

Estyn's response on the proposal to close the Learning Support Centre at Cwmtawe Community School.

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

The proposal is by Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council and is to close the Learning Support Centre for pupils with specific literacy difficulties at Cwmtawe Community School.

It is Estyn's view that this proposal is likely to, at least, maintain the standard of education provision in the area.

Description and benefits

The council has presented a suitable rationale outlining the reasons for the proposal. As part of its wider work, the Council is currently reviewing the number and type of schools in the region to assess whether best use is made of resources and provisions. This evaluation of suitable provision will include assessing settings for those pupils with additional learning needs. The council states that as part of the Strategic School Improvement Programme (SSIP) it will re-organise provision for specialist support, skills, and expertise available within the County Borough.

In its assessment of current provision and demand for specialist provision for pupils with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), the proposer provides a detailed summary. As part of its own tracking, the council has indicated the greatest areas of need and demand on specialist provision in the next three years. At primary level this is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), in addition to Severe and Profound Multiple Learning Difficulties (SLD/PMLD). At secondary level this is ASD, Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) and Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD). In response to ASD need, the council has provided additional places over the past 5 years.

The council appropriately outlines its current approach and research in relation to meeting the needs of pupils with SpLD. It highlights that schools in Neath Port Talbot can successfully support pupils with an IDP in mainstream classes. There are currently ten pupils with SpLD across its schools who hold a Local Authority Maintained IDP. All are educated and supported within mainstream schools.

In 2020/2021, there were six pupils at the Learning Support Centre (LSC). Currently no statutory aged pupils attend the facility in the academic year 2024/ 2025. There are also no teachers or support staff currently employed within the centre.

The council appropriately concludes that it needs to adapt its current additional provision to provide sufficient support for areas identified as the greatest need. It also suggests that specialist support will be provided in mainstream schools including Welsh-medium schools, in line with the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales. This appears to be a fair and reasonable plan based on the declining numbers at the LSC. If approved, the proposal of closing the LSC provision for SpLD will take effect from September 2025.

Overall, the proposer identifies clearly and fairly the expected benefits and disadvantages of closing the LSC when compared with the status quo as well as how they will manage any risk. One of the main advantages is the improved use of public money as the funding will be repurposed to provide additional provision in areas where they have identified the greatest need. It provides acceptable reasons as to why they have discounted maintaining the status quo. For example, currently no pupils attend the provision. The council has completed a risk assessment and suitably highlighted the potential areas of risks in implementing the proposal.

The council has considered the impact of the proposal on transport arrangements. Under the council's transport policy, free transport is provided for primary school pupils who reside over two miles and secondary over three from their nearest appropriate school. The proposal indicates that all pupils with IDPs will receive targeted support within their catchment school, thus reducing the need for additional travel costs to alternative settings. This appears to be a fair assessment.

The council has suitably demonstrated the impact of current and future position of Cwmtawe Community School in terms of surplus places. Full-time pupil numbers have declined from 1228 in 2019/20 to 1115 in 2023/2024. Data also suggests that numbers will decrease further over the next five years. The proposer indicates that the closure of the LSC will not have a negative effect on the school's full time pupil capacity.

The proposal takes sufficient account of the impact of the proposals on Welsh medium provision within the local authority and the extent to which the proposal supports the targets in the local authority's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). The council has undertaken an impact assessment on the Welsh language and states that the proposals will result in Welsh-medium provision being equitable

to English-medium provision. For example, following implementation, specialist support for pupils with SpLD will be provided in Welsh-medium schools in line with individual pupil IDPs.

The council has appropriately considered the financial implications of the proposal. In 2023-2024, Cwmtawe Community School LSC received an additional £17,176 for one pupil. As the proposal seeks to close the LSC, the school's budget would be adjusted and funding repurposed.

The local authority has provided a Community Impact Assessment as part of this proposal.

Educational aspects of the proposal

The council appears to have considered the quality of outcomes, provision and leadership and management at the school. They have included brief highlights of the outcomes of their last Estyn inspection report in 2018, returning good and excellent judgements in all areas. While the section provides a useful insight, it does not include further up-to-date evaluations of the school's effectiveness. For example, the proposer has not included the local authority's view on the current quality of leadership and management of the school.

The council states that as there has been a significant decline in numbers attending the LSC, the impact on pupils with ALN and their parents will be limited. It provides a detailed summary of its support programme for children and young people with SpLD within mainstream schools. This includes the involvement of specialist staff, casework, and high-quality training. The proposer carefully stresses the need to build capacity and knowledge in the system in order to continue to effectively support pupils with SpLD.

The council has undertaken an impact equality assessment to consider the impact of the proposal on the protected characteristics. As a result of this assessment, it has concluded that the proposal is unlikely to have any impact on the protected characteristics.

The proposal will close an ALN provision in a mainstream school where the pupils admitted are in addition to the admission number for the school and where the provision is recognised by the Council as reserved for pupils with ALN. As such, this constitutes a regulated alteration requiring statutory publication of the proposal. As part of the proposal, the council appears to take due consideration of the factors set out in the 'School Organisation Code' (para. 1.14, page 16) in relation to proposals affecting special schools and specialist resource bases in mainstream schools.