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Jeremy Miles MS
Minister for Education and the Welsh Language
Welsh Government
By email

13 February 2024

Re: Conwy Council's Educational Cuts

Dear Minister of Education and Welsh Language, Jeremy,

I am writing to you today regarding the education cuts that the Cabinet of Conwy Borough County Council are proposing to make this financial year. As you can imagine these cuts have prompted widespread concern and condemnation from governing bodies, teachers, parents and carers, who are fearful that these cuts will have wide and far-reaching consequences for the children of Conwy.

Last week, every headteacher in Conwy signed a letter condemning the Council for proposing to cut school budgets by 6-10%. They explained that: "The financial situation in schools is now critical and there can be no doubt that further cuts to school budgets will have a significant impact on what we can provide for our pupils." The letter goes on to explain that job losses and redundancies in schools will undoubtedly follow. This will severely affect their ability to offer the additional services – such as Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Welsh language support – that our communities crucially rely on. Essentially, it will be our children who suffer most.

This has worried a great number of my constituents, many of which have written to me expressing their concern. They have highlighted that the consequences will be extensive and comprehensive. Firstly, cuts to the education budget will mean that additional services currently being offered to those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities will be severely affected. Many of my constituents feel that the cuts will inevitable mean a decline in the support currently offered as support staff are made redundant and those requiring additional support are left behind. As one constituent pointed out, "10 minutes per day with support staff in school has had enormous positive benefits for my son, this can't be taken away from him."

Moreover, this poses dire consequences for the future of the Welsh language. Losing Welsh speaking support staff will invariably mean that a Welsh medium education will diminish. As one of my constituents asks: "With the potential cuts, how does the Welsh Government aim to fulfil and reach their educational target of 1 million Welsh speakers?"

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Secondly, at a time when we there are multiple housing projects underway here in Conwy, there exists a real fear that class sizes will balloon and the already reduced additional support will be further stretched to breaking point. Indeed, one constituent has asked: "How is the school expected to manage with the prospective influx of children from new developments, and how will we see standards rise with these changes?"

Thirdly, sustained cutting of educational budgets will have detrimental effects on everything from children's mental health, the economy and anti-social behaviour. It will severely hamper our ability to progress as a society, manifesting considerable unforeseen long-term consequences. As one constituent commented: "By cutting funds from schooling we are merely storing up trouble for the future, in every sector of society and which will inevitably cost more in the future."

This clearly outlines the extent to which these cuts will affect, not only our children, but the very future of Conwy and Wales itself. In short, these cuts will devastate all communities across the county – they must be reversed.

It seems prudent to outline how we got to this point. I am well aware that as a nation we are facing significant financial hardship. Economic fallout still plagues our everyday lives and we must work hard to redress this. However, there are other two prominent factors at play that have precipitated the situation we are in today.

Firstly, Conwy has received the lowest increase settlement of only £3,975 million from 2023-24; a reduction in real terms. This represents a 2% increase on 2022/2023 – this is, I note, 1% less than the national average of 3%. This is clearly unsustainable. Furthermore, as has been previously noted, a key concern is that often outdated data being used to allocate funding, some of it from the John Major era. Therefore, I would like to ask you if you could offer an explanation behind the decision making of the 2% settlement and what improvements will be made to the funding formula.

Moreover, while I understand the need for some to access free school meals, this should not be universal and the recent plans for blanket free school meals will further stretch an already strained budget. It is my belief that those who are fortunate enough to be able to pay for their children's lunch should pay. It would be only a minor difference to those who can afford meals, and it would have a profound impact on the budgets of schools nationally. Indeed, the current Welsh Government has already increased the food and nutrition budget by £22.5 million in the 2023/24 budget which, clearly, is money being redirected away from more urgent educational services, such as for staff training and retention.

Secondly, Conwy Council are facing a £25m hole in their finances which is fundamentally the reason behind the cuts. No doubt the decreased settlement over a number of years has led to a bleak financial outlook for Conwy Council. However, this is not the only reason for the funding shortfall (although I note this is the Council's sole reasoning for the cuts) but also due to their own fiscal mismanagement.

In 2018 it was revealed that Conwy Council's new headquarters would cost the people of Conwy a staggering £58m in rent. The £35m building was funded by financial backers however, the rent is around £1.45m annually. All repairs were also expected to be carried out by the Council, not the landlord, and to add insult to injury after the 40 years the Council have the option to buy the building for a £1 . As was identified at the time by campaigners: "Taxpayers want to see their hard earned money spent on essential services not shiny new offices for council bureaucrats."

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Earlier this year it was revealed that the Council spent £160,000 on the public toilet project at Gwydir Park. While the new ones are being completed, £21,000 of this had to be spent on the hire of portable toilets. What is most concerning though is that this huge expenditure could have been avoided through placing the public facilities in the long closed, Conwy Council owned café in the park.

Lastly, in 2016 Conwy Council took out a 35 year lease on four industrial units at a cost of £240,000 per annum which subsequently turned out to be unusable. The units were intended to be for storing the Council's HGVs. However, a report uncovered that a lack of "physical due diligence" on part of the Council meant that they were unaware of issues with the foundations. Thus, the units were unable to be used for their intended purpose.

As you can imagine, I am deeply saddened and concerned by the proposed cuts to Conwy's educational budget and I hope this letter goes some way to outline the scale of the consequences we face and how we have arrived at this dismal situation. As the Minister for Education, and prospective First Minister, it falls to you to ensure that the future of all our children, of all backgrounds and abilities, are safeguarded.

We stand on the precipice of a vital moment and it is the decisions of here and now that will shape the future of Wales. You must make the right choice. Step up to protect and preserve the future of education in Conwy.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Janet".

Janet Finch-Saunders MS/AS