Cilmaengwyn Uchaf Farm

Cilmaengwyn

Pontardawe

Swansea

SA8 4TX

23rd May 2023

Steven Hunt

Leader of Neath Port Talbot Council

Civic Centre

Port Talbot

SA13 1PJ

Dear Steven

**Re: Future of Godre’rgraig Primary School**

I am writing to you on behalf of the governing body of Godre’rgraig Primary School. We held a meeting last week in which we discussed our response to the recent decision not to go ahead with the 3-11 school at Parc Ynysderw, Pontardawe. We firstly wanted to express our thanks to the rainbow coalition now running NPTBC, for listening to the views of all concerned, and over-ruling the decision to create a ‘super-school’. As you will probably be aware, we were very strongly of the view that this was not the right plan for our pupils at Godre’rgraig, nor for our community.

We are now writing to you because we have received information and correspondence from someone with elevated understanding of geotechnical issues and slope remediation techniques. This information suggests that our decision to agree with the demolition plan for the school was not based on a full understanding of the data available, and that there are considerable questions about how this data has been represented to us by council officers. We are not suggesting any deliberate attempt to mislead, as this information is technically complicated. I believe that you and several other members of the coalition have been sent the initial report prepared by Tegwch which raises a number of questions about the way in which data from ESP has been interpreted to come to the decision. Having spent much more time working through the ESP reports, we are asking the coalition to review the decision to demolish the school and reconsider the possibility that the old building might be safe to return to with some appropriate remediation in place. Some of the larger questions raised are shown below (other more technical questions will be sent under separate cover):

1. The information presented suggests that there might be inaccuracy in the calculation of the volume of spoil. ESP acknowledges this is a source of error. It appears there is more spoil on the slope than would have been excavated from the quarry void.

2. It is suggested that the slope instruments are currently within installation settlement ‘calibration’ rather than clear pattern of slippage, since although one inclinometer measured some downward movement, another measured uphill movement. This suggests that the reported 2cm slip that the decision to demolish was in part based on, was likely due to settlement rather than actual movement.

3. The inputs used in the modelling that concluded the school was at risk from slippage was based primarily on particles up to 20mm in size. The ESP report itself states that more information about the size of content of the spoil heap is needed as there appear to be larger boulders underneath, and if these are interlocking, the strength of the quarry discarded material may be considerably stronger than modelled.

4. The risk of slip is based on there being a 1:100 year rainfall incident, but what such a rainfall incident would be (i.e. how much rain would need to fall) is not indicated in the ESP report. We have had exceptional rainfall since the school was closed, include great flooding down Cilmaengwyn, in the Varteg, in Ynysmeudwy, and yet there has been no reliable evidence of movement. Further assessment of the permeability of the ground has not been estimated, and so it is hard to see how officers have interpreted that the ESP report concludes that a slip is likely.

5. It appears that the gradient of the slope has been measured at its steepest, and this is the measurement taken for the purposes of modelling, which would result in a greater level of risk. The ESP reports seem to be focused on smaller (in the region of 2m to 5m) escarpments rather than gross movement of the hillside while the concern in the reports was around 500m3 of material flowing into the school.

6. The officers have not stated what Factor of Safety or tolerance of risk would be acceptable. If no risk at all is required, the arguably, all schools, and a significant amount of other infrastructure in the Swansea Valley should probably close as none are entirely free from risk.

7. The only trigger mechanism for a slip presented so far, has been a 1 in 100 year rain event. This event has not been quantified, and we could argue that a rain event such has this has happened in recent years, with significant flooding down Cilmaengwyn road and in the Varteg estate.

8. A low Factor of Safety in the modelling undertaken to date only summarises the ratio of forces destabilising the slope against the stabilising forces. The modelling does not show how the slope will deform over time and it does not show that a rapid landslide could reach the school.

9. ESP were instructed to pursue only three options for the slope (complete spoil removal, construction of a berm / wall / fence, or demolition of the building) when other options are considered viable.

Given the history of several attempts to close Godre’rgraig School by the previous administration, and the fact that officers making these recommendations (along with those in the education SSIP team) served under the previous administration, we are keen to ensure that the decision to close and then demolish our school building was not made for political reasons, and that the advice given was not designed to predetermine the future of Godre’rgraig School. We are not suggesting that the current administration had involvement in this, but the concern remains. In the ESP reports there are numerous mentions of additional data collection and further modelling required. These data should be supplemented by what risk is acceptable to NPTC. We are also keen that a second independent expert opinion on the ESP data and reports is sought to gain additional information about the risk of a slip affecting the school.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further, and would like to invite you to discuss the questions with well-informed locals who would be happy to contribute to the direction of investigation to ensure we make a balanced and appropriately informed decision about the future of our school and its building. Just to be clear, we are asking for a review of the decisions made in the light of the opinions about data gaps and the questions raised. We understand that the conclusion may still remain that we cannot return to our old building.

If this is the case, then as a GB, we would also like to push for a more appropriate and longer term solution to our building problem than the current portacabin set up. We would ask that the leadership seek a location within the catchment and that a plan is made and action commenced with a degree of urgency. Some of our pupils are likely to go through their entire primary schooling in temporary buildings, and this is far from ideal.

As a governing body, we ask that the school and GB are kept informed, ideally on a monthly basis, of the developments and plans concerning our school. It is unsettling and damaging for the school to have this uncertainty about our future, without knowing anything of what the plans might be. Whilst the school and staff remain dedicated and working hard to maintain our high standards of education and pastoral care, we would very much value regular updates and information (even if this is that there is nothing to add at the moment), to help manage the continued stress of being in portacabins with an unknown future.

Kind regards

Dr Susie Davies

Chair of Governors

On behalf of the Governing Board of Godre’rgraig Primary School