Sir

I was delighted to see your report last week that Brecon Town Council has resolved to oppose Powys County Council’s plan to hive off all Post-16 education to NPTC College. While I welcome to possibility of a new school building, this would be a deeply counter-productive sacrifice. School re-organisation is only legitimate where it leads to improved educational outcomes for ALL students. I see no possibility whatsoever that NPTC could match current 6th Form standards – let along improve them. Even at their most optimistic, they are only predicting about 150 students, yet NPTC have promised to offer 25 different A Level courses. That would mean and average class size of five! I cannot believe that will be viable in the long run.

6th Form Colleges (AKA the “Tertiary Model”) cut costs by employing lower-qualified and lower-paid lecturers. It would inevitably be necessary to employ many part-time lecturers – unlike a school where teachers can split their time between A Level courses and the lower school. Neither of these factors gives me any confidence that current standards could be maintained – let alone improved. And what would happen if applications for any given course were too low? We don’t need to speculate. We already know what happened this year: students were told that the course would still be available - but only if they travelled to Neath!

Last month the Welsh Government published a report by Professor Sue Maguire called Improving the Performance and Efficiency of sixth forms in Wales. It says quite specifically that successful 6th Form Colleges are exclusively located in urban areas. In rural areas, it notes, the tertiary approach would be “extremely hard to operationalize”. The average size of 6th Form Colleges in the UK is over 1700 pupils. How could Brecon with 150 students possibly be viable? NPTC may point to the fact that they already serve a far larger number of students, but that is of no relevance to Brecon, given that Neath is 50 miles distant and separated by a mountain range!

Finally, I note that Powys CC has no consistency of approach. At Ysgol Maesydderwen (Ystradgynlais) and at Ysgol Bro Hyddgen (Machynlleth) I hear that new schools have been established which cater for all pupils up to A Level. Even the plans for the new-build school in Builth Wells include a 6th Form. So why is Powys so keen to wash its hands of 6th Form education in Brecon?

Once a decision is taken, and a new school built with no provision for a 6th Form, there could be no turning back. So if, as I fear is likely, NPTC were to withdraw or limit provision in this area due to low student numbers, Powys could offer no alternative, and would have no influence whatsoever over the NPTC’s strategy . NPTC is run independently of political control, along business lines; it will never endanger its core business by subsidizing courses in its remote outposts. If Powys CC insists on this reckless gamble, the outcome will very probably be that Brecon will end up with no A Level provision whatsoever.

Rather than planning for the improvement of 6th Form education, Powys has resolved to abdicate from it. It is an irresponsible plan, and must be halted. I commend Brecon Town Council’s decision to oppose it. I hope that the people of Brecon will respond to the consultation in large numbers to voice their concern too.

Yours sincerely