

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

CABINET EXECUTIVE

24th October 2023

**REPORT AUTHOR: County Councillor Pete Roberts
Portfolio Holder for a Learning Powys**

REPORT TITLE: Irfon Valley 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 Irfon Valley C.P. School from the 31st August 2024, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools
- 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

Irfon Valley C.P. School

- 2.1 Irfon Valley C.P. School is a small English-medium primary school located in the village of Garth in the Builth Wells catchment area of Mid-Powys. The school has a formal Collaborative Partnership Agreement with Ysgol Dolafon, Llanwrtyd, based on Collaboration Between Maintained Schools in Wales (2008) Act. This means that there is a formal agreement between the schools to share a headteacher. The agreement comes to an end this academic year.
- 2.2 In July 2023, the governing body of the school wrote to the Council, outlining their concerns about the impact of the decrease in pupil numbers on the educational and financial sustainability of the school. The governors stated that the lack of wraparound provision at the school, such as a breakfast club, was a key factor in some parents' decision to move their children to other schools, along with concern about the small numbers in year groups and the impact of this on their children's education and wellbeing.

2.3 Current pupil numbers at the school are as follows¹:

	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Irfon Valley C.P. School	1	6	4	0	1	2	5	19

Information about Irfon Valley C.P. School

2.4 The following is a summary of key data relating to Irfon Valley C.P. School:

Pupil Numbers

i) **Current pupil numbers²**

	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Irfon Valley C.P. School	1	6	4	0	1	2	5	19

ii) **Historical pupil numbers³**

	Jan. 2016	Jan. 2017	Jan. 2018	Jan. 2019	Jan. 2020	Jan. 2021	Jan. 2022	Jan. 2023
Irfon Valley C.P. School	55	52	50	46	45	45	42	43

iii) **Projected pupil numbers (Birth rate)⁴**

	Jan. 2023 ⁵	Jan. 2024	Jan. 2025	Jan. 2026	Jan. 2027
Irfon Valley C.P. School	39	42	41	41	44

iv) **Projected pupil numbers (Finance projections)⁶**

¹ Teacher Centre, 22nd September 2023

² Teacher Centre, 22nd September 2023

³ PLASC (R – Yr6)

⁴ Powys Schools Service Projections based on PLASC & Birth Rates

⁵ These are the projected figures based on PLASC 2022 information, therefore include a projection for January 2023. PLASC 2023 information and projected pupil numbers based on PLASC 2023 are not yet available.

⁶ Powys Finance Projections based on data provided by the school – updated by Finance August 2023

	Jan. 2023	Jan. 2024	Jan. 2025	Jan. 2026	Jan. 2027
Irfon Valley C.P. School	33	19	17	n/a	n/a

Building Capacity and Condition

i) Capacity

	Current Capacity ⁷	Currently Filled	Surplus Capacity
Irfon Valley C.P. School	60	19	41 (68.3%)

ii) Building condition⁸

	Condition	Suitability
Irfon Valley C.P. School	C Poor	B/C Satisfactory

Quality of Education

i) Estyn

Irfon Valley C.P. School was inspected by Estyn in June 2022.

The recommendations were as follows:

- R1 Address the health and safety issue identified by the school
- R2 Ensure that the curriculum is broad and balanced, and that it meets pupils' needs
- R3 Provide regular opportunities for all pupils to write creatively, at length, across a broad range of genres
- R4 Strengthen the governance of the school, to ensure that the governing body fulfils the statutory requirements and develops its role as a critical friend

⁷ MSCW Capacity Jan. 2022 from the Welsh Government Planning of School Places Return – October 2022

⁸ Condition, Suitability and Sufficiency – The Transforming Education PowerBI Dashboard – 2022

Financial information

i) Cost per pupil⁹ (Section 52 Budget Statement, 2023/2024)

	Budget share per school	Budget share per pupil	Notional SEN budget	Non ISB funds devolved to the school
Irfon Valley C.P. School	£242,000	£7,346	£7,000	£0

The Case for Change

2.5 Following a conversation with governors at Irfon Valley C.P. School, it was agreed that the Council would carry out an options appraisal exercise, to consider future options for the school.

2.6 The following is a summary of the main challenges at Irfon Valley C.P. School:

2.7 Low pupil numbers

Current pupil numbers¹⁰ at Irfon Valley C.P. School are as follows:

	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Irfon Valley C.P. School	1	6	4	0	1	2	5	19

The Welsh Government defines a 'small school' as a school with less than 91 pupils. Pupil numbers are significantly lower than this.

2.8 Budget difficulties

The significant reduction in pupil numbers at the school over a relatively short period has caused significant budgetary pressures at the school.

⁹ Section 52 Budget Statement 2023/2024

¹⁰ Teacher Centre, 22nd September 2023

2.9 High budget share per pupil

Based on the Council's Section 52 Budget Statement for 2023-24, the school's budget share per pupil during 2023-24 was £7,346. This is higher than the Powys primary school average of £4,821. Irfon Valley C.P. Primary School is ranked the 4th highest primary school in Powys by budget share per pupil.

2.10 Combined age classes

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

Options appraisal

2.11 An options appraisal exercise has been carried out to identify and consider reasonable options for Irfon Valley C.P. School. This is attached to this report as Appendix A.

2.12 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.

2.13 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:

Option 7: Close Irfon Valley C.P. School, pupils to attend their nearest alternative schools

2.14 The reasons for this are:

- Would address the issue of low pupil numbers at Irfon Valley
- Would reduce the Council's overall surplus capacity in primary schools
- Revenue saving to the Council

- Pupils would attend larger schools, which would be better equipped to meet the requirements of the new curriculum
 - Pupils would attend larger schools, which could provide a wider range of educational and extra-curricular opportunities
 - Pupils would be taught in classes with peers of similar ages
 - Minimal impact on other schools
 - Opportunity for the Council to realise a capital receipt from sale of the school site
- 2.15 The options appraisal document considers the impact of the preferred option on the factors outlined in the School Organisation Code as factors to be considered when developing school organisation proposals. This is included in ‘Part C’ of Appendix A.
- 2.16 The preferred option aligns with the vision and guiding principles as set out in the Strategy for Transforming Education in Powys.
- 2.17 Implementation of the preferred option is subject to the statutory process outlined in the School Organisation Code (2018).
- 2.18 As Irfon Valley C.P. is identified in the School Organisation Code as a rural school, 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. The draft Community Impact Assessment is attached as Appendix B.
- 2.19 The draft Community Impact Assessment includes the following conclusion:

‘Should there be no school in Garth, pupils would transfer to alternative schools. These would be larger schools, and the expectation is that an increased number of activities would be available to 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.

Should the proposal be implemented, there would be no school provision in the village of Garth. The information provided above indicates that there is some community use of the Irfon Valley School building, including as a meeting place for parents. There is, however, a village hall located in Garth, therefore community events and activities could continue to take place in the village.

It is also acknowledged that implementation of the proposal would result in additional travel to school for pupils for whom Garth is currently their closest school. Whilst free home to school transport would be provided to eligible pupils in accordance with the home to school transport policy, it is acknowledged that there could be an impact on some pupils’ ability to access after school activities, and

could impact on the ability of parents to take part in school events, meetings etc.'

Statutory Process for School Organisation Proposals

2.20 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, to ensure that their views are taken into account, in 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 would consider the report and the feedback received during the consultation period, and would 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 would 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.

Presumption against closure of Rural Schools

2.21 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.

2.22 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.’

2.23 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

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

3. **Advice**

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

- Close Irfon Valley C.P. School, pupils to attend their nearest alternative schools

3.2 The reasons for this are:

- Would address the issue of low pupil numbers at Irfon Valley C.P. School
- Would reduce the Council’s overall surplus capacity in primary schools
- Revenue saving to the Council
- Pupils would attend larger schools, which would be better equipped to meet the requirements of the new curriculum
- Pupils would attend larger schools, which could provide a wider range of educational and extra-curricular opportunities
- Pupils would be taught in classes with peers of similar ages
- Minimal impact on any other schools compared with other options
- Opportunity for the Council to realise a capital receipt from sale of the school site

3.3 Should the recommendation to commence the statutory process be approved, it is anticipated that consultation would commence in October / November 2023.

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

4. Resource Implications

- 4.1 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 £75k. This overall figure comprises a potential saving on Schools' delegated funding of over £121k and estimated additional transport costs of £46k.
- 4.2 There are currently estimated building costs amounting to £347k needed to bring the building up to current standards. This cost would not be a revenue saving, but should the proposal be implemented these costs would be avoided. There is also a further £10k saving in rates and statutory testing that would be released upon disposal/sale of the building.
- 4.3 The school is currently projecting a carry forward surplus of £31k at the end of financial year 2023-24 rising to a cumulative deficit of £122k by 31 March 2026. If the proposal is agreed there would be a surplus on closure in Aug 24 of £1.4k.
- 4.4 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 to limit expenditure and prevent the budget slipping into deficit.
- 4.5 Implementation of the proposal would require involvement from various 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.
- 4.6 The Deputy Head of Finance (Deputy Section 151 Officer) notes the content of the report and supports the recommendation.

5. Legal implications

5.1 Legal: The Schools Organisation Code must be followed and as such the recommendations can be supported from a legal point of view.

5.2 The Head of Legal Services and the Monitoring Officer has commented: "I note the legal Comment and support the recommendation"

6. **Climate Change & Nature Implications**

6.1 Implementation of the proposal would require additional travel for pupils currently attending Lrfon Valley C.P. School for whom this is their closest school. This would have a negative environmental impact as more home to school transport would need to be provided to transport pupils to their nearest alternative school.

6.2 However, implementation of the proposal would mean that the Council would no longer need to run the Lrfon Valley school site. This would result in a reduction in the use of heating and electricity amongst other factors.

6.3 Should Cabinet agree to proceed, further consideration will be given to the impact of the proposal in terms of carbon emissions related to the above, and will be reflected in future Cabinet papers related to the proposal.

7. **Data Protection**

7.1 N/A

8. **Comment from local member(s)**

To follow.

9. **Impact Assessment**

9.1 An initial 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.

9.2 The summary of the impact assessment is as follows:

'The aim of the proposal is to improve the educational provision for learners, however the assessment has identified some negative aspects. These primarily relate to the impact on the local community due to loss of educational provision from the village, and the additional travel that would be required for pupils to attend alternative provision and their parents to access school activities.'

9.3 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.

10. Recommendation

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

- To close Irfon Valley C.P. School from the 31st August 2024, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools

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