



Lynette Lovell
Interim Chief Education Officer
Powys County Council

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Dear Lynette

Transforming Education in Powys – Pre-Consultation Response to Options for Castle Caereinion Church in Wales Primary School

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the initial options appraisal in respect of Castle Caereinion Primary School. Can I say at the outset that the Diocese of St Asaph fully appreciates the need to review the pattern of schooling provision in Powys and the opportunity that the 21st Century Schools Programme presents to enable all children to access high quality provision.

We therefore want to work with you through this process to ensure that the final proposals are in the best interests of children and sustainable in the longer term. We have therefore discussed in some detail with the Headteacher and Governing Body the options document which you have shared with us and they are aware of the content of this letter.

In making this response, we have taken as our starting point the School Organisation Code 2018 which states that “amongst the overarching principles and policies which should be taken into account by relevant bodies in developing school organisation proposals, is “Faith in education”. It goes on to stress that “with reference to the nature of schools subject to proposals, whether the alternative school-based provision is sufficient to meet existing and projected demand for schools of the same.....designated religious character”. It further stresses that “where school provision is being reduced or removed, alternative school provision of the same nature (language category or, if relevant, religious character), wherever possible, should remain available and accessible to pupils in the local area”.

Finally, the Code highlights, inter alia, that where the proposal concerns a school with a designated religious character, the following information **must** be included in the consultation document:

- The impact on availability and access to places at a school with the same designated religious character.

It is very disappointing therefore that in presenting the options, including an emerging preferred option, there is no reference to alternative Church in Wales places. We are of the view that this is a fundamental flaw and needs to be revisited. Castle Caereinion is the only English medium Church in Wales provision in the cluster.



The Council has identified a range of options. Having considered these options, in some detail, it is our view that it would be premature to close this school at this stage. We would ask that the following issues are considered carefully before proceeding further

i) Low pupil numbers

Whilst there are only 24 pupils currently in the school, and this falls within the Welsh Government definition of a 'small school', it is also listed as a 'Rural School' by Welsh Government in Annex F of the School Organisation Code. In such circumstances, "the case for closure must be strong and all viable alternatives to closure must have been conscientiously considered by the proposer". Small numbers on their own are not necessarily sufficient to justify closure.

The school has just received a grant from the Small Rural Schools Welsh Government Grant Scheme to develop the school's website. This is part of the school's vision to increase pupil numbers at the school. The website will not be live until the end of January / beginning of February 2021.

The Pre-Consultation document states that no increase in pupil numbers is likely. However, there were 22 pupils at the start of the academic year, which has increased to 24 as of January this year. We are aware that a family moving to the village with four children are due to join the school on February 21, thus increasing numbers further to 28 pupils. New affordable housing developments (31 housing commitment units in the LDP) currently taking place in Castle Caereinion, will also draw in young families who will be looking for a local school.

ii) High budget per pupil

Inevitably, smaller schools do generate a greater per pupil share of the budget because of the fixed costs they are unable to control (staffing, premises etc). The additional cost above the Powys average for 23 pupils is £57.5k (although there are actually 24 pupils currently in the school). Whilst funding for schools must be spent judiciously, this is not a huge amount of money given that additional transport costs need to be factored into the final solution which have not been included at this stage. If numbers do increase as we have suggested, the per pupil allocation will reduce.

iii) Issues with the building

We were surprised to read the comments in relation to the building. It has been assessed as 'good' in terms of both its condition and suitability, and whilst it is not a modern building, its ability to meet the needs of the new curriculum are not a concern for us. The supposed issues with the school building have been identified as a weakness in options 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8.

Castle Caereinion Church in Wales School benefits from large outdoor areas with a pond, forest school area, and two outdoor learning environments for each classroom. The school is a two-minute walk from the local church, enabling pupils to have a hands-on learning experience about their Faith and the importance of both the church and the school in this village. Within the building itself, the pupils benefit from large classrooms that are ideal for collaborative learning. There are interactive whiteboards in each classroom, enabling collaboration and virtual learning experiences. The school has its own computer suite, enabling each pupil access to a computer for their work. There are also sufficient iPads in school to allow pupils to carry out tasks with the use of this technology too. This provision is, in our opinion, significantly better than other schools in Powys.

iv) Leadership arrangements

It is not correct to say that the current Headteacher arrangements are temporary. This changed in September 2019 when a substantive permanent Headteacher was appointed and with the full support of Powys County Council. Since that time, the Headteacher has been working hard to implement the changes that needed to be made and recent review reports from the school's challenge adviser have confirmed that the school is making good progress. The challenge adviser has also confirmed their confidence in the Headteacher's ability to focus on the leadership of the school, by recommending that the Headteacher becomes the chairperson for the cluster ALNCO collaboration group.

The Options Appraisal document states that the Headteacher has a significant teaching commitment, which limits the time available to focus on the leadership of the school. The Headteacher currently has a 0.6 teaching commitment which is less than the teaching Heads in at least two of the other schools in Section 3.1, where Headteachers are running their schools with a 0.8 teaching commitment. If this forms part of the rationale, are other schools being considered for closure on this basis, as they have even less time to focus on the management of their school?

v) Need to improve quality of provision

The Estyn inspection referred to in the Option Appraisal document took place in 2016 when the previous shared headship model was in place. Subsequent to this, Estyn conducted a review in 2018 but there is no mention of this. At this time, Estyn rated the school as 'good'. The previous amber school categorisation support capacity rating was applied because the school had an Acting Headteacher in place. Having supported the change to permanent leadership arrangements just 18 months ago, we do not feel that the Council has given the school a reasonable timescale to demonstrate improvement and grow pupil numbers, particularly with the disruption caused by Covid over the last year.

The document states that the Headteacher has identified a need to improve pupils' basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills as well as a need to raise both pupil and staff expectations. This need was identified on the SDP over 12 months ago. The digital skills across the school were and continue to be strong. The standards in the school have improved, as have expectations. Learners are thriving and progress is being made. The historic school standards and expectations were a consequence of the previous shared leadership model. This model is no longer in place and since the recruitment of the current Headteacher, the stable leadership model has proved effective with a consistent approach. This is evidenced in the data and monitoring activities that are now embedded in the school.

The Headteacher has built up strong collaborative networks with other schools within the Llanfair, Welshpool and Newtown clusters. The new model of leadership needs longer to demonstrate the improvements it has made.

vi) Safeguarding issues

The issue as described in the document is not correct. The community centre has its own separate access point away from the school and is not used by members of the public during school time when the school has sole use. In any event, we believe that the use of a padlock on both gates would resolve the issue.

Additional Points

- When exploring Headteacher options 18 months ago, the school was advised that it was not possible to move cluster due to transport. However, the current proposals

indicate that pupils would be accommodated at the nearest school (Berriew in the Welshpool Cluster).

- There is no consideration in the options to educating children staying within the cluster – this is particularly relevant if children already have siblings who are attending the high school.
- A number of the options are not feasible because Castle Caereinion is a Church in Wales school and Berriew is a County Primary.
- The options document does not reference or account for the fact the school is in the Llanfair Cluster (as both Berriew and Welshpool are in the Welshpool cluster) and the subsequent implication this would have on transport requirements. There are currently former Castle pupils who attend Welshpool High School who do not receive transportation as it is not a feeder school, and conversely, there are former pupils attending Llanfair High School who do receive transport. There clearly will be implications for future (and potentially current) transport arrangements in both directions.

The Options Appraisal document contains a number of inaccuracies which have a significant impact on the arguments made by the LA. In particular, the “lack of suitable accommodation for the new curriculum” and the “temporary leadership arrangements”. As detailed above, we have evidenced how the school is able to deliver education which meets the requirements of the new curriculum and we have confirmed the fact that the Headteacher is a permanent, substantive position which has more leadership commitment than other schools in Powys and is already showing improvements.

We appreciate that there will be further opportunities to comment on whatever proposals the Cabinet determine should be put forward for the next stage of the consultation. Our request to Cabinet is that any proposals in respect of Castle Caereinion are deferred until Wave 2, when a more realistic assessment of the school’s position can be made.

Our firm view is that the LA should allow the school sufficient time to embed the changes that have already been implemented and are showing success, notwithstanding Covid. A review in the next wave would allow:

- the school time to demonstrate the impact of the new leadership structure that is in place
- sufficient time to demonstrate the impact of the Welsh Government Small Rural Schools Grant, which was provided to the school to raise its profile through the development of its website.
- a reasonable amount of time to enable our closest alternative Church in Wales school to embrace their new school building and to settle in before adding in the additional element of new pupils, who will undoubtedly find the change from their small rural primary school to a large town school difficult at this time.

I would like to thank you again for consulting with the Diocese at this early stage. Through this ongoing and constructive dialogue, I hope we can reach a way forward that may nevertheless involve compromises on both parts in the best interests of children. We do believe that children have an entitlement to a faith education where this is desired by parents, and the loss of such places needs to be balanced carefully with proposals for other schools in the area.

Yours sincerely

Heather

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