

Village Schools



The case for Positive Rationalisation

June 2008

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Cymdeithas yr Iaith recognises that the complete network of village schools is not sustainable in its current form. These schools are under pressure from many directions, and we have no desire to see a gradual and inexorable deterioration. We maintain that many of the village schools are indeed viable institutions that perform well and as such should be allowed to flourish. In many other cases however the status quo cannot be maintained. We agree that rationalisation is required – *the issue is whether it should be negative rationalisation offering the easy bureaucratic solution of closing schools and centralising education or a new positive rationalisation working with parents, governors and local communities to establish new structures, and placing primary education in the wider context of providing public services in rural areas.*

In this document, we argue the case for **Positive Rationalisation** as we recognise the key importance of village schools to sustain many Welsh communities, **as well as** being innovative education models on which urban models could be based.

We argue that the Assembly Government has a special responsibility in this area for a number of reasons –

- a) The Assembly Government creates the Guidelines for reviewing the supply of school places – *we believe that there are major flaws in the guidelines themselves, and, more importantly, in how they are implemented.*
- b) The Assembly Government's management of School Building Improvement Grants – *this budgetary pressure is cited often by LEAs as a reason for introducing plans for negative rationalisation. The Assembly Government is perceived to have a back-door policy of enforcing Local Authorities to close many schools. In a formal meeting during the consultation process on the future of Ysgol Llanddeusant on 17.1.08, a teacher (according to the minutes) asked: "If you decide to close a school, is there any point in us complaining?" The Education Portfolio holder within Anglesey Council responded: "The Assembly is putting pressure on us to close small schools. Even so, they have not told you that you may not oppose closures!" Therefore, we believe that the Assembly Government – through the current guidelines – is calling for consultation on the one hand, while on the other hand it is pushing for school closures.*
- c) The concept of making village schools viable through the use of their premises and resources for a range of community services. i.e. treating them as essential community development resources, the provision of primary education being part of their function – *The creation of an administrative and financial framework to do this is a broader issue than education alone, and therefore we shall refer the notes to the Minister for Education and the Minister for Rural Affairs, and initially to the Rural Development Sub-committee's inquiry.*

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1. OUR PRESUMPTION IN FAVOUR OF WELSH-MEDIUM VILLAGE SCHOOLS

Cymdeithas yr Iaith freely acknowledges that it has a presumption in favour of Welsh-medium Village Schools because of their success and their importance on many counts –

a) **EDUCATIONALLY** – There is a prima facie case for claiming that village schools are very successful educationally since those counties, which have the highest proportion of such schools, are among those that attain the best academic results. In part this could be as a result of the level of family and community support to be found in village schools, the sense of security felt by the young children, the potential for mentoring and the requirement for everyone to participate in activities. The teacher/pupil ratio is also an important factor. It is certainly not problems of an educational nature that have motivated Local Authorities to threaten the future of village schools. Rather than trying to undermine them, research should be carried out to discover why these schools are so successful educationally and an attempt made to learn lessons for urban schools e.g. it might be better educationally to have urban primary schools with sites in every community rather than large, central units, in order to create the community support and the “learning community” that are characteristic of village schools.

b) **IN TERMS OF WELSH-MEDIUM EDUCATION** – The current policy on the impact of school closures on Welsh-medium education is very narrow, and is a reflection of the narrow-minded attitudes that are characteristic of general education provision in Britain – attitudes that place educational establishments outside mainstream life. The only consideration given is to whether a “reception” only school is also Welsh-medium, regarding the Welsh language only as a subject or a medium for teaching. According to the evidence of regular lay visitors to schools (booksellers, educational literature providers, dramatic literature providers), Welsh village schools are particularly effective in assimilating the children of in-migrants to Welsh-speaking village communities, as they are able to offer the language as a key to accessing the community rather than as just a skill for individual pupils. Where there is a Welsh Village School, Welsh Education is acknowledged by everyone as the norm rather than an individual choice that is opted into by choosing to send children to a Welsh school. Where a Welsh village school is lost, in-migrants in almost every county, apart from substantial parts of Gwynedd, then have to make a conscious choice concerning where to send their children and there is a risk that many children will be lost from Welsh-medium education. Even if the village community in which the village school will be based is no longer primarily Welsh-speaking, the school is the “machinery” of the community. It is a microcosm of how the community can reinstate the Welsh language as the main medium and the main motive for in-migrant parents to learn the language through the medium in which their children are educated. Communities such as Mynyddcerrig in Carmarthenshire and Abersoch in Gwynedd are good examples of this.

c) **IN TERMS OF MAINTAINING COMMUNITIES** – The factors that make a collection of dwellings a community are the opportunities for social communication, both formal and informal. This might include a village hall, shop, pub, place of worship, opportunity for children to play together, but the most important of these is the local school. The building and its resources can be used for formal meetings and activities, but of even greater importance are the opportunities for informal community communication. Young parents see each other at the school and in meetings involving the school and the children foster a sense of belonging to the village group. It has become fashionable for bureaucrats to try to justify centralised Area Schools as “community schools”. This is the middle aged and professional classes’ perspective of what constitutes a community – those people who get in their cars to travel to organised activities. From the children’s point of view, community is going out to play with friends from neighbouring houses for an hour before supper. From the point of view of the

majority of young parents, community is informal communication with others who share the same aspirations for their children. The concept of community and of community schools is in fact a set of concentric circles. It is true that there are community events whose scale dictates that they can only be held in large centralised schools e.g. leisure centres. Such settings are for community events that can best be organised in large villages that serve a number of smaller villages e.g. community services and health and more specialised classes. But there is also a sense of a more organic community, which can only be fostered in the specific village community, and activities which are best organised at an organic community level e.g. learning Welsh together and family learning. A village community has a sense of ownership of its school supports it and sees it as a symbol of hope and continuity for the future. On the other hand, young parents are far less likely to buy houses in villages without a school; with no young blood a village without a school will age. This is a particularly serious consideration with regard to the Welsh language. Welsh is in essence a language of community. Its role needs to be extended into every area of life, but its fundamental roots and its unique strength lies in the local community that uses it as an everyday medium of communication. The present trend involving the closure of up to 200 Welsh village schools, could result in the loss of the majority of our Welsh-speaking village communities within the next decade – not so much losing them overnight, but denying them a future. We do not claim that the school is the only institution that defines or promotes a community. In the days when community networks were strong, and Welsh culture was strong, losing a school would not have such an impact. Nowadays, local communities are under socio-economic and cultural pressure, and schools are the most important resource to sustain those communities, and have the potential to revive them (which is not happening at present).

Ch) CONCLUSION Cymdeithas yr Iaith, therefore, has a presumption in favour of Welsh-medium village schools – as did the Education Department in England - although their definition of “a small school” was very different from ours. In the year 2000, the former Education Minister, Jane Davidson, stated that there was no need for any presumption in favour of village schools in Wales, since they were not under the same threat as in England. She stated that only one or two village schools per year were closed in Wales throughout the nineties. This situation has been transformed with current trends threatening the future of some 200 village schools in Wales within the next decade. In face of the impending disaster, we see an exercise in passing responsibility between the Local Authorities and the Assembly Government. In the following section, therefore, we will be focusing on those issues that are unequivocally the responsibilities of the Assembly Government.

II. THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT'S CURRENT STRATEGY

a) IMPLEMENTING THE ASSEMBLY GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL CLOSURES

With regard to the actual guidelines which the Assembly Government are setting for Local Authorities in relation to school organisation proposals (circular 23/02), we, of course, would like to see an additional basic guideline – namely a presumption in favour of village schools for the reasons given above. This would not mean that no village school would ever be closed, but there would be a requirement for the Local Authority to establish an exceptional case for doing so. Even if such a guideline is not added, we draw attention to 4 guidelines that are, to our mind, not being correctly implemented at present. It is the responsibility of the Assembly Government to ensure that there are no means of misinterpreting the guidelines, as happened, for example, in Anglesey, as we mentioned in the first section. Also, in practice, the decisions of the Assembly Government establish “case law” in relation to how the guidelines should be interpreted. In our view, the consistent decisions to reject appeals against school closures have sent a clear message to local authorities that the guidelines do not have to be taken seriously.

Among the appeals under consideration are those opposing the closure of the following schools: Alltwalis, Alltwalis, Llanfihangel-Ar-Arth, Henllan Amgoed, Bwlchygroes, Trewyddel, Hermon, Dinas, Mynyddcerrig, and Llansadwrn. None of these appeals have been successful. As a result, there is increasing cynicism about the consultation process and a feeling that participating in the process never affects the final decision. This feeling of helplessness is exacerbated by the current Education Minister and her predecessor's refusal to discuss – prior to and following closures – any specific cases due to her role in adjudicating on appeals. Therefore it is not possible to question the reasons for rejecting an appeal nor to put arguments forward personally and in advance. This undermines confidence in the process of democratic consultation. The following are the four often ignored guidelines to which we would like to draw to your attention -

1) Any recommendation for school closure must be based on educational arguments. The Assembly's 23/02 circular claims that “the effect on the standard of education”(1.6) is paramount, and yet to “improve the standard of education” (2.2) is the main objective. However, this is qualified in (1.1) by a willingness to accept an alternative that “would offer at least equivalent quality and diversity of education at lower total cost”. This places financial considerations above all others. The new guidelines should place the standard of education as the priority and should state that no school should be closed if it is successful in terms of educational performance, unless there are exceptional reasons for doing so – be they financial or otherwise. However, Local Authorities do not even follow the current guideline of making it its main priority to “improve the standard of education”. It is true that Local Authorities use pseudo-educational arguments in an attempt to justify school closures, but they rarely claim that their case is based on educational considerations i.e. educational failure does not drive the agenda for closing village schools. It is generally recognized that village schools provide a good standard of education. In terms of introducing an extensive curriculum or increasing social communication, there are no improvements that can be better provided in a large central school than can be provided by neighbouring village schools working together. We acknowledge that any specific problems will be magnified in a small school i.e. as regards a teacher's ability to teach a poem or sports but such difficulties can be overcome by pooling the skills of teachers in neighbouring schools in ways that befit the local situation. We also believe that the Assembly Government has underestimated the educational value of the support given by parents and the community in a village school and also the sense of security given to young children who are educated in their own neighbourhood. A much higher proportion of parents and members of the local community actively participate in village school life than in a centralised school. Indeed, in our experience, village schools – at odds with the views of every bureaucratic rationale – find it easier to fill their quota of parent-governors than area schools. The reality

of parents' rights to move their children to schools outside their communities must be recognised, although we would prefer if everybody worked together to ensure that there is an integrated educational centre of the highest standard in their own communities. However, parents may sometimes move their children for practical reasons, e.g. the absence of a crèche for younger children and holistic plans are needed to secure the future of our community village schools. When adjacent village schools co-operate, or form one integrated multi-site school, the children get the best of both worlds in educational terms. We go into more detail in section (4) as to how we believe new guidelines should provide a wider range of options to enable co-operation that would facilitate this development. Our concern is that it is always easier for bureaucrats to close schools and to centralise education rather than to seek innovative ways of promoting collaboration between schools.

2) That there is a requirement to assess the impact of a school closure on Welsh education (circular 23/02, sections 1.6 and 1.14). Usually, the LEA only provides a sentence or two to meet this guideline. They simply state that Welsh medium education is *available* within reach, either in the centralised school to which it is intended to send the children or within a reasonable distance. This is an urban perspective, which is totally inappropriate to the Welsh language in the context of rural villages. In many village communities Welsh education is the NORM as the village school is Welsh-medium. Consequently, the majority of children, including the children of in-migrants attend the village Welsh-medium school as the NORM. When a village school is closed, parents then have to make a conscious choice about the school to which they send their children. There is evidence – based on statements we have collected – that many English-speaking in-migrants would send their children by choice or because of convenience of work to an English-medium urban school if there were no school in their village. LEAs never undertake professional Impact Studies with regard to the effects of school closure on the language. The only thorough research undertaken in this field has been by Cymdeithas yr Iaith. The research document *Moderneiddio Iaith Sir Gâr* (the Modernisation of the language of Carmarthenshire) shows that up to 500 children in the county could be lost from Welsh-medium education following the recommendations of the MEP to close dozens of village schools cymdeithas.org/pdf/mai_2005_moderneiddio_iaith_sir_gar.pdf. There is, therefore, a real danger of losing pupils from Welsh medium education if local village schools are closed in the counties of Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, Powys (Carno in particular), Denbighshire, Conwy and areas of Anglesey and Gwynedd. Cymdeithas yr Iaith insist that this is not just a deficiency in terms of the Welsh language, but is in fact a fundamental educational deficiency since fostering the ability to communicate effectively in Welsh is an educational skill. Even where a pupil goes from a village school to an area school, which is also a Welsh-medium school, s/he will learn the language as an individual but will link it purely with her/his educational experience. In their own village school, with their friends and siblings around them, they will start to use the language more naturally as a language of social communication. The closing of a Welsh-medium village school often undermines a Welsh-speaking community by depriving it of a focus for communal life through the medium of the language as described in Section 1. Finally, maintaining a Welsh-medium village school provides a far greater boost for in-migrants to learn the language since they identify with the school. Therefore, this is an important issue in community villages where there is a substantial deterioration in the percentage of Welsh speakers. We believe it is totally unacceptable that the Assembly Government is prepared to accept a couple of “cut-and-paste” sentences from the LEA as satisfying the guideline that the impact of school closure on the Welsh language has been considered. Action that could impair children's education and undermine a Welsh-speaking community should not be permitted without a thorough, professional study. So far, only Gwynedd has agreed to commission language impact assessments on the effect of school closures. Other counties insist that such assessments are made before giving planning permission for housing developments, but they do not attribute the same professional scrutiny to the impact of school closures. The current Assembly Government guidelines are too limited to have anything other than tokenistic value. It should be mandatory for Local Authorities to study the effect of reorganisation plans on the Welsh language and on Welsh communities, as well as on education provision in Welsh. Quality assessments should also be mandatory, rather than two clichéd sentences.

3) That the impact of the school closure on the local community must be considered – This issue is referred to several times in circular 23/02: (1.9) “the effect of the proposal on any existing community use of the school premises”; (1.11) “the overall effect on the community of closure and the extent to which the school is serving the whole community as a learning resource” and (2.2) “the overall effect of a closure on the local community” and “whether the possibilities of making fuller use of the existing buildings as an educational resource in the community have been explored”. Most importantly, section (1.27) states: In some areas, a school may be a focal point for community activity, and its closure could have implications beyond the issue of provision of education”. This was the message of the Local Education Authorities. Usually, a couple of sentences in the LEA report are accepted as showing “that they have considered the impact on the community, but that educational considerations should take precedence.” This reflects a box-ticking mentality and, once again, a study whose poor quality would not warrant a C grade at GCSE. Of the 9 cases that came before the Minister, no effort was made to investigate the impact of school closure on the local community, and yet all appeals were rejected. Recently, Anglesey went one step further by blatantly listing how many formal events that were held in the schools concerned. It is clear that the guidelines for Local Authorities need to be made more robust. A thorough community impact assessment of a school closure is needed, and a language impact assessment could be part of that. The same community effects can also be seen in areas where the Welsh language is not so prominent. Once again, we believe that it should be mandatory for Local Authorities to offer an exceptional case for closing a school if that school is central to the local community. Of course, the impact of closing schools on a community is complicated and varies from community to community. It deserves a professional Impact Study or the hypocrisy of imposing this guideline on LEAs should be quashed. We also totally oppose the insinuation that there is an essential difference between educational needs and community needs. On the contrary, we believe that community and family support is an educational consideration of paramount importance for children at KS1. Bureaucrats find it very easy to evaluate the importance of a good building and material resources to a child’s education, but are very poor when it comes to evaluating the contribution of community and family support. Once again, we insist that jeopardising community and family support to a child’s education is an *educational* issue. This will vary from community to community and there needs to be a quality Impact Study with a prominent contribution from the villages themselves – in every case.

4) The Foundation Phase - Section (1.18) of circular 23/02 states that “proposals affecting early years provision should take into account the desirability of further integrating pre-school education and childcare services...” Since this was published, of course, the Foundation Phase Strategy has been introduced. It claimed that the strategy was critically important to children’s education. The new guidelines should therefore recognize the risk of depriving 3-5 year old children who are living in rural areas of these key advantages. Children under 5 years old cannot be transported to school by bus. Therefore, if the village school is closed, 3-5 year old children are deprived of Foundation Phase education unless their parents have private means of taking their children to a central school. The availability of Foundation Phase education and childcare services will certainly be factors taken into account by young parents in deciding where to live and where to send their children to school. Holistic measures should therefore be put in place to ensure that these services are available within village schools, as part of a range of public services.

5) Every alternative must be thoroughly researched before recommending a school for closure. Section (2.2) of circular 23/02 includes the following paragraph: “Consideration of alternatives: whether alternatives to closure have been actively considered, in particular whether federation, clustering or collaboration with other schools have been looked at (taking account of the scope for use of ICT links between school sites) and the reasons for not pursuing these as an alternative to closure. Whether the possibilities of making fuller use of the existing buildings as an educational resource in the community have been explored”. The second recommendation was not even considered (a feasibility study of utilising the school as a community teaching resource) in any of the nine proposals for school closures considered by the Minister, but the Local Authorities were allowed to ignore this responsibility.

Until now, however, the alternative proposals to school closure have usually revolved around promoting co-operation between schools leading to the creation of a federalised or multi-site school. This alternative is presented as a means of maintaining an educational site in every village community whilst still gaining the benefits of broader educational and social experiences for the pupils by the pooling of material resources and teachers and bringing children together for activities. A federation is misrepresented by a number of central and local government officials as being a system that is dependent on particular conditions. The truth of the matter is that federation is a very flexible concept; there can be as many different models as there are federations. There can be a federation where pupils occasionally move between sites or one where teachers do the moving. Capital developments can be concentrated on one site, or each site can specialise in a particular aspect. It is possible to have a combination of relatively equal sites in terms of their size, or a central site with smaller satellites. It is also possible to have a structuralised cluster of equally-sized independent schools or a multi-sited federalised school. We support the intention to add the whole range of options within the new guidelines.

The exact model depends on the comparative size of the various sites, the distance between them, the specific facilities and so on. Everything is possible and there needs to be a detailed examination of each case as a viable alternative to closing a school as demanded by the Assembly Government guideline. No Local Authority has fulfilled its responsibility in exploring all other options other than school closures. To most officials, these are relatively foreign ideas, and they do not understand the true legal position or the scale of their responsibility in terms of exploring models other than school closures – which is always the easiest option in bureaucratic terms.

In 2001, Carmarthenshire Education Authority misled the residents of Llanfihangel-Ar-Arth by stating that it was not possible to create a federation between the village's church school and Pencader community school. The truth is, creating a federation would have meant closing both schools and opening a new multi-site school. The issue of whether the new multi-site school would be a church school or a community school would then have to be decided. As a result of this error, governors were deprived of any option to investigate other than closure. The Education Minister's rather reckless response in adjudicating the appeal was that it was an unfortunate error but that it was unlikely to have affected the final decision. Earlier this year, Anglesey Education Authority failed to understand that it was responsible (see Annexe A - Opposition to closure notice for Llanddeusant School) for considering options other than school closures. It noted ESTYN's definition of various education models and believed that it had considered options for Llanddeusant and Aberffraw Schools by referring back to these general models. However, it is clear that what is meant by the guidelines is that every alternative must be considered in the context of that individual school rather than depending on a "cut and paste" exercise. This means a lot of work for officials, but it is completely appropriate that new guidelines emphasise that a decision to deprive a community of its school and to interrupt children's education should not be taken lightly.

In Annexe B and C (our response to plans to reorganise Gwynedd's schools) Cymdeithas yr Iaith explains that the original plans' authors have once again failed to understand that they are responsible for conducting a full review of all other methods and the impact of school closures on the local community. They set a timetable of statutory consultation in over 30 schools within a nine week period. That is, each school's fate was considered for just 1.5 days! According to the revised plan they aimed to consult on the future of 7 schools during the final 4 weeks of the summer term. The new guidelines must remove the possibility of "mass closure" without due consideration of each individual case. Carmarthenshire Education Authority consistently ignored this guideline of considering every other option in its endeavours to push through a mass policy of village school closures. As a matter of dogma, they want to see the closure of schools and the establishment of centralised area schools and do not give serious consideration to a federal alternative nor to school collaboration. They show the greatest contempt towards the guideline by using cut and paste methods in order to place exactly the same paragraph of opposition to the federal alternative in each and every case, thus failing to make any effort to carry out a serious study of the alternatives in each individual case.

By opposing a federal alternative in the case of Ysgol Mynyddcerrig (January 9th 2007), the Authority stated that

“This included the option of federation. The Authority was however also mindful of the need for the document to encourage and engage stakeholders in a genuine process of dialogue and debate. Accordingly it sought to assist stakeholders by identifying as many options as possible as well as giving them some idea of the issues any alternative options forward would need to address. Officers also met with Governors, Staff and Parents to discuss the document and the implications of the proposal. Furthermore the usual consultation period was extended by a period of one month, at the request of the Governing Body.

Whilst therefore the LEA was prepared to consider any alternative option put forward by stakeholders there would need to be a credible basis for determining whether or not such a proposal could be realistically implemented. In making a case for federation then clearly having a willing partner would make such a proposal much more worthy of consideration.

The advice given was therefore an attempt to assist stakeholders in putting forward a case.

With regard to the advice given by Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) officials relating to the "leading" role that the LEA should provide in any discussion regarding federation then this would have been the case where the LEA had identified federation as a preferred option. In such a case then the Authority would indeed play a leading role in discussion relating to federation even if all, or indeed any, of the schools involved were not willing partners.

In this instance federation was not considered to be the preferred option by the LEA and no credible alternative option was provided.”

Six months later, the same Authority gave its assessment as to why they did not believe that federation was a viable option asking the Executive Board to close Ysgol Llansadwrn (23/7/07) :

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As can be seen, exactly the same wording is used, including the standard “generous offer” of an additional month of consultation. There is no attempt at making a specific assessment of the alternative in the context of the school under threat. Instead, standard paragraphs are cut and pasted. This makes a mockery of the Assembly Government guideline that every other option is supposed to be examined. The fact that the Assembly Government allows the Authority to ignore the guideline in practice in such a derisory manner sends a signal to the Local Authorities that the guidelines are not to be taken seriously. It is true to say that WAG has pulled up Carmarthenshire Education Authority on several specific points with regard to misleading governors in relation to the mechanism for creating a federalised school as an

alternative to closure e.g. 1- the Authority was criticised for misinforming that “church” schools and “county” schools could not consider creating a federation together (in fact the school would have closed and reopened as federated schools and it would have been a matter for the governors to decide on the status of the new federated school) e.g. 2 – the Authority was criticised for misinforming that schools had to find willing partners (in fact, the role of the Authority is to examine the possibilities). But there is a Catch-22.

The LEA does not have to conduct a thorough investigation of an option such as federation if it is obvious from the outset that it will not solve the “problems”. Carmarthenshire Education Committee interpret this as being no need to examine the federal option if that is not their “preferred option”, and it never is their “preferred option” in any case and therefore they never have to examine it. The Assembly Government does not challenge them on this and thus they allow the LEA to make a nonsense of the guideline. It is obvious that federation is an option to solve any perceived problem regarding resources to provide a broad curriculum, perceived problems concerning social communication for the children and as a means of cutting back on running costs (by having a single head teacher, the non-duplication of resources etc). By definition, however, a multi-site school cannot dispose of the capital costs of premises since its whole purpose is to maintain these sites. Since the driving factor for Carmarthenshire’s MEP is to raise income by selling off premises and sites, a federation can never be the answer to this basic requirement, and, in their view, there is never any need for them to examine the option properly, and so the guideline in terms of having to examine alternatives to closure is worthless.

It is very iniquitous that WAG allows the LEA to treat such a guideline with contempt. This throws WAG circulars into disrepute. Far more importantly, this throws the democratic consultation process into disrepute. By now, parents and governors understand that Carmarthenshire Education Authority is determined to sell off village schools and the consultation process is a token exercise which is never going to change anything and there is never a meaningful examination of any alternative to closure or study into the impact of closure. This alienates parents and governors alike from both the education process and local democracy. At the exact time when parents and others are manifesting concern for the education of their children and when schools should have good reason to be delighted that apathy does not reign, the LEA is allowed to conspire against them rather than working with them. The WAG guidelines have become completely meaningless and the responsibility for WAG to rectify the situation is of high priority. As a result parents and governors in the village areas have lost all trust in the education authorities and the democratic processes and they have become totally disillusioned.

Everyone knows before they embark on the consultation process what the outcome will be and the LEA sees defeating parents and governors and pushing through their policies as a victory. The formula is so successful that there is now a template available for going through the motions. Not only is this situation bad in terms of participation in democracy, it is also bad educationally since the enthusiastic support of parent and voluntary governors is essential to the success of education. There is a real need to transform the current method of interpreting WAG guidelines, and to set a clear methodology within the new guidelines as to what is expected from the LEA in assessing educational options and the impact of their recommendations on communities. Circular 23/02 states that the Minister, in adjudicating on appeals, considers (2.2): “whether the statutory consultation and publication procedures have been properly carried out”. There is no evidence of any such considerations, and some Local Authorities clearly believe that the guidelines do not have to be followed too strictly, since the Government places financial considerations much higher than educational and community considerations.

b) ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT OF THE SCHOOL BUILDING IMPROVEMENT GRANT

The Local Authorities claim that they are responding to pressure from the Assembly Government in their preparation of negative plans for rationalisation resulting in the closure of a large numbers of village schools – as shown in the previous example in Anglesey.

1. WAG figures show that there could be as many as 113,300 vacant places in primary schools by the year 2010. We believe that some 200 Welsh-medium village schools are under threat each containing an average of 50 pupils (i.e. schools varying from less than 20 pupils to over 70). If all these schools were to be closed, it would save some 10,000 places (assuming that there is a means, which is sometimes expensive, of placing them in other settings). This is 10,000 places out of a total of 113,300. In other words, if 200 Welsh-medium village schools were to be closed, undermining these communities that are mainly Welsh-speaking or have the potential to be so, 92% of the problem of surplus places would remain. In the next section we refer to our alternative solution, namely to take a large number of these places out of commission within the school premises by using some of the rooms for wider community purposes.

2. On 15th March 2007, the Minister for Education sent a Circular to the LEAs warning them that the School Building Improvement Grant (SBIG) in its new guise from 2010 onwards will favour Authorities which prove they are effective in terms of asset management. We accept that that the circular was sent for a simple administrative motive rather than being an indirect attempt to influence local policies. But this allows Local Authorities to interpret the circular as meaning that funds will not be given to them for building improvements unless they have plans in hand for negative rationalisation or the closure of schools e.g. Carmarthenshire County Council education officials quote extensively from the circular in their report to the Executive Board (April 2007) on the MEP (A Strategy for Modernising Education Provision) which included the intention to close dozens of Welsh-medium village schools. There is constant reference to the Assembly Government's demand to ensure that school buildings should be of a particular standard, as being a reason for closure since there are no funds available to improve them.

3. Local Authorities often follow what they perceive as guidance from the Assembly Government. Carmarthenshire Education Authority followed the process of creating a new school funding formula. The new formula removed the "allowance" for small federalised schools and means that Welsh-medium schools lose a total of £460,000 a year. A total of 50 Welsh-medium village schools would lose out and only 13 would benefit. Once again we see that education officials are claiming that they are following WAG guidance in preparing a new funding formula that attacks Welsh-medium village schools. According to the officials proposing the new funding formula in the consultation document: "The review in Carmarthenshire anticipated the directive from the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning that every Council should consider reviewing their formulas for financing schools."

c) WAG REGULATIONS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR VILLAGE SCHOOLS.

Perhaps unintentionally, the Welsh Assembly Government has set regulations for accepting teachers into courses for training head teachers, which are totally unsuitable for village or small schools which in turn puts further pressure on these schools by not ensuring a supply of potential head teachers. Applicants for the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) must satisfy a criteria which is more appropriate to teachers in large schools.

The Welsh Assembly Government must make the criteria more flexible in order to allow Local Education Authorities the ability to encourage applicants whom they feel appropriate to their educational, geographical needs and for the needs of their communities.

The criteria and role of a Head Teacher in a small school is substantially different from that at a large school but this is not reflected in the NPQH courses. Also, potential applicants are denied access to training courses because of the constraints of time and location. The Government must adopt a more flexible approach to access to training courses for head teachers or otherwise it will be viewed as an

attempt to close village schools by the back door. There is clear evidence that successful applicants on the NPQH are not confident to apply for headships as Local Education Authorities throughout Wales encounter difficulties in filling vacancies for head teacher posts. The challenge before the Assembly is to restructure the arrangements for training head teachers in order to prepare teachers to undertake a leadership role in our small schools.

III. SO HOW DO WE ENSURE MORE SUSTAINABLE ARRANGEMENTS FOR VILLAGE SCHOOLS?

a) CREATING VIABLE EDUCATIONAL UNITS – We have already discussed these needs. The question is how to create a viable and sustainable educational unit that offers education and a full range of opportunities in suitable buildings located within the pupil's own community, fostering enthusiastic contribution from parents and the local community. This must be considered within the context of each individual school and every group of schools. The Assembly's Department of Education is responsible for defining the range of options available, encouraging Local Authorities to engage with parents, staff, governors and local communities to discuss which of the options are most appropriate for the local circumstances. LEAs should be instructed that special reasons must be established to justify acting against local wishes and an exceptional case is needed to justify closing a school that is academically successful and is important to the local community. We must overcome the immature view that it is a simple choice between closing a school and maintaining the current system. We must also get rid of the stereotype that the status quo is not an option. In many schools, the current system (perhaps with a few minor events and investment) is a highly sustainable solution. In other areas, the best option would be to maintain the existing schools but to expand their community functions (see the next section) In other areas, a model based on a formal federation would be appropriate. Many parents fear federations at the moment, since no statutory process must be followed to close the site of a federation. It is predicted that this unsavoury task could be handed over to governors by putting pressure on school budgets and that a federation could be a step towards a school closure. We therefore support efforts to find new means of structured collaboration between schools to ensure increased opportunities and financial savings, whilst simultaneously maintaining a strong element of independence and statutory security. Different solutions will suit different situations, and it is important to ensure that LEAs carry out a comprehensive review of the options available and that parents, governors and local communities feel that they have ownership over any new system.

b) THE CREATION OF VILLAGE AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES, THE PROVISION OF PRIMARY EDUCATION BEING PART OF THEIR FUNCTION

This is where we ask for a completely new approach, and we direct these comments both to the Rural Affairs Minister and the Education Minister. At present, it is building considerations rather than educational considerations, which control future schools policy. It is thought that the use of funds from the statutory education budget cannot be justified for the improvement of Welsh-medium village school buildings. Basically, this is the end of the story under the present system. Although the schools may provide a good education and there are positive means (by working together) of improving the provision, and despite the significant support given by families and the community and the fact their closure will often be a devastating blow to the language and Welsh-speaking communities, there is no serious consideration of any path other than closure. In each and every case, Carmarthenshire County Council has never provided a solution, and will never provide a solution, other than closing schools and the creation of centralised Area Schools that then enable them to acquire capital receipts by selling off the school premises. Carmarthenshire County Council is attempting to maximise its income through awarding itself planning permission to demolish Ysgol Mynyddcerrig in order to build new homes – even though there are other developments in the village. The consultation processes are merely a matter of going through the motions and this has set a precedent for other counties. Councils in counties such as Gwynedd, Anglesey and Conwy have all referred to what is happening in “other parts of Wales”. Carmarthenshire County Council has endeavoured to speed up the process even further by reforming its

school funding formula in order to starve small schools of funds, and it has also changed its rules regarding the offering of “redundant” school buildings” (their derisive description – in keeping with their attitude to the village communities themselves – of school premises which have been closed). Local communities now only have a year instead of three years in which to draw up a business plan to get the premises operational for community purposes and have to establish “exceptional circumstances”. In essence, it has become an argument of real estate rather than one about education or communities or any honest attempt to discover any other solutions through the consultation process.

In this section, we offer a different method of dealing with the problem of maintaining the premises of village schools. If the problem of school buildings can be removed from the equation, then the consultation processes concerning the future of schools can return to proper educational and community issues. If judgments are made according to educational and community criteria, there will certainly be a broad range of different constructive solutions which are best suited to different communities. In some communities, it might be the parents’ choice that the current pattern of education has expired and that the schools are closed. Every option could well be a valid option involving genuine discussion on an educational and community basis and respect for the views of parents and governors. This is very different from the present procedure of deciding on a school’s future according to issues of “real estate” and imposing a single solution on every community. How then do we deal with the matter of the upkeep of buildings?

The former Education Minister, Carwyn Jones, has made reference to the answer to this by stating that the use of school buildings and resources by the community could be a means of saving some of them. But, despite paying lip service to joined-up strategies, the truth of the matter is that administration and funding are organised on a departmental basis in both local and central government and this militates against a holistic approach towards the use of village schools. When Ysgol Llanfihangel-ar-arth was closed by the Carmarthenshire County Council Education Department, officials from the Council’s Regeneration Department came to discuss grants for converting the school into a community centre i.e. to regenerate something that had been destroyed by another department! When it was asked why such grants had not been offered while the school was open - the whole essence of the reason behind their closure being the difficulties involved in maintaining the building - we were told that these were different grants for community centres not available for schools! The blinkered approach of the Authorities and narrow funding rules work against positive rationalisation – namely that a building is more likely to be viable if it is used for a statutory educational purpose and for other purposes thereby sharing the overheads between the departments/authorities.

WAG and Local Councils have touched on the solution with reference to “Community Focused Schools”. But this is a limited reform involving the organisation of community fringe activities in institutions which are essentially schools.

Cymdeithas yr Iaith calls for a much more radical change which could secure any Welsh-medium village schools, as well as giving them an educational boost. We call for the creation of a system whereby present village schools can be recognised, not as schools of which some community use can be made, but as key community assets with the provision of statutory primary education being just part of their function. This would not be just an empty statement. Our demand is a totally new management and funding structure to support such a radical change.

The new system is set out below -

- A process of being able to identify and designate certain village school *buildings* as Key Community Assets (KCA). One would need to discuss the mechanics of this process. It would not be appropriate everywhere. It would be one of the options during discussions on a school’s future, and an application would have to be made to the Minister to designate the building as a KCA.

- The transfer of the building management arrangements for KCAs away from Education Departments to a department such as Regeneration in the Local Government context or a Department such as Rural Affairs in the context of the Assembly Government. A fund would be needed for purchasing the specified buildings from Local Authorities (or churches) and for their upkeep. An annual fund for developing rural schools already exists – which is distributed automatically to the LEAs and is part of their general education budgets. Increasing this fund to around £5m p.a. would be sufficient to buy around 70 of the schools and to upgrade them gradually over the next decade.
- The WAG Rural Affairs Department would produce guidelines for Local Authorities on how to develop the KCAs and would distribute the building improvements budget.
- The County Council Regeneration Departments (or their equivalents) would undertake an audit of all the County Council services and those of public and voluntary agencies in the rural areas examining how they might be better provided by using the spare capacity of village school premises and resources during the day as well as the use of all facilities outside school hours. This would include the location of some posts by the Council (Area Officers) and posts of agencies such as the Mentrau Iaith within schools where appropriate – giving due regard to the child safety regulations, of course.
- The Education Department would have an agreement with the Regeneration Department on a par with the BBC's agreement with S4C. The Education Department would organise the primary school in the KCA and would meet all the running costs of statutory education. In addition, the Education Department would pay a reasonable allowance towards the maintenance costs of the premises. The Education Department could of course maintain a multi-site primary school by utilising the facilities of several KCAs.
- The Regeneration Department would review the situation of every individual KCA, identifying the excess capacity available. In some KCAs, the maintenance of the primary school would mean that there was no excess capacity during the daytime/term, and the Education Department would simply place contracts with other organisations, (or rent a room) during the evenings/holidays. In other KCAs, the primary school could be held just in part of the building, freeing capacity (and immediately decommissioning a number of vacant places) for contracts with other council departments, public agencies or educational institutions for other areas of the building during the day. These tenants would also contribute to the maintenance cost of the premises, heating etc. There would also be saving in the current account since different organisations would share administrative costs. We do not claim that joint administration would atone for the “additional” costs of maintaining the schools. But the “additional” costs would be relatively low in terms of public funds. An average figure of around £50,000 per annum would be a very reasonable cost for developing and regenerating many of our rural communities, and that would make better use of public funds than many of the current short term schemes. Most importantly, this “additional” funding would not be spent from the statutory educational budget, and therefore it could not be claimed that rural communities were regenerated at the expense of tackling urban deprivation.
- The WAG Rural Affairs Department would investigate as a matter of urgency the use of European funding to further such an innovative regeneration venture, as the KCAs could attract Community Development grants not available for schools. These capital costs – rather than the current additional costs often quoted by LEAs – are the true reason for attempting to close schools. This could be a way of finding a positive solution to the capital problem in many cases, through the possibility of attracting funding from other sources apart from the educational budget.
- The WAG Rural Affairs Department would set out detailed guidelines on matters of child protection in KCAs bearing in mind their use by individuals other than educational staff. On the positive side, breaking down the barrier between the schools as an academic institution and the community would also be of definite educational value.
- There is a danger in contemporary Wales that Welsh will be perceived simply as the language of the education system. Through the implementation of such a revolutionary change, the language of the education system would better influence the language of the local community. By

implementing such a new system, the discussion concerning the future of village schools could return from issues concerning real estate, to proper educational and cultural matters. The Assembly Government would also be able to show that they offer a new future to Welsh-speaking village communities. The KCAs could become engines for the regeneration of our Village Communities as well as being means of sustaining an excellent educational provision based in the experience of the young pupil's immediate environment.

It will also be an opportunity for the Assembly Government to make a real difference to the prospects of our village communities by offering a uniquely Welsh solution for an issue of importance to many in Wales.

Finally, we believe that there could be an innovative method of improving pupils' educational standards by harnessing the resources that families and communities have to offer. By monitoring limited developments such as these, there could also be important lessons to learn regarding educational organisation in urban communities, ensuring that roots are placed in every neighbourhood.

Cymdeithas yr Iaith – June 2008