

Y Coetshws,  
Trefan,  
Llanystumdwy,  
Cricieth, Gwynedd.

10 December, 2007

Dear Councillor,

### **Primary School Re-organisation**

We hope you will be able to take the opportunity to read and consider the contents of this letter.

The purpose of this letter is to kindly request that you consider not voting in favour of any proposal at next Thursday's meeting of the Council that contains the word "ACCEPT", but rather to support a proposal in favour of "NOTING" the document as a basis for consultation. This may appear like semantics, but we believe it is extremely important for the following reasons:

- Despite any sincere hopes to the contrary, "accepting" would most likely lead to councillors and others losing an opportunity during the consultation process to discuss other options, challenge central suppositions and to exchange ideas creatively. We will all be painted into a corner as logic dictates that "accepting" a report, even as a report for consultation purposes is to state that this is the stance the Council is opting for and that the burden of proof in effecting any change to the contents falls squarely on those who submit comments. This is exactly the principle as in the "Development /unitary Plans". This forces the Council into a defensive mode as well as narrowing the discussions to the strict details of the Council's document, such as timetables, or trying to rescue a small number of schools, with schools pitted against each others.
- There is room to try and develop a fresh outlook that is based on a rural approach rather than the bureaucratic urban approach of the Assembly, which can be seen seeping through the document presented to Councillors. Although discussions in the full Council are useful, it is not the ideal place to develop and investigate and develop new policy ideas such as this. We can appreciate that this isn't the type of consultation that the Council intends, but this is what we will be forced into. A decision to "accept" defies basic logic.
- Any Council in the future could use an "accept" resolution as a licence to move forward with the contents of the document exactly as it is without really taking any notice of views from the outside. This Council is probably absolutely genuine and sincere with regard to serious consultation but it is a risk to assume now that the Councils of the future, with more and more financial constraints upon them, will see things in the same way. Who knows?
- A general consultation is needed on basic principles and alternatives and an agreement (where possible) on the general way forward, with the wealth of

expertise and different experience available being fully utilised, before coming to a decision about the details. The situation is that there is a lot of real uneasiness and some cynicism with regard to the last winter's "consultation". With regard to the present proposals, the exercise was virtually worthless. Repeating that process from the start would go a long way towards reinstating the goodwill of those the Council hopes to cooperate with in the near future. (It is emphasized that there is no suggestion here that the Council intentionally mislead anyone). By "accepting" the document it will be extremely difficult to carry out any semblance of a basic consultation exercise.

- We can't see how the Council following a reasoned approach could "accept" such an important document when so much essential information is not yet in place. The Assembly's guidelines state that thorough investigation is required of the effect that any re-organisation would have on language and community as well as declaring that there needs to be a clear assessment of all alternative options. (Remember that it is the education authority's responsibility to investigate and present these options) Trying to assess this after "accepting" the document is putting the cart before the horse. "Accepting" is synonymous to saying that the Council has formed an opinion without taking these important points into consideration. Forming such an opinion is contrary to the clear guidance given to councillors by the different regulations and is likely to leave councillors in quite a difficult situation.
- The guidelines do not mention the need to assess the effect of any re-organisation on the local economy. As a Council which has a vast rural area in its territory, and with a fragile economy at that, Cynfor Gwynedd should take the opportunity to assess this effect e.g. the value of the salaries lost to the area.
- If the assessments on the language, the community and the economy show negative effects there should be the opportunity to either revise the scheme, or for councillors to satisfy themselves that other measures are in place to counteract any negative effects, before formally "accepting" the report. It could be too late afterwards. This means working across Council responsibilities and traditional departments. This is something the Council aims for and internal structures have already been put in place to deal with matters such as these. "Accepting" is synonymous to saying that the Council isn't unduly worried by these aspects.
- Another important point of information which is missing is the basis of the education argument put forward. We can't see that the Council has clear evidence that the type of school and the arrangement proposed excels in terms of the quality of education over any alternative or existing arrangement. The Assembly's guidelines note that "educational reasons" should be foremost in the Council's mind when considering any re-organisation. We take this to mean that there needs to be clear documented evidence of the failure of one arrangement on educational grounds and equally strong evidence that any proposed arrangements are indeed an improvement. Financial reasons are a secondary consideration. As far as we can see the Councillors haven't received such evidence. How, therefore, can such an immature document be "accepted"?
- There does not seem to be any information available either with regard to the targets/financial estimates of the scheme. If this scheme is driven by the financial

situation (and we sympathise with the Council in this respect) then surely all Councillors and other relevant parties should have received fairly detailed estimates concerning the cost of implementing the scheme and how it is to be financed. They should then have the opportunity to weigh all this up against the benefits and disbenefits of the scheme. Such a far-reaching scheme deserves a fairly detailed sort of a cost benefit study. Such studies have in the past been carried out on lesser schemes than this in less fragile areas. This would also be an opportunity to assess other ways of contributing towards any savings that are required e.g. co-operating with other local authorities in the region aiming to reduce the bureaucratic costs of providing the education service. This could be a means of saving some schools if the Council actually presumes in favour of rural schools and communities.

- It appears that the document is based on the presupposition that a closure list is essential in order to secure a grant from the SBIG fund. “Effectiveness with regard to managing assets” is one of the Assembly’s yardsticks in this respect. It is understood that this means effectiveness in general terms. – i.e. that the Assembly is not going to fund wasteful or rich Councils, and not necessarily the need for a hit list for school closures. We fail to see how the Council can “accept” a document which has possibly misinterpreted the Assembly’s guidelines.
- The Council is under a disadvantage as it has to work to Assembly guidelines which have an urban perspective to all intent and purposes. The regulation with regard to training headmasters is one example. Every means of adapting these regulations to suit rural areas should have been investigated e.g. by co-operating with other councils or the association of local councils. It would be interesting to know to what extent this point has been pursued since 2004. Attempts should be made to bring this question to a head with the present Assembly government, which could have a better understanding of rural issues. After “accepting” the document it will be very difficult to make such a point. There will be no second chance with the schools and communities that have been affected.
- It appears that the Council isn’t clear on the situation with regard to individual federal school sites after any re-organisation. We were told by the Council’s representatives that the individual sites would be more secure under a federal system, but it appears that further financial pressures could force governors to close some of these sites, and that federalisation in reality does not offer greater future security. All councillors, especially those who have federated sites in their constituencies should be absolutely clear on this point before “accepting” the document in the mistaken belief that by doing so they are helping to safeguard a site/school within a community.
- The scheme will be implemented over a number of years, when there are likely to be changes to the basic assumptions and the underpinning ideas as well as any external changes which will be beyond our control. A minute of “accepting” will make it much more difficult to respond to situations which are bound to change with time. It is good practice to build flexibility into any scheme. There is a danger of seriously reducing flexibility in this case...

We understand the position of schools that are to all sense and purpose ripe for closure, as well as those communities which welcome the proposals relevant to them. A resolution to “note” could be worded in such a way as not to create any obstacles in this direction. Doing justice to such difficult and complex issues and having to undo any recommendation from the report in the future would be much more difficult with a resolution to “accept”.

We again emphasise the far reaching effects of this scheme on rural areas, and the importance of considering every angle and being imaginative in striving to find the right answer. There will be no second chance, and the reality of “accepting” the proposals will make this much more difficult, irrespective of any arguments made in favour of such a decision. It will be difficult to justify “accepting” the proposals with so many gaps in the information and with so many opportunities, options and basic assumptions not having been fully explored.

If the Council maintain that rural schools and communities are important, it is reasonable to expect that they receive deserved attention

Although the effects would be scattered, the overall impact will be significant

Without being melodramatic, but in order to illustrate a point, about 70 people of all ages were moved from the Tryweryn Valley prior to it being submerged. Research shows that one of the first effects of school closures is that young families move from communities no longer with a school to areas closer to the “new” school. A significant number of schools in on the closure list as well as the smaller federated sites are located in the more rural areas. Assuming only that one family four persons move from 25 communities that will no longer have a school, there will be a loss of 100 young people from the rural areas. In reality the figure could be much higher. This would leave a vacuum to be filled by second homes and immigration. Whole communities could in the longer term disappear.

History, as in the case of Tryweryn will judge us, those promoting schemes as well as those attempting to safeguard their communities.

“Noting” rather than “accepting” the scheme will be of great assistance in ensuring that we have given ourselves every opportunity of finding the best answer to the very difficult challenges facing us.

Thank you for your attention

Sincerely,

Sioned Morys  
on behalf of “Achub Llanystumdwy”