

# **Estyn's response to the proposal by Caerphilly local authority to replace Plasyfelin Primary School with a new and enlarged school in the grounds of the existing school site**

## **Introduction**

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.

## **Summary/ Conclusion**

Estyn considers that the proposal is likely to maintain the standard of education provision in the area. However, there is too little information on the current standard of education in Plasyfelin Primary School or how surplus places in neighbouring schools could be affected.

## **Description and benefits**

The proposer has provided a reasonable rationale for this proposal. It follows the local authority's plan to invest in improving its school buildings and developing shared and co-located facilities for community use. The proposal would see the creation of a new and enlarged replacement school in the grounds of the existing school site, with an increase from the existing capacity of 394 pupils to 420 pupil places, plus 60 nursery places. The proposer has not identified whether the existing capacity of 394 pupils includes nursery places.

The School Organisation Code (Welsh Government, 2018, p.19) does not require the proposer to consult under the code, as the main entrance of the replacement school would be within 1.609344 kilometres (one mile) of the main entrance of the existing school. Nevertheless, the local authority sets out its aim to engage in transparent, balanced and open decision-making, through informing and consulting stakeholders, which reflects the principles of its Consultation and Engagement Framework 2020-2025.

The proposer presents a detailed description of the options framework it used to support its decision-making about the relative desirability, viability and feasibility of this proposal. It sets out clearly and fairly the expected benefits and disadvantages of making changes to the existing school. The proposer outlines clearly the difficulties of undertaking additional physical work to the existing school, due to asbestos identified throughout the buildings. Clear and valid reasons are provided as

to why three of the alternatives have been discounted. The proposal identifies how a number of community groups, such as amateur dramatics and a local football team, already use the existing school buildings and its outdoor environment. It is therefore unclear why an option of replacing the primary school building on the existing Plasyfelin site with the same admission number and with facilities for use by the community, has not been considered.

The proposer has considered the impact of the changes on learner travel arrangements, but as there is no change to the catchment area and the proposed location for the new building is within the existing school site, it is reasonable to assume that there will be minimal implications for learner travel arrangements. A number of 'safe travel' routes are already established. The local authority has identified that the proposal provides an opportunity to improve the access road to the school and the designated bus or taxi turning points. In the case of accessibility, the proposer has not outlined how it might achieve these improvements, while minimising disruption to local residents, pupils and staff.

In its rationale, the proposer identifies new housing developments in the Plasyfelin Primary School catchment area, as the main reason for increasing the school's admission number to a capacity of 420 pupils, plus 60 nursery pupils. The projected numbers, however, indicate that the school would not reach capacity by 2030 (six years after the projected completion date of the new build). The projected number of nursery pupils on roll by 2030 suggests there could be 24 surplus nursery places in the school. The proposer does not give sufficient explanation for increasing the number of nursery places, when modelling suggests numbers on roll would be very similar to those currently.

The proposal details admission numbers for Plasyfelin Primary School and for neighbouring primary, infant and junior schools. At present, 73.31% of pupils attending the school are from within the catchment area. Around a third of pupils eligible to attend Plasyfelin attend other English medium provision and almost 40% of pupils within the Plasyfelin Primary School catchment area attend faith and Welsh-medium schools. It is unclear whether the proposer has taken a similar analysis of the patterns of attendance across the neighbouring schools into account in the projected numbers.

The local authority has identified possible risks associated with the proposal, one of which is destabilising other already established educational provision in the area. The proposer feels confident that the risk can be mitigated by increasing the admission number to Plasyfelin Primary School over time 'by a manageable amount'. However, it does not show how the projected surplus places in other schools up to 2026, such as Hendre Infants School, Hendre Junior School and St James' Primary will be impacted. The proposal refers to the current provision for the Welsh language within Plasyfelin and nearby Welsh-medium schools. Given that a third of pupils within Plasyfelin Primary School's catchment attend Welsh-medium provision, the proposer is not specific enough about how this proposal supports, or might affect, the targets in the local authority's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan.

Overall, the rationale for taking forward option 5, which increases the school's admission number, over option 4, replacing the primary school with no change to the current pupil admission number, is not sufficiently robust.

The proposer explains how it will fund the building of a new school for Plasyfelin Primary School but does not provide indicative costs for the project or the scale of any projected net savings.

### **Educational aspects of the proposal**

The local authority has considered suitably the impact of the proposals on the quality of the pupils' learning experiences and their wellbeing, for example in relation to their physical development through improvements to indoor and outdoor facilities. The proposer considers the information from the most recent Estyn inspection report for the school, published in 2016. However, the local authority provides a misleading interpretation of one of the report's judgements which it uses to support its rationale for the proposal.

In the summary of the school's current performance and commentary on its prospects for improvement being 'good', the inspection report identifies that 'Staff manage resources well and pupils benefit from a learning environment of high quality' (Estyn, 2016, p.2). The inspection report does not identify that improvements '*could be achieved if resources were balanced well*' or that '*pupils would benefit from a learning environment of high quality*', as stated in the proposal. Furthermore, the proposal does not provide an up-to-date view of the local authority or regional consortium on current standards, the quality of teaching or curriculum; care, support and guidance, or the quality of leadership and management.

The proposal takes appropriate account of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (2018) in describing the proposed design and layout of the new building and has carried out a detailed integrated equality impact assessment. It concludes that the proposal would likely have a positive or neutral impact in relation to the Equality Act 2010, socio-economic factors and the achievement of the local authority's wellbeing objectives.

The local authority is confident that there would be minimal disruption to the daily operation of the existing school, while the proposed building works are carried out, and that community groups who also use the school's facilities will be able to continue their activities. However, there is insufficient information about how disruption to the site would be monitored and how learners and staff would be supported in the move to the new school. In addition, the proposer has outlined that the current buildings will need to be decommissioned, demolished and disposed of in line with appropriate guidelines when the new facility is complete. It is not clear how this might affect staff, pupils and local residents, or how the local authority would mitigate any issues associated with this work.