

Estyn's Response to the proposal to amalgamate Ysgol Pen-y-Bryn and Ysgol Crug Glas into one Special School on 1 September 2025 on existing sites; and to relocate the new school on 1 April 2028 to purpose-built accommodation on Mynydd Garnllwyd Road, whilst increasing the number of planned places.

Introduction

This report has been prepared by His 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.

Summary/ Conclusion

Estyn considers that the proposal is likely to, at least, maintain the standard of education provision in the area.

Description and benefits

The local authority has set out a clear rationale for its proposal. It outlines strongly the many advantages of building a new school to meet the needs of the growing number of pupils with complex needs. The local authority has identified that over the past five years the proportion of pupils with complex ALN has risen, driving an increasing demand for special school places within Swansea. Both schools are currently operating at capacity, with no further options to expand. The rationale for the new build seems sound and includes developing more capacity to meet pupils' needs, greater sharing of expertise and efficient reorganising of resources.

The local authority has provided a suitably detailed description of the proposal which includes an estimated timetable for statutory procedures.

In the main, the proposer identifies clearly and fairly the expected benefits and disadvantages when compared with the status quo and how they will manage any risk. The proposed site for the new school is a short distance from Ysgol Pen-Y-Bryn and a 13-minute drive from Ysgol Crug Glas which would mean additional travel for these pupils. However, the local authority identifies that due to the nature of this specialist provision, all pupils need to travel across Swansea each day and transport arrangements will be made in accordance with Swansea Council's Home to School

Transport Policy. It appears that whilst a site for the new build has been identified, this has yet to be confirmed.

The local authority has considered other options such as expansion of the existing schools, but neither site has the capacity to meet the needs of the growing number of places required across Swansea for pupils with complex and profound ALN. In addition, neither school is currently 'fit for purpose' or able to provide a suitable environment for pupils without a huge financial investment. Thus, a new school will be more cost effective and likely to meet the growing demand for places.

Whilst the new school proposal and eventual amalgamation has clear advantages in terms of a purpose-built school with a larger capacity, the local authority's case for the amalgamation of the two schools by 2025 does not appear as compelling. Whilst the school will operate as one with one governing body, one set of policies, one budget, the advantages to the pupils do not appear to be as clear. There will be no additional places available, no further work is planned to improve the sites and staff will still be working on two separate sites which are almost three miles apart. Sharing of facilities and professional development opportunities for staff and pupils between sites would not be easy. It is not clear why an amalgamation is necessary before the proposed new school is built as this appears to be an additional disruption.

After a wide review of specialist teaching provision across the local authority by Swansea Council, the rationale identifies an increasing demand for special school places within Swansea. The local authority has reviewed the language needs of the current cohort of learners across the schools and have concluded that there is no current requirement for a Welsh-medium special school in Swansea. However, the importance of the Welsh language across the current settings is set out clearly. The local authority is planning to utilise the expertise of staff between schools to continue to develop its practices in this area.

No capital funding is being sought for the amalgamation; however, there will be revenue funding implications as the newly amalgamated school would receive one budget share, as opposed to two. This will be calculated using the approved funding formula and will account for the total of 250 planned places that the amalgamated school would have. When the school moves to the enlarged site the budget share will increase to reflect the new site and the 350 planned places.

The local authority had identified that if the shortfall of special school places in Swansea is not addressed, pupils needing out of county or in the independent sector provision would increase which would impact on cost. The new school will be financed through Welsh Government's Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme and cost have been estimated at £43,600,000. The investment will be funded 75% Welsh Government and 25% council, with 100% of additional costs expected to be met by Welsh Government to deliver the Net Zero Operational

Carbon. However, it is not clear whether this funding is secure. The proposer does not explain what will happen if this funding is not available and if local planning permission is not granted.

The local authority has provided a Welsh Language Impact Assessment and a Community Impact Assessment as part of this proposal. Estyn provides their opinion only on the overall merits of school organisation proposals and does not evaluate the Welsh Language Impact Assessment or the Community Impact Assessment.

Educational aspects of the proposal

The local authority considers appropriately the impact of the proposals on the quality and standards in education, including pupil standards, wellbeing, teaching and learning experiences, care support, guidance, leadership, and management. For example, the proposal identifies that transferring to a new site would provide extensive outdoor space, including green space, for pupils to learn and play. The local authority references the recommendations from the Estyn Inspection of Ysgol Pen-y-Bryn which identifies the need for improved outdoor learning. It assumes fairly that pupil wellbeing and attitudes to learning would benefit from a diverse and engaging outdoor space. It notes that a fit-for-purpose school building would help staff to provide broader learning experiences which would contribute to the delivery of a balanced curriculum, in line with the new Curriculum for Wales. The proposal also notes that Ysgol Crug Glas will continue its work with Welsh Government on developing authentic learning experiences for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties.

The local authority considers that the new build will enhance the learning, well-being and therapeutic experiences provided for all the pupils. It also considers how the new school will facilitate the provision of multidisciplinary working with a range of external professionals. Both schools place much emphasis on care, support, and guidance with a focus on meeting individual needs and providing suitable support to develop physical and emotional well-being.

The council appears to have considered the capacity for leadership in both schools and how this has recently developed and improved but does not seem to have considered how this structure will work when the schools amalgamate.

The local authority notes that school reorganisation proposals inevitably cause some disruption and uncertainty. It identifies that experience shows that this can be kept to a minimum through meaningful engagement throughout the consultation process and has included opportunities for pupils to respond to the consultation. Nevertheless, the proposal does not consider what these disruptive factors may be in this case, or how the local authority will minimise these for learners.