

Inquiry into 21st Century Schools and Education Programme

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders (Cymru)

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents nearly 19,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL Cymru represents school leaders in more than 90 per cent of the secondary schools and an increasing proportion in the primary phase in Wales. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of Welsh schools and colleges of all types.
2. ASCL Cymru has been fully supportive of the Welsh Government's principle of providing a specific funding stream to address the issues around poor school building stock, and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

With reference to your specific areas of focus:

Setting expectations and targets

3. From a school's perspective, the information about expectations has come via local authorities, and has always been couched in very specific terms. Schools have therefore relied upon information from local authorities about the programme and may not have sought out further detail on the anticipated wider benefits from Welsh Government.
4. Information from schools that have benefitted from new buildings indicates that there is some inconsistency over environmental standards. We have had reports that some schools have been very pleased with the outcomes, but some others less so. Specific concerns have related to the effectiveness of solar generation not meeting expected levels and other forms of alternative energy falling short of what was anticipated. We would be happy to seek out more detailed information about specific concerns if that would be helpful.

The Funding Model

5. We are delighted that the Welsh Government has committed to £640m of capital funding for the next five years. We would point out though, that this is a comparatively small amount given the scale of the problem with school buildings, and means that significant number of schools will be left with no prospect of improvements and have to deal with ever-increasing maintenance costs until the middle of the next decade.

6. ASCL Cymru has some concerns about the Mutual Investment Model. Whilst it is encouraging that the Welsh Government are seeking out ways to increase the amount of funding that can be made available for school building projects, there are potential dangers associated with the model. In particular we are concerned that the service charge should not be passed on to individual school budgets. There are still cases where schools built under previous PFI systems have been placed in an impossible financial position because of having to pay service charges from school budgets. This has impacted upon staffing levels and therefore the quality of education the school has been able to offer. We would rather see a system under which the local authority takes responsibility for the service charge with a proportionate reduction in the maintenance budget allocation to the school.

Standardising build elements and costs

7. There are clearly considerable potential advantages to standardising elements of building programmes. Our experience is that some architects employed to design new school buildings have not necessarily been those with expertise in this area. This has, in the past, resulted in some buildings not always meeting the needs of the school. Utilising architects who have a proven track record of providing high quality, fit for purpose school buildings would seem eminently sensible.
8. Whilst there might be advantages to have other standardised elements in new builds, care needs to be taken that it does not lead to a “one-size-fits-all” approach that does not take account of the specific context and needs of the individual school. Any such approach would need to have built-in flexibilities that allowed for the specific requirements of individual schools.

Welsh Government Consultation

9. We have not been a part of any Welsh Government consultation on this matter to date.

Areas to consider in the next phase

10. We believe that in the next phase of investment, careful consideration must be given to re-assessing the condition of all school premises, particularly taking into account the amount of asbestos that is present in many older school buildings. We would suggest that this needs to be a priority to ensure the health and safety of both students and staff.
11. There are many schools in which our members have serious concerns about other factors impacting on health and safety, particularly in relation to rotting timber in window frames and doors and the presence of mould. Whilst we appreciate that the “funding pot” is limited, it is vital that young people and school staff have a safe and weatherproof environment in which to work. Currently this is not always the case.

Conclusion

12. I hope that this is of value to your inquiry, ASCL Cymru is willing to be further consulted and assist in any way that it can.

Tim Pratt
Director of ASCL Cymru
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