

SCHOOLS TASK GROUP:

A STRATEGIC SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME: PRINCIPLES TO UNDERPIN CHANGE

Rationale :

The rationale for the task group being established is in the context of falling rolls, a large number of surplus primary and secondary school places, a number of Head Teachers reaching retirement age in the next 5 years and financial constraints leading to a growing number of schools in a deficit budget situation. Maintaining the status quo may not be an option, but at the same time acknowledging the great variety and diversity across the County needs to be taken into account in any future plans. A strategy for sustainable provision is required.

1. Background

School re-organisation is an evolving process, driven by events both locally and nationally. It is the means by which a local authority responds to changing circumstances that impact upon its ability to meet its duty to secure efficient primary and secondary education in its area and to promote high standards and the fulfillment of every child's potential (Education Act 1996).

This paper sets out the principles underpinning the process of school re-organisation in Bridgend County Borough. The principles have been developed to support an overarching strategy for school improvement that aims to provide 'fit for purpose' schools capable of delivering high quality educational experiences for all pupils. It is in this context that the principles are to be applied. They provide clarity of purpose and transparency of approach and determine the main factors that will be taken into account in considering all proposals for change, including, where necessary, school closures and alternative school models. Full and effective implementation of a school improvement programme will need a long term strategy for delivery, one that maps out proposals for change over an elongated period, delivered by means of a rolling programme reviewed annually.

To ensure a coherent and integrated County Borough-wide approach to the strategic school improvement programme, there is a strong and explicit relationship between the principles articulated in this document and corporate policies and priorities. The principles reflect the priorities of the Corporate / Partnership Plan. They also draw upon the Welsh Government guidance document 'School Organisation Proposals' (Circular No: 23/02) which requires prime consideration be given to the effect of any proposed change on the standards of teaching and attainment in schools and the Welsh Government guidance 'Federation process of maintained schools in Wales' (Circular No:011/2014).

Embodied in the principles is the vision for education articulated in the Partnership Plan; a vision that enhances achievement through continued school improvement and places education at the centre of community development. Delivering change that will allow all the citizens of Bridgend the opportunity to access services of the highest standard is an aim of the Partnership Plan that is supported by the principles.

Similarly, the principles, guided by a sustainable development theme, promote a long term perspective in planning for future interests, whilst recognising the demands of today's needs.

Within this context, the Children's Directorate is well placed to take forward a strategic school improvement programme. It already has school improvement as the cornerstone of its delivery and making a positive difference to the lives of children and young people within Bridgend, both now and in the years ahead, is a core function of the Service.

The Service holds detailed information on educational performance, pupil numbers, school organisation and capacities, and the suitability and sufficiency of building stock. This combined with contextual information from other services enables the Children's Directorate to develop plans for the future of education within the County Borough from an informed base.

2. Contextual Information

i) General

Bridgend County Borough Council is a unitary authority sharing borders with 3 other authorities. The County Borough covers an area of about 28,500 hectares and is economically and linguistically diverse. The employment rate is 71.7% compared to the Wales average of 66.7% (Estyn 2012), which is above the national average. Eleven of the 85 areas in Bridgend are now in the 10% most deprived areas in Wales. (WIMD 2011) The percentage of pupils of compulsory school age eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM) is the 8th overall average of 'compulsory' aged children who were FSM at PLASC 2014.

ii) Schools

Currently, Bridgend County Borough Council, the local authority, maintains 60 schools: 49 primary /infant/junior schools, 9 secondary schools, 2 special schools and one pupil referral unit. Within this structure the authority also supports 22 (for 2013-14) learning support centres located within our mainstream schools and 1 within a special school.

In January 2014 279 Nursery Year 1(2-3 year olds) and 1602 Nursery Year 2 (3-4 years) accessed the authority's early years' provision.

The school population is around 22,690 pupils.

The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is 20.65%, which is above the Wales average of 19.14% and the 8th highest in Wales (PLASC 2014).

iii) Surplus Places

The Welsh Government defines significant surplus capacity as 25% or more of a school's capacity and at least 30 unfilled places.

It is generally accepted that the term 'small school', in relation to primary schools, is applied to schools with fewer than 91 pupils and, in relation to secondary schools, is applied to schools with fewer than 600 pupils (700 pupils for schools with a 6th Form).

- Bridgend Primary Schools

All surplus place data is under review and verification.

Indicative figures suggest that there are 1092 surplus places within the primary school sector. Currently, 5 of the 49 primary schools have significant surplus capacity.

4 primary schools fall into the category of being 'small schools' (under 91 pupils) when nursery pupil numbers are excluded and 1 of these is below 91 (including nursery pupil numbers).

- Bridgend Secondary Schools

All surplus place data is under review and verification.

From the January 2014 census, 1 secondary school falls into the category of being a 'small school' and has significant surplus capacity.

Pupil population predictions indicate that, for the period April 2014 to April 2018, primary school pupil numbers will increase from 12,705 to 13,868 rising again to 14,470 by 2022. Secondary school pupil numbers are projected to fall from 9,612 to 9,322 between 2014 and 2018 and then increase again to 9,646 by 2022. However, these (which include 6th form pupils) are subject to change and will, therefore, need to be reviewed annually.

3. The Principles

The principles underpinning the process of developing and implementing school improvement proposals are set out below.

- 1 Commitment to high standards and excellence in provision
- 2 Equality of opportunity, so that all pupils can access quality learning opportunities, regardless of which school they attend
- 3 Inclusive schools, which cater for the learning needs of all their pupils
- 4 Community focused schools, where the school actively engages with its local community
- 5 Value for money

4. Policy And Planning Framework

To put these key principles into practice we need a policy and planning framework. We believe this should include the following areas:

A *School performance, quality and standards*

- considering pupils' attainment and progress, as indicated by National Curriculum assessment and public examination results, and their broader achievement.
- taking account of the outcomes of school inspections and self-evaluation.

B *Quality of the learning environment*

- ensuring that pupils experience a physical learning environment which is of high quality, safe and secure and which has an appropriate range of facilities and resources.
- providing accommodation of sufficient size to meet national standards and guidelines and which is permanent rather than temporary.

C *Diversity of provision*

- providing choice for parents and pupils by maintaining and developing Welsh medium provision in primary schools maintaining an appropriate range of primary and secondary denominational provision, in association with the Diocesan Authorities.

D *Local schools*

- providing high quality local schools for local children, preferably within walking distance to reduce travelling time and contribute to better health and greater sustainability.
- planning new provision and making changes to catchment areas where necessary, to reflect changes in the distribution of the population over time.

E *Size of schools*

- ensuring that all Bridgend's primary schools are large enough to make the full range of necessary provision, limiting wherever possible, the age-range within individual classes and avoiding classes which include pupils from more than one key stage.
- having secondary schools that are large enough to offer a broad and effective curriculum that includes scope for choice and diversity of provision, either on their own or, increasingly, in partnership with others.
- ensuring that all schools are not so large that they become impersonal institutions or difficult to manage because of their scale.

F Social inclusion

- securing equal access to a high quality education for all pupils whatever their circumstances.
- ensuring that all pupils attend the most suitable school in mainstream education wherever appropriate and supporting all schools in making relevant provision.

G Special educational needs

- ensuring that there is early identification of need and appropriate intervention, in conjunction with parents/carers, schools and other agencies.
- making provision that is broad and balanced, but targeted at individual pupils' needs.

H Community-focused schools

- ensuring that all Bridgend's schools have an active and coherent community focus, a sense of place and a local identity.
- making effective use of schools' resources to develop further out-of-hours activities, family learning, extended schooling and adult and community learning.
- Ensuring as far as possible that all new schools are designed with a community-focus emphasis.

I Parental preference

- meeting parental preference in choice of schools wherever possible by providing and allocating places on the basis of clear and agreed admissions criteria.
- expanding provision, where this is feasible and cost effective, in schools that are over-subscribed from within their catchment area and taking action to remove unnecessary surplus places in others.

J Continuity of education

- providing the greatest degree of continuity and progression in children's learning with a smooth transition from one key stage to the next.
- providing, 'all-through' primary school (3 to 11 years) provision as the best way of delivering nursery, infant and junior education
- and consider extending this from 3-16 or 3-19, as appropriate.

K Post 16 education

- ensuring that all pupils have access to a comprehensive range of viable post 16 learning opportunities and pathways in schools, in Further Education or in work-based learning.

- extending participation in learning post 16 and improving progression, choice and flexibility.

L Class sizes

- meeting legal requirements and guidelines concerning the size of classes in primary schools and ensuring that health and safety issues are considered first and foremost in all schools.
- meeting requirements concerning space and child: adult ratios for the Foundation Phase is-in Wales.

M Travel

- ensuring that we continue to promote and actively support the use of healthy routes to school.
- Ensuring that, where offered, home to school/college transport is provided in a safe, efficient and effective manner, in line with Council policy.

N Site organisation

- ensuring that the layout of schools' accommodation and of the site in general do not become a barrier to effective learning and teaching.
- avoiding 'split site' schools (where possible) and re-organising provision to achieve this.
-

O Sustainable development

- ensuring that the environment that schools provide is sustainable, makes use of renewable resources where appropriate and eliminates waste.
- considering, in every potential development, issues such as energy conservation, the use of low maintenance materials and recycling.

P Value for money, efficiency and effectiveness

- ensuring that provision is made as economically and efficiently as possible by being innovative and by rigorously monitoring the impact of spending, resource management and procurement.
- narrowing the gap between the most and the least expensive provision currently

Q Consistency with the Council's strategic plans

- ensuring that any proposed changes in provision are in line with the priorities and policies set out in the Council's key strategic plans.
- continuing to consult widely with a range of key groups and networks.

We recognise that there will be occasions when aspects of these policies may conflict, for example, there may be differences between the parents' preferences and a policy of reducing travel to school by car or bus. It may not always be possible to achieve the optimum space and learning environment due to site availability and funding constraints. However, there is a need to identify proposals which meet the greatest number of policy objectives as possible, and improving the quality of education will be our goal.

5. Other considerations

In applying the principles, consideration will also be given to alternatives to school closure and community impact, in particular to:

- whether alternatives to closure have been actively considered, in particular, whether revised catchment areas, amalgamation options and the potential to federate have been looked at (taking account of the scope for use of ICT links between school sites) and the reasons for not pursuing these as an alternative to closure
- whether the possibilities of making fuller use of the existing buildings as an educational/community resource within the locality have been explored
- emerging priorities as articulated in the Children's Directorate Plan

In addition, the views of interested parties will be sought, in particular:

- the views of parents and other local residents, including those relating to parental choice and the impact on the local community
- the views of children
- the concerns of other LAs affected by the proposals
- the concerns of any diocese affected by the proposals
- the views of other schools, playgroups or other providers in the area
- other interested parties

6. Developing a Strategic School Improvement Programme

This principles paper is the first stage in the development of a comprehensive improvement programme for Bridgend schools. It forms the basis of a structured approach to the rationalisation of educational provision in the County Borough, an approach that will be evidenced based and one that will draw upon data and information from a variety of sources in order to reach informed conclusions about

the nature of provision and the need to add, remove or relocate school places. As necessary, school improvement proposals will use the Authority's statutory powers to establish, transfer, alter the character of and discontinue schools.

Legislative processes apply to the significant alteration or closure of a school which includes statutory consultation periods. Even without allowing for planning, development and building construction work it is advisable to allow 18 to 24 months in which to undertake the necessary statutory processes.

The purpose of the strategic school improvement programme is to set out the context in which decisions on the organisation of school places in Bridgend are made and to plan the delivery of a managed programme for change. The nature of change in school organisation will mean that some schemes can be effected within a short timescale whilst others will only be achieved over an extended period.

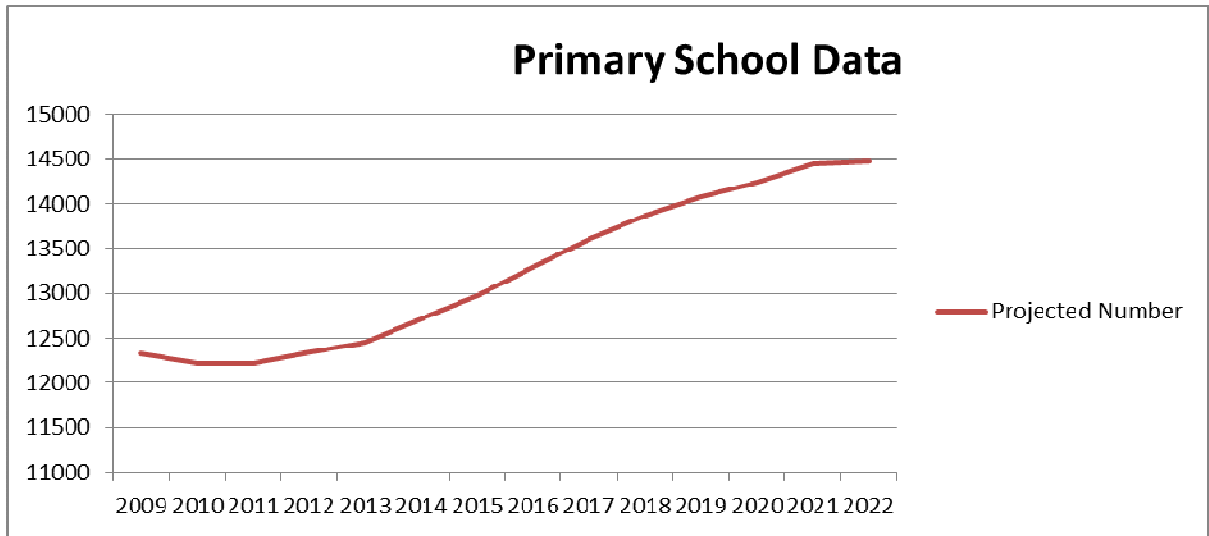
Proposals will be clearly linked to corporate priorities articulated in the Authority's plans and policies. They will focus upon making the most effective, efficient and flexible use of finite resources in order to raise educational standards and support continuous improvement. In developing proposals for 'fit for purpose' schools that will meet the educational demands of a modern society, consideration will need to be given to both the rationalisation and development of provision across the County Borough. Whereas reducing surplus places and managing building stock more efficiently will feature prominently in a strategic school improvement programme, in meeting the twin aspirations of raising educational standards and supporting continuous improvement an essential requirement is the provision of suitable and sufficient schools; that is - right school in the right place. A strategic school improvement programme will, therefore, need to address key issues at both primary and secondary levels in areas such as: Welsh medium provision, faith education, additional learning needs, curriculum developments, teaching and learning initiatives and a community focus for schools.

The successful development and implementation of the strategic school improvement programme will require a programme and project management approach. Under the direction of the Director of Children's Services, the programme will be developed and overseen by a project manager supported by an internal specialist team.

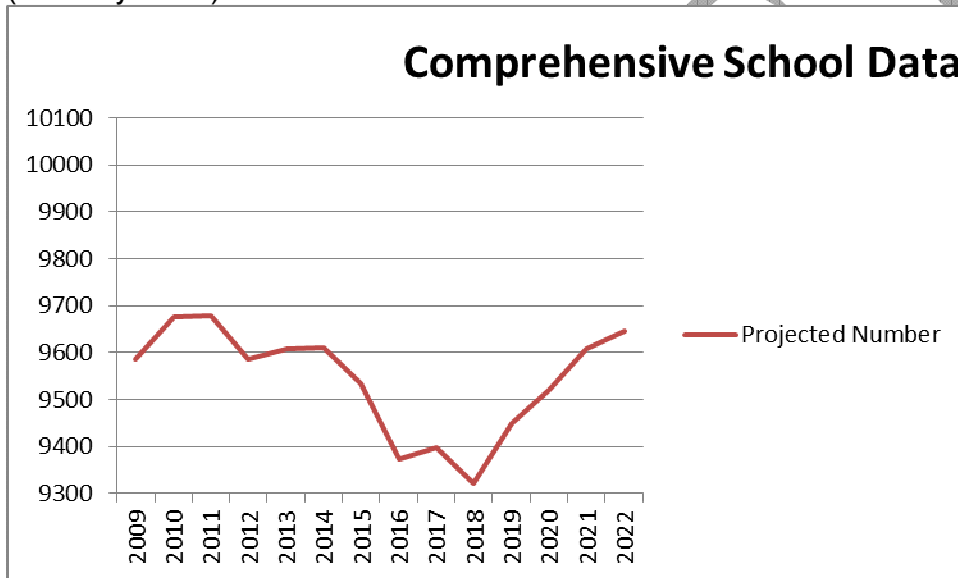
7. Evidence for change – Surplus Places

A review of data relating to surplus places and capacity is underway. There is a need to consider the relationship between capacity and pupil numbers and any increase in the extent of surplus capacity across Bridgend schools in the primary and secondary sectors.

The trend in pupil numbers projected over time. It should be noted that the following information is accurate at January 2014 and will need to be updated continually. Individual school data will need to be considered as the distribution of growth/decline is uneven.



(January 2014)



(January 2014)