

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

22 May 2019

**Corinna Davidson – Statement regarding agenda item 6
Specials Schools Consultation**

To Councillor Laura Mayes – Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills

Statement

Prior to the publication of the Special Schools consultation report, my friend asked me: “What is your greatest fear?” I replied: “To have the SAME proposal put on the table AGAIN and to then realise that our most vulnerable children with SEND are merely reduced to money and cost cutting”

And here I am, looking at a proposal that in essence proposes the same “deal” as before.

The purpose of the report is to bring to Cabinet the responses from Phase 1 and 2 of the consultation on a proposal to close three special schools (St Nicholas School, Larkrise and Rowdeford) and open ONE new school at Rowde. Having read the report, I feel it is my duty to point out a **FEW** examples of inaccuracies, statements and arguments which make no sense at all and I will also offer some clarifications.

Needless to say what predominately stands out here is the fact that the one school proposal is NOT supported by the majority of stakeholders. This was the case in Phase 1 and is still the case in Phase 2. However, we are reminded in the report that it is important to remember that 45% **DID** support the proposal, even though the reasons for rejecting the proposal far outweigh the reasons for its support. **The Children and Families Act 2014 states that Local Authorities MUST take into account the views, wishes and feelings of children, young people AND their parents and include them in their decision making to achieve the best possible educational and OTHER outcomes.**

I hope you agree that the reasons for **REJECTING** the proposal are valid and varied, including reasons of real fear...**NOT** fear of change but fear that the needs of the most complex SEND children have been **disregarded** and completely **minimised**.

I stood here before and talked about the importance of inclusion. On page 40 the report mentions that parents fear that if children with SEND, particularly those with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD) and Severe Learning Disabilities (SLD,) are not visible in the communities in which they live, communities would be

less inclusive. Cabinet members, this not an unreasonable fear! Research supports an education system which **has an ethos that values diversity, promotes equality and recognises the MUTUAL benefit and contribution of children and young people, with and without a disability, when they are educated together.** The report shows percentages of how many children ACTUALLY go to school in the community they live in. However, these figures only relate to St Nicholas and Larkrise schools. No figures are delivered applying the same to Rowdeford. I pointed out this very same omission at the first round of consultation and I am still awaiting an answer! Fact is though that the number of children visible in the community close to where they live will be very small, smaller than it currently is. This proposal thereby increases discrimination and prejudice against our children in north Wiltshire.

The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) states that schools, and other public bodies are required to have due regard to the need to IMPROVE equality of opportunity. This involves having due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination and to tackle prejudice and promote understanding by fostering good relations between different groups of people: those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

The report argues that 70% of children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are indeed educated in a school in their local primary or secondary school ensuring that all communities continue to interact with children with special educational needs however, this is preposterous. Having a child with high functioning autism, dyslexia and mild learning disabilities in their classroom is NOT the same as having one who is non-verbal, in a wheelchair, on oxygen, and/or has profound and multiple learning disabilities. It is evident that Wiltshire Council failed to look up the definition of inclusive education, leaving an air of arrogance and ignorance in their report.

Article 24 (2)(b) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires states to ensure that persons with disabilities can access an INCUSIVE, QUALITY and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others. Students must be able to access education WITHIN THE COMMUNITY in which they live, which means the educational environment must be reachable for persons with disabilities, including through SAFE transport.

On page 41 the report states that “Families themselves are ensuring that any barriers are broken down in their everyday lives by going to the shops, the pool or the cinema with their children.” Please let me enlighten you that this statement is a HUGE preconceived notion and is absolutely NOT the case for families living, for example with mental health problems, parents/carers who have disabilities and other medical issues themselves, poverty and deprivation! In fact we know that all these factors have a negative impact on social participation.

The council further explains that it funds a wide range of out of school/short break activities for children with SEND in the communities in which they live. However, the report does not mention that the age range, accessing for example youth clubs, was cut from 25 to 18. It also omits that the times and sessions have been slashed. For

example youth clubs are no longer running during the school holidays, a time when children and young people with SEND are most at risk of social isolation.

In its conclusion the report AGREES that the one school option DEPRIVES other communities of inclusive engagement with children/young people with SEND.

It is also evident that a one school option will indeed **isolate** children and young people with SLD and PMLD from their peers. WC seems to keep forgetting that there is a reason why Rowdeford works so brilliantly as it is now. Because it is not a 400 pupil school and it serves children with very different needs compared to those learners in St. Nicholas and Larkrise. I wish Cabinet members would not have cancelled the scheduled visit to St Nicholas school and not only have had a look around an empty Larkrise. I don't know if you made it to Rowdeford. The point is you are the decision makers here and I ask myself how is it possible to make a decision on recommendations based on a report full of flaws AND without actually not meeting those who would be affected by this the most - pupils from St Nicholas and Larkrise.

The report states on page 54 that Wiltshire SEND Action which I am also part of, raised with officers that a preferred location for a single school would be Melksham, Trowbridge or Chippenham. This is not a true representation of what was said. What was said was that we would NEVER be in favour of a one school option but if WC had proposed that they build one school in Melksham for example then many of our arguments regarding inclusion wouldn't be appropriate as Melksham is a town and is local for some of our children. I can also confirm that there was NEVER a wish expressed to have a one school option located in Chippenham or Trowbridge by Wiltshire SEND Action. This is fabricated by officers.

With regards to Coproduction, page 54, I am attaching a statement from a childcare professional who is prevented by contract from speaking publicly and I wonder who else is in this very same position? (Appendix1) Who else is prevented from voicing their opinions for fear of being reprimanded?

Moving on to Costs and Feasibility on page 60– you will be glad to hear that I have not much to say about this because I acknowledge the fact that I am not a number cruncher. I easily admit that and leave this to people who are more experienced in this field. Therefore it is beyond me, why more weight and consideration was not given to the needs of the most complex SEND children and their parents, who are after all the experts of their children? While officers undoubtedly listened ...the proposal shows no solutions to ensure the well-being of the majority of St Nicholas and Larkrise children. Otherwise I would not be standing here.

Back to page 60 – the expected costs for fixtures, fittings and equipment is £1m. I would class a hydro pool as equipment. Regardless of where the hydro pool fits into the predicted costs in the report, I hope it is acknowledged that at a school the size of the proposed, will need to house at least 4 hydro pools or a few hydro pools and a swimming pool. I could not spot any pool buildings on the map but trust there will be enough space? The cost of building one hydro pool at St. Nicholas was £700.000.

Page 62 mentions the concerns raised about the relative benefits of a rural versus urban education for children with SEND. The report acknowledges that parents and staff from St Nicholas and Larkrise strongly believe a rural setting prevents children from learning to access shops and facilities and would lead to fewer people WITHOUT SEND being in communication with children with SEND. It then argues the fact that rural learning is of equal importance. Can I point out that one statement has nothing to do with the other. One relates to social inclusion, the other about the benefits of outdoor education. You can't compare the two to form an argument.

What should have been pointed out is that Rowdeford is the perfect provision for its current pupils with MLD. All evidence in the report point to this and these learners are more likely to meet the outcomes set out in their EHCP which prepares them for adult life, the transitioning to adulthood. **However, under The Children and Families Act 2014 and regulations, the Local Authority MUST ensure there are pathways into employment, independent living, participation in their community and good health by using information from the EHC plans. The Act further states that preparing for adulthood should start from the earliest years. An EHC plan is a legally binding document and will have participation in the community as an outcome incorporated from an early age. To achieve this for 400 pupils educated in a rural location will be very costly as everyone will rely on transport.** Consequently parents/carers can, by rights, choose an out of county provision.

There is no doubt that being educated in a rural location such as Rowdeford brings with it many benefits. It has been pointed out in the report many times, however it does not mean St Nicholas and Larkrise do not offer any outdoor learning opportunities. I would like to point out that both schools have sensory gardens and participate in a specialised learning approach called Forest School. It is an inspirational process offering ALL learners regular opportunities to learn through experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees. The report completely fails to praise all the positive aspects of being educated in an urban environment, which very much includes outdoor experiences every day!

What I summarise from this Special schools consultation report is that it mentions lots about places, building and money when it should be about people, provision and positive outcomes. In order to make REAL and meaningful change happen, it seems that there needs to be a shift in mindset first.

Once you **truly** understand the diversity of SEND children will you come to the RIGHT conclusion. And it is only then that you will come to realise that a one school option will NEVER be a morally or ethically option in North Wiltshire.

Corinna Davidson – Parent Governor and parent of a child with complex needs and disabilities at St. Nicholas School

Appendix 1

Childcare Professional statement

Here are my views as concisely as I can manage!

It is shameful that a 55% majority rejecting the proposal has been blatantly ignored. 45% in favour is NOT a democratic reason to carry the proposal.

There have been other very valid and good proposals which have also been thrown aside with no justification. Why?

The children who are central to the whole situation are not being considered as able to have feelings or opinions. The proposal focuses the on all the physical things like therapies etc. Nowhere are the feelings of these special and often vulnerable children being considered.

Families of the children with siblings are not even being given a mention. Siblings take great pride in being involved with the special school communities. They go to school in their home town with their friends and have had a choice of where to go to school.

I know of many families with children needing specialist schooling who have visited all three special schools before settling on the one they feel best suited for their child. The St Nicks and Larkrise have the same philosophy but have different 'personalities'. Some children are better suited to one school or the other. At the moment the parents have a CHOICE.

Parents of mainstream children are able to put up to three choices of school. This is amazing and the families are able to find the school they feel best suited for their child.

Currently the families with a complex need child do at least have a choice of two schools. It is hard enough having to accept their child needs this type of education but to have a choice does at least help the parents consider which school they feel best suited for their child's personality as well as their physical and emotional needs.

Surely it is a human right in a democracy to have a choice? Putting all the special children in in place removes these children's human right to an education which has been chosen by the people who know them best, their parents, to fit their needs.

The current special schools are a part of their local community . They interact with mainstream schools, use the church for Christmas, got to the park, visit the town. The children are seen in their local towns and are accepted and recognised as apart of the community.

Children with additional needs who attend a mainstream primary school aspire to attend Rowdeford School. They are proud to be able to go there.

One big school will take all that pride away.

One big school is not a one size fits all. It is like saying everyone has to wear the same style shoe regardless if it doesn't fit or is uncomfortable.

Where these children are now accepted in their local community they will soon be seen as being shut away and hidden from society. They will be once again be seen as odd, different, something to be ashamed of.

Families will be torn apart with siblings currently attending mainstream schools in the same town as the special school being miles away from each other. Many parents drop of one child and carry on to the other school able to get both to school on time. This will be impossible with the big school proposal. Who will lose out? EVERYONE. The stresses already encountered by these families will be stretched to breaking point.

This proposal must be reconsidered. Why not build a third special school in Devizes. The children travelling long distances to Trowbridge and Chippenham could transfer there. This would free up spaces in the current schools. Why not build a specialist ASD school at Rowdeford. Something which is desperately needed. This too would free up spaces in the special schools and resource bases . The children with ASD could have the specialist education so much needed for them to succeed and flourish in an environment suited to their unique needs.