

## **Estyn response to the proposal on the future of secondary education in the upper Afan Valley.**

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 and other additional information such as data from Welsh Government and the views of the Regional Consortia which deliver school improvement services to the schools within the proposal.

### **Introduction**

The proposal by Neath and Port Talbot County Council is to close Cymer Afan Comprehensive School on 31st August 2019 and to make arrangements for pupils to attend the new all-aged school at Margam in a new, purpose built facility.

### **Summary**

The proposal asserts reasonably that Cymer Afan Comprehensive School is a small school. It is one of only five established mainstream secondary schools in Wales with fewer than 300 pupils. It is Estyn's view that overall the proposal is likely to at least maintain the standards of education and provision in the area.

### **Description and benefits**

The proposer has given a clear rationale for the proposal's expected benefits in relation to offering a well-resourced environment which is able to accommodate pupils from the upper Afan Valley.

The proposer notes appropriately the advantages of the proposal, This includes directly addressing the issue of unfilled places at Cymer Afan Comprehensive School. With the physical capacity to accommodate 641 pupils the school has a significant surplus capacity of 65% (415 places). Even at the forecasted high in 2021 there will still be 58% surplus capacity at the school. This is reflected further in the high 'per pupil' funding at Cymer Afan Comprehensive school which is significantly higher than the average for the Council's schools, a cost that has increased annually. According to the proposal, since 2015/16 'per pupil' funding at Cymer Afan Comprehensive School has exceeded the average for the Council's schools by nearly 60%. The proposer forecasts that the 'per pupil' costs at the new school at Margam, will be at or below the local authority average. Based on the local authority average alone there will be annual revenue saving of £2,635 per pupil. With 226 pupils currently on roll, the proposal notes that this equates to a total annual saving of £595k.

The proposer also notes that the number of pupils attending the upper Afan Valley federation, particularly at secondary level, has not increased since its establishment and its not forecast to increase significantly going forward. The provider argues that this brings into question the sustainability of 11-16 age provision given that there are other secondary schools within reasonable travelling distance, which could accommodate the pupils of the upper Afan Valley.

The proposal indicates that the current site is categorised as overall building condition C which means poor. The proposer asserts that elements of the building are exhibiting major defects and/or not operating as intended. In addition, the proposal affirms that revenue costs associated with maintaining a small secondary school are significantly higher than for those schools with greater pupil numbers. According to the proposer, closing Cymer Afan Comprehensive School will remove £3m of backlog maintenance and accessibility liabilities.

The proposer has identified suitably the disadvantages of the current proposal, which focuses on the impact on pupils and parents due to the increase in journey time. Additionally, this would result in an annual increase in travel costs of £76k for the authority. The pupils affected would be the current year 7, 8 and 9 pupils as well as year 5 and 6 pupils.

The proposer has recognised further possible risks to include resistance to change leading to lack of pupil, parent and staff support as well as staff anxiety about job security and job losses. The proposer notes clearly that should a decision be taken to close the school, staff with contracts attached to Cymer Afan Comprehensive School will be declared redundant.

The proposer also identifies that the removal of Cymer Afan Comprehensive School from the federation would also change the current federated structure and operational arrangements. However, this proposal would not have a significant effect on the present federated governing body. The federation could continue following the closure of Cymer Afan Comprehensive School, however, a revised structure and purpose would be needed.

In addition, it is also noted in the proposal that the closure would impact on the wider community with community provision and activities that have been developed over an extended period at the school site being displaced under this proposal and relocated from the school to alternative locations.

The cost of the £30m new build investment at the new school at Margam is not dependent on this proposal.

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

The proposer makes appropriate reference to the outcomes of the schools' most recent Estyn inspection in April 2015. It identifies correctly that both the current performance and the prospects for improvement were judged to be adequate. Estyn monitored the school and in November 2016 the school was judged to have made good progress in respect of the key issues for action.

The proposer also notes that the Estyn report refers to leadership and management at Cymer Afan Comprehensive School being adequate and not having enough impact in ensuring good progress in indicators that include English and Maths. However, results at key stage 4 at Cymer Afan Comprehensive School have shown a steady improvement over three years in all key indicators with a significant rise in 2016. The school has experienced some instability in recent years with a number of changes in key leadership roles and recruitment of a permanent Headteacher has proven to be difficult.

The proposer also refers briefly to the schools' categorisation within the National School Categorisation System. In 2016/2017 the school was judged to be in the yellow support category which indicates it is an effective school with many aspects of performance which are self-improving.

The same arrangements will apply at the new school at Margam for pupils with special educational needs. Cymer Afan Comprehensive School currently teaches Welsh as a second language. This arrangement will continue under the proposal.