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**Re-organisation of the county's primary
schools for the educational benefit of all
children in Gwynedd**

Consultation

Draft report on the response findings

May 2008

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this draft report is to outline the principal findings that arose from an analysis of these responses to the consultation held on the draft version of the *Re-organisation of the County's Primary Schools for the Educational Benefit of All Gwynedd Children* scheme. In the first instance, this draft report was prepared to inform officers of the principal trends and to determine whether the report structure is appropriate.

Overall, full responses were obtained to the consultation. Approximately over half the respondents tend to thoroughly deal with the consultation document -namely the draft scheme for *Re-organisation of the County's Primary Schools for the Educational Benefit of All Children in Gwynedd*- through attempting to address those points that were outlined in the draft scheme. As far as the remainder are concerned, appropriate points were presented which tended to stem from the particular situation of individual schools or based on individual experiences. The following principal messages emerged from the consultation:

- That parents were hugely opposed due to the experiences of individual schools;
- That there is no firm grounds for the Council's argument as regards the data used and the financial basis;
- Educational reasons had been ignored;
- That a framework for the whole county cannot be created - local patterns need to be addressed;
- That proposals regarding federal schools are wholly unacceptable;
- That a less ambitious strategy is required by working in specific areas and building on local aspirations and proposals;
- That local education has suffered in the past due to lack of investment in communities.

2. The consultation and the document

450 responses were received to this consultation. Those who were of the view that the consultation process, including the meetings held, was a fair method of gathering opinions, were in the minority. Overall, the majority had doubts about the entire process and argued that the consultation document had shortcomings.

The general view was that:

- there had been misrepresentation,
- notes in meetings had presented the improper emphasis.
- inadequate mention of certain options
- the analysis was unfair due to incorrect data;
- the process was being driven by financial rather than educational reasons.

One respondent (parent) noted

' this was not consultation but rather a presentation of defective arguments and expecting us to accept them'

Another individual (a parent) noted:

Questionnaires that have been sent to parents are poor examples of the methodology, with leading and weighted questions. Lack of information for people to make informed choice is also a big issue, facts and figures seem to be released when it suits, and even then not the whole picture.

And another individual:

The consultation process is being steered to 'justify' a decision which has already been taken by councillors of Gwynedd council.

However, several governing bodies noted that the analysis was correct and reflected their situation

There was a unanimous view that the analysis was unfair

3. The case for change

Respondents were asked to note whether they agreed that the current situation was unsustainable. Some (around five) refused to answer this question as they were suspicious of the question and felt that it was misleading. However, the various cohorts who responded to this question were as follows:

Cohort	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know/no view
Parents	7	7	45	97	
Governors/governing body	7	12	11	9	1
Member of school staff		4	10	12	

Headteacher	3	1	4	1	
Teachers Union		1			
Community/town Council	1	8	5	7	
Community groups		3	8	9	
Individuals	3	14	22	23	

The figure provided for individuals does not include the 39 similar responses obtained from 'members of the community' for Ysgol Baladeulyn in a similar form. In the case of the Ysgol y Clogau area, several similar responses were received but they used the official questionnaire and these were therefore included in the above totals. With regard to Abersoch, several responses were received from local organisations, establishments and businesses who have been included in the community groups. Respondents from Llanystumdwy, Borth y Gest and the neighbouring area tend to use the same ready answers provided on a sheet glued on to the questionnaire. Several local organisations contributed to the consultation in the Rhostryfan area. Some parents at Ysgol Llandwrog used a ready short response form.

From this table, it can be perceived that the rationale for saying that the current situation is unsustainable for the future has not been accepted at all by the parents who responded to the consultation. The vast majority (91%) either disagree or strongly disagree that the situation is unsustainable. The vast majority of these come from schools named as being considered for re-organisation, and there will be a need to consider how the measures it is intended to take with this cohort can be further discussed.

The other cohort who objected to the proposals and the rationale for them and who hold that the situation is sustainable are members of school staff, where a majority have not accepted the arguments for the sustainability of the situation. Headteachers have more divided opinions and around a half of them either agree or strongly agree that the current situation is unsustainable. Governing bodies or individual governors are also of the same view. In addition, a little under a half of the town/community councils agree with the rationale for change.

Amongst those who disagreed that the situation is not sustainable, the main reasons given were:

- That the situation of the particular local school was appropriate and had received Estyn's approval;
- The figures produced by the county were either incorrect or had shortcomings or ignored recent trends especially when taking birth rates into account. Figures published by the health board noted that a 5% increase had occurred in births during 2005 - 06. Some were concerned that the document used figures for 2005 and that figures for 2008 possibly differed;
- That per capita cost figures had been effectively used to support the argument but that these reflected an extreme situation and that they do not reflect true costs that could in some instances, be considerably less;
- That several schools exceeded their capacity but yet there was talk of closure;
- Doubts about scarcity of headteachers, their new role and recruitment in general;
- That community use of Rural schools was developing with organisations such as Young Farmers, the Urdd, Religious Clubs holding meetings in them.
- Smaller classes were to be welcomed;
- Need to give more consideration to community regeneration and the value of educational provision in light of new mindsets;
- Transport costs will cost as much as keeping a school open.

A few noted that developments in Gwynedd were wholly contrary to the policy promoted by governments in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. There was a trend in those countries to try and reinforce rural provision rather than weaken it. These also tended to take stock of research focussed upon by NASS of the value of educational investment in provision for a few pupils. These argued that studies had proved the value of small schools although in reality, the research stemmed from scrutinizing the effectiveness of other educational developments.

However, amongst those who objected to the basic issues regarding the case for change, there was a general consensus that:

- the council had received a poor settlement;
- some school buildings were in a poor condition - although several argued that a building's condition does not have any impact on children's education.

A minority favoured the document's rationale - principally community councils and some governing bodies and some headteachers. As regards these responses, the following comments were obtained:

There is general agreement that the nine reasons noted establishes a good case for change, where that is consistent with the county's general aims and local aspirations. The Governing Body welcomed the fact that the County Council presents a firm action plan rather than do nothing about the problem and await for it to disappear. It was noted however, that almost half of Gwynedd primary schools (48 from 106 thus far) had objected to the scheme. It was also noted that the Council had shown some flexibility when responding to the concerns expressed and that hopefully this will continue during the consultation phase. (Governing Body)

Agreeing that there is a case for change does not imply that we agreed with all of the above-mentioned points. In our experience, in the view of several inspectors' reports, the principal reason for the need for change at Ysgol .. is the serious condition of the three most senior classes.

One mother favoured the document because

Education is better in a bigger school

One town councillor felt that the current situation was unsustainable and that the scheme's aims and objective were:

Healthy in principle. The question is how is the council through closing some schools in a rural village going to ensure community-based and social development in those areas.

4. The Principal Strategy

In this section of the consultation, respondents were requested to give their views on specific proposals such as federal schools and area schools.

4.1 Federal Schools

A vast majority of respondents voiced strong and significant opposition to the notion of federal schools.

The principal reasons noted for opposing the notion of establishing federal schools were:

- That there was no evidence that this model would work in Gwynedd and that possible models had not been trialled;

- That these schools would lack a community identity and would find it difficult to create a firm identity;
- That there was no certainty that this system would lead to an improvement in education;
- The funding basis for this model had not been determined - possibly this would prove a more expensive method of funding education having taken into account the headteacher and teachers' travelling costs;
- Headteachers would become site managers rather than educators and would become less acquainted with pupils;
- It would not be easy to create or develop staff specialisation;
- The process of creating federal schools would be too unmanageable when trying to establish this implementation pattern throughout the county;
- That the proposals forced a uniform system rather than trying to promote organic, efficient local developments;
- The headteacher would not be present all the time.
- Children would travel between sites - high transport costs and an unpleasant situation for children.
- The specialisation provided by certain schools which had a special educational needs unit would be lost;
- Possibly, some schools would not want to work together.
- In some situations, children from the same family would be separated.
- Local power would be lost due to having a single governing body
- There was future financial uncertainty;
- Contacts between a headteacher and the area would be weakened
- Contact between school and community would be weakened
- Prior to establishing a federal school, every individual school within the partnership would have to be closed
- The system would be unworkable without parents' support and that is far from forthcoming at present.

Another respondent (individual) noted:

Many say that creating a federal school would eventually lead to the closure of that school. What would then be left in Gwynedd apart from large urban schools and area schools. That would be a great pity.

Advantages of federal schools

Only a few advantages were noted. These included:

- Maintaining a school's presence in a village/area.
- Take advantage of the specialisations of a broader pool of teachers.
- Reduce teachers workload in co-ordinating/leading a subject.
- Provide opportunities for children to assimilate with children from other school sites.

Even when there was a consensus that this model needed to be explored, doubts were expressed such as:

The Governing Body's view was that the various models presented offered valuable possibilities, although it was unclear why clustering was no longer an option. The Body was of the view that it was up to schools and other areas to consider and decide which in their opinion, would be the most suitable models in their case, within the framework of general aims noted in the scheme. The advantages and disadvantages of the models will vary from one area to another and it was felt that it would not be worthwhile to prepare a comprehensive list that would apply in each circumstance.

One governing body noted:

In the original consultation, school clustering was proposed but again no clustering arrangement is proposed .. and the vast majority of schools regard clustering as the ideal option.

Whilst one individual insisted:

Its not as easy as it sounds and involves a lot of careful planning and flexibility to make it work

One regular theme that emerged in this part of the consultation was why the draft scheme had not included proposals on school clustering.

4.2 Area Schools

The vast majority of the respondents were dissatisfied with the proposals for area schools. The principal objections to area schools were:

- Closure of small rural schools to create Area Schools;
- Transport - young children being transported along rural roads.
- Travel costs for the children - up to £1000 per capita/ a year for a 5 mile journey.
- Children taken out of their communities - no sense of belonging.
- Less ownership/support by parents and communities deprived of their schools
- Larger classes
- Difficulties in integrating pupils from non-Welsh backgrounds

The advantages noted:

- A headteacher based on one site;
- More resources - child-minding clubs;
- That the education provided can be better at a larger school - as there are more opportunities for pupil involvement with each other;
- Some particular areas would benefit;
- If that was the choice of the individual particular area and that local co-operation and goodwill assisted to create the area school;

A parent commented:

The best area school is that which remains part of a neighbourhood. This benefit is lost if a school is not part of a neighbourhood and instead is a branch of a central federal large school which does not belong to one particular neighbourhood.

And said an individual who described herself as 'being concerned about the permanent squeeze on rural areas especially the Welsh-speaking rural areas':

It is contentious to assert that creating area schools will save money in the long term. What will be the true capital costs of building new buildings? What will be the true cost of transporting children to the new schools in the long-term?

Whilst another parent enquired why savings in terms of environmental considerations had not been proposed:

Why have no ideas for upgrading current buildings even been costed? What about fitting schools with latest tech, as in Germany, with wind/solar power, energy efficiency, making our schools low/zero carbon, thus protecting heritage AND saving money.

However, overall, most respondents expressed serious doubts about area school proposals.

4.3 School Closures

When this section of the questionnaire was reached, most who objected to the proposals had presented their arguments and tended to present short comments to support their opposition to school closures. Here were the main points noted:

- Obvious - community lost an important resource.
- Village less attractive to young families as there is no school available.
- Children have to travel to the nearest school - rural roads are dangerous.

- Again travel costs.
- Teaching staff to be relocated or lose posts.
- Support Staff e.g cartakers, assistants and kitchen staff would lose posts. Contribute to unemployment.
- Join with larger classes and higher teacher: pupil ratio.
- Children do not have the same sense of belonging to the new school.
- Impact on the Welsh language;
- Impact on the environment due to more travelling;
- Inconvenience and in certain instances major transport difficulties for parents which will compel them to change their daily arrangements;

However, a minority of respondents gave a reminder that school closures were inevitable -

'A decision to close some schools will have to be faced' (Governing body).

4.4 Build new schools

Building new schools were seen as having obvious advantages yet there were strong feelings that good education did not depend on good buildings.

'Good buildings do not guarantee a good education' was a regular comment which featured in responses. One headteacher cited information provided by NASS which insisted:

'There is no evidence to indicate that a good building ever improves results achieved by children'

However, one parent noted:

'All of these options are simply part of a big 'mix and match' policy which has been framed as a) fait accompli and b) as being the only viable option.'

One headteacher asked where the funding to build new schools would come from and questioned whether it would be better to use that funding to improve current schools. Some feared that the mention of new buildings only served as a bait to attract support for the county's plan - a pledge that would not ultimately be realised.

5. Other options/Gwynedd Proposed Scheme

The general view was that the county should consider a less ambitious plan which would strive to address the patterns in individual areas through co-

operating with the stakeholders to set appropriate development stages as required. The following specific points were therefore noted:

- Why have a whole county scheme where the situation in every catchment-area could be looked at individually as and when required?
- How about looking at catchment-areas who are eager to enter federal arrangements and trial and ensure that these arrangements work before experimenting on them with all the children within the County?
- Why not consider alternative Federalization models? Several possible models have been trialled and success has been achieved in other counties - and these are models which have been proposed by the communities.
- How about the Officers going out into communities and discuss with them the type of model they believe would be appropriate - I do not think that adequate attention has been given to the initial discussions. Why is there so much haste?
- Nothing has been done for over 30 years - why are all the changes required in 5? I am afraid that this plan is being pushed through without either a suitable time-table or the County having the capacity to support it.
- Could the idea of an Administrative Officer be explored - rather than a federal head and then allow the school headteachers to lead their sites and get rid of some of the bureaucracy. The County must recognize that hours of headteachers working hours are being duplicated!
- Establish a working-group of headteachers of schools which are under threat of closure/federalization to discuss options that matches the majority and have the least negative impact on the communities. Greater investment in our communities, building more affordable housing, creating employment to keep our young people in their communities and fill our schools is a long-term option.

The following quotations summarise respondents comments that the proposals are too ambitious and provide a framework for the whole county rather than promote local models based on the need for desired changes in individual situations:

The Plan is much more far reaching than any catchment-area ever imagined and is totally contrary to any discussions held during the early years (Community Council)

The entire document is highly misleading and presents little space for proper grass roots consultation. 4.1 to 4.5 are simply different aspects of the same overall scheme. There is little space to present alternatives (parent)

It is wise to consider other options - more co-operation between schools but it is important that discussions be held with the community. (Town Council)

It is felt that options are suitable for the future - the challenge is to persuade communities that the current situation is unsustainable - perhaps there should be a move towards introducing changes in those areas where there is a genuine desire to do so. (Governing Body)

6. Conclusions

A substantial number of individuals and bodies have responded to the consultation. However, most remain sceptical of the value of the process. In addition, important cohorts disagree with the advice that the current situation in primary school provision is unsustainable. This particularly applies to parents - especially those who live in areas where local school closure is proposed. They reject the Council's rationale on the basis that incorrect evidence has been provided on pupil numbers who are likely to attend these schools. They are also very sceptical about the educational basis and financial basis underlying the Council's rationale.

Other groups such as governing bodies, individual headteachers and community or town councils are more likely to agree with the Council's arguments. However, even in those instances where the respondents recognize the need for change, they are not persuaded that the correct options are being provided. There is firm opposition to the notion of federal schools and the proposal for area schools does not receive a much better response. The notion of school clustering is regularly raised in responses - and these respondents regret that this model has not been mentioned in the draft scheme.

The message that emerges is that many of the respondents feel that having one comprehensive large scheme is unsuitable. They assert that the council should consider developing different local models which are more in keeping with the aspirations of particular communities. These models should draw on goodwill to create more acceptable patterns through recognizing the strengths of local primary education provision. Obviously, some governing bodies and community councils who accept the case for the need for change are places where there is the potential to explore different local models.