

County Council Schools' Reorganisation Brecon High School's position paper

Powys County Council has announced proposed changes to school provision in South and Mid Powys that directly impact on pupils, parents and carers, and the broader community of Brecon High School.

We welcome proposals to build new facilities at Brecon, because the current school building is no longer fit for purpose and does not provide an appropriate modern learning space. We are, though, concerned that provision of a new school has been promised in Brecon for years: such a development is now in urgent need of delivery.

However, independent of this, the proposals – if carried out – will remove Welsh-medium provision and school-provided Sixth Form education from Brecon. These proposed changes were not discussed with Brecon High School (nor other schools as far as we know), until the week they were announced. The original announcement contained little detail for us, the school Governors, to respond to. That is still the case. Whilst we have significant concerns about the proposals for Post 16 (Sixth Form) education, and believe that pupils would be better served by a school based Sixth Form, not a college based system, we will return to that issue as that consultation period commences in September.

The first of the two consultation phases (on Welsh-medium education) begins this month. We are taking this opportunity to share our position and concerns, and to ask for your support by engaging with the consultation to ensure that all views are widely voiced. The overriding issue and priority for Governors and staff at the school is that pupils in the Brecon area should have access to local high quality education throughout their school years in English or Welsh-medium.

We strongly believe that, with the support of parents of pupils in Welsh-medium primary schools, a viable Welsh-medium stream can and should be provided at Brecon.

We would urge everyone interested in the education of our pupils - recent leavers, parents and carers, grand-parents, employers and potential employers, etc., - to read the proposals and, even better, to join us in responding when the formal consultation starts.

The formal Council consultation is taking place in two stages. The consultation on the future of Welsh-medium education takes place in June, that on the broader Beacons Learning Campus in September. In the first instance, therefore, as a school, we would like to invite you, as parents and carers, to meet and talk with Governors to discuss the proposals on Welsh-medium provision.

The meeting will take place at Brecon High School on 22 June from 5.00pm. We will schedule a subsequent meeting for the Beacons Learning Campus, including A-level provision in Brecon, for early September.

Welsh-Medium Provision in Brecon

Powys County Council's announcement concerning schools' reorganisation has a number of implications for educational provision in Brecon and the surrounding area. The stated priorities that are relevant to this paper are:

Priority 1: Beacons Learning Campus. The proposal is to establish a new £50m state-of-the-art education campus - the Beacons Learning Campus – in Brecon, to replace the current Brecon and Gwernyfed secondary schools, with Post-16 education delivered at a Sixth Form Academy and Vocational College by NPTC Group of Colleges.

Priority 2: Mid Powys

A review of secondary education in Builth Wells and Llandrindod Wells will be carried out. The number of pupils between both schools is projected to fall to around 900 in a few years. It is the Council's aspiration that, in future, there could be one dual-stream secondary school in Mid Powys which will have a thriving Sixth Form, but a full assessment will need to be carried out first to explore all possible options. A business case to be considered by the Council's Cabinet in July 2015.

Priorities 1 and 2 share a cross-cutting theme which is the provision of Welsh-medium education across Mid and South Powys. The Council is concerned about the viability of the small Welsh-medium stream at Brecon High School, and is recommending that the Welsh stream ceases to be delivered at the school from September 2016 – learners will be offered a place in the larger Welsh stream at Builth Wells High School. If approved by Cabinet, formal consultation will take place with all schools, parents, staff and pupils before any final decisions are made.

<http://www.powys.gov.uk/en/schools-students/plans-for-powys-schools/secondary-school-review/>

The High School's Governing Body has little information beyond these priorities (extracted from the letter sent by the Head of Schools Service to parents and carers on 16 March), and the information on the County Council's website:

<http://www.powys.gov.uk/en/schools-students/plans-for-powys-schools/beacons-learning-campus/>

Neither has the Governing Body informed the proposals or been consulted on them in advance of their publication or subsequently. Our opportunity to do so formally will be during the public consultation periods.

With key documentation being submitted to the Welsh Government to seek approval in principle for the Beacons Learning Campus we would, therefore, like to use this position paper as a basis for discussion with stakeholders in the current Brecon High School to inform the debate and discussion in advance of, and during, the formal consultation period. Our focus in this paper is the provision of Welsh-medium education in Brecon.

The Governing Body is deeply concerned with the proposals for moving Welsh-medium provision from Brecon to Builth Wells (potentially Llandrindod according to the outcome of that review), and for such provision not forming a part of the Beacons Learning Campus. This concern is based on a number of considerations, primarily the educational aspirations of young people to study through Welsh being impeded if not offered locally (and the impact of this on the community); and the social impact for them of being less able to access extra-curricular activities because of travel constraints and travel time. Additionally we recognise the potential impact on Welsh-medium

education in our feeder primary schools if local provision is removed. The strategic and geographic significance of Brecon within the South Powys area is also recognised: removing Welsh provision from this central hub is politically and culturally short-sighted.

In recent times, the small size and viability of the current Welsh-medium stream at Brecon High School is undeniably an issue that needs to be addressed. There are, though, a number of considerations that suggest a potential future for Welsh-medium education at the Beacons Learning Campus – not least the interest that a new build will inspire locally. Demographically, the 2011 Census figures for the numbers of Welsh speakers in Powys indicate a growing potential. In addition to northern Powys, the more established Welsh speaking communities are to be found in the Northern Swansea Valley and the adjoining communities of, for example, Maescar, Trallong and Yscir. It is interesting to note that, within these figures, the higher percentages are normally to be found in the younger age groups (for example, the 5-15 age group across Powys remains the strongest age range with 42.3% able to speak Welsh.)

The Local Authority currently provides transport from these areas to Welsh secondary education provision out-of-county, at Ysgol Gyfun Ystalyfera. We are also concerned that should a proposed new build Welsh-medium school on the Ysgol Gyfun Ystalyfera site go ahead the current position will persist and learners from these areas will not re-engage with education in Powys. The potential for viable cohorts has been further weakened within the more immediate Brecon area by free transport being funded to Builth Wells.

The Governing Body will, through the consultation, ask for this policy to be reconsidered in the context of an improved (possibly 100%) Welsh offering at the Beacons Learning Campus being explored to engage the learners at Sennybridge and Ysgol-Y-Bannau and retain them in County and in Brecon: this would impact significantly on the viability of the future cohorts. Such an approach would be consistent with Welsh Government and Powys County Council strategies. For example, the Welsh Government's vision, as stated in its **Welsh-medium Education Strategy** (2010) is "to have an education and training system that responds in a planned way to the growing demand for Welsh-medium education, reaches out to and reflects our diverse communities and enables an increase in the number of people of all ages and backgrounds who are fluent in Welsh and able to use the language with their families, **in their communities** and in the workplace." [our emphasis]

The current proposals also undermine other strategies and plans produced by Powys County Council. For example, their Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) 2014 – 17 was informed by survey data that concluded:

"According to the findings of this survey, it is clear that the greatest demand for a designated Welsh-medium secondary school is in the south of the County. Apart from the Ystradgynlais area, where pupils already access a designated Welsh-medium secondary school outside Powys, **the highest percentage of respondents who would prefer for their children to attend a designated Welsh-medium secondary school were the parents of pupils currently attending Welsh-medium primary provision in the Brecon catchment**, followed by parents of pupils in the Builth Wells catchment"

The same document identifies that, "the Council is committed to providing the highest quality Welsh-medium education to every child and young person in Powys within a **reasonable distance** from their homes". At the time the plan was written the expectation was that "all six dual-stream schools will **maximise their Welsh-medium provision**, with the aim that they will all become Category 2B schools by 2020..." In our view the proposal to move Welsh-medium education to Builth places it outside of being at a reasonable distance. Furthermore removal of Welsh-medium education at secondary level will potentially have a significant impact on engagement with primary provision – undermining Welsh-medium provision in the area.

We see a strong, principled, argument in favour of retention of Welsh-medium provision in Brecon and would ask for parent and pupil support in making the argument, and in making future Welsh streams viable. The Governing Body will, once the public consultation period on the Local Authority's proposals is opened, confirm that in its view the Beacons Learning Campus should include a Welsh-medium stream.

For parents and pupils currently in the Welsh-medium stream at Brecon High School: the Governing Body, and the Headteacher, remain fully committed to the Welsh-medium students at the current Brecon High School. We wish to maintain breadth of provision in Welsh, whilst operating within the constraints placed upon us by the current small size of the Welsh stream. Whilst we respect decisions being taken now to move children in the light of the Council's proposals, we are concerned that this will weaken the case for retention and development of the Welsh stream at Brecon. Should, ultimately, the Council proceed with moving provision out of Brecon please be assured that we will fully support students through the transition period. We hope that with your support this scenario can be avoided.

Brecon High School, Governing Body
10 June 2015