

Estyn's response to the proposal by Neath Port Talbot to close the Learning Support Centre for pupils with Visual Impairment at Cefn Saeson Comprehensive 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.

Conclusion

The proposals are likely to maintain or improve the standard of education provision in the area.

Description and benefits

The local authority has given a clear rationale for the proposal. Essentially, the learning support centre (LSC) for pupils with visual impairment has two planned places and neither of these have been taken up since 2021-2022. As a result, there are no teaching or support staff allocated to the unit. There are 11 pupils with visual impairment in secondary education in Neath Port Talbot (NPT) but by choice these pupils attend their local schools with support from the visual impairment team rather than attending the LSC.

The consultation document sets out a clear description of the proposal to close the unit, the projected timetable for statutory procedures and the implementation of the proposals from September 2025. There are only two options available: to retain or close the LSC. The local authority explains fairly the benefits for pupils with visual impairment of attending their local schools and the financial saving from closing the unit which would be repurposed to support areas of greater need, notably provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Given that there are no pupils currently using the LSC, there are unlikely to be any adverse impacts of the proposal on pupils, parents or staff. What isn't clear within the consultation document is what will happen to the space the unit currently comprises within Cefn Saeson Comprehensive School. The LSC is additional to the capacity of the school and so its closure is likely to mean a slight increase in the school's overall capacity. The school is projected to have about 63 surplus spaces by 2029. However, since the unit has only two pupils allocated to it, the extra space is likely to have a very small impact on the school's overall capacity.

The local authority sets out clearly within the consultation document that its preferred method of supporting pupils with visual impairment is in their local schools using advice, guidance and professional learning provided by the visual impairment team. This support is in Welsh or English depending on the language choice of the pupils. As such, there is no detriment to the provision that is currently available for these pupils.

In 2023-2024, the LSC cost £33,928 and the plan is that future funding will be used to support areas of greater need within the Inclusion service. It isn't clear from the consultation document what the funding from September 2022 until April 2025 has been used for while there have been no pupils within the LSC. It also isn't clear what will happen to the funding for the period April 2025 – August 2025 before the unit closes in September 2025.

Educational aspects of the proposal

Pupils with visual impairment and their parents in NPT are choosing to attend their local schools with support from the visual impairment team rather than attending the LSC at Cefn Saeson. The consultation document suggests that they are making these choices primarily to maintain friendships and have better access to local activities and facilities. Since there are currently no pupils attending the LSC, nor any planned to attend in the 2024-2025 academic year, there can be no adverse impact on standards, well-being, teaching, care, support and guidance or leadership by closing the unit. There is also no primary unit for pupils with visual impairment and so no group of pupils expected to transfer into the LSC in the coming years.

The consultation document makes appropriate reference to the most recent inspection report for Cefn Saeson Comprehensive School. It is clear how pupils at the school will be consulted on the proposal to close the LSC. However, there is no plan to consult with pupils with visual impairment who are attending other schools, which might be a helpful addition to the programme of consultations.