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PRESS RELEASE

Unique challenges for school design

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Educational performance, results and the way our young people behave seems to be a constant dialogue in the press as we seek the best for children and young people.

The strategic schools building programme emerging in Wales over the coming years will no doubt continue to make the news as necessarily difficult decisions are made about falling rolls, the state of the schools estate and the amalgamation of community facilities in local authorities across the country.

While money is tight there will be a move to prioritise and perhaps focus more on refurbishment and extension rather than expansive new build programmes.

At the Design Commission for Wales, we welcome investment in good quality buildings that support the education experience for pupils and which strengthen connections with surrounding communities and opportunities for extended use.

We aim to encourage a built environment which is inspirational and which is delivered in an open and inclusive manner, stimulating fresh thinking. The design process should be a catalyst for motivating the aspirations of the client and ultimately, those who will occupy and use the finished building.

In every success story, where well designed schools have assisted better performance and strengthened community links, a key characteristic is strong leadership and clarity of vision – from the top of the government through the local authority and the design team leadership is a key element in delivering a sound project, in a realistic timescale within a properly managed budget.

Over the last ten years or so there has been more than a step change in the technological communication tools that we use and the way which we socialise and communicate with each other.

The development of these tools is moving fast and in terms of our teaching environments, long corridors and rectilinear classrooms reflect an earlier age – how appropriate are they now with a focus on individual learning?

In 1969 and 1997 respectively, *'The Observer'* (1969) and *'The Guardian'* (1997) ran a national competition 'The Schools That I'd Like' inviting secondary school pupils to generate ideas for their schools. Children's responses highlighted a desire for schools that moved away from 'squareness' (1969) and that were beautiful, comfortable and safe (1997).

Recent research ^{*1} reveals that secondary students reflect on their school environment from a holistic point of view, rather than a 'classroom-centric' perspective. They are more aware of well designed social and circulation spaces, good quality toilet and dining facilities and an environment that makes them feel safe and secure.

Children clearly have views about the quality of their environment. While adults would like to tie those to educational attainment, the relationship between the quality and design of school buildings and children's learning continues to be a complex one.

Delivering Special Educational Needs (SEN), with a focus on individual learning and coping with challenging behaviour, teaching communication skills and improving social relationships presents a design team with a more complex set of challenges.

New schools are not simply about delivering a standard product on time on budget. In Wales, do we really want schools that are just good enough or do we want those that are as good as they can be? The schools estate in Wales must be inspirational and must deliver well designed buildings and public spaces, responding to our distinct curriculum, serving the needs of the school and the local community. These schools need to be memorable and distinctive, well used and cherished by the people who use them and the communities in which they sit.

^{*1} (Edgerton, McKechnie & McEwen 2011)

The Design Commission for Wales hosted an invite-only seminar on 27 February to an audience of 40 guests including local authority professionals who are delivering the 21st Century Schools Programme. Key note speakers were representatives from Hampshire County Council and Haverstock Associates Architects who shared their experiences of delivering SEN schools.

Notes for editors

The Design Commission for Wales was established in 2002 by the Welsh Assembly Government, with four strategic aims:

- To champion high standards of design and architecture to the public and private sector in Wales by promoting wider understanding of design issues and the importance of good standards in enhancing the built environment across all sectors.
- To promote design practice that is compatible with the National Assembly Sustainable Development Scheme, promoting best practice in energy efficiency, waste disposal and public transport.
- To promote design practice compatible with the highest standards in relation to equal opportunity and promoting social inclusion.
- Give due regard to promoting excellence in day to day developments, like housing estates and industrial units, as well as promoting excellence in prestige projects.

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Further Information: www.dcfw.org

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