

The Statutory Proposals for the Transformation and Re-configuration of Secondary Education in the Dinefwr area of Carmarthenshire



Consultation response from:

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&
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Forward

As the elected Member of Parliament and elected Assembly Member for the Carmarthen East & Dinefwr constituency, in which all five schools considered in the local authority's statutory proposals are based, we believe it is our duty to respond to this consultation.

Over the course of the past two years, since the publication of the local authority's informal consultation on school reorganisation in December 2008, we have been contacted by pupils, parents and members of the community from all areas in the constituency, all of whom have shared their opinions and raised their concerns to the County Council's proposed options for the future of education in the Towy, Amman and Gwendraeth areas of the county.

The foundation of this response stems from the views and opinions brought to our attention.

Background

As noted in the local authority's consultation document, a series of recent Welsh Government strategies has resulted in the need for the local authority to address its delivery of secondary education in the county. An overarching principle of the Welsh Government when presenting the *Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009* was to ensure an enhanced curriculum is available to pupils. Local authorities and schools should therefore provide a minimum of thirty subjects, academic and vocational, for pupils aged 14-19.

Cooperation and collaboration were the founding principles of the 2009 Measure. Where schools were unable to offer vocational courses, partnership with the local further education college was essential. This partnership was seen as essential for further education institutions unable to offer particular academic courses.

Appreciating the geographical difficulties cooperation between institutions could bring, we believe the local authority should, as a illustration of transparency, publish all documentation to demonstrate what reviews were undertaken by the local authority into how well schools and colleges collaborated, within Carmarthenshire and cross boundary, to provide an enhanced curriculum, and why the authority believes reorganisation, rather than collaboration, is the only way to meet the requirements outlined in the 2009 Measure.

The Proposal for Dyffryn Aman

We welcome the proposal to provide facilities to cater for up to 24 pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties and Profound Learning Difficulties at Ysgol Dyffryn Aman. The opportunity for pupils with additional needs to have their education with their peers at a more specialist and dedicated unit will undoubtedly assist some of our most vulnerable pupils. As the proposal is to relocate the current provision for Special Educational Needs pupils from Ysgol y Gwendraeth to Ysgol Dyffryn Aman, the local authority must, however, ensure that parents of Special Educational Needs pupils at Ysgol y Gwendraeth and feeder primary schools are engaged about any changes in provision at the earliest opportunity.

We also welcome the progression from a 2C to a 2B bilingual school. Whilst assessment of the school's compliance in delivering a bilingual curriculum will inevitably take place through Estyn inspections, we recommend the local authority implements a support mechanism for Ysgol Dyffryn Aman to ensure the school is supported through the transitional phase to delivering the higher output of Welsh medium courses. We also reiterate our calls for collaboration between Ysgol Dyffryn Aman and Coleg Sir Gar to help increase the availability of Welsh language courses at the further education institution.

We note the proposal to extend the catchment area of Ysgol Dyffryn Aman southwards into the Gwendraeth valley; an inevitable consequence of the authority's proposals for one 2A school in the Gwendraeth area.

It is crucial that a comprehensive transport plan is available for all parents and pupils who will find themselves within the new catchment area. Robust legislation is in place for the provision of school transport and we would urge the local authority to ensure parents and pupils are fully aware of the transport provision available from the local authority at the earliest opportunity.

The proposal for Cwm Gwendraeth

We welcome the continuation of Ysgol Maes yr Yrfa as a category 2A school. During the initial stages of the local authority's informal consultation a small number of concerns were raised at the loss of a bilingual school within the Gwendraeth area.

There is undoubtedly a strong case to ensure Welsh medium education in the form of a 2A category school remains in the area and any sense of opposition to the closure of Ysgol y Gwendraeth appears to have diminished.

The local authority must continue to liaise with pupils and parents in order to reach a conclusion regarding the GCSE provision for Year 10 and 11 Ysgol y Gwendraeth pupils in 2014 and 2015. The delivery of education should always remain the priority and cannot be allowed to be lost in the reorganisation/closure of school buildings. The authority must therefore publish its proposals at the earliest opportunity.

The Proposal for Dyffryn Tywi

It is with regret that we must express our disappointment with the consultation process as a whole in relation to Ysgol Pantycelyn and Ysgol Tregib. We have received a catalogue of representations from constituents and have held a series of meetings with residents, parents and pupils concerning the poor level of transparency in the process.

The authority will be aware of our concerns regarding the procurement of Atkins Ltd. to undertake the technical appraisal of a new site.

The authority has confirmed in a Freedom of Information request that no role / remit / terms of reference had been established before Atkins Ltd. was engaged, and that all information was provided to Atkins Ltd. in meetings that were not minuted or recorded. We fail to see how a full tendering process could have been undertaken without a clear direction for external companies to submit a bid for the work. Whilst our concerns remain unanswered by the authority, we are left with no alternative but to consider the selection of Llandeilo as the preferred location to be *fait accompli*.

We believe the authority needs to publish the full site appraisal reports for both the land at Lodge Farm, Llandeilo and for the 'Old Burden's site' along the A40. The local authority must fully outline why it is minded to prefer the site in Llandeilo.

Many concerns have been raised by parents relating to the flooding and transport arrangements. The authority must publish the information it holds regarding flooding concerns on or around the proposed site in Llandeilo.

The authority will of course be aware of the major logistical challenge that lies ahead in terms of transport for the pupils. As is the case for the Ysgol Cwm Gwendraeth proposed arrangements, it is crucial that a comprehensive transport plan is available for all parents and pupils from the Llandovery and surrounding areas. Robust legislation is in place for the provision of school transport and we would urge the local authority to ensure parents and pupils are fully aware of the transport provision available from the local authority at the earliest opportunity.

We recommend the publication of information which demonstrates the consideration given by the local authority to increased traffic levels in Llandeilo in light of the town being designated as an Air Quality Management Area.

We welcome the progression of the new school to a category 2B bilingual school. In saying that, we do not believe that the authority has carried out a full and proper consultation on the demand for Welsh medium education and we are yet to be convinced that 2B education is sufficient to ensure continuity from primary schools in the area.

The availability of Welsh medium courses is an historical problem for the local authority. As the authority is insistent on a category 2B school we require reassurance that children will have choice to pursue subjects though the medium of Welsh. Similarly to Ysgol Dyffryn Aman, assessment of the school's compliance in delivering a bilingual curriculum will inevitably take place through Estyn inspections. We do however recommend the local authority implements a support mechanism for the new school to ensure it is supported through the transitional phase to delivering a higher output of Welsh language courses.

We would like to congratulate Ysgol Pantycelyn for the improvements indicated in the most recent Estyn inspection report since the new acting head has been in place – “The dynamic leadership and management of the interim headteacher, well supported by the senior team, has already brought about significant improvements”.

The local authority cannot allow Llandovery to become an education desert. The authority must recognise the need for a form of ‘institution’, possibly within the public sector; to be based in Llandovery should the authority's preferred option of the closure of Ysgol Pantycelyn be implemented.

The authority has a duty to ensure the status of Llandovery, as a very important town within Carmarthenshire, is not damaged should Ysgol Pantycelyn close. We recommended an assessment of the town is undertaken at the earliest

opportunity to consider what public services and facilities are available, and what can be improved to ensure Llandovery remains an attractive town for visitors and those wishing to make a home in Carmarthenshire.

Conclusion

In conclusion we believe there is broad support to the proposals for Ysgol Maes yr Yrfa, Ysgol y Gwendraeth and Ysgol Dyffryn Aman. The authority must acknowledge the deep lack of confidence in the process from those living in and around the Llandovery area.

It is clear that many plans have already been drawn out for the future of the schools; the consultation document itself demonstrates examples of extensions to existing schools and a further illustration for the proposed new school. Appreciating the need for the authority to be as prepared as possible, this does not sit well with parents and pupils who are being consulted on future plans when the authority has clearly spent significant sums of money on what it believes to be the way forward.

Given that all plans have been drawn up for the three schools, as a demonstration of transparency we recommend the authority publicises all estimated costs for all building works.

The authority must look to promoting a “Community-Focused Schools” agenda in which school facilities are opened up to the community. Whether this is the swimming pool or library, we believe there is scope for the local authority, in its endeavour to make efficiency savings, to look at what services can be opened up for community use. Naturally, the welfare of pupils and teachers is paramount and such an agenda would dictate the layout/security arrangements of the school.

Finally, we believe the consultation process has indeed lacked transparency. The authority must, as a matter of urgency, publicise all information it has regarding the location of the new school in Dyffryn Tywi. The addressing of flooding/traffic concerns should not be postponed until Planning Permission is requested. Pupils and parents need answers to their concerns. Any form of stalling will not help raise an already low level of trust in the local authority.



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