

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

CABINET EXECUTIVE

9th February 2021

**REPORT AUTHOR: County Councillor Phyl Davies
Portfolio Holder for Education and Property**

REPORT TITLE: Churchstoke C.P. School – Proposal Paper

REPORT FOR: Decision

1. Purpose

- 1.1. This paper requests Cabinet approval to commence the statutory process on the following proposal:
- To close Churchstoke C.P. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools in Powys
- 1.2. The report is supported by the following appendices:
- Appendix A – Options Appraisal
 - Appendix B – Draft Community Impact Assessment
 - Appendix C – Draft Integrated Impact Assessment

2. Background

Strategy for Transforming Education in Powys

- 2.1. On the 14th April 2020, a new Strategy for Transforming Education in Powys was approved by the Leader via a delegated decision.
- 2.2. The Strategy was developed following extensive engagement with a range of stakeholders during two separate periods between October 2019 and March 2020.
- 2.3. The Strategy sets out a new vision for education in Powys, which is as follows:

‘All children and young people in Powys will experience a high quality, inspiring education to help develop the knowledge, skills and attributes that will enable them to become healthy, personally fulfilled, economically productive, socially responsible and globally engaged citizens of 21st century Wales.’

2.3 The Strategy also sets out a number of guiding principles which will underpin the transformation of education in Powys. These are as follows:

- *A world class rural education system that has learner entitlement at its core*
- *Schools that are fully inclusive, with a culture of deep collaboration in order to improve learner outcomes and experience*
- *A broad choice and high quality of provision for 14 – 19 year old learners, that includes both academic and vocational provision, meeting the needs of all learners, communities and the Powys economy*
- *Welsh-medium provision that is accessible and provides a full curriculum in Welsh from Meithrin to age 19 and beyond*
- *Provision for learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN)/Additional Learning Needs (ALN) that is accessible as near to home as is practicably possible, with the appropriate specialist teaching, support and facilities that enables every learner to meet their potential*
- *A digitally-rich schools sector that enables all learners and staff to enhance their teaching and learning experience*
- *Community-focused schools that are the central point for multi-agency services to support children, young people, families and the community*
- *Early years provision that is designed to meet the needs of all children, mindful of their particular circumstances, language requirements or any special or additional learning needs*
- *Financially and environmentally sustainable schools*
- *The highest priority is given to staff wellbeing and professional development*

2.4. The new Strategy sets out a number of Strategic Aims and Objectives, to shape the Council's work to transform the Powys education system over the coming years. One of these Aims is to '*improve learner entitlement and experience*' and includes an objective to '*rationalise primary provision*'.

3. The Case for Change

3.1 WHY CHANGE IS NEEDED IN CHURCHSTOKE

The following is a summary of the main challenges facing Churchstoke C.P. School:

i) Low pupil numbers

Current pupil numbers¹ at Churchstoke C.P. School are as follows:

¹ Finance NOR – 2020 Pupil Count Day (6th November 2020)

	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Churchstoke C.P. School	8	4	5	3	10	2	4	36

The Welsh Government defines a ‘small school’ as a school with less than 91 pupils. Pupil numbers at Churchstoke C.P. School are lower than this. They are not expected to increase significantly for the foreseeable future.

The school’s low pupil numbers have also resulted in a high number of surplus places at the school. Based on current pupil numbers, there is currently 50% surplus capacity at the school.

ii) High budget per pupil

Based on the Council’s Section 52 Budget Statement for 2020-21, the school’s budget share per pupil during 2020-21 was £7,475. This is significantly higher than the Powys average of £4,264. Churchstoke is ranked the 2nd highest school in Powys by budget share per pupil².

iii) Building condition and suitability

The Welsh Government’s survey of school buildings carried out in 2009 identified issues with the building condition and suitability of Churchstoke C.P. School. The building condition was assessed to be condition C – Poor, whilst its suitability was assessed to be condition B/C – Good/Poor.

iv) Leadership

Whilst there is permanent leadership in place in Churchstoke C.P. School, the headteacher has a significant teaching commitment, which limits the time available to focus on leadership of the school.

v) Combined age classes

The small pupil numbers at the school mean that pupils are taught in whole key stage classes, with Key Stage 2 in one class and Foundation Phase in another class. Because pupil numbers in each year group are small, it is more difficult to ensure all pupils are appropriately challenged.

4. Information about Churchstoke C.P School

The following is a summary of key data relating to Churchstoke C.P. School:

² Section 52 Budget Statement 2020/2021

Pupil Numbers

i) Current pupil numbers³

	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Churchstoke C.P. School	8	4	5	3	10	2	4	36

ii) Historical pupil numbers⁴

	Jan. 2014	Jan. 2015	Jan. 2016	Jan. 2017	Jan. 2018	Jan. 2019	Jan. 2020
Churchstoke C.P. School	64	54	53	41	39	28	25

iii) Projected pupil numbers (Birth rate)⁵

	Jan. 2021 ⁶	Jan. 2022	Jan. 2023	Jan. 2024	Jan. 2025
Churchstoke C.P. School	22	21	21	17	16

iv) Projected pupil numbers (Finance projections)⁷

	Jan. 2021	Jan. 2022	Jan. 2023	Jan. 2024	Jan. 2025
Churchstoke C.P. School	36	39	44	N/A	N/A

Building Capacity and Condition

i) Capacity

The following table provides information about the school's current capacity:

³ Finance NOR – 2020 Pupil Count Day (6th November 2020)

⁴ PLASC

⁵ Powys Schools Service Projections (R – Yr6) based on PLASC 2020 & Birth Rates

⁶ These are the projected figures based on PLASC 2020 information, therefore include a projection for January 2021. PLASC 2021 information and projected pupil numbers based on PLASC 2021 are not yet available.

⁷ Powys Finance Projections – February 2021

	Current Capacity⁸	Currently Filled	Surplus Capacity
Churchstoke C.P. School	72	36 (50.0%)	36 (50.0%)

ii) **Building condition⁹**

In 2009, Welsh Government carried out condition and suitability assessments of the school.

	Condition	Suitability	Access to hall on site
Churchstoke C.P. School	C Poor	B/C Good to bad	Yes

Standards of Education

i) **Estyn**

	Churchstoke C.P. School
Date of Inspection	April 2015
Standards	Good
Wellbeing	Adequate
Learning experiences	Good
Teaching	Good
Care, support and guidance	Good
Learning environment	Good
Leadership	Adequate
Improving quality	Adequate
Partnership working	Good

⁸ Welsh Government School Places Return – August 2020

⁹ Premises Data Return to Welsh Government – 2020

Resource management	Adequate
Follow Up	School to draw up action plan. Estyn to monitor progress. The school was removed from Estyn monitoring in November 2016.

ii) **School Categorisation¹⁰**

	Standards Group	Improvement Capacity	Support Capacity
Churchstoke C.P. School	N/A	B	Yellow

Financial information

i) **Cost per pupil¹¹ (Section 52 Budget Statement, 2020/2021)**

	Budget share per school	Budget share per pupil	Notional SEN budget	Non ISB funds devolved to the school
Churchstoke C.P. School	£202,000	£7,475	£16,000	£7,000
Powys average (Primary)	N/A	£4,264	N/A	N/A

5. Statutory Process for School Organisation Proposals

5.1 The process for school organisation proposals is set out by the Welsh Government in the School Organisation Code (2018). The process is summarised below:

i) **Consultation**

Consultation would be carried out with stakeholders as required by the Code. This includes consultation with the pupils at both schools, to ensure that their views are taken into account, in

¹⁰ 2019. Categorisations were not carried out in 2020 due to Covid-19.

¹¹ Section 52 Budget Statement 2020/2021

accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Feedback from the consultation would be collated and summarised, and a report would be presented to the Cabinet. Cabinet will consider the report and the feedback received during the consultation period, and will decide whether to proceed with the proposal, to make changes to the proposal or to not proceed with the proposal.

If Cabinet decides not to proceed, that will be the end of this proposal.

ii) Statutory Notice

If Cabinet decides to proceed, a Statutory Notice would be published, which would give a period of 28 days for people to submit written objections.

If there were objections, the authority would publish an objection report providing a summary of the objections and the authority's response to them. A further report would be presented to the Cabinet, which they would consider alongside the objection report, in order to decide whether or not to approve the proposal.

iii) Implementation

If Cabinet approves the proposal, it would be implemented in accordance with the date given in the Statutory Notice or any subsequently modified date.

6. Presumption against closure of Rural Schools

The School Organisation Code (2018) includes special arrangements in regard to schools identified in Appendix F of the Code as rural schools, which require proposers to follow a more detailed set of procedures and requirements in formulating a rural school closure proposal and in consulting on and reaching a decision as to whether to implement a rural school closure proposal.

As indicated in the Code:

'This does not mean that a rural school will never close but the case for closure must be strong and all viable alternatives to closure must have been conscientiously considered by the proposer, including federation.'

The School Organisation Code includes a number of steps required to be taken when formulating a rural school proposal which relate to the following headings:

- Formulating the proposal
- Identifying reasonable alternatives
- Preparing a proposal paper for the decision maker

As the School Organisation Code identifies Churchstoke C.P. School as a rural school, the additional requirements for rural schools have been addressed when developing the proposal paper.

7. Process of identifying preferred option

7.1 Officers have carried out an options appraisal on identified reasonable options for Churchstoke C.P including the possibility of federation. School. This is attached to this report as Appendix A.

7.2 The options appraisal includes the following:

- Consideration of key data
- Identification of reasonable options
- SWOT analysis of each option
- Assessment of each option against a number of critical success factors
- Identification of an emerging preferred option
- Further consideration of the emerging preferred option against factors listed in the School Organisation Code (2018) as factors to be taken into account when developing school organisation proposals.

7.3 Based on the options appraisal carried out and further consideration against the factors outlined in the School Organisation Code, the preferred option is as follows:

Close Churchstoke C.P. School, pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools in Powys.

7.4 The reasons for this are:

- Would address the issue of low pupil numbers
- Would reduce the Council's overall surplus capacity in primary schools
- Revenue saving to the Council
- Pupils would attend larger schools, which could provide a wider range of educational and extra-curricular opportunities
- Pupil would be taught in classes with peers of similar ages
- Pupils would attend schools with better quality accommodation
- Minimal impact on any other schools
- Would enable pupils to continue to access provision in Powys
- Meets all of the Critical Success Factors

7.5 A draft Community Impact Assessment has been carried out on the preferred option, which considers the impact on the community. This has been developed with input from the school. This is attached as Appendix B.

7.6 The draft Community Impact Assessment includes the following conclusion:

‘It is clear that a wide range of extra curricular activities are available to pupils at Churchstoke C.P. School. Should there be no school in Churchstoke, pupils would transfer to alternative schools. These would be larger schools, and the expectation is that at least a similar range of activities would be available for pupils. However, it is acknowledged that pupils would need to travel to the alternative schools, which could impact on their ability to access activities, particularly where these take place after school.

The information received by the school also suggests that that there are extensive links between the school and the local community, and that many community activities are arranged in the school which are accessed by the community. It is therefore acknowledged that closure of the school could have an impact on the community in terms of the services and activities available, and in particular on the availability of early years provision in Churchstoke.

Should there be no school in Churchstoke, any school facilities used by the community would no longer be available. There is a Community Hall in Churchstoke which would continue to be available, therefore community events and activities could take place here. However, it is acknowledged that the Hall relies on the support of the school, and that closure of the school could also impact on the viability of the hall in the longer term.

Closure of Churchstoke C.P. School would result in additional travel to school for pupils for whom Churchstoke is currently their closest school. Whilst free home to school transport would be provided to eligible pupils in accordance with the Council’s Home to School Transport Policy, it is also acknowledged that there could be an impact on some pupils’ ability to access after school activities, and this could impact on the ability of parents to take part in school events, meetings etc. This would also mean that pupils who are currently able to walk to school would be unable to do so.’

8. Advice

8.1 It is advised that Cabinet approves a recommendation to commence the statutory process on the following proposal:

- To close Churchstoke C.P. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools in Powys

8.2 The reasons for this are:

- Would address the issue of low pupil numbers
- Would reduce the Council's overall surplus capacity in primary schools
- Revenue saving to the Council
- Pupils would attend larger schools, which could provide a wider range of educational and extra-curricular opportunities
- Pupil would be taught in classes with peers of similar ages
- Pupils would attend schools with better quality accommodation
- Minimal impact on any other schools
- Would enable pupils to continue to access provision in Powys
- Meets all of the Critical Success Factors

8.3 Should the recommendation to commence the statutory process be approved, it is anticipated that consultation would commence in February / March 2021.

8.4 It must also be noted that implementation of this proposal does not preclude that school from being a part of future reorganisation proposals.

9. Resource Implications

9.1 The amount of funding provided to schools is driven by the funding formula. Any change to the formula funding provided will impact on the Council's revenue budget. Based on the current formula, it is estimated that implementation of the proposal would result in annual revenue savings to the Council of around **£50,000**. This overall figure comprises a potential saving on Schools' delegated funding of over £61,000, estimated additional transport costs of £19,000 and savings on catering costs of around £7,500.

9.2 The School held a cumulative surplus balance of £4,266 as at the 31st March 2020, and have submitted a budget that utilises this balance.

9.3 The Scheme for Financing Schools also states the following in section 3.7.2:

'In order to ensure effective stewardship of the resources available to schools, the Authority may impose additional restrictions on a school scheduled to close, including but not limited to:

- Restriction of expenditure to agreed plans
- Removal of powers of virement'

The Council will consider the use of these powers of intervention where appropriate.

- 9.4 Implementation of the proposal would require involvement from a number of service areas, including staff from the Schools Service, Finance, HR and ICT. These service areas will be kept informed of the development of the proposal throughout the statutory process.
- 9.5 The Head of Finance (Section 151 Officer) notes the content of the report and can support the recommendation.

10. Legal implications

- 10.1 Legal: The recommendation can be supported from a legal point of view
- 10.2 The Head of Legal and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) has commented as follows: “ I note the legal comment and have nothing to add to the report”.

11. Comment from local member(s)

- 11.1 Cllr Michael John Jones:

‘This document has been overtaken by events. Projected nos in paragraph 3(iii) of Appendix A are out of date. At present there are 38 children on role due to an influx (14) from a recently completed housing development of 28 dwellings (within walking distance of the school) built by Mid Wales Housing Association. A further 9 social houses and 30+ 2, 3 and 4 bedroom family dwellings are in the process of been built on an adjacent site. Hopefully this may result in 20 pupils. There are also extant planning permissions for approx 50 houses including 40 on a County Farms site which is currently being marketed. There have been suggestions that part of the site could be used for Council houses. A growing school will also attract pupils who may be considering alternative schools including from out of catchment. There are currently 19 children in the Little Explorers pre-school group of whom 7 will be joining the school in September. Some receive 3+ funded hours of foundation education. Incidentally the pre-school group is based in the school, producing an income for CCP. If the school closes so does the pre-school. Alternative sites in the village are difficult and pre-school provision in neighbouring communities are full. Alternative schools are some distance away and will cause particular problems for less well off households. Parents will not be able to attend school events or allow their children to take part in extra-curricular activities due to a lack of access to transport. Children who opt for English schools will lose the opportunity to learn Welsh. The preferred option, Montgomery, has 29 available spaces, Churchstoke has 38 pupils and rising!?! The school buildings may be classed as poor but they are adequate. It would not take much money to make a big

difference especially when compared to the huge ever increasing cost of new schools in Welshpool! The turnover of staff is low even though some are part time. Many people prefer part time work due to personal and/or family reasons. With a rising school role there will be opportunities for more full time staff. Thirty three (33) objectives have been analysed in the Impact Assessment (Appendix B) of which only 4 are Good impacts while 6 are Poor; 3 Very Poor; 1 CATASTROPHIC and 1 Medium. The remaining 18 are Neutral. I take issue with some of the Good and Neutral conclusions.

Section 1 Vision2025.Learning and Skills-Should be Neutral or Poor as less well off pupils will be unable to access some activities.

Section 6 Welsh Government goals-as above

Section 7 Councils Key Guidelines.Long term-Should be Neutral as pupil numbers are rising as per previous comments.

Involvement-Should be Poor.At this time of medical emergency involving lockdowns etc it will be very difficult to fully engage with the consultation due to poor; or sometimes non existent;broadband and/or mobile phone connectivity.Indeed I experienced three breaks in a Teams meeting only last week. As we all know public meetings etc are not possible.Furthermore staff are under huge pressure having to teach in class children of key workers and vulnerable pupils (approx 40% of role) and the rest online. To deal with the consultation process as well is too much. Their jobs are on the line afterall.

Payroll-Should be Very Poor. People are going to loose their jobs.

I agree whole heartedly with the Catastrophic,Very Poor and Poor impact assessments. Closing the school will immediately cause the closure of the pre-school group and put the village hall at serious risk with all the attendant consequences. The full effects can be found in Appendix C (Churchstoke Community Impact Assessment)

Budget - With an increasing role the cost/pupil will decrease drastically.38 pupils are being taught with roughly the same budget as 28 last year.

After reading the report and appendicies, in my humble opinion, because the village and school are growing there is no need to take the matter of closure further at this point. The future of the school should be looked at when the North Powys review of the 21st Century Schools Investment Program takes place.'

12. Integrated Impact Assessment (draft)

- 12.1 An initial integrated impact assessment in respect of the recommendation is attached as Appendix C. The impact assessment

considers the proposal's impact on the Welsh Government's well-being goals, as outlined in the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

12.2 The summary of the impact assessment is as follows:

'The aim of the proposal is to improve the educational provision for learners. However, whilst this impact assessment has identified some positive aspects, in particular relating to learning and skills and ensuring the best strategic management of the Powys schools' estate, the assessment has also identified some negative aspects. These primarily relate to the impact on the community of Churchstoke due to loss of educational provision from the village, and the associated additional travel requirements for pupils. In addition, whilst the proposal is that pupils would transfer to alternative schools in Powys, it is possible that some pupils would transfer to provision in Shropshire, which would mean that they would no longer access a Welsh curriculum, and could impact on the Welsh identity of the village of Churchstoke.'

12.3 Should Cabinet approve the commencement of the statutory process in respect of the recommendation, the impact assessment would be updated throughout the process, to take account of feedback received.

13. **Recommendation**

13.1 It is recommended that Cabinet approves commencing the statutory process on the following proposal:

- To close Churchstoke C.P. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools in Powys

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