



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tavish Scott MSP

Mr Gary Robinson
Political Leader
Shetland Islands Council
Town Hall
Hillhead
Lerwick
Shetland
ZE1 0JL

4th November 2014

Dear Gary,

We write jointly on Shetland Islands Councils approach to education. As you know we have discussed this privately on a number of occasions and have expressed our concerns over the closure proposals that are affecting many Shetland communities and placing a considerable strain on parents, pupils and schools. We understand the SIC's financial position and recognise the difficult decisions you and your colleagues have already taken to reduce budgets when faced with the 19.7% cut in Scottish government grant since 2010/11.

The SIC schools plan to save money was based in large part on closing schools. This week's decision by the Education and Families committee to retain North Roe and Urafirth primary schools are welcome. There is no doubt that the transport implications for young children were deeply worrying to parents and we are pleased that elected members recognised these and made their decision accordingly. There is nothing wrong with this decision when children's safety is put first.

Two further school closure consultations for Symbister and Mid Yell Junior High Schools are about to begin. We urge you to stop these immediately and indeed stop any further school closure proposals.

You have stated that the SIC is making good progress towards a stable financial position. The SIC has already made significant savings across Shetland education. The SIC accounts are no longer qualified by Audit Scotland. You and your colleagues deserve credit for all these steps. But further school closures are intensely damaging across Shetland. We would ask elected members to reflect on this year's exam performance of Shetland's pupils. Despite the introduction of a new exam system, the Anderson High, Brae High and our Junior High Schools did well. They are to be congratulated on giving Shetland's young people a good start in their pursuit of university, college, vocational or other routes into work. In other words despite the hiatus of constant consultations across Shetland education our schools, teachers and pupils sitting exams continue to do well when compared to the rest of Scotland.

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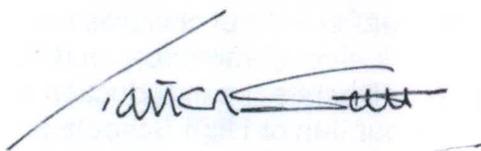
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We would therefore suggest that this is where your Education Department now concentrates its time. Instead of undertaking arduous and unpleasant closure proposals that puts huge pressure on both communities and Hayfield House staff, we suggest that SIC Education builds a vision for Shetland's educational future. Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is being taught in every school. They need help to make that a success. The SIC is already reviewing tertiary education and considering the future of Shetland College and the Marine Centre in Scalloway. These are important Shetland assets and must play a significant part in providing Shetland pupils with vocational routes into work. That is also the direction of travel of the Wood Commission and government policy and in this area is absolutely right. Your education officials have a big task in weaving all this together. We suggest they are charged with that responsibility.

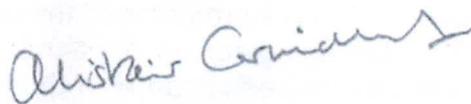
We also contend that there is no right model for the delivery of secondary education. 4 year junior highs in Whalsay, Yell and Unst make sense to us. The system works. No one including Education Scotland is saying that it is impossible to deliver CfE with such a model. The numbers of pupils who would transfer at secondary 5 to AHS or Brae High School are relatively small and the professional excellence of those schools would allow that transfer to be as seamless and positive as possible. It is not the SIC fault that the new AHS at Clickimin in Lerwick is delayed. Many of your colleagues are deeply uneasy about the hubco model of financing the new school and we share your Councils concerns. The new AHS is sadly at least a year behind schedule. That makes any decision about the mainland junior highs less pressing. Again this is no one's fault. But why put the south end and the west side through a year of agony when the SIC cannot say when pupils would transfer to the new school as no one knows when it will be built and open.

We believe that Shetland education has much to be proud of. Above all we want pupils to have the best chance in life and the basis of that is the excellence of teaching, learning and surroundings that can be provided. The SIC has made great progress on saving money. But any further attempts to close schools look doomed to us. So instead we suggest that the SIC take stock, charge officers with working through a coherent educational vision for the future without the threat of school closure proposals hanging over everyone and therefore move forward in a positive spirit.

We of course would be happy to assist in any way. Shetland's educational future matters a great deal to all of us.



Tavish Scott MSP



The Rt Hon Alistair Carmichael MP