

Leighton Andrews AC / AM
Y Gweinidog Addysg a Sgiliau
Minister for Education and Skills



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-04-323
Ein cyf/Our ref LA/05438/11

William Powell AM

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Dear William

29 July 2011

Thank you for your letter of 29 June and the petition submitted by Leila Kiersch, which collected 244 signatures. The petition essentially urged the retention of small schools, particularly in rural communities, and challenged a perceived preference, on the part of the Welsh Government, for new schools rather than the refurbishment of existing schools.

I would firstly like to clarify the position on small rural school closures. Between 1999 and 2010, some 50 small rural schools closed. At the same time a significant number of schools in other areas, not all of which might be described as small, closed due to reorganisation and reconfiguration. It can therefore be seen that the closure of small schools must be seen as part of a much wider process of reconfiguring learning provision across Wales.

In around half of the small rural school cases cited above, decisions were taken locally because no-one had objected. In several instances few or no pupils remained at the point of closure. The reconfiguration of schools has resulted directly from the substantial decline in pupil numbers that has been evident during the same period, exemplified by the decline in the number of primary school pupils from 291,712 to 257,445 in the period 1999 to 2010, a reduction of well over 30,000 in the primary school population. It is entirely appropriate that local authorities should plan and if necessary restructure school provision in order to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of the local population so that the resources available for education may be targeted directly at meeting the needs of learners. The need for such action has been highlighted in the Frontline Resources Review, and its update report published earlier this year.

It is for local authorities to decide which schools they will continue to maintain, out of the resources provided to them in the Revenue Support Grant settlement and their own revenues; indeed it is the case that many local authorities provide additional support to small schools through their funding formulae for schools, in order to address the inevitable challenges that such schools face. In addition, the School Effectiveness Grant, which supports my three key priorities of improving standards in literacy, in numeracy, and reducing the impact of poverty on attainment, is available to all schools regardless of size.

Statutory procedures under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 are necessary prior to school closures being implemented. These procedures provide for consultation to be conducted with all those who could be affected, and are designed to ensure that those with an interest have an opportunity to make representations. Where proposals are submitted to me for determination because objections have been lodged during the time available for the purpose, I pay close attention to whether those who could be affected have been consulted.

I also pay attention to expected travel times when considering closure proposals and would raise concerns if these were to exceed 45 minutes one-way for primary aged pupils. I am not aware of any closures that have caused such concerns in recent years. In addition checks are carried out to ensure that schools receiving pupils are sufficiently large and resourced so that the addition of pupils would not adversely affect educational standards. I also consider the impact that closures might have on the community, and on the Welsh language. The factors considered by me when I am required to determine contested proposals, which include considerations relating to costs, are set out in full in Circular 21/09 which can be found through the following link.

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/publications/circulars/schoolorganisation/:jsessionid=vLJhTdbHnZ6ZFHHNPMGrLft4QVpgBJpgWTMB5Q43yy2xnyQr5JTr!889719512?lang=en>

Whilst research information precisely matching that described by the petitioners may not be available, they may wish to be aware that Estyn undertook research into the effect of school size on outcomes. Their research, published in 2006 as "Small Primary Schools in Wales" found that there was no link between school size and performance and that schools of all sizes can provide education of a high quality. I have recently asked Estyn to re-visit this research in order to establish whether these conclusions still hold true. Estyn are currently planning this work and can be expected to advise me of their findings in this regard within the next 2 years.

I recognise the importance of children being consulted on decisions in relation to school organisation which affect them. In response to concerns raised by the Children's Commissioner for Wales in reports regarding this issue, the revised circular on school organisation (Circular 21/09), sets the expectation that local authorities will include children and young people in consultation exercises when changes to schools are proposed, and this was welcomed by the Children's Commissioner for Wales in his most recent report.

You may be aware that further change to the process for reorganising schools is being considered and the Children's Commissioner has already engaged with the consultation process that was carried out relatively recently. In devising a revised process, I will give full consideration to points raised by him, and to obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Turning to the points raised in respect of capital expenditure, the Welsh Government in collaboration with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) has, through the 21st Century Schools Programme set ambitious targets for the improvement of school buildings. It has not, however, prescribed to local authorities how such improvements should be made. Capital investment proposals are considered on their merits and whilst it is expected that projects for which funding is being sought would achieve efficiencies along with benefits to learners, there is no expectation that a particular type of school should be provided, or position on whether new build is preferable to refurbishment.

The programme is more than a building programme and one of the main aims is to deliver a 21st Century Schools Standard for all schools in Wales which reduces recurrent costs, energy consumption and carbon emissions.

The standard is to assist with understanding and applying sustainable design, focusing on energy use and carbon dioxide emissions in school design and refurbishment. It relates to other aspects of sustainability including the indoor environment, green space, attractiveness of design, quality and durability of the building and sustainability of construction materials.

Ultimately, any decisions regarding investment in schools are a matter for individual local authorities based on need and circumstance.

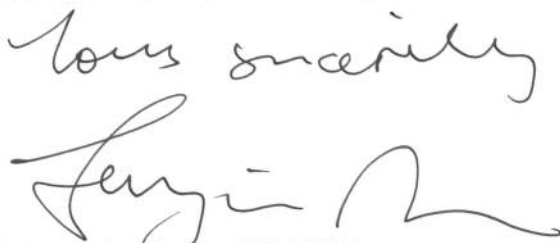
Whilst from time to time, the Welsh Government has adopted the Audit Commission's definition of a small school for the purpose of statistics or the allocation of grant, it has not been commended to local authorities or others as a minimum size of school. Indeed it is for local authorities to decide what size of school is appropriate to their area, in accordance with their duty to plan and provide schools to meet the needs of the local population.

Finally, the petitioners might like to note that in 2008/2009 the Rural Development Sub Committee of the National Assembly for Wales conducted an inquiry into rural school reorganisation, which reported in December 2008. The report of the inquiry, and my predecessor's response can be found at the following link.

http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-third-assembly/bus-committees/bus-committees-scrutiny-committees/bus-committees-third-rd-home/inquiries-3/rdc3_inq_ruralschools.htm

Paragraphs 5.10-5.30 of that report consider the issue of "Impact on the community" in some detail and provide a thoughtful and nuanced view of the matter which I would commend to the petition committee's attention. I would like to particularly draw attention to the Committee's view in paragraph 5.29, in respect of the loss of a school as a community resource, that "this is not sufficient reason to retain unsustainable, outdated premises. The principal purpose of a school must be to provide the best education possible for the children it serves. Any further community benefit is an additional advantage but cannot be used as a reason to support the retention of a school where that school may not be delivering the best educational opportunities for its pupils".

I hope that my response is helpful to the committee's consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leighton Andrews', written in a cursive style.

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