

Estyn's response to the proposal by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Council to amalgamate Cefn and Craig yr Hesg Primary schools to create a new community primary school on a new site

Introduction

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.

Summary/ Conclusion

It is likely that the proposals will maintain or improve the standard of education provision in the area by providing improved facilities for teaching and learning and helping the current federation's leadership to operate more effectively and efficiently.

Description and benefits

The proposer has given a clear rationale for the amalgamation of the federated primary schools based on the poor quality of the existing school buildings and the opportunities that a new amalgamated school would provide to improve teaching, learning and leadership.

The local authority has provided a detailed description of the proposal, including the timetable for statutory procedures and for implementing the proposal. However, it is not clear enough within the proposal exactly where the new school will be built. On page 1 of the consultation document, it states: 'The new school building will be built on the existing Craig yr Hesg Primary School site and the land adjacent to it (the former site of the Ty Gwyn Pupil Referral Unit).' However, on page 10 it states: 'Due to the limitations of the existing school sites, neither site is suitable to accommodate the new school in its current format. A new school is therefore required for Glyncoch which must be built on a new site.' On page 11 the document restates: 'Following this assessment, the existing Craig yr Hesg Primary School site and the land adjacent to it (the former site of the Ty Gwyn Pupil Referral Unit) was identified as the only suitable location for the new school.' The lack of clarity is around the extent to which the current site of Craig yr Hesg Primary School will be part of the new school location and what impact the building work will have on the current school during the construction phase.

The proposal sets out the expected benefits and disadvantages in a clear and fair way compared with the status quo. However, the only risk identified is that of parents choosing to send their children to an alternative school. There appear to be other risks which are not considered in the risk management section of the proposals. For example, the increase in traffic at the new school site is one such risk and the proposer states that a 'drop-off area' to help reduce this risk is only 'under consideration' and requires 'further surveys and transport and traffic assessments.' If the drop-off area isn't included in the final plans, there is likely to be a negative impact on traffic around the new school site at certain times of the day. An

additional risk could be the potential impact on Craig yr Hesg Primary School during the build phase, which is not discussed in the proposal.

The proposer has considered suitable alternatives and explained clearly why these are either not possible or less effective than the chosen proposal. The selected location for the new school on land adjacent to the Craig yr Hesg Primary School site is considered to be the 'only suitable location' within the area. The two federated schools are only 0.6 miles apart and, therefore, by locating to a site next to Craig yr Hesg Primary School, it is predicted that there will be little impact on travel arrangements for learners. The new school will be fully compliant with the Equality Act 2010, whereas both current schools do not meet the accessibility requirements, especially Cefn Primary School.

The information given in the proposals about surplus places is not clear enough. Pupil projection figures for 2025-2026 suggest that there will be a significant number of surplus places at Cefn Primary School (35%) and slightly too few places at Craig yr Hesg (-2%). This projection is given as one reason why a single new school would be better than the status quo. However, the new school is being planned to have a pupil admission number of 360 (excluding nursery places), even though the total number of pupils, according to the projections given, would be 245 in 2025-2026. This would give the new school an immediate surplus capacity of over 30%, yet anything over 30% is seen as a potential reason for considering reorganisation by the local authority. The reasons for building such surplus capacity into the new school are not made clear in the proposals.

Both of the federated schools offer English-medium education, and teacher Welsh as part of their curriculum. The new school will do the same, so there would appear to be limited impact on the local authority's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan. There is a commitment that the amalgamated school will undertake the Cymraeg Campus' Language Charter, aimed at developing the use of Welsh in different contexts in school.

It is clear in the proposals that there will not be a large financial saving, because the two schools have been federated since 2012 and have already made savings as a result of this. It is estimated that approximately €78,000 could be saved annually based on the current school budgets. However, there would also be other financial benefits such as writing off the substantial maintenance backlog (estimated to be in excess of €750,000), the greater energy efficiency of the new school and potential future land sales.

Educational aspects of the proposal

The proposer has considered well the likely impact on the quality of standards in education of the proposals. In November 2021 the federated schools were removed from Significant Improvement following a monitoring visit by Estyn. This reflected improvements in the stability and effectiveness of leadership and in the quality of teaching across the federation. There are a number of examples within the proposal about how the facilities will provide new or extended opportunities for learning and well-being, such as enhanced ICT provision, creative outdoor play areas, a forest schools area, a habitat area and a multi-use games area. The new facilities are likely to help ensure delivery of the full curriculum at foundation phase and key stage 2, including the Curriculum for Wales.

The local authority considers the impact of the proposal on vulnerable groups suitably. This includes identifying that the Learning Supports Classes currently located at Cefn Primary School will be relocated at the new school in purpose-built accommodation, which is likely to help improve those pupils' experiences and learning opportunities.

The proposal is for a new community school with all-day access to parts of the new facility for community groups as well as after-school availability. At the same time, the site will be

better protected from anti-social behaviour than the current school sites by 'secured by design' fencing. These improvements are likely to increase its role in community cohesion.

If the school is sited near Craig yr Hesg there could be considerable disruption to the operation of the school. The proposal does not give sufficient consideration to the potential disruption to Craig yr Hesg Primary School during the construction phase and how this will be minimised.