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1. Introduction

1.1 In 2001 the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) published a report called *The Future of Small Schools in Wales*. The report was well received and influential amongst local authorities. However, since the report was published the policy agenda has moved on significantly in Wales and it is increasingly the case that planning school places is a concern of all schools, not only small schools.

1.2 This changing policy agenda and shift from the issue of small schools to that of strategic planning of provision prompted the WLGA to form *The Planning School Places Task and Finish Group*. The Group was member driven and chaired by the WLGA Spokesperson for Lifelong Learning, Cllr John Davies. The remainder of the Group consisted of an elected member from each one of the political groups represented in the WLGA.

1.3 The Group also involved relevant local authority officers with a particular expertise in the area of planning school places, this included the chair of the Planning School Places Group that sits within the Association of Education Directors in Wales (ADEW) structure, and also a number of local authority directors for education. The secretariat for the Group was provided by WLGA officials.

1.4 The purpose of the project was to work with local authorities and wider stakeholders in the education community in Wales to gain an understanding of the current position regarding planning school places. The Group was aware that many local authorities were working on school places planning and capital investment in school buildings. The Group was interested in hearing how local authorities were tackling issues associated with the strategic planning school place provision, what the barriers are to effective planning and what issues need to be taken into consideration when planning school places. The Group was also interested to hear from all stakeholders within the education community, including the Assembly Government and the inspection agencies.

1.5 The aim of the Group was to produce a report based on the evidence provided by local authorities that highlights the current issues relating to planning school places, including the challenges, and to give an outline as to how local authorities have dealt with these challenges. The report is not meant to provide definitive guidance to local authorities on how to tackle the planning of school places but rather reflect current practice and to provide an overview of the issues that should be taken into account when planning.
2. Methodology

2.1 The Group decided that the most effective method of gaining a clear understanding of the overall position in Wales was to speak to those organisations that are most intimately involved in the planning of school places. This included local authorities but also a wider group of stakeholders were invited to become involved in the project. In order to achieve this, the Group decided that a combination of oral and written evidence would be sought.

Written Evidence

2.2 A questionnaire was devised with the approval of the Group and was sent to a wide range of organisations within the education family in Wales. The questionnaire was also sent to a number of wider stakeholder groups and all MPs and AMs in Wales. The questionnaire concentrated on a number of relevant issues, such as how respondents viewed the role of the community and the connection between capital investment and planning school places. There were also questions relating to the approaches that have already been taken in response to the issue of planning school places. There was an opportunity in the questionnaire to add any additional comments and also an invitation to stakeholders to give oral evidence to the Group.

2.3 The questionnaire was sent out to organisations by e-mail where possible and hard copy where this facility was not available. Follow-up e-mails and telephone calls were made to encourage organisations to respond.

Oral Evidence

2.4 The Group undertook oral evidence sessions on three occasions in South Wales, Mid-West Wales and North Wales. The purpose of these sessions was to receive more detailed evidence from key stakeholders. Evidence was received from 10 organisations, primarily local authorities but also other stakeholders.

2.5 Each session involved a presentation from the stakeholder followed by questions and discussions with the Group. All presenters were invited to stay for a more informal discussion following the presentations.

Further Sources of Evidence and Information

2.6 In addition to the evidence received via the written questionnaires and the presentations and discussion in the Group sessions, there was also significant expertise within Group which has contributed to the Report.

2.7 Informal discussions were also held with a number of Welsh Assembly Government officials to look at various aspects of the issues surrounding planning school places, particularly with reference to methodology of calculating surplus places in schools and regarding the links with capital investment.

2.8 Extensive desk research was also undertaken and further evidence was obtained from a number of publications and research papers concerning planning school places and its implications. A full
bibliography can be found at the end of this Report. However, there are some documents that are useful and are highlighted below.

2.9 The Audit Commission published *Trading Places* in 1996 and also produced *Trading Places: A Review of Progress on the Supply and Allocation of School Places in 2002*. These documents provide a useful and meaningful overview of the position in both England and Wales. The publications focus on the importance of planning places as well as examining issues such as accurate forecasting and overcrowding in schools.

2.10 The recently published EMIE at NFER document *local authorities’ perspective on school reorganisation* by Dr Shirley Goodwin provides a legislative and policy context for school reorganisation and also useful case studies. The document mainly focuses on the position in England and therefore does not take Wales specific policies into account.

2.11 The National Assembly for Wales Circular No: 23/02, *School Organisation Proposals*, issued in July 2002, sets out the key policies and principles for planning places in schools in Wales. This circular is useful, however, it should be remembered that the policy context has moved on significantly since 2002.

2.12 In addition to the Circular the Welsh Assembly Government policy document *The Learning Country: Vision into Action* provides an overview of Assembly Government policy and progress in lifelong learning and skills.
THE WELSH CONTEXT

3. The Education Policy Picture for Wales

3.1 Educational attainment in Wales has continued to improve since devolution in 1999. The initial figures for examination results in 2006 (covering all examinations not just young people) show that there was an overall increased pass rate in A level, up 0.1% with 96.9% achieving A to E grades and overall GCSE results were up 0.4% to 98.1% with A* to C grades up 1% to 62.3%. In addition to these results the Welsh Baccalaureate has proved to be very successful in 2006 with 76% of pupils that completed the Diploma being awarded the full Advanced Diploma, which is the equivalent to an A grade at A Level.

3.2 The backdrop for the continuing educational attainment in Wales is the dynamic policy scene set by the Assembly Government in partnership with local authorities. In recent years there have been advances in the use of technology in schools and changes in the policy dimension that are having a significant impact on planning school places. This section will outline the policy context as set by the Assembly Government and also the current demographic and financial position impacting on planning school places.

3.3 The methodology for measuring the capacity of schools in Wales has recently been published. The document outlines how to categorise space within a school and what contributes to the calculation of surplus places. Throughout the process of collating evidence a number of local authorities suggested that the methodology did not reflect the current policy context and the complexities of addressing surplus places in schools.

Falling Pupil Numbers

3.4 The latest figures from the Office of National Statistics show that in 2006 there were 1,944 schools in Wales and the number of pupils in Wales fell from 500,929 in 2005 to 494,534 in 2006. This fall in pupil numbers is a trend that has been seen across the country and is expected to continue. It is estimated that pupil numbers will have fallen by 46,000 by 2013.

3.5 Due to the fall in pupil numbers across Wales there are an increased number of surplus places in schools. In January 2004 there were 49,767 net empty school places in primary schools and 23,094 in secondary schools in Wales. This is an overall increase in surplus places of 16,049 from 2000.

3.6 An acceptable level of surplus places within schools has not been clearly defined by Government in Wales. However, the Wales Audit Office, Estyn and the Assembly Government work on the assumption that the total percentage of surplus places should not rise over 25%. Based on this definition of surplus places in schools, the Estyn Annual Report for 2005-2006 shows that overall there were 419 schools in Wales with 25% or more unfilled spaces, 381 in the primary sector and 38 in the secondary sector. These figures represent 23.3% of schools in Wales.
Policy Context

3.7 There are a number of policy initiatives in Wales which have ensured that education provision in Wales is distinct from that in England. These policies have a significant impact on planning school places, organisation of school provision within local authorities and the management of education assets.

3.8 All Welsh Assembly Government policies directed at children and young people are based on a set of principles; the seven core aims for children and young people. These aims are premised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The seven core aims state that all children and young people in Wales:

- have a flying start in life and the best possible basis for their future growth and development;
- have access to a comprehensive range of education, training and learning opportunities, including acquisition of essential personal and social skills;
- enjoy the best possible physical and mental, social and emotional health, including freedom from abuse, victimisation and exploitation;
- have access to play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities;
- are listened to, treated with respect, and are able to have their race and cultural identity recognised;
- have a safe home and a community that supports physical and emotional wellbeing;
- are not disadvantaged by any type of poverty.

3.9 These principles underpin all Assembly Government education policy and have resulted in a number of key initiatives being issued by the Assembly all of which must be taken into account by local authorities when planning school provision. A number of policies are particularly relevant when considering the issue of planning school places, these are highlighted in the following sections.

The Foundation Phase

3.10 The foundation phase consists of curriculum and assessment arrangements for 3 - 7 year olds, and so is directly related to the activities of schools in the lower age range. The aim of the foundation phase is to provide a rounded approach to the education of young children with a combination of child initiated and adult directed learning.

3.11 There is an increased child to staff ratio associated with the foundation phase, 1 adult to 8 children, aimed at improving increased input by qualified staff. The change in curriculum entails a need for increased space and access to outdoor play areas.

3.12 The initiative is being phased in following implementation in a number of pilot areas. In September 2004 the first phase of the pilot commenced in 41 settings across all 22 local authorities. The all Wales roll-out of the foundation phase begins in 2008 to be completed by 2010/11.
14 - 19 Learning Pathways

3.13 The Assembly Government is committed to ensuring that 95% of young people by the age of 25 will be ready for high skilled employment or higher education by 2015. The development of the 14 - 19 Learning Pathways is key to the Assembly achieving this commitment.

3.14 The initiative essentially aims to provide all young people with the opportunity to develop in an academic or vocational field to fulfil their full potential. Schools, the further education sector and businesses have been asked to work together to provide a variety of opportunities for young people to access the type of education and training that best suits them. Each young person is entitled to a learning coach to help them develop their learning pathway. In order to achieve this local authorities have developed Learning Networks which bring together key stakeholders to take the program forward and to provide a strategic lead.

Community Focused Schools

3.15 The Assembly Government issued guidance in 2003 to schools and local authorities to increase the community use of schools in Wales. Schools are often the centre of a community but their facilities are sometimes unused in the evenings, on weekends and in the holidays.

3.16 The initiative encourages schools and local authorities to view their schools as a community resource. In practice this means not only using schools for after schools clubs for children and young people, but also a possible base for additional services such as health, social services, libraries and adult education activities.

3.17 Work undertaken by the WLGA and the Assembly Government under the Narrowing the Gap project showed that a key factor in a successful school is a close relationship with the wider community which the community focus school initiative aims to achieve. Involvement with the community improves the achievement and motivation of a school and benefits the pupils in that school.

3.18 In 2005 additional funding was made available for local authorities to enable a renewed focus on the community use of schools. In order to achieve this local authorities are working together to develop a more regional approach to the community use of schools.

Welsh Assembly Government Circular 23/02 School Organisation

3.19 Although written prior to the seven core aims for children this Welsh Assembly Government Circular sets the context for organisation of school provision and planning school places. The circular outlines the key considerations when organising schools as:

- the effect on the standard of education to be provided by the area
- the cost effectiveness of the proposals and whether adequate financial resources are available to implement them
- the effect on accessibility to schools, particularly in rural areas and on journey times to schools
- the views of those most directly affected, such as parents and other...
schools or providers in the area
the needs for the particular type of provision that is proposed, for example the level of parental demand for Welsh medium education
any effect on the proportion of places in faith schools in the area
the need to comply with duties under the Sex Discrimination act 1975
the extent to which proposals would foster collaborative arrangements between providers for student aged over 16

3.20 It is important to note that the first consideration in this list is the impact on educational standards in the community.

Capital Investment in School Buildings

3.21 In 2002, the Assembly Government gave a commitment to have all schools in Wales fit for purpose by 2010. This commitment was given in response to the acknowledgement that some school buildings in Wales are not of a sufficient standard to deliver the increased demands of the curriculum and policy initiatives in the 21st century. Inspection by Estyn has shown that up to a third of primary and a fifth of secondary schools have “shortcomings” in their accommodation. Continuing commitment to improvement can be seen in The Learning Country: Vision into Action, however, the Assembly Government states in the 2006 document that schools should be “fit for purpose on the basis of target dates agreed with individual local authorities”. This is in response to the realisation that the vast majority of local authorities in Wales were not able to meet the 2010 target.

3.22 To enable local authorities to achieve this commitment the Assembly Government made in excess of £500 million available to local authorities through the Schools Buildings Improvement Grant (SBIG). In addition, funding local authorities were also in a position to use part of the their general capital allocation. Across the lifespan of SPIG there is an allocation of £9 million per local authority for major capital investment with the remainder of the money each year being allocated to authorities on a formula basis.

3.23 As part of the process of improving school buildings each local authority has been asked by the Assembly Government to draw up an Asset Management Plan. The plans should outline the current state of school buildings within an authority area and develop a costed plan outlining, in detail, improvements to existing schools and any plans for new build. The development of the Asset Management Plans is closely related to the issue of planning school places. In order to have a clear view of the type and amount of investment needed in school buildings it is first essential to know where school places are needed and what type of provision is required.

3.24 The WLGA recently commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers to carry out a piece of research to assess of the current position of local authorities regarding capital investment across a number of service areas including education. The report concluded that an estimated £1.6 billion is needed to make schools in Wales fit for purpose. This funding gap was calculated using the SPIG money, capital allocations by local authorities and other methods of raising capital, such as prudential...
borrowing, capital receipts and section 106 allocations.

3.25 In response to the identified funding gap, Value Wales and the Assembly Government are working to identify groups of local authorities in Wales to work together to address issues concerning capital investment in school buildings. Working in collaboration, local authorities can not only share best practice but collaborate on an operational level in areas such as procurement, project management and, where appropriate, work with private sector contractors. This work is in the development stage, however, it is hoped that this will provide opportunities to produce significant efficiency savings.
4. Educational and Financial Outcomes

Key Drivers for Change

4.1 All local authorities in Wales are currently looking at how to plan school places more effectively. From the evidence that was collated by the Group and as the Welsh policy context above highlights, there are a number of clear policy drivers in this process. The numbers of pupils in Wales are falling overall. In addition, there is also a demographic shift away from some traditional centres of population. The combined effect of this is that there are schools in some areas that have a significant percentage of surplus places.

4.2 However, planning school places is a more complex issue that merely addressing falling pupil numbers and filling surplus places in schools. Conwy County Borough Council highlighted that the supply of school places is not just about surplus places, it is more important that the places offered are of good quality. This view was echoed by other stakeholders, the evidence from the Cardiff County Council stated that the issue is “matching local schools for local people and matching local demand with local places, which is different to just looking at the numbers of pupils in the school.”

4.3 A further key policy driver for planning school places is the UK Government’s policy of parental choice which means that parents are able to send their children to a school other than their local school. Flintshire County Council have undertaken a survey which shows that a significant percentage of children and young people do not attend their local school and this pattern is reflected in other local authorities. Ceredigion County Council gave evidence which suggested that three schools in the county are closing because parents have moved their children to other schools.

4.4 It has already been outlined that the current state of school buildings in Wales is further incentive for local authorities to examine the configuration of schools in their area and whether the current provision best serves the community. Many schools in Wales were built over a hundred years ago to meet the educational needs of that century. Also, there is an issue of the maintenance of the current building stock, as the stock ages the cost of keeping the building safe and appropriate for use is increasing. In addition, the recent developments in policy and curriculum have increased the demands on the school building to undertake a wider variety of functions, schools that were built in the 19th and 20th centuries in some cases, are not equipped to handle these diverse functions. Also due to falling pupil numbers and parental choice many schools are simply not in the right place. Responding to these challenges requires large amounts of capital funding some of which can be generated through opportunities of reconfiguration of schools.
Principles for Change

4.5 The evidence sessions and the written responses highlighted the key policy drivers for change and they also outlined underlying principles for change that seemed to be consistent across the authorities consulted.

4.6 The Assembly Government in its key policy document *The Learning Country: Vision into Action*, states that they are still “committed to a system of community comprehensive schooling delivered through English, Welsh, bilingually or in a faith setting.” During the gathering of evidence commitment to the principle of comprehensive education consistently arose as an underpinning principle from local authorities.

4.7 The desired outcome of any change process is improved educational standards which are closely linked to maintaining the commitment to comprehensive education in Wales. Evidence from the Wales Audit Office stated that “raising standards should be the ultimate aim of any re-organisation of schools”, this principle was reflected in all evidence sessions.

4.8 The commitment of stakeholders to raising educational standards was clear and the attainment of pupils in Wales continues to improve year on year. However, the capacity of some authorities to provide the broad range of policy initiatives is currently stretched to the limit. This is particularly evident in rural authorities that traditionally have a large number of small schools. 30% of schools in Wales have less than 90 pupils (less than 90 pupils is defined as being a small school). However some authorities have significantly higher proportions than this. In Ceredigion for example, 77% of schools are categorised as small, with 54% have fewer than 40 pupils and 26% have fewer than 20 pupils. This is a position that can also be seen in other rural authorities such as Gwynedd, with an average school population of 96. Although the Estyn report *Small Primary Schools in Wales* shows that there is little difference between the standards achieved or the quality of education in small schools, it is still a challenge for authorities to provide the spectrum of initiatives that are currently being rolled out by the Assembly. This is particularly the case with the Foundation Phase and the 14-19 Learning Pathways. These policies are in their initial stages and it is not clear how much more space is needed to effectively deliver them. However, these policies are key to continuing to provide a comprehensive education for all pupils regardless of the size of school they are attending.

4.9 Improving the educational outcomes of children and young people is the key principle in planning school places and school improvement is the main role of education departments in local authorities. However, it must be acknowledged that financial outcomes are also an important consideration when planning school places. It was made clear when collecting evidence that planning school places should not be led by the aim to make financial savings but should concentrate on making more efficient use of existing resources. However, it should also be remembered that where there is a fall in pupil numbers there will also be a fall in funding for schools.
4.10 The Audit Commission report *Trading Places* published in 1997 showed that at that time small schools did cost more to run. However, evidence from stakeholders stated that the potential positive aspects of the education provided by schools should be weighed against the costs of the school. Evidence provided by Gwynedd Council stated that there was significant variation in the level of financial resources allocation to various schools “the main difference can be attributed to the fact that the cost of teaching a pupil in a small school is substantially greater than in a larger school”. Research by the Gwynedd Council working group on planning places showed that as the number of pupils in a school falls below 100 the cost per pupil starts to increase, with a significant increase in costs when numbers fall below 30 pupils. According to the Assembly Government Section 52 budget analysis for 2005 the highest cost per pupil in Wales was over £15,000, with the lowest cost being just under £2,000 per pupil. In 2004, Gwynedd Council had 21 schools that had 33 pupils or less. There are also a number of other Welsh local authorities that have a significant number of schools that have schools with less than 90 pupils.

4.11 The Estyn document *Transforming Schools: a discussion paper*, written in 2007 supports the Wales Audit Office conclusions by stating that there “is no direct link between how well pupils do and the size of the school they attend.” It goes on to say however, that “the responsibilities and workload demands on teachers in very small schools are considerable and the financial resourcing of these schools is substantial and demanding on limited budgets.” These are considerations that local authorities need to take into account in the context of providing education for all children and young people across the local authority area.

4.12 A Wales Audit Office review of school funding looked at the question of the variation of per pupil spend between local authorities and concluded that “the variation in Individual Schools Budget (ISB) per pupil between councils and within each council are not unreasonable”. The report goes on to show that the average difference between councils ISB in primary schools for 2005/2006 was £918 and for secondary schools was £824, although, as has been seen above the variation can be much wider. The report states that comparisons between the average levels of ISB can be unreliable as they do not take into account the differing approaches to the delegation of funding and that can mask the extent to which schools of different sizes are funded. It is also highlighted that the average level of ISB is heavily influenced by the proportion of small schools within the individual authority and concurring with the findings in Gwynedd, that there is a high correlation between the numbers on the roll in a primary school and the ISB per pupil. However, the report states “the extent to which small schools are subsidised by larger schools is lower that might be expected. Even though about 30% of primary schools have fewer than 90 pupils, only 9% of school pupils attend these schools and they consume only about 11.5% of the total ISB.”
4.13 Further financial considerations, particularly for authorities with a large number of small schools concern workforce issues. In Gwynedd Council, 1 in 4 teachers are heads, due to the proportion of small schools. This is not only a financial issue, there are also educational and management considerations. Having a small number of teachers in a school has implications on the amount of non-contact time that is available for heads and deputy heads and fulfilling performance management and self evaluation commitments becomes difficult. This can lead to a lack of opportunities for teachers in the areas of professional development and career progression. In some local authorities this situation has lead to retention and recruitment problems, especially into headship positions. There are also workload pressures on teachers that have to take on lead responsibilities for a number of subjects and a wide range of responsibilities for curriculum planning.

4.14 The need to improve school buildings and reach the Assembly Government’s fit for purpose target has also provided a significant financial incentive for local authorities to more effectively plan school places. The PricewaterhouseCoopers report that was commissioned by the WLGA showed that there is a potential funding gap of £1.6 billion for getting schools fit for purpose. Some schools not only have surplus places and are located inappropriately within the community but are also costly to maintain. Effective planning of school places can provide a clear vision what the school structure within an authority area needs to look like to deliver 21st century education.

4.15 A problem that was highlighted many times when gathering evidence for this report is that local authorities have not been given a clear steer by the Assembly Government as to what fit for purpose means. The Learning Country; Vision into Action states that schools should be “fit for purpose” and have regard for (BRE) Environmental Assessment Method (BRE) Environmental Assessment Method standards and incorporate sprinklers when using Assembly Government funding. This however does not provide direction for local authorities when considering the development of a comprehensive Asset Management Plan for their schools. Fit for purpose could mean ensuring that a school is warm, dry and safe or it could mean building a school for the future equipped to deliver 21st century education in a way that is inspiring to children and young people today and into the future.

4.16 What was clear from the evidence collated by the Group was that all local authorities spoken to, and those providing written evidence, were consistent in making the link between asset management planning and planning school places. One authority representative stated that their approach to planning school places was to make it a school buildings improvement issue rather than a surplus places issue. This was also a theme that was highlighted by both the Wales Audit Office and Estyn in their evidence.

4.17 In summary, the principles that are underpinning the planning of school places in Wales are the improvement of educational outcomes for children and young people, and this inevitably includes some consideration of the financial outcomes for both schools
and local authorities. The process of planning places has been driven mainly by educational need, financial efficiency, as highlighted in the Assembly Government circular 23/02, *School Organisation*, and by a range of secondary factors, namely; falling pupil numbers, the policy of parental choice has meant that children no longer automatically attend their local school and the current state of the school building stock in Wales. This combination of factors has meant that for many local authorities the status quo is no longer an option.

**Key Messages**

4a Many local authorities in Wales are looking at policies that provide local school places for local pupils

4b The physical state and location of a school is a significant consideration when local authorities are looking to plan school places. This creates the need for a strong link between planning school places and the development and implementation of local authority asset management plans

4c A key principle for change within local authorities is to improve educational standards

4d Implementation of Assembly Government policies impact on the use of space within a school

4e Evidence from local authorities suggests that smaller school are more expensive to run, however, the Wales Audit Office report shows that 9% of pupils in Wales attend schools of under 90 pupils and they use 11.5% of the total individual pupil spend (IBS)
5. The Political Context

5.1 The drivers and principles for change as outlined above have combined to create the situation in Wales where all local authorities are looking at how to effectively plan school places. The national strategic direction for any change comes from the Assembly Government, however, it is local authorities who have to develop and implement plans for schools in line with their statutory responsibility for the education of children and young people in their local area.

5.2 Local councils are the democratically appointed bodies whose responsibility it is to ensure the well-being of their communities. As an elected body they are not only accountable to their communities but also play a key community leadership role. It is because of this position that elected local authority members must have a key role in the effective planning of school places.

5.3 Every local authority spoken to and a number of the key stakeholders consulted acknowledged that political support for local plans was essential for the success of any process addressing school places. The evidence received from Pembrokeshire County Council outlined that “political commitment to the principles of any policy is crucial”.

5.4 A successful model to ensure political support is impossible to outline because the political situation in each local authority is different. However a number of local authorities outlined strategies that were used to ensure that the process successfully involved local authority members.

5.5 In developing plans it is essential that the elected body of the authority demonstrate strategic leadership, which is required to cultivate an agenda of radical change. It is always beneficial to encourage member participation at the earliest stage of an agenda to change and modernise. Monmouthshire County Council for example, involved local authority members at the beginning of this process, this was also an approach taken by other authorities including Gwynedd. In Monmouthshire, in addition to the working group which involved local authority officers there was also a Cabinet Member Working Group which met regularly to discuss both the development and implementation of the plans to improve schools in the county and deal with surplus pupil places.

5.6 Political support is reliant on a clear, evidence based presentation of the facts of the local area. According to one local authority spoken to when local members were shown the fall in pupil numbers in schools and the effect that this was having on the quality of education received, they were persuaded to support the principles for change.

5.7 Representing the views and needs of their local constituents is crucial to the role of a local authority member. Thus in looking at the process of planning school places, liaison with the local community is central to their role. There have been a number of cases in Wales where there has been significant opposition to school closures and this is not confined to rural small schools but has also been seen in urban areas of Wales. Although planning school places need not necessarily involve
school closures, many plans to address surplus places have involved some school closures or amalgamations. This is an emotive issue for communities and the involvement of the local authority member can be crucial in gaining the trust and support of local communities.

5.8 This community liaison role for local members will increase further with the implementation of the Children Act 2004. Under section 26 of the Act each local authority has to appoint a lead local authority director for children’s services and also a lead local authority member. The guidance on the implementation of the Act published by the Assembly Government gives a brief outline of the role of the local authority member and a key element of this role is to represent the needs of the community and to ensure that local communities, particularly children, young people and their families and carers are consulted when policy decisions are made. As part of this process of implementing the Act local authority plans will be rationalised into a Single Education Plan (2006) and eventually a Children and Young Peoples Plan (2008). Thus the lead member will be responsible for ensuring that communities are fully involved in the processes of planning services for children and young people, this will inevitably include further involvement in school organisation.

5.9 The support of local members is closely linked with support from the local community; without the community support the members may be reluctant to support proposals and support of the local authority members is essential if the local communities are going to support proposals. As already outlined, it is essential that members are fully involved from the outset of the process.

5.10 In some authorities a staggered approach has been successful. This means initial political agreement for the principles of change, so the policy drivers and the educational outcomes need to be presented and agreed. How these outcomes are to be achieved will be the next stage of agreement, and the local authorities that have been successful have demonstrated flexibility at this stage. This stage necessarily involves consultation with other stakeholders including parents, teachers and the wider community.

5.11 Involvement of local authority members is essential for effective planning of school places, the Group also heard evidence to suggest that political support from local Assembly Members, Members of Parliament and Welsh Assembly Government Ministers is also important. One local authority gave evidence to the Group and stated that local AMs were leading the opposition to school closures. In order to address this issue the local authority shared documents and presented the issues to the AMs and emphasised that the issue was about school improvement and standards rather than school closures and financial gains.

5.12 Evidence presented to the Group suggested that some local authorities felt that there was conflicting policies coming from the Assembly Government. The School Organisation circular issued in 2002 provides guidance to authorities regarding planning for the provision of school places, however, policies issued since then mean that there is an additional requirement for space in schools, such as implementing the Foundation Phase. There needs to be
a more joined up approach from the Assembly Government and greater co-ordination between policy areas and an understanding of their impact on planning places.

**Key Messages**

5a Political commitment to managing school places and implementing any change is essential at both a local and national level.

5b There needs to be strategic involvement of local authority members at an early stage of the planning process for any school changes.

5c Local authority members are a key link to the local community.

5d A national understanding of the pressures on local authorities is essential to support school organisation planning.
6. Planning and process

6.1 Stakeholders that addressed the Group outlined the importance of being clear regarding processes and setting out principles of any change before moving forward with plans. This section looks at the planning and process aspect of dealing with school places.

6.2 Oral evidence suggested that the following needs to be undertaken before beginning the process of implementation of plans.

- Collect a data background
- Projecting pupil numbers (using robust data such as NHS data)
- Look at where pupils live
- Assess parental choice
- Assess current school capacity

Develop an Asset Management Plan looking at the following:

- Condition
- Sufficiency
- Suitability
- Financial Planning
- Asses all costs involved
- Look at bridging the funding gap

6.3 Evidence received by the Group showed a variety of methods to tackle planning places, however, the above model succinctly shows the process that needs to be covered before beginning to implement a plan and the removal of surplus places.

6.4 Accurate assessment of the capacity in school is essential to the process. This should be done using the Assembly Government’s capacity methodology which has undergone recent changes. However, even with these changes some confusion was expressed over what is acceptable use of space within schools, which can have an impact on the number of surplus places in a school. The community use and other alternative use of space in schools is a useful method to remove surplus places, which also provides an additional school and community resource and additional capacity to plan Children Services.

6.5 In addition to the assessment of the numbers of surplus places, a range of statistical evidence is required to draw up meaningful plans. Examples of information that could be collated include the size of schools within the local authority, information relating to birth rates and predicted birth rates, which is essential for making accurate predictions for future provision. Other information that could prove useful would be planning information relating to housing developments and other potential population information, such as immigration issues (this information is obviously very hard to accurately predict).
Options for Dealing with Surplus Places

6.6 On an all-Wales basis there are an increasing number of surplus school places, although this is not uniform across the country. In fact, there are some areas that do not have a significant problem with surplus places, although these authorities may still have to deal with the issue of poor building stock and the predicted fall in pupil numbers. Individual circumstances in local authorities mean that there is no one solution to reducing the number of surplus places, or to upgrading the building stock. A variety of models have emerged that reflect local circumstance and discretion of local authorities to deal with the problem as best fits their area.

6.7 Dealing with surplus places in schools and poor school buildings can also lead to the proposal of school closures or amalgamations. Some local authorities spoken to had looked at the configuration of schools within the whole local authority area, assessed the movement of pupils within the area, assessed the state of school building stock and used accurate pupil number predictions to propose school mergers, closures and upgrades. A solution in some areas of Wales is the creation of an area school; this will result in the amalgamation of a number of schools within an area and establishing a new school on one site. Effective planning of school provision can release capital money to be reinvested, for example Carmarthenshire County Council utilised capital funding to build Ysgol Y Bedol. The evidence from Pembrokeshire County Council, showed that the County has been engaged in this process since 1996. To date over forty school sites have benefited either by way of new schools or extensive ‘as new’ refurbishment. Within the last ten years nearly £100 million has been spent in making the County’s schools fit for purpose. Pembrokeshire have seized this financial opportunity by effective use of capital grants such as SBIG, along with an efficient Asset Management Programme. This approach has resulted in school changes being seen by communities as a positive action.

6.8 It seems inevitable in many local authorities that school closures will occur and managing this process is a key element of planning school places. School closures can cause opposition from politicians (as seen in the section on the Political Scene) and it has been seen to cause opposition and tensions within communities across Wales. Thus, the Assembly Government circular, School Organisation Proposals, makes it clear that there are a wide range of issues that need to be considered when proposing schools closures that take the needs of the community into account in addition to educational and financial outcomes. For example, the impact on the community and the distance that local children would have to travel if their school closed.

6.9 There is a statutory process that has to be followed when reorganising school provision within a local authority area. There are a number of phases that must be followed; informal discussions, pre-notice consultation, publication of statutory notice, formal consultation, decision and implementation. A significant element of this statutory process is focused on consultation with
stakeholders, including the local communities. The first two stages can take up to 12 months to be effectively undertaken. Gwynedd County Council has recently been undertaking early consultation with communities across the county in a series of meetings with local residents. These meetings were held in the evenings and provided communities with the opportunity to express their views on current school provision and to discuss proposals for future provision.

6.10 Following the initial consultation phase if authorities choose to make changes to school provision a notice must be published and a formal 8 week consultation process allowed. If there are objections during this period then the decision on school closures is taken to the relevant Assembly Government Minister. In recent years there has been a change in legislation so that the Minister must decide even if there is only a single objection. Many local authorities would like to see a return to the previous legislation which stated that there needed to be ten appeals before the decision was taken out of the hands of the local authority. In addition, local authorities would like to see only objections from local community members counting toward those ten objections. When the proposals have been decided the local authority then has a legal duty to implement the proposals.

6.11 Although there is no definitive guidance on how to consult with local communities when considering school closures, local authorities that gave evidence to the Group highlighted a number of successful strategies to ensure that communities felt part of the process.

For example, Carmarthenshire County Council made close links with schools and the community a key element of their wide-ranging reorganisation plans. A body of evidence was collected to support the local authority’s plans but there was also a degree of compromise where appropriate on achieving the aims of the plan. Working closely with communities also meant bringing parents from different areas together to demonstrate the educational benefits of the proposed changes.

6.12 In addition to working with the local communities, it is also essential that schools and teachers are fully involved in the process. Gwynedd Council set up a working group of members to respond to the issue of planning places and at the first meeting it was unanimously decided that in order to be open and transparent in the process that head teacher representatives should have membership of the working group. It is also essential to work closely with governing bodies through the process.

6.13 Regardless of whether there are planned school closures in Wales each local authority must incorporate school organisation in to their planning processes and consult on that plan and review it annually. This plan must include an assessment of the perceived demand for school places over the following five years. It has already been seen that the Assembly guidance on school organisation outlines the importance of working with local communities when looking at school reorganisation.
Managing School Places

6.14 Local authorities with a large proportion of smaller schools are keen to maintain beneficial aspects of village and small community schools whilst minimising negative educational and financial issues. Positive aspects of small schools were highlighted when evidence was received from a number of local authorities. Benefits that were cited included, teachers having a close relationship with pupils and their families, small class sizes and younger pupils being supported by older pupils. One method of achieving this is federating schools or creating clusters of schools. This conclusion is supported in the Estyn publication Transforming Schools: a discussion paper which encourages small schools to work in collaboration to maintain the ethos of the school and community but also offer increased educational opportunities. Although different in practice much of the principle behind federation and clusters are similar. They both aim to link schools within an area to share some services and curriculum responsibilities.

6.15 Federation is the more formal of the options. Under the Education Act 2002 (England and Wales) federation can involve having a shared governing body between up to five schools in both the primary and secondary sectors. Under federation schools generally retain separate sites. Dependent on how many schools are federated, and the degree of federation, some financial savings and education benefits are evident. Financial savings can be made in backroom services and if fully federated, savings can be made on having only one head teacher across a number of sites, although there can be increased travel and additional allowances costs. There are also potential benefits for progression of management staff and application of aspects of the curriculum that can be shared over more staff. Communication between sites can also be improved with increased use of IT.

6.16 Federation however, does not necessarily address the issue of surplus places in schools or indeed financial revenue pressures. Federation of schools also has implications for capital investment plans. Maintaining the same number of schools could mean continuing with the costs of upkeep and upgrade of the existing school building stock. Local authorities need to make an assessment on the potential benefits of federating schools and this will largely depend on the local circumstances within that area. Some authorities have found the model of federation to be financially unviable especially in sparsely populated areas.

6.17 Clustering of schools is a more informal arrangement and typically involve schools within an area working together on certain aspects of education delivery. Although this can have benefits educationally there is little financial savings and this method does not address any problem with surplus places within a local authority.

6.18 There are also other methods for removing surplus places that can be considered. Alternative uses for classroom space in schools can go beyond the traditional community use of schools, although this can impact on surplus places by using
space for community or youth facilities for example. Conwy County Borough Council has converted space in one of its schools into an integrated centre with the use of Assembly Government funding. The teacher’s workload agreement also requires work room for teachers which can also remove surplus places from schools and put the space to good use.

**Key Messages**

6a A clear and robust planning process is essential for looking at school organisation and asset management plans

6b Any plan needs to be appropriate to local conditions, there is no single method for planning school places

6c When dealing with school closures open and transparent communication with the schools, staff and local communities is essential
7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Tackling surplus places is one of the great challenges faced by local government at the present time in its commitment to deliver better outcomes for children, young people and learners of all ages. Throughout Wales, local authorities are being challenged to address their falling pupil numbers and the consequent increase in surplus places. This is not an easy task.

7.2 It is part of the local authority’s responsibility for planning school provision and providing the best education service for its area given the prevailing circumstances and resources. Such planning must be part of a national strategy – as set out in *The Learning Country: Vision into Action* – and must include a vision of the kind of school buildings that are needed to deliver education and lifelong learning in the 21st century. It needs to ensure enough high quality places in or as close to the most appropriate location as possible. Such planning is linked inextricably therefore with local authorities’ asset management processes and programmes for the improvement of school buildings and facilities. Asset management planning and, hence, the planning of school places should be fluid processes, in which the optimum number of places required is a continuously moving target. This planning process needs to be informed by robust data, the best educational practice and views from both elected representatives, the local community itself and other stakeholders. In addition it needs to be driven by the local delivery of a national strategy as part of a broader vision of the future.

7.3 As a consequence, the current process of planning of school places is taking place in a very dynamic policy setting. This presents local authorities, schools and other stakeholders involved in the process with considerable challenges. As the Assembly Government seeks to fulfil the commitments enshrined in *The Learning Country: Vision into Action*, a greater shared understanding is needed, between local and central government, of the consequences and implications of these policy initiatives. Further clarity is needed from Assembly Government on the impact on the calculation of school capacities of initiatives such as the Foundation Phase, Primary and Secondary Transition, Community Focused Schools, 14-19 Learning Pathways, the merger of ELWa into the Assembly Government and the teacher’s workload agreement. As part of this process, local authorities and schools should be authorised to designate some rooms and spaces in schools, whether used for alternative community purposes or otherwise, as being for non-teaching purposes and remove them from the calculation.

7.4 Local government must embrace the collaborative agenda in seeking to plan school places and as the regional approach to service delivery grows so must cooperation between neighbouring authorities.

7.5 Consultation with communities should initially be about the vision for the future of school provision for the area in question and then about how best to realise the vision, by offering affordable, effective and high quality provision without causing unnecessary disruption to current learners. Agreement about
the vision and the underpinning principles will facilitate the subsequent development and presentation of specific proposals for change. Local authorities should provide alternative options at this stage wherever possible and seek views on these before formally consulting on a particular proposal.

7.6 Local authorities need to be in a position financially to put into place proposals which have gone through these processes successfully and the funding issues should be subject of further discussion between Assembly Government and each local authority, in addition to the continuing dialogue between the WLGA and Assembly Government on such matters.

## Recommendations

1. Work needs to be undertaken examining increased opportunities for the federation of schools and clustering, including examining current legislative barriers

2. The link between capital investment in school buildings and planning school places needs to be highlighted at both local and national level

3. The planning processes for the school places and capital investment need to be closely aligned, locally and nationally

4. There should be an expansion of collaborative working between local authorities in relation to capital investment in school buildings

5. Local authorities should look to share good practice regarding the process for developing policies to manage school places

6. There needs to be greater clarity from the Welsh Assembly Government, Estyn and the Wales Audit Office regarding what constitutes an acceptable threshold for surplus places in schools

7. Political commitment at all levels should be the cornerstone for all strategic planning for school places

8. The central theme when planning school places should be improved educational outcomes

9. Local solutions should be identified dependent on local circumstance
Bibliography

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Planning School Places Task and Finish Group: MEMBERSHIP

- Chair Cllr John Davies - Pembrokeshire (Independent)
- Cllr Dai Rees Jones - Gwynedd (Plaid Cymru)
- Cllr Peter Foley - Bridgend (Liberal Democratic)
- Cllr Anthony Hampton - Vale of Glamorgan (Conservative)
- Cllr Brian Mawby - Torfaen (Labour)
- Gerson Davies - Director for Education Pembrokeshire
- Iwan Trefor Jones - Corporate Director Gwynedd
- John Howells - Chair ADEW sub-group on Planning School Places

Planning School Places Task and Finish Group: CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1. Are the current arrangements and guidance for calculating surplus places in schools satisfactory?
2. Good practice and models for planning school places
3. What are the educational and financial outcomes of current measures being taken to plan school places?
4. The school and local authority inspection process and how it can influence planning school places.
5. What is the relationship between the re-organisation of schools and Welsh language issues?
6. What is the relationship between the re-organisation of schools and the provision of ICT and post 16-education?
7. What is the relationship between capital expenditure programmes and planning school places?
8. Can you give evidence of partnership working between local authorities or with other stakeholders on the issue of planning school places?
9. Introducing change - consultation and working with communities
10. Wider policy links, including policies such as Community Focus Schools, the foundation phase, workforce remodelling and Narrowing the Gap. (This is not an exhaustive list)
List of Presentations Received

- Monmouth County Borough Council
- Cardiff City Council
- Estyn
- Wales Audit Office
- Pembrokeshire County Council
- Cyngor Sir Ynys Mon
- Flintshire County Council
- Conwy Borough County Council
- Ceredigion County Council

List of Responses Received

- Caerphilly County Borough Council
- Carmarthenshire County Council
- Ceredigion County Council
- Conwy Local Education Authority
- Cylch Gorchwyl a Gorffenn Pannu Lleoedd mewn Ysgolion
- Newport City Council
- Powys County Council
- Presbyterian Church in Wales
- Rhondda-Cynon-Taf County Borough Council
- Roman Catholic Diocese of Wrexham
- Welsh Language Board
- Wrexham County Borough Council