

Statutory consultation on the amalgamation of Dolgarrog, Tal y Bont & Trefriw Schools

Introduction

Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Consultation Document (the Document) on amalgamating Dolgarrog, Tal y Bont & Trefriw schools. We would be more than willing to discuss and expand on any of the comments at any time.

UCAC appreciates the Authority's aspiration to ensure modern schools which are appropriate for the twenty first century and fully realise that the Authority faces challenges when trying to plan towards ensuring the best provision for a more rural part of the county. It's also recognised that school reorganisation is a complex matter and that there are a variety of opinions and strong feelings from pupils, parents, school staff and from the communities themselves.

UCAC recognises that the Authority has held a series of 'drop in' sessions for shareholders, specifically for parent and staff, to receive information and provide comments. An UCAC officer attended one of the sessions, and whilst the staff who were present were amiable and keen to respond to enquiries, they were not in a position to answer a number of key and specific questions about the proposals, particularly staffing issues.

Reasons for the change

UCAC fully realise that local authorities are under pressure to reduce empty places at schools and it's obvious that this scheme tries to respond to that. The experience of our members in several counties is that building capacity doesn't always reflect in reality the amount of space in a building because of the way capacity is calculated. There is a danger of constructing schools which quickly become too small and must be aware that statistics suggest that there will be an increase in the population over the next decade which will naturally effect primary schools to begin with. Planning new schools or remodelling must ensure that it's easy to extend the provision if the need arises.

The Union also fully realises the considerable financial pressure schools and local authorities are under these days. We regularly draw these issues to the attention of politicians. Regarding foreseeable savings, we often find that there are additional costs – capital costs and revenue costs – which have not always been identified when planning to re-organise schools that leads to real savings to be lower than foreseen. We gather that the Authority is fairly confident that it will receive money for the scheme through a 21 century schools grant from the Welsh Government, but also presumes that the proposed scheme is totally dependent on it.

Options

UCAC notes that the Document refers to the different options that were under consideration prior to this but also note that there are no options regarding co-operation, such as federalisation, have been fully explored. Except the quote from Estyn, there is little recognition in the Document to any informal co-operation that already happens between the three schools.

Buildings/resources

The Union commends the ideal of having buildings and resources fit for the purpose of the 21 century. We agree that having the best learning environment is essential for children's education; we would add that this is also beneficial to staff morale. We also recognise that the school is a valuable resource within the community and that losing a village school will be a blow to two of the communities. It's important that full consideration is given to the voice and opinion of the communities before coming to any final decision.

We congratulate the staff of the three schools in their success promoting the Welsh language as demonstrated in the Document. We welcome the statement in the Document that it isn't foreseen that amalgamating the three schools will have a *'negative effect on the use of Welsh'*. We note that there is no reference in the Document to the location of the language unit at Dolgarrog and how the proposed development will effect this valuable resource.

In a period of incomparable cuts in local government, the question must be asked will the match funding expected by the Government be available from Conwy Council to ensure that the scheme comes to fruition. Without this assurance there is no purpose continuing with these intentions.

Staffing the new schools and interim arrangements

Though the Document is a formal first step in the statutory process of amalgamating the schools, the announcements that have already been made has led people to think that a final decision has already been made. This has effected the stability of the schools and, as is common in such situations, parents have begun to move their children to other schools endangering jobs in the short and long term. The union is disappointed that the Authority hasn't been more proactive when responding to this.

While accepting that it will be the shadow governing body's responsibility to set final staffing structures for a new school, there is room for the Authority to give greater consideration to the implications of the amalgamation on the posts of current staff. Naturally, the first step will be the appointment of a head and UCAC would like to see this happen at least a year in advance. The Union is of the opinion that there is room to express possibilities regarding the interim staffing arrangements jointly between the three schools with the aim of protecting jobs and promoting continuation.

We press for an early decision on staffing issues and ensuring that the staff of the three schools are included in discussions and are regularly updated about what is happening. Considering that any new arrangements will not be in place before 2017/2018 at the earliest, staff will face an extended period of uncertainty and this can only have a negative effect on educational standards and stability in the three schools.

To conclude

UCAC presses the Council to do all it can to come to a final decision on the future of schools in the Caerhun and Threfriw area as soon as possible and try to keep to the proposed timetable. We are very willing to co-operate with the Council in an effort to promote education at the three schools and protect the interests and working conditions of teachers and the other staff who work in them. With this in view, UCAC would appreciate being invited to any future meetings which directly or indirectly deal with staff posts which are effected by the proposed reorganisation at the effected schools.

UCAC
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