

The Additional Pressures on Funding for Education Provision Faced by Sparsely Populated Rural Areas

Powys in Context:

Powys occupies approximately 25% of the landmass of Wales.

An area of approximately 2,000 sq. miles spread across a large rural county.

Powys has less than 5% of the population of Wales

With a population of just over 133,000 (2011 Census), it is the most sparsely populated Welsh county.

The sparsity of Powys settlements

Only two towns, Ystradgynlais and Newtown have populations of more than 10,000. The third largest settlement, Brecon, has a population of approximately 7,000. The remaining settlements are smaller market towns, villages and isolated hamlets.

The largest road network in Wales

The county has 3,400 miles of road, a high proportion of which are single-track with infrequent passing places. Such roads can only be used by small minibuses, resulting in an often unacknowledged constraint on school transport provision. The Powys landscape is typically upland topography making travel difficult. The public transport infrastructure is limited and currently under further threat because of the forthcoming cuts (of the order of 20%) to the council's overall budget.

A low wage economy

Powys is an area of low wages, with transport and housing pressures leading to high levels of 'waged poverty'. The economy relies heavily on public service, education and health.

An ageing population

The 2013 Welsh Government population projections showed that the Powys population is projected to rise by 1.2% by 2036 as a result of net inward migration. The largest increase, 98%, is expected in the number of people in the 75+ age group.

The current basis for Welsh Government funding for the Rate Support Grant:

The majority of funding, including for education, is un-hypothecated and is based on the Standard Spending Assessment formula. The Indicator Based Assessment formula for education has as its main elements: pupil numbers; deprivation and sparsity. The formula is intended to address the issue of varying degrees of rurality, including the limited ability of rural authorities to benefit from economies of scale.

Why the formula requires review:

The underlying principle recognises that sparsity presents a challenge to the effective delivery of essential public services in rural areas such as Powys but the weighting currently allocated to this fails to provide the necessary protection.

In theory, non-hypothecated funding should allow Local Authorities the flexibility to transfer money from one budget heading to another in order to support services under pressure. In practice, if insufficient funding is available, as a result of flaws in the overall formula, an authority lacks that flexibility to top up spending in order to fund circumstances specific to it.

Impact:

Damage to communities

Powys has implemented a school modernisation/transformation programme, matching the WG 2015 target of 15% surplus places in the primary sector, but this is now at the point where real damage is being done to its communities (see report on the impact of closure of Beguildy Church in Wales Primary School). As parents opt to send their children to the next nearest school, following closure of their community school, friendship groups are redrawn and communities fragment.

Demographic imbalance

The remaining schools are key to community life and essential factors in attracting and retaining the young people needed to redress the demographic imbalance in the age profile of the population as a whole.

Learners lost to Wales

The closure, or threat of closure or reorganisation, of schools along the border with England is resulting in more and more learners being lost from Wales as parents opt to send their children to schools closer to their homes rather than subject them to increasingly long journeys to schools within Wales.

Travel times extended

Children are forced to travel unsustainable distances on minor roads, adding up to two hours to the school day.

Further closures will mean that recommended maximum travel times and distances set out in Welsh Government guidelines become the norm not the exception for many learners.

Delivery of high quality education threatened

Schools and sixth forms are at breaking point, exhausted by continual threat of closure. During the last ten years the people working in the school system have been subject to an almost continuous barrage of threats of closure, actual closures, withdrawn closures, withdrawn closures that turned into actual closures because parents abandoned schools that they perceived as being under threat, and threats of threats. It is no wonder that Powys finds it difficult to recruit teaching staff.

Nursery education is now also under threat.

Continuous cuts to school budgets are causing round after round of redundancies making it impossible to deliver the quality of education that teachers trained for and that our young people deserve.

Delivery of all services is inevitably more expensive in an area with the longest road network in Wales

Travel costs for services such as household waste collection, Home Care and school transport account for a disproportionate of the overall budget, leaving nothing to support the specific problems of providing education in widespread communities.

Action:

If a devolved Wales is to thrive, the Welsh Government must lead the funding discussions in Westminster. The loss of our schools heralds the death of our communities and our local economies, accelerating the demographic time bomb of our increasingly elderly population

The Welsh Government must investigate the additional challenges to education in sparsely populated rural areas, such as Powys, and whether the funding is sufficient to meet the needs. This will require a detailed re-examination of the formula and its relative weightings and a study of the actual amounts of funding generated under the headings of deprivation and sparsity.