

Estyn response to the proposal to amalgamate Ysgol Dolgarrog, Ysgol Tal y Bont and Ysgol Trefriw

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 and other additional information such as data from Welsh Government and the views of the Regional Consortium, which deliver school improvement services to the schools within the proposal.

Introduction

This consultation proposal is from Conwy County Borough Council.

The proposal is to amalgamate Ysgol Dolgarrog, Ysgol Tal y Bont and Ysgol Trefriw to form a new community primary school with effect from September 2017. The proposal is to accommodate the new school on the Ysgol Dolgarrog site within new buildings funded by the Welsh Government's 21st century schools programme.

Summary/ Conclusion

The proposer has adequately outlined the benefits of the proposal in terms of addressing the current excess capacity in all three schools and developing more appropriate school accommodation to meet the needs of pupils in the area more effectively.

However, it has not provided the regional consortium's view of the schools nor does it provide any analysis of current or recent performance data for any of the schools. The lack of information makes it difficult to judge the likely impact of the proposal on standards in the proposed new school.

Description and benefits

The proposer has provided a clear rationale for the proposal. The proposer clearly demonstrates how the amalgamation of the three schools and building of a new

community primary school will address the aims of the council's primary school modernisation programme. These are to reduce surplus capacity, achieve greater equality of funding for pupils and improve the fitness of purpose of current school buildings across the authority.

The proposer makes brief reference to the expected benefits of the proposal, including the positive impact of amalgamation on the quality of the learning environment, leadership and potential outcomes for pupils. However, the proposal considers these in general terms only. It has not provided nor analysed any recent performance data for the three schools in any detail to support the argument that amalgamation would ensure that standards would at least be maintained in the new school.

The proposer appears to have considered the expected disadvantages of the proposal including the implications on current staffing levels at all three schools, the operational challenges of establishing a new school and the loss of two village schools. However, it does not provide an evaluation of these and does not demonstrate how it will address any of the identified disadvantages in its subsequent risk management.

The proposer has identified only one risk associated with the proposal, namely that the proposal may not be supported and approved by Conwy County Borough Council's cabinet. It does not consider the disadvantages of the proposed amalgamation as risks to be managed, nor does it consider the potential risk of parents from Ysgol Trefriw choosing alternative provision, which would be likely to lead to a reduction in pupil numbers transferring to the new school. Finally, it does not identify the potential impact the new school might have on the numbers of pupils applying to other local schools in the area.

The proposal clearly identifies how Conwy Education Services completed a comprehensive option appraisal in 2013 as part of its primary school modernisation programme. This appropriately sought the views of parents, staff, governors, pupils and the wider communities of Ysgol Dolgarrog, Ysgol Tal y Bont and Ysgol Trefriw on four options for the future of the schools in question. These included the current proposal of a new build area school on the Dolgarrog site; the option of maintaining the status quo; the option of an area school created by remodelling the existing Dolgarrog school; and the option of creating an area school over the three existing sites. The proposer appears to identify sound reasons for the adoption of the proposal based on the restricted space available at two out of three sites, the outdated nature of all of the schools' current buildings and limitations on gaining funding through the Welsh Government's 21st century schools programme.

The proposer has appropriately considered the impact of the proposal on pupils' travel arrangements and their ability to access the provision. The proposal states

clearly that it anticipates an increase in transport provision, as some pupils will have a slight increase in their journey to the nearest appropriate school. This is particularly relevant to pupils from Ysgol Trefriw, who will have the furthest distance to travel. In addition, the local authority has stated that under this proposal there are no plans to change its policy on the transport of children to and from schools.

The proposer does not clearly demonstrate how the proposal will reduce the overall number of surplus places in the area. The proposer identifies current surplus capacity of 44%, 63% and 68% in Ysgol Dolgarrog, Ysgol Tal y Bont and Ysgol Trefriw respectively and asserts that the development of a new area school will reduce the number of surplus places significantly. Elsewhere in the report, it provides useful information on projected pupil numbers for the current schools for the next five years but it does not link this to an estimate of surplus places in the new school.

The proposal to amalgamate the three schools is unlikely to have a negative impact on Welsh medium provision within the local authority. All three schools are currently Welsh medium category 1 schools as would the proposed new school.

Educational aspects of the proposal

The proposer has considered the impact of the proposal on the quality of outcomes, provision and leadership and management in general terms only. The proposal makes appropriate reference to the schools' most recent Estyn inspections. However, the report for Ysgol Tal y Bont dates from 2010 and the proposal does not provide any analysis of current performance data for any of the schools. It lists a number of potential benefits for outcomes, provision, and leadership and management that would arise from the amalgamated school. These include more opportunities for additional activities, better access for pupils and staff to additional specialisms, resources and facilities, and greater opportunities for staff development with potential for specialist staffing and management structures. However, these relate mainly to provision and the proposal does not evaluate these in any detail. Overall, it does not clearly identify how the potential benefits it lists would have an impact on school standards.

The proposer has adequately considered the likely impact of the proposals to ensure delivery of the full curriculum at the Foundation Phase and at key stage 2. The proposal contains useful information on the current state of buildings and facilities at each of the existing schools and contrasts these with the enhanced accommodation that would arise as a result of a new build school. This includes the development of specialist practical areas, a library resource centre, sensory and habitat zones, and soft and hard play areas.

The proposer has undertaken an equality impact assessment, which identifies a range of vulnerable groups, including those with a disability. The proposer asserts that there is no indication that any pupils would be disadvantaged should the proposal to amalgamate the three schools proceed. However, there is no analysis of how the proposal might affect any of these groups, including those with special educational needs, and the proposer does not provide any evidence to support this general assertion.

The proposer indicates that, should the proposal proceed, building work for the new school will take place on the grounds of the existing school site at Ysgol Dolgarrog while the existing school remains in operation. However, the proposer does not show how it intends to minimise potential disruption to current learners or staff at the school.