



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY 2022-2027 COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny 2022-2027 Committee held on Wednesday, 8 May 2024 at 10.00 am at the Llys Cadwyn, Pontypridd / ZOOM.

This meeting was live streamed, details of which can be accessed [here](#)

County Borough Councillors – The following Overview and Scrutiny 2022-2027 Committee Councillors were present in the Council Chamber:

Councillor B Stephens
Councillor S Emanuel
Councillor M Powell

The following Overview and Scrutiny 2022-2027 Committee Councillors were present online:-

Councillor S Morgans
Councillor W Jones
Councillor M Ashford
Councillor Sheryl Evans
Councillor R Davis
Councillor C Middle
Councillor G L Warren

Officers in attendance:-

Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication
Ms L Howell, 21st Century School Organisation and Business Manager
Ms A Richards, Service Director for 21st Century Schools and Transformation
Mrs S Daniel - Principal Scrutiny Officer

County Borough Councillors in attendance:-

Councillor D Grehan, Councillor R Lewis, Councillor A O Rogers and Councillor S Trask

Apologies for absence

Councillor J Edwards Councillor J Bonetto
Councillor Sera Evans

91 Declarations of Interest

In accordance with the code of conduct, no declarations were made pertaining to the agenda

92 Call In of the Cabinet Decision of the Proposal to Close Rhigos Primary School with Pupils transferring to Hirwaun Primary School

The Service Director Democratic Services & Communications presented the report which outlined the procedure for the meeting, as set out in rule 17 of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee Procedure Rules. The Service Director advised

that a call-in request was received from County Borough Councillors S Trask, A Rogers and D Grehan within the prescribed timescales, on 2nd May 2024, which complied with the relevant criteria and considered valid by the proper officer.

The call-in requested that the decision of Cabinet in respect of the proposal to close Rhigos Primary School with pupils transferring to Hirwaun Primary School, taken at its meeting held on the 29th April 2024, be considered by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Service Director outlined the procedures for the meeting with the three signatories, who signed the call-in form, to address Committee first, setting out their reasons for requesting the call-in and why they consider the decision should be referred back to the decision maker for reconsideration. Secondly, the registered public speakers will have the opportunity to address Members before the Director of Education & Inclusion Services and Cabinet Member address the comments made by the speakers. Members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee will have the opportunity to consider the valid reasons set out in the report together with all contributions before voting on whether they consider whether the matter should be referred back to Cabinet.

It was confirmed that the nominated signatory, Councillor A Rogers would make the final address before a roll call vote is taken on whether or not to refer the matter back to the relevant decision maker for reconsideration. It will be for the Director of Legal and Democratic Services to clarify and summarise the Committee's decision.

Councillor D Grehan

Councillor Grehan stated that the decision fails to acknowledge the benefits associated with the current school and the negative impacts on the proposal. Under the rural school scheme there are cultural and social benefits which in turn provide a high quality education. He continued on the importance of engaging learners from disadvantaged backgrounds for long term sustainability which will benefit all in the Rhigos area. He continued that a close community is essential in developing the resilience of a child and felt that smaller schools allow more freedom to bring education to life. These elements have all been reflected in the Estyn review and fulfil ambitions of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Wales Act.

He continued that whilst the consultation report is judgmental of classrooms available, there was no judgement on the classes in the Estyn report in 2019 and felt this was being used as an excuse for poor planning. The Member asked that the Council do not take the easy option of closing the school but consider investing and modernising the school and engage with the community to present a case to Welsh Government which will demonstrate the negative impacts of closing the school and evidence the advantages of it remaining open. He urged Members of the Scrutiny Committee to put residents central to their decision making and make the right choice and refer the matter back to Cabinet to be reconsidered.

Councillor A Rogers

The decision has left the residents of Rhigos frustrated with alternative options dismissed which is the reason for the call-in. He continued that there was a

need to further scrutinise the decision following the objections received from the Community. He stated that many residents are upset at the decision as their Council Tax has increased but services have been reduced. He continued that the breakfast club is currently well attended, which now means the children's morning routine will change, as they will have to get an early morning bus to reach their closest school which will have an impact on their mental health and wellbeing. He continued that objections had been omitted from the report and stated that there was no evidence to suggest that the decision to close the school will positively impact the goals in the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act. He continued that the proposal has not been designed in partnership with the community as it is contrary to meeting the community needs. The children of Rhigos will find socialising harder due to rural location and distance to the new school. He concluded that the decision encourages behaviours such as more car use on our roads to commute to school which is something we should be trying to avoid.

Sam Trask

Councillor Trask stated he believed the wrong decision has been made and that the matter should be referred back to Cabinet to reconsider. Rhigos is at the heart of the community with pupils, teachers, parents carers will be affected. He continued that not enough consideration has been given to pupils who will have an extended day with travel. The current model works well, which is demonstrated with high attendance figures and achievements of pupils. He questioned whether the Council will be in breach of legal duty as the Corporate Plan states the Council should encourage active travel and encourage walking but this will leave many families having to drive their children to the nearest school.

Following conclusion of the presentations by the three signatories to the call-in, there followed an address from the public speaker, Mr J Morris who was provided five minutes in which to address Committee.

The Director Education and Inclusion was then invited to address the comments made.

In response to some of the comments made by the previous speakers, the Director assured the Committee that there were no omitted objections and that they had all been presented to Cabinet. She continued that projected figures, based on birth data show admissions to Rhigos were highly likely to decline over the next 5 years and they had continued to decline since the consultation period with the number of statutory school age learners reducing from 56 to 44, with 5 of those living out of catchment. The director continued that with the funding reduced every time the number of pupils reduces, it was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain the school. She clarified that Hirwaun were not on the cusp of special measures which had been stated by a previous speaker and that the school was in fact performing well. The Director confirmed that robust impact assessments had been carried out and were accessible to all Members to view with all options included in the consultation documents for Cabinet to review.

The Cabinet Member Education stated it was clear from consultations that the matter is emotive but we have a difficult decision to make and we need to act responsibly. He continued that the Authority has an excellent track record in investment, particularly in ALN to increase attainment and we seek to provide

the best facilities for our children which fit for 21st century schools. He continued that there are falling pupil numbers at Rhigos which has a detrimental impact on schools budget. He reassured Members that Hirwaun has excellent facilities and had been reassured that Home to School transport will be provided. He concluded that he did not think that the objections raised require further scrutiny and felt that the process has been overseen in a fair and efficient manner. He thanked Members and officers for their engagement in the long process.

A Member stated that the decision proposes to ensure the viability of education in the area and based on this he felt the report and officers responses presents a clear rationale for the decision and was content that the process had been a robust one. Another Member agreed with these comments and stated the new school will provide a fantastic opportunity for the children.

Another Member stated that the negative comments regarding Hirwaun were frustrating but was pleased the Director had confirmed the situation and Estyn have said it will be *at least* as good as Rhigos. The Member was therefore satisfied that all the relevant information has been presented to Cabinet and an informed decision was reached.

Councillor Rogers Closing remarks

Councillor Rogers stated that a number of pupils had already left Rhigos, due to the closure process and that they believed it was a done deal. He urged the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to demonstrate it is not a done deal and refer the matter back to Cabinet to allow them to fully debate the matter. He continued that the Community conducted a professional survey which was rejected, which is why Members Called in the matter. There has been no honesty, out of date data presented to Members and it is felt that the various consultations have been a tick box exercise. He concluded that removing the school from the village goes against community cohesion.

The Chair undertook a rollcall to determine whether or not to refer the matter back to the decision maker for reconsideration.

Following consideration of the issues and in accordance with the Overview & Scrutiny Procedure Rules, it was **RESOLVED** not to refer the relevant decision taken on the 29th April 2024 back to Cabinet for reconsideration and therefore that decision will be implementable following the closure of this meeting.

93 Urgent Business

None received

94 CHAIRS REVIEW AND CLOSE

Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg / This document is also available in Welsh

This meeting closed at 11.00 am

Chair.