

P-04-496 Ysgolion Pob Oed
P-04-496 Through Schools

[1] **William Powell:** I ask Dawn Docx and Anna Gresty of the St Brigid's Action Group to stand-by: we will just organise the nameplates and then we will get under way.

[2] Croeso cynnes. It is great to see you again, Dawn, and to meet you, Anna. I wonder whether you would introduce yourselves briefly just to check the sound levels and also give us a brief update on developments, which I know have been broadly positive and widely covered in the last couple of weeks with regard to the specific issues in your campaign.

[3] **Ms Docx:** Thank you very much. Diolch yn fawr for the opportunity to be able to give some background to our concerns, as well as an update. My name is Dawn Docx, I am the lead petitioner. I am also the parent of a pupil at St Brigid's School.

[4] **Ms Gresty:** I am Anna Gresty, and I am the parent of a pupil at St Brigid's and a member of the action group.

[5] **William Powell:** Thank you.

[6] **Ms Docx:** Since the consultation closed on the proposed merger of the two schools—obviously, we will talk about that in more detail later—the results of that consultation have been considered by Denbighshire County Council, and it has decided not to go ahead with phase 1, which was the closure of two schools, which are over 10 miles apart, and combining them to be, in effect, one school, but on two sites. Its intention is to go forward with the phase 2 of the consultation, which is to close both schools once they have built the new school on a different site. Thank you very much.

[7] **William Powell:** Excellent. Please refresh your glasses with the water. So, clearly, in that case, there has been significant progress in terms of the local issue at this stage, in terms of getting that further involvement.

[8] **Ms Docx:** Yes, I think that what we are asking for is Welsh Government guidance around school mergers and closures—not just for St Brigid's, but for other schools as well.

[9] **William Powell:** Absolutely. I was just going to ask you to clarify the points that you think are of wider application across Wales, particularly, for example, in situations where there is not such a concerted, articulate group as has assembled around the St Brigid's case to protect school communities and wider communities against something inappropriate happening as the result of a particular bureaucratic decision.

[10] **Ms Docx:** Thank you. We particularly wanted to focus on through schools, which, as you are aware, are primary, secondary and sixth form, because, obviously, having pupils aged from three to 19 brings additional complexities to any of these changes.

[11] **William Powell:** Like pastoral things and all sorts of other matters.

[12] **Ms Docx:** We believe that this guidance could be necessary for other schools, and not just through schools, but schools throughout Wales that may be facing closures and mergers. We do understand that there has to be development and improvement in the infrastructure of our education establishments, and we do know about the guidance that surrounds the twenty-first century schools funding, but we believe that it is not strong enough, because—dare I say it?—in their dash for cash, local authorities may well be tempted to produce a plan with an eye to the future, or the vision of the new school that they wish to build, with very little

consideration for the impact that it has on the current pupils or, indeed, on pupils moving into the schools. The whole process takes years, and these are years that we do not get back for our children's education.

[13] We are using St Brigid's as a case study, as you know, and it is a very popular and oversubscribed school, very much like Prestatyn High. Unlike Prestatyn High School, however, we have not been able to have the capital to expand and to meet that demand. As parents, we found ourselves with this plan that Denbighshire County Council had created, where the idea was that it would close both schools and then reopen on the same two sites, over 10 miles apart, and with very little consideration of the practicalities of this arrangement. So, when we ask how it would work, whether the children would be bussed from one site to another, and whether the teachers would be driving up and down in their cars, the answer that we received was that it would be up to the new headteacher and the governors to work out how that would work in practice. We do not think that that was good enough, really.

11:45

[14] We also believe that there was very little consideration of children with special educational needs or medical needs. Although an equality impact assessment needs to be undertaken, it certainly was not developed to the extent that it should be—and this is why Anna is with me. Anna has a son, Jake, who is seven—

[15] **Ms Gresty:** Do you want me to—

[16] **Ms Docx:** Yes; thanks.

[17] **Ms Gresty:** Go on, then; I will.

[18] Jake is seven and has a life-limiting illness. So, obviously, his medical needs are quite great, and the equality impact statement had no provision for how things would change or how his needs would be met. When I asked the question at the consultation meeting of how they would meet his additional needs, they just said, 'Well, this is why we're here'. So, I said, 'Well, I'm asking this question now', and there was no attempt to engage with children with medical needs or special educational needs, and there was no consideration given to those children. I think that they needed to look at how they were going to meet those needs, because I know that St Brigid's meets the needs of children quite well in a through-school setup. It needs to be considered.

[19] **William Powell:** In any management of change of that sort, children with specific conditions are the most vulnerable to suffer, are they not?

[20] **Ms Gresty:** Yes, and they will suffer. They just did not seem to understand that.

[21] **Bethan Jenkins:** Did they say that they did not have guidance from Government? What was the reason given for why they did not come up with that initially, so that you had to prompt them for an answer?

[22] **Ms Gresty:** They did not give any sort of reason. I asked quite a long, convoluted question about how they were going to meet all these different needs, and when it was minuted, it was, 'A parent asked how they were going to interact with parents'. I did not ask that; I asked how they were going to meet specific needs, and there was no understanding of the requirement by the Welsh Government to meet the needs of children with additional needs.

[23] **Bethan Jenkins:** Where has that gone now? Where does that sit now in the scheme

of things for the development and progression of the discussions?

[24] **Ms Docx:** The intention now is to move to phase 2 of the consultation, in which they will consult on the idea of building a new, combined school on a different site. What we would want to see is much more careful consideration of some of these issues that we have raised and have put in writing during the first phase of the consultation, so that we can see that the issue is being addressed, rather than it being left to petitioners to try to prompt the local council regarding the need to think about these things.

[25] We note the response from the Minister, and he obviously thinks that the code is sufficient. However, our experience is that it is not really sufficient and that more needs to be available for local authorities, which have the ultimate responsibility. However, it needs to be able to show that they have considered these things, not simply at the end of a consultation process when we have explained it all to it.

[26] We also are very pleased to see that the Minister recognises that through-school education is very valuable. Although, maybe, it is not the place of the Welsh Government to actively promote it, given that a number of through schools are being built or exist in west Wales, we think that it is right that we promote the benefits of through schools and the fact that it makes a real difference to pupils moving into year 7. They do not have a dip in educational attainment.

[27] **William Powell:** The issues of transition do not exist in the same way, do they?

[28] We have the opportunity to represent the views that you have expressed today and, when we have a transcript of today's session, we will feed that back to the Minister. It would also be helpful for us if you could, together with colleagues, reflect on your response to the Minister. You have given an oral response today, but if you could give a considered view, taking into account the views of other campaigners and others involved in the petition, it would help things considerably.

[29] **Bethan Jenkins:** What has the Welsh Local Government Association said on this? Have you talked to the WLGA? Obviously, to play devil's advocate for a minute, the Welsh Government would say that, if it was to micromanage and be so prescriptive, where would it start and end on these things, because education budgets are given to local government to administer. So, have you spoken to the WLGA to see what is done in other parts of Wales, so that best practice can be shared?

[30] **Ms Docx:** No, we have not, but that is a useful suggestion; thank you.

[31] **William Powell:** That is something that we as a committee can also consider doing in the next phase, after 26 November. Russell, you have been very patient.

[32] **Russell George:** My question was very similar to the one that Bethan asked. Ultimately, these are decisions for the local authority and, once again, playing devil's advocate, what can happen or what some people argue is that too much guidance from Welsh Government can be restrictive for the local authority, particularly because the geography in different areas across Wales is so different. What are your views on that?

[33] **Ms Docx:** The difficulty is that there are certain directions, such as the need to remove surplus school places, and the letter states that the focus has to be on educational achievement. We would say that we have a school here that is achieving really excellent results and yet, because of the surplus school places issue at the other school involved in the merger, they are being overridden by the need to get the money and therefore address surplus places, and it has not been thought out with regard to the way in which this will work out here

and now for the pupils involved at both schools. When we took the wider petition out, we got 3,300 signatures.

[34] **William Powell:** Clearly, this is an issue of concern, not just in your own community, but potentially, as you said, across Wales.

[35] **Ms Docx:** Yes, it could be.

[36] **William Powell:** If there is a final message that you would like to leave us with today for us to take away and to inform our consideration of the evidence on 26 November, which is when we shall do that, we would be very grateful for you to share it with us now.

[37] **Ms Docx:** It is really about having a broader consideration than is in the guidance now. There is also the matter of the complexities of through schools, and the fact that we do not want to do away with through schools, because we see the advantages of them. It is a question of whether that is taken into account when closures and mergers are considered.

[38] **William Powell:** Do you have any view on the weight given to the views of diocesan authorities in the case of faith schools, and whether any additional guidance or support might be helpful there, because I realise that that is factor in your particular case?

[39] **Ms Docx:** We would not know the answer to that. With our case, we get the impression that the opinion of the two diocese is very important, and they are pushing for the concept of the faith school, which does not seem to have the same general enthusiasm from parents.

[40] **William Powell:** That is useful.

[41] Diolch yn fawr am ddod heddiw ac Thank you for coming today and for the
am y sesiwn y bore yma. session this morning.

[42] We are extremely grateful to you for having come here to Prestatyn High School to speak to us in person. We will take that forward, because of time constraints, at our next meeting on 26 November. We look forward very much to receiving your correspondence in the meantime, in terms of a fuller response to the letter that we received from Huw Lewis. Diolch yn fawr iawn.