

Abbey Primary 2023

Post Occupancy Review

June

Strategic School Improvement Team
Neath Port Talbot Council



Introduction

Overview

This Post-Occupancy Evaluation (POE) aims to gather and examine key insights about the facilities' performance, functionality and operational processes from the view points of the clients (pupils, staff and SMT). This information can be then compared against the projects in order to determine how effectively these goals were met. POE can therefore help the Strategic School Improvement officers to collect relevant, and well-disseminated evaluation information to impact the design and functionality of future facilities. This report includes both positive and negative findings. This enables the positive aspects of the facility to be repeated and the negative aspects to be addressed in future project delivery.

Project Information

The new build English-medium school, located on the site of the former Dwr-Y-Felin Lower Comprehensive School, has places for 420 primary and 50 nursery pupils. It has replaced the former Abbey Primary School which was split across three sites.

The new school comes with a 12-place early year assessment centre and also benefits from a newly established 32-place childcare setting.

The new Abbey Primary School will continue to serve the existing catchment area and will be of sufficient size to accommodate projected growth in local pupil numbers.

Councillor Nia Jenkins, Neath Port Talbot Council's Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Training, said: "As we officially open the new Abbey Primary School, we celebrate not only the state-of-the-art facilities but also the bright future it represents for the children of our community.

"With its modern design and excellent resources, this school will provide an outstanding learning environment for our young people, enabling them to thrive and reach their full potential."

Built by BAM Construction Ltd, the £10.5m cost of the project was 65% provided through the Welsh Government's Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme. The remainder was funded through the council's prudential borrowing capacity.

Analysis and Findings

Methodology used for evaluation

In order to capture the information required for producing the post occupancy review a sample of Key Stage 2 pupils were interviewed. The group comprised of 6 pupils and they were interviewed as a group in order to ensure interaction and discussion.

The Headteacher and Bursar were also interviewed in person as they played an active role during the planning and building process.

A questionnaire was sent out to all staff members (Microsoft Forms) in order to provide the evaluation team with the ability to sample large bodies of users/stakeholders.

The three main assessment criteria used for the investigation were Process, Product and Performance.

Pupil Responses

Positives:

- First year has 'definitely' been enjoyable. Pupils noted that they enjoyed exploring the new building.
- Pupils noted that they found it much easier to work in larger classrooms and noted that being able to work in the large, wide corridor helped them to complete work in a quiet environment and helped to develop their independence.
- Some pupils noted that the large hall/ studio was important to them as it enabled them to develop their performing skills. Having room for a stage with lighting and sound systems enabled them to produce 'shows' and performances of a standard that wasn't possible on the old sites (one pupil noted that they previously had to walk to Dŵr y Felin for all performances and rehearsals which wasn't practical).
- Pupils felt that it was an advantage to have a range of staff with different expertise on one site.



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- All pupils noted that having direct access to a 'way bigger yard' was important to them and that they now work outside much more often than on the previous sites.
 - All pupils noted that they were apprehensive but very excited to move. They said that it was sad at the time and that they were scared and nervous of getting lost and not seeing friends / being in different classes but settled in very quickly in the new school.
 - Pupils noted that they felt that they'd learned more this year as they felt happier and calmer in the new school environment. The increased light coming into the building, high spaces and the choice of colours contributed to this. They also stated that teachers were 'better' as they had more 'props' and space and 'a nice staff room with excellent views'.
 - All pupils agreed that pupils were much calmer and that behavior had improved in the new building.
 - All pupils agreed that having different quiet/ seating areas throughout the school was important to them.
 - All pupils agreed that being on one site was important as they could see/ play with friends, family members that would otherwise be on different sites.
 - Pupils also noted that pick up and drop off was much easier for parents as siblings were on the same site.



Negatives:

- Some pupils noted that not having the field was an issue for them as they has to hold sports days etc. on the MUGA which was too small. *(Playing field will be usable by Spring 2024)*
- One pupil noted that the transition was difficult in the early days as she felt as if she was losing memories (although she was happy to move).
- One pupil felt noted that she was uncomfortable with unisex cubicles in the toilet rooms. She didn't mind sharing a room but felt that cubicles within that room should be allocated to either boys or girls.
- Pupils noted that they preferred the toilets that could be accessed from the corridor outside of the classroom from the toilets that could be accessed from the classrooms due to the lockers also being situated next to the toilets (with no partition door) in the classrooms. This resulted in that area being very busy as the area was a shared area with the class next door.
- Lack of car parking for parents were discussed but pupils were aware that an additional car park was being built. *(Additional car parking currently being approved by planners)*

What could we do to improve:

- Ensure that pupil participate and are aware of plans and developments from the initial planning stage. One pupil noted that seeing floor plans of the building prior to occupation would have alleviated many of his worries about the size of the school, getting lost and not being in the same class/ corridor as his friends.
- Pupil input in regards to recreation, relaxation and comfort zones from an early stage would benefit the overall planning stage.
- Pupils form Abbey could meet regularly with pupils from future new builds to talk about their worries and how to overcome them/ share their experience.

Staff Response (quoted from 10 responses to online questionnaire)

Positives:

- It was great that the children had the opportunity to work alongside BAM staff to see what their new school would be like e.g. the children signed their names on the steel frame(s) of the structure.
- There was a smooth transition from all 3 sites.
- The move was hard for all, but was successful.
- Process was fine!
- The move went surprisingly smoothly. No negative impact in my class, other than excitement.
- Access to the yards through classroom doors is great.
- The light airy classes are pleasant to teach in and provide good natural light for the children to work. The classes appear sound proofed which helps with the reduction of noise from other classes.
- Hall/studio has made it possible to offer children more experiences and opportunities.



- Behavior has improved across the school.
- Overall, the new school is very good. The children have settled and appear to be enjoying the new school environment. Facilities are to a good standard. The design of the building is contemporary and smart and is mostly functional.
- Social spaces are pleasant and have fantastic views. They provide enough space for staff to gather without becoming claustrophobic.

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- The large open spaces in the corridors etc. are fantastic for out of the classroom learning.
 - A lot of social space for the children to have time to chill if needed.
 - Good storage within classrooms, with the teaching walls being an excellent resource.
 - Relationships between staff have improved. Conducive working environment. More opportunities to spend time together. Staff across the school sharing good practice. Communication between staff has improved e.g. during transition.
 - Being able to see the whole school together is a positive impact of working on one site. It is beneficial to speak to all staff and work together as a team.
 - Ability to share Forest School practice over the whole age range has been beneficial. Skills can be embedded with continuous access to sessions. Possibility of using older children to support learning of younger children within sessions to develop range of skills.

Negatives:

- Having workers on site during the move day was not helpful as staff were restricted in terms of what can be brought in and where could be accessed.
- The move was delayed so there was an impact on teaching and learning as the classes were packed up and the children and staff were excited to move. As a result of packing up the class there was an impact on accessing resources. Otherwise things worked fairly smoothly.
- Not enough communication with staff regarding the new school and what to expect.
- No time was given to actually prepare teaching spaces in the new school, instead it was assumed that staff would come in during their school holidays. (2 INSET days were set aside for preparing teaching spaces)
- It has been impossible to have PE and other sporting events on the school field due to the surface. It is unplayable and dangerous.
- There are not enough windows that open and during the summer months the classes can become unbearably hot. Air conditioning would have alleviated this problem.

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- Access to the outdoor classrooms is great, it's a shame that was not provided for every class.
 - A canopy which kept the rain from coming into the area would have been beneficial.
 - The outdoor space is not an improvement on the previous site. The lack of natural grass, wildlife areas and space does not allow the children to feel/experience the freedom of a natural environment they used to have. The ability to play sport safely is reduced and the variety of sporting activities we can offer is limited.
(grassed areas and field will be ready for use in 2024)
 - The school does not have enough storage.
 - Sinks in the Year 2 bathrooms are too low.
 - The hall is not big enough for lunch times. There should have been a separate dining hall. Due to hall lunch times, the hall is out of use for teaching and learning between 11:15am and 1:30pm.
 - Not enough break out spaces for learners and not enough meeting spaces for staff (meetings, PPA etc.).
 - Poor heating and cooling system - the 'breathing building' system is ineffective.
 - Beautiful classrooms but they are too small.
 - The storage room for the dinner tables is in completely the wrong place... It should have been in the hall and not in the studio. It means that any lessons in the studio have to be interrupted several times a day to move the tables back and forth. There is also no storage in the hall for PE equipment.

What could we do to improve:

- Continue to support Headteachers in managing staff expectations as this questionnaire shows that staff have different opinions in regards to all aspects of the build and the move.
- Further consideration needs to be given to ventilation and air conditioning systems in future builds.
- Ensure that outdoor spaces are designed to ensure use in all weather e.g. canopies, shelters etc.

- Consider studio/ hall spaces in new builds that are accessible all day and not restricted by dining times.



Headteacher and Bursar Response

Positives:

- Excellent communication between Headteacher and Bursar made the project run smoothly and resulted in the Headteacher not needing to be released in order to assist with project. The Headteacher and Bursar met before every team meeting to agree on questions/points to be raised. Headteacher and Bursar invested days of work in planning every stage and preparing for the next steps. This was key to the success of the project.
- The move went well. Headteacher and Bursar made a strict timetable for packing, crate moving, unpacking, number of staff on site etc.
- Essential that Headteacher/ Bursar attended all meetings, including meetings outside of school term dates.
- Many initial key decisions were made by Headteacher and Bursar and were not shared with all staff in order to make decisions in a timely manner and ensure continuity e.g. rooms needed, colour schemes, furniture etc. Staff were involved in decisions regarding how much storage was needed.
- Design team were very effective in working with the Headteacher to agree on colour schemes etc.
- Effective communication with NPT project manager and architect was a positive as the Headteacher felt that they listened to her and adapted the scheme as a result of these conversations.

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- Most of the old furniture was not taken to the new building resulting in less transfer time and packing/ unpacking.
 - Pickfords (removal company) were very efficient and made the move easier. The Headteacher noted that they 'did more than expected' and built up a good relationship with staff members.
 - INSET days before the pupils attended the new build was essential and it gave staff time to bond and to get to know the building.
 - Layout of school is effective. The office configuration is 'so much easier' and the pupils adapted in days.
 - 'Behavior has improved massively and pupils manage the building well'.
 - The large separate yards have improved behavior and having a forest school area and MUGA is 'great'. The addition of outdoor classrooms and outdoor teaching areas has also contributed significantly to the improvement in behavior.
 - Direct access to the outdoors from classrooms are effective and has resulted in the outdoor area being used much more frequently.
 - Hall is big enough to hold all pupils and has excellent lighting, sound systems etc. Partition in hall is essential and allows community use e.g. Babbling Babies
 - Lockers in areas between classrooms work well.
 - Middle floor for interventions has proved to be essential (just the right number of rooms) for pupils and community use e.g. family liaison officer.
 - Large, wide corridor is well used and encourages independence.
 - ICT teaching walls work well.
 - The childcare facility works well. They are a 'part of the school' and all places are full (more places are needed). This has enabled more effective transition and meetings prior to pupils starting in Nursery.
 - The shared facility with the EYAC is effective and runs smoothly.
 - Pupil voice was used throughout the project.
 - Bursar minuted all meetings. This was essential in order to communicate effectively throughout the project.
 - Having discussions and a list of IT equipment from Mike Morris before the meeting with contractors worked well.
 - Guiding/ training parents on the site for the first few weeks was essential i.e. staff on duty to direct parents during drop off/ pick up etc.

Negatives:

- Many decisions and meetings were held during holiday time where Head needed to be involved (it wasn't a negative for this project as it had the full commitment of the Headteacher, but could be for future projects).
- Small issues with furniture order (furniture company phoned the Headteacher directly on numerous occasions during holidays).
- Training on alarm systems, CCTV etc. wasn't good. Many didn't turn up on the agreed dates and turned up unplanned on the opening day for pupils.
- Privacy for girls in toilets is essential and could be improved due to the open plan nature of the locker and toilet room.
- An additional childcare room for babies would have worked well to fully support families.
- Storage is minimal. Staff could do with more but not too much (as 'they would only be filled up and not used').
- An additional community space/ hall would be beneficial as the main hall is used for a large part of the day for breakfast club, assemblies and food sittings (noted by new Headteacher) and cannot be used for PE etc.
- More cleaning stores needed.
- Customer care of contractor after completion is not acceptable and the BIM app is not effective.
- Car parks need to be completed before opening.



What could we do to improve:

- Ensure Headteacher/ Bursar 'buy-in' to the whole project from the start (as in this project).
- Re consider the model of a Headteacher being released. Having an effective Bursar throughout the project was just as effective as releasing a Head.

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- Schools should be encouraged to dispose of most of the old furniture.
 - ‘Soft landing’ approach for all alarm, CCTV, ICT, gas electricity equipment at least a week before opening would be beneficial.
 - Using the expertise of a Headteacher and Bursar that have been through the process would be very beneficial during future projects.
 - Early planning for Childcare provision (scope of provision) and community usage is needed to ensure maximum support for families and to make full use of the facilities outside of school hours. Early input from EY team is needed at planning stage.
 - Abbey Primary saved up over the 3 years to compensate for fixed equipment that had to be left behind e.g. swings, fixed ALN equipment. Headteacher states that it is essential that future projects follow the same model in order to be in a position to buy additional equipment that cannot be included in the move.

Summary

We would like to thank the pupils and staff of Abbey Primary for their participation in this review. This has been an invaluable opportunity to evaluate and assess the process and the performance of the building from the client’s perspective. Lessons learnt from this feedback will feed into future projects with the aim of continuous improvement.



