

Estyn's response to the proposal to close Rhigos Primary School with pupils transferring to Hirwaun Primary School

This report has been prepared by His 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.

The proposal is the closure of Rhigos Primary School with pupils transferring to Hirwaun Primary School.

Summary/ Conclusion

Estyn considers that the proposal is likely to, at least, maintain the standard of education provision and outcomes for pupils in the area.

Description and benefits

The local authority has set out a clear rationale for its proposal. It outlines strongly the many advantages of closing Rhigos Primary School, with all pupils transferring to Hirwaun Primary School. It is proposed that pupils who are in the Rhigos Primary School catchment area will instead go to Hirwaun Primary School, where there is a brand new 21st Century building and new facilities. Hirwaun Primary School's catchment area would extend to include the current catchment area of Rhigos Primary School and would therefore cater for pupils aged 3 and 11 years of age requiring English medium education in both communities.

The local authority provides a suitably detailed description of the proposal. This includes a background to the proposal and an estimated timetable for statutory procedures. It is proposing that Rhigos Primary School will close resulting in pupils transferring to Hirwaun Primary School no later than September 2024.

The proposer identifies clearly and fairly the expected benefits and disadvantages when compared with the status quo and how they will manage any risk. One of the main advantages detailed in the proposal is that the pupils of Rhigos Primary School will benefit from the fully accessible, brand new primary school in Hirwaun, which would provide an improved learning environment with first class facilities. Most of the

risks are deemed as low impact. One risk is deemed as having medium impact following implementation of the proposal which is that existing Rhigos Primary School staff may not be retained.

The local authority has considered four alternative options, including maintaining the status quo. It lists the advantages and disadvantages of each option and these appear to be fair and reasonable.

The proposer has considered the impact of the changes on learner travel arrangements. The proposal sets out that the local authority has exercised discretionary powers afforded to it under the provisions of the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 to make a more generous provision to pupils. The eligibility criterion for walking distance for pupils at their nearest suitable school has been set at 1.5 miles, instead of 2 miles as required by the measure. This is provided to pupils who meet the 1.5 mile eligibility criterion from the start of the foundation phase (the start of the school term after their third birthday), which seems reasonable.

The local authority has usefully demonstrated the impact of the proposal on surplus places. The projected pupil numbers at Rhigos Primary School over the next five academic years for statutory school aged pupils falls consistently year on year, from 51 pupils in 2023 to a projected 36 pupils in 2028. The projected pupil numbers for Hirwaun Primary School for the next five years demonstrates that there is capacity for all current and future pupils of Rhigos Primary School to attend.

The proposal takes a detailed account of the impact of the proposal on Welsh medium provision within the local authority and the extent to which the proposal supports the targets in the local authority's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). The local authority aims to embed positive habits and attitudes towards the Welsh language through purposeful planning to promote the informal use of the Welsh language amongst pupils inside and outside schools. Hirwaun Primary School will continue to be encouraged and supported to do this through the achievement of the 'Cymraeg Campus' Welsh Language Charter, a framework to promote and increase the use of Welsh.

The local authority has appropriately considered the financial implications of the proposal. It states that there is no need to invest additional capital as Hirwaun Primary School is a new build. If the proposal progresses, Hirwaun Primary School will receive an increase on their funding formula as a result of the additional pupils on roll. In addition, the modern building design and fabric at Hirwaun Primary School is more energy efficient which also has a positive impact upon the running costs of the school, as well as delivering benefits in terms of sustainability and reducing carbon emissions.

Educational aspects of the proposal

The local authority has considered the quality of outcomes, provision and leadership and management at the school which include the outcomes of the last Estyn inspection report for both schools. Rhigos Primary School was inspected by Estyn in February 2019 and the outcomes in the five inspection areas were judged to be good. Hirwaun Primary School was inspected by Estyn in 2018. The care, support and guidance area was judged to be good, three other inspection areas were adequate whilst teaching and learning experiences was unsatisfactory. As a result of the inspection in 2018, Estyn placed Hirwaun Primary School in the reported category of 'Significant Improvement.' In response to the outcome of the core inspection, Hirwaun Primary School was required to draw up an action plan to address the recommendations, subject to review by Estyn. In July 2019, Estyn removed Hirwaun Primary School from the list of schools requiring 'Significant Improvement'.

The proposal has also considered the impact of the proposal on the quality and standards in education including separate sections on outcomes, provision and leadership and management. While the sections on outcomes and provision appear to be fair and reasonable, the section on leadership and management is too generic and doesn't focus specifically enough on the implications of the proposal on leaders in both schools. The proposal identifies that transferring pupils from Rhigos Primary School to the newly built Hirwaun school would provide extensive outdoor space, including green space, for pupils to learn and play. It assumes fairly that pupil wellbeing and attitudes to learning would benefit from a diverse and engaging outdoor space. It further notes that a fit-for-purpose school building would help create a better learning environment. The proposer identifies that if the proposal comes about it is likely to have a positive impact on the delivery of the curriculum at the school.

The proposal considers the impact of the proposal on vulnerable groups, including children with Additional Learning Needs. It does note that moving pupils to Hirwaun Primary School from Rhigos will result in greater capacity and space for additional needs intervention and support. In terms of accessibility, Hirwaun school is fully accessible and compliant with the Equality's Act 2010.

The proposal takes a detailed account of the impact of the proposal on the community. These considerations include the positive impact of additional facilities on the Hirwaun site for community use and that the current Rhigos site is not compliant with the Equalities Act 2010. The proposal also considers the 'out of hours' support for pupils. For example, breakfast club and private after school care will be provided on the new site if the proposal materialises.

