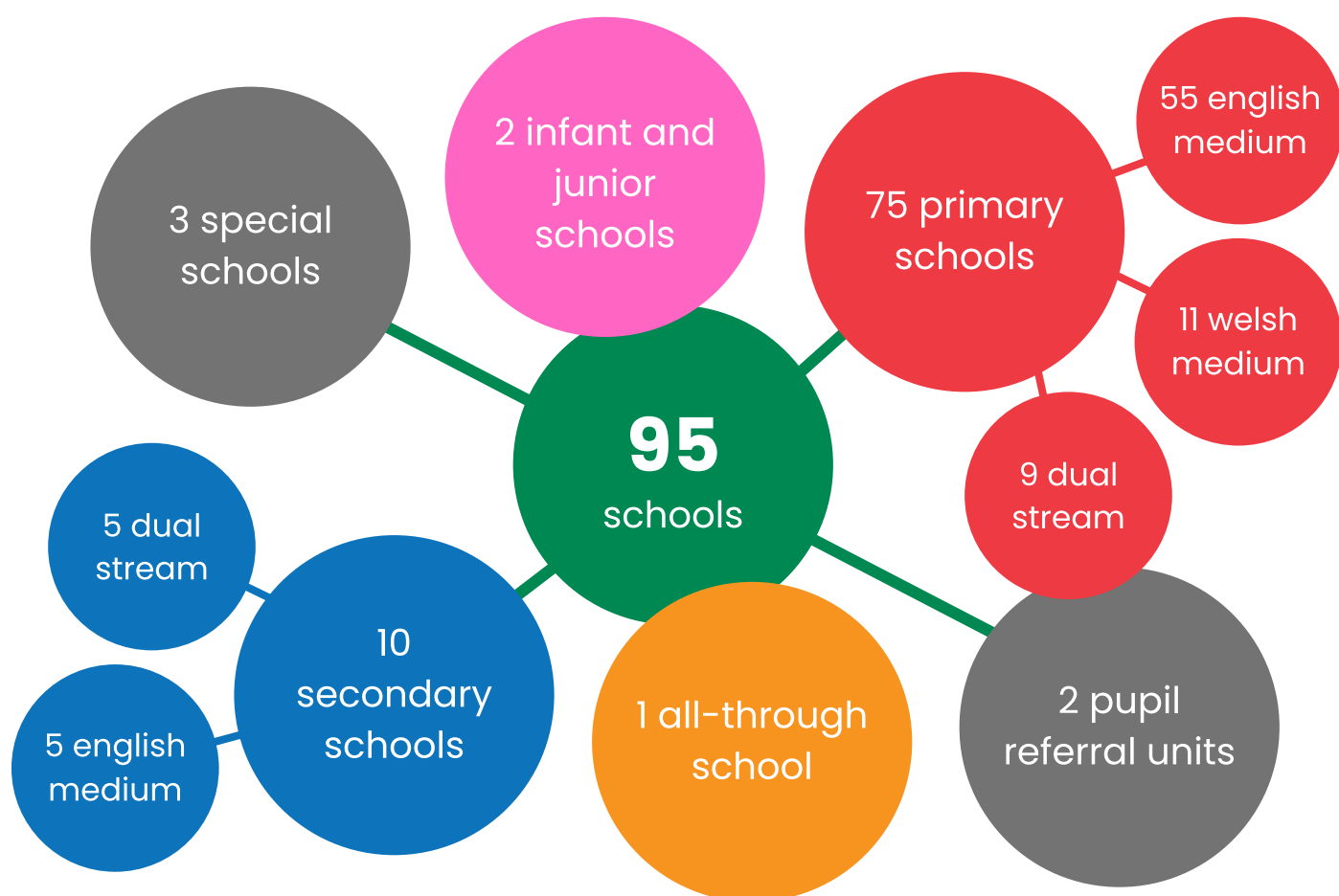
During the Summer of 2019, the Council carried out a wide-ranging school data collation exercise, that could easily be shared with key stakeholders in order to improve understanding of the current situation with Powys schools. The data includes information on current and projected pupil numbers, surplus places, budget share per pupil, quality of provision, building condition and information about pupil travel patterns.

During the autumn term 2019, the data was presented to a number of stakeholders, including Councillors, the Council's Management Team, Headteachers, Governors, Schools Service staff and staff at our schools. It has also been made available online allowing stakeholders and others direct access. This is the link to the data:

<https://sway.office.com/8aTHND8fR5JPYfik>

The Powys Schools Infrastructure

Based on January 2019 PLASC figures, Powys County Council delivered education to 16,619 pupils during the 2018-19 academic year, via a network of 95 schools as outlined below:



Schools are either Welsh-medium, English-medium or provide education in both languages via a dual stream system. This means that in Welsh-medium schools, the language of teaching is mainly Welsh and results in pupils become fluent in both Welsh and English, becoming fully bilingual. In English-medium schools, the language of teaching is English, with Welsh taught as a second language. Pupils are fluent in English, and may have some understanding of Welsh, but are not bilingual.

In dual-stream schools, pupils are taught in different streams. The language of teaching in the Welsh stream is Welsh and pupils become fully bilingual, and the language of teaching in the English stream is English with Welsh as a second language – these pupils mostly leave school fluent in English with some understanding of Welsh.

All secondary, all-through, infant and junior schools are categorised as community schools, however, there are variations in terms of the categories of the 75 primary schools – 56 of these are categorised as community primary schools, 15 are categorised as voluntary controlled Church in Wales primary schools, six as voluntary aided Church in Wales primary schools, one voluntary aided Roman Catholic primary school and one Foundation school.

There are significant variations within schools, the most obvious being pupil numbers. Based on PLASC 2019 figures, primary schools ranged in size from 22 pupils to 327 pupils, secondary schools range from 303 pupils to 1031 pupils.

The significant size range also means that there is a significant difference in the cost of educating each pupil in our schools – in the primary sector, the cost per pupil in Powys schools in 2019 ranged from £3,123 to £7,877, and in the secondary sector, the cost per pupil ranged from £3,801 to £6,419.

The current schools' infrastructure causes a number of challenges, both to the schools themselves and to the Council. It means that there are significant differences in the provision and experiences available to pupils in different schools.

Current Challenges

Following the data engagement exercise stakeholders were asked to identify the key challenges / problems facing the Powys education system.

A wide range of challenges were identified by stakeholder groups which are set out in detailed reports available separately. However, there were a number of points which regularly featured in the feedback provided. These are outlined below:

High proportion of small schools

Although there has been a reduction in the number of small schools in Powys over recent years, there continues to be a large proportion of schools which meet the Welsh Government definition of a small school (fewer than 91 pupils).

Based on PLASC 2019 figures, there are currently 33 small primary schools in Powys – this is approximately 40% of the primary provision in the county. 21 schools have fewer than 50 pupils and for those the budget share per pupil is higher than the Powys average for primary schools.

Decreasing pupil numbers

Pupil numbers have decreased over recent years and are expected to continue to decrease over the next few years.

Pupil numbers in the primary sector in Powys are expected to decrease by approximately 4% by 2025. Pupil numbers in the secondary sector are expected to decrease slightly by 2025 and to decrease further in the future following the expected decrease in primary pupil numbers.

High number of surplus places

Whilst the Council has been working to reduce the level of surplus places in its schools over recent years, a significant level of surplus places remains.

Based on PLASC 2019 figures, there is currently 18% surplus capacity in Powys primary schools, and 26% surplus capacity in Powys secondary schools.

With pupil numbers across Powys projected to decrease overall over the coming years, it is anticipated that the proportion of surplus places across the county will continue to increase.

Building condition

Whilst the Council has invested in its schools' estate through the 21st Century Schools Programme and the Asset Management Plan, building conditions remain an issue across Powys, with associated maintenance costs.

The Welsh Government categorises school buildings on a scale of A to D, with A being new schools and D being schools that need significant investment and are in a poor state of repair. The recently opened Brecon High School is categorised as a condition A school and Ysgol Maesydderwen which received significant investment a few years ago is categorised as condition B. The rest of the secondary school estate is categorised as C/D, without significant capital investment, the repair and maintenance cost of maintaining this estate will only increase.

Financial pressures

The Council is currently facing significant financial pressures in general. This is affecting all service areas, including the schools sector, with increasing numbers of schools facing deficit budget positions. There are significant variations in the budget share per pupil across Powys schools, ranging from £3,127 to £7,877 in the primary sector, and from £3,801 to £6,419 in the secondary sector.

A review of the Council's funding formula for schools was carried out in 2018, and a new formula was subsequently introduced in 2019. The funding formula was needed to ensure that all schools could function and provide an appropriate curriculum for their learners. Whilst small schools appear to have benefitted from the new funding formula, larger schools are funded below levels in similar authorities.

The overall funding the Council spends on education is in line with the proportion of funding spent by other authorities. However, the current schools' infrastructure means that the overall funding envelope is having to be spread too thinly. This is evidenced in schools by a curriculum that provides limited choices for learners and limited support for learners who require additional support.

Inequality in access to Welsh-medium education

Welsh-medium education is delivered through a network of schools across Powys.

In the primary sector, this includes a mixture of Welsh-medium schools and dual stream schools.

In the secondary sector, Welsh-medium provision is delivered via Welsh-medium streams in a number of schools across the county.

The size and proportion of the secondary streams varies significantly across the county, and the range of subjects available through the medium of Welsh also varies significantly. The curriculum offer is increasingly limited for Welsh-medium learners, and there is significant concern amongst the profession regarding the commitment of the authority to learners who study in Welsh.

In contrast to most other areas of Wales, the majority of Powys learners are unable to access a designated Welsh-medium secondary school, apart from learners in the Ystradgynlais who can access full Welsh-medium secondary provision at Ysgol Gymraeg Ystalyfera Bro Dur, located in Neath Port Talbot.

In 2017 the Welsh Government launched an ambitious strategy to create a million Welsh speakers by the year 2050[3]. This Strategy acknowledges that increasing the number of pupils accessing Welsh-medium education will be key in order to meet this aspiration. In contrast with other areas of Wales, the number of pupils accessing Welsh-medium education in Powys has stagnated over recent years. This suggests that the Welsh-medium provision in Powys is failing to meet the Welsh Government's aim to increase the number of pupils accessing Welsh-medium education.

Estyn identified on page 11 of its report on Education Services in Powys in June 2019 that: 'the authority's record on stimulating the growth of Welsh-medium education is weak. As a result, the proportion of pupils receiving their education through the medium of Welsh has stagnated over recent years.'

It is recognised that significant changes are needed to the Welsh-medium offer in Powys in order to reverse the trend of the last few years and ensure that all Powys learners can access comprehensive Welsh-medium provision throughout their educational careers.

Limited post-14 and post-16 offer

In September 2019, the Council's Cabinet considered a report on post-16 provision which outlined a number of challenges facing the sector, including decreasing learner numbers, financial challenges and sustainability of the curriculum offer, including Welsh-medium provision.

One of the biggest challenges facing the Council in terms of post-16 provision is the increasing number of pupils accessing provision outside Powys – during 2018/19, it is estimated that approximately 450 Powys learners were accessing post-16 provision outside Powys. This is having a significant impact on the provision that can be offered in Powys, due to the loss of funding faced by the Council as a result of losing these learners.

Engagement with schools throughout November and December 2019 has highlighted that the concerns previously raised regarding the poor choice for learners at 16 is now being echoed for learners at 14.

Historical lack of political decision making

Although there have been some developments in terms of the schools' infrastructure in Powys over recent years, these have mainly involved changes to primary provision and establishing all-through / dual sited schools.

In 2016, the Council carried out consultation on significant changes to secondary provision in Mid and South Powys, which included proposals to rationalise secondary and Welsh-medium provision in the area. At the same time, the Council was also consulting on proposals to close a number of small schools in the Mid Powys area. Whilst a number of these proposals were implemented, several of the proposals were not approved by the Council's Cabinet.

The Council's failure to implement a number of high-profile proposals during this period has left a legacy in Powys, and there has been a reluctance to embark on large scale reorganisation of education provision since then. This is reflected in Estyn's report following its inspection of Education Services in Powys in June 2019, which states on page 11 that: 'Despite making modest progress in reorganising primary schools over time, the authority has been unable to deliver on a few key proposals in recent years, particularly following consultation to reorganise secondary schools in south Powys.'

Engagement with schools' staff during November and December 2019 has revealed a deep skepticism amongst the profession regarding the council's political commitment to schools and to the delivery of the improvements that are needed.

What do we need to do?

Through the feedback received during the engagement it has become clear that significant changes are needed to the Powys schools' infrastructure to ensure that the provision offered enables learners to access provision to meet their potential.

Several themes have emerged in terms of possible ways in which the Council could develop its schools' infrastructure going forward. The themes are as follows:

- Invest in improving the school estate
- Rationalise the number of schools
- Ensure equity of funding in delegated budgets
- Develop a network of Welsh-medium provision
- Establish more all-through schools
- Develop more formal catchment models
- Develop a post-14/16 system that provides a range of opportunities for skills development and is sustainable, and attractive to learners.

It is possible that the way forward could be a combination of these models, depending on the geography and demography of Powys.

There is a need to agree a clear vision for education in Powys, including a clear understanding of the entitlement for learners at various stages of their education.

References

- [1] <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/www.estyn.gov.wales/files/documents/Powys%20County%20Council.pdf>
- [2] <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Population-and-Migration/Population/Estimates/Local-Authority/populationestimates-by-localauthority-year>
- [3] <https://gov.wales/cymraeg-2050-welsh-language-strategy>

