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Welsh Conservative Assembly Member for South Wales West

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Ein cyf / Our ref: SD/CL/
2 January 2019

Dear Sophie

Swansea Council Cabinet decision to close Craigeffnparc Primary School

I was disappointed to see that Swansea Council's Cabinet decided, on Thursday 20th December 2018, to proceed with their proposal to close Craigeffnparc Primary School.

I wrote to the Cabinet more than once before the decision was made, highlighting the principles underlying the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act ("the Act") and its requirements. I have not had a response from the Cabinet addressing the points raised in my correspondence.

While I appreciate that you may not wish to comment on an individual case, I would be very grateful for your general advice on how the Act should be applied (questions in bold) when it comes to considering school closures, bearing in mind other considerations which officers and councillors would need to address; the weighting which should be given to the Act in decisions of this nature, in particular the balance between planning for sustainable communities and other considerations.

By way of example, the consultation documents and final report relating to this closure do not promote the existence of the Act so that young people, staff, parents and villagers might consider its application. **Would you expect its provisions to be brought to their attention in the consultation document and the final report?** (I include the latter as objections may be raised to the decision made on the basis of the final report). It is also far from apparent that Cabinet members received training in balancing considerations: In the Cabinet's final report following consultation, it was noted merely that "Cabinet have also been reminded of Swansea Council's duty under the Future Generations Act" without summarising what that advice was. **Would you expect to see such a summary so that interested parties would know what Cabinet members were told as well as benefiting from that advice themselves?**

The final report, on which the decision to close this particular school was made, referred to the Act in the following way:

The Objectives definition of communities is not restricted to specific physical communities of any particular size but includes communities of interest too. The council's plans support the development of a new community which will be created at Clydach Primary School.

Arguably, this is an opportunity to be part of a more diverse community with potential benefits in terms of experiencing a wider range of cultures, languages and communities that can enrich pupils' experience. The most relevant of the 3 steps under the Objective is 'individuals are connected and feel a sense of belonging' and, while this is true of a small school community, it is also true of larger school communities which tend to benefit from greater intercultural opportunities.

A "new community" is one thing: An existing community whose sustainability is influenced by the existence of its primary school is another. Craigcfnparc is a long-established, rural community in its own right, represented by its own community council. It is different in character and history from that of post-industrial Clydach. It is not apparent, from the papers, how the Cabinet considered the future impact that closing the school could have on the community of Craigcfnparc itself. The final report speaks only of the perceived benefits of a new community without any reference to the negative effect on the existing community, one which extends beyond the school. I find it interesting that the issue of connection and sense of belonging is identified as "the most relevant" step under the Act in making this decision, yet there is no examination of either the "small school community" or the actual village community. The community impact assessment – such as it was - was beyond woeful in its lack of information or evidence adduced.

What guidance does your office provide to Councils to help them balance the needs of neighbouring communities and, in decisions which can materially affect those communities, what criteria, level of detail and evidence would you expect to see to in community impact assessments?

In response to many consultation submissions regarding the use of the school by the community and its role in village life, it is concerning that the final report states, without citing any statutory authority:

This proposal has been made for educational reasons and these must be paramount over a perceived impact on the community

In this case, the Council's assessment of the quality of education at this school, especially looking forward, is open to challenge, as is the officials' view of the community use of the school. That notwithstanding, the case is presented as better education coming *at the cost* of a particular community rather than the sustainability of both being a possibility. I would not argue against a child's welfare being paramount, but welfare goes beyond education. I am not convinced that officials offered a balanced view on the option of improving the education offer at this school and helping community cohesion at the same time, weighting the information in the consultation documents in favour of closure and, thereby, risking the sustainability of the village.

In helping them plan long-term, what guidance does your office give to council officials and councillors about how to evaluate the chances of good outcomes across a greater range of ostensibly competing challenges?

Finally, the final report was very thorough in citing specific consultation responses and offering explanations of how those views were considered before accepting or rebutting them (although a considerable number were simply "Noted", offering no illumination.) Tellingly, no comment at all was offered to the observation of the local county councillor quoted as follows:

Councillor commented – Wellbeing of Future Generations Act not taken into account in papers {to Cabinet} in June. Will it be taken into account at next stage?

What evidence would you expect to see, in a report of this nature, to confirm that the requirements of the Act have been complied with?

I would be grateful if you could let me know what actions are open to you in the event of concerns such as this being raised with you. In addition, I would also be grateful to hear from you with replies to my questions, accepting that you may have to answer them in general terms rather than in connection with this particular decision.

If you need any further information, please do let me know.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Suzy Davies". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Suzy Davies AM/AC

Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Education & Welsh Language

Ysgrifennydd Cabinet yr Wrthblaid dros Addysg a'r Iaith Gymraeg