

Appendix C – Minutes of meetings with Staff and Governors

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Consultation meeting with Staff of Irfon Valley CP School

23 November 2023

Present:

Staff:

Rhoanne Clark, Executive Head Teacher
Clare Anthony, Assistant Head / Class Teacher
Becca Price, TA
Julie Grannell, Cook
Carys Lawrence, TA / SA
Halimah Lord, HLTA / Admin

Officers:

Lynette Lovell, Director of Education and Children
Marianne Evans, Service Manager Schools Transformation
Sarah Astley, Strategic Programme Manager, Transforming Education
Amy Radford, Transforming Education Programme Officer
Sharon Nicholls, HR Business Partner

Lynette Lovell welcomed all to the meeting. Everyone in attendance introduced themselves.

Lynette Lovell explained that there would be a brief presentation with an opportunity for discussion, followed by comments and questions to the officers. It was explained that the meeting would be recorded for minuting purposes, but the recording would be deleted once the minutes had been typed up and agreed.

Sarah Astley gave a Powerpoint presentation which outlined the background to the current proposal and explained that in October 2023, the Council's Cabinet gave approval to proceed with a proposal to close Irfon Valley C.P. School. The consultation commenced on the 26th October 2023, and will continue until the 7th December 2023.

The proposal is:

- To close Irfon Valley CP School from the 31st August 2024 with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative school.

Following the presentation, staff were given the opportunity to ask any questions or to make any comments in relation to the matter.

Member of Staff: You mentioned that someone is coming into school to speak to the children. How does that work? Will it be individually or as a class?

Marianne Evans: It will be either Sarah or myself or both of us. We'll need to discuss the date. Normally we meet with the school council, but it can be a selection of pupils across the whole school. Given that there are only 19 pupils, it may be that we speak to all of them. It's a session where we explain to them what the proposal is, explain the process and then listen to them, their questions, and their concerns. We start off by asking what's good about this school, then take the discussion down further to get their views. In most situations the teachers have worked with pupils beforehand, so sometimes they come with questions already prepared.

Member of Staff: It's difficult for us because there are only 7 children in Class 2, our Key Stage 2 class. 5 of those 7 children are Year 6 so would be leaving us in the summer term anyway. 1 pupil is Ukrainian. As a teacher, and probably similarly to the other staff, I feel this overriding sense of guilt and responsibility at the moment, especially after having parents evening last week and listening to parents concerns. At parents evening, parents were asking where they should take their children instead, they were saying they don't want to leave this school. Children are saying they're worried about moving to a different school. Some have visited other schools, and have said they didn't like them.

I'm quite disappointed with the presentation for the children that has been published, I don't think it's aimed at our younger children at all.

A lot of parents have told us that they don't want their children to be questioned because they think it's going to cause more anxiety, and they're already anxious.

Marianne Evans: We have to follow the process, which states that we must hear the voice of pupils. However, we understand the sensitivities around this. In another school, the headteacher spoke to the children and sent their views on to us, so that could be an option.

Member of Staff: Also, I don't think the pupils completely understand when the school is closing. They think it's happening tomorrow. They don't realise it may be a few months down the road, or if it's going to close and then open again. It's hard to explain to them, especially the youngest pupils.

Member of Staff: Parents are concerned as well about whether their five-year olds are going to give a good input. You never know, they might say they don't like the school at all!

Member of Staff: Also if they have in-depth discussions with people they don't know at all at this stage, when they're 5 and 6, will they have anxiety about it for the rest of the year? It's a long time for a very small child.

Lynette Lovell: We would really like to get the children's views. It's really important to hear learner voice. What would you suggest we do? We'd like to be able to hear from them, it's really important, but you're the ones that have the relationship with

them, you're the ones that know the children really well. We want to do what's best for the children.

Member of staff: It might be better for us to have the questions you would ask. I think parents would feel happier about that as well.

Marianne Evans: It's been interesting this year, we've been consulting on school organisation changes for many years, however this year for the first time we've had parents refusing to let us come and talk to the children, or raising concerns about it all. This hasn't happened before, I wonder if that's a sign of the times?

If you can facilitate a conversation with the pupils, we'll send you the questions. You can then have the discussion with them, and if you can feed that back to us that would be great.

Member of staff: Our parents have shown that much concern, they're going to want to know and give permission for the children to be involved.

Member of staff: We've had parents tell us they would remove their child on the day you're coming in, that's how strongly they feel. I think also, and I know the decision hasn't been made, but from having seen what's happened in other parts of Powys, they think the decision has already been made. And they're questioning why are you causing this further anxiety for our children, asking whether they like the school or not. They've seen what's happened in other places and they've seen the fight that the community have put up and I think they know what will happen in the end.

Member of staff: Will you be meeting with parents?

Marianne Evans: We don't have meetings with parents or public meetings as part of school reorganisation processes, however we do meet with staff and governors as part of the process. The governing body includes parent representatives, and obviously there are other ways of feeding in as well. We're happy for you to take forward the meeting with pupils though.

Sarah Astley: You can either speak with the pupils, or in the past we've had submissions from pupils on paper, either written responses or pictures, so that's a possibility too – either instead of speaking with them, or as well as. We're more than happy to take a steer from you in terms of what would work best.

Member of staff: The children aren't actually going to be able to influence the decision making much because it's down to money at the end of the day, isn't it? If they say they love the school, it doesn't mean the school's going to stay open for them, so it's just a bit disheartening for them really, it would stir up their emotions.

Member of staff: And it's harder because if the Year 6's say they love the school, well they're not going to be here anyway as they will be going.

Sarah Astley: I'll send on what we have sent to other schools recently to use as a basis for a meeting with pupils, and would be happy to speak with you about how to approach consultation with pupils.

Member of staff: I presume we would have somebody asking the questions, and somebody scribing so that we get it recorded exactly as the children say, rather than paraphrasing? Or would we just record it?

Sarah Astley: Yes, whatever works best – you could record it and send us the recording.

Member of staff: We'll have a little think about what would be less daunting for them.

Member of staff: The other thing parents are concerned about is that this is taking away their first choice of where they want their child to be. They feel they're being almost dictated to because it's the closest school they have to go to rather than having a choice, and because other schools are oversubscribed or full, they haven't got a choice of putting them into those schools. And I think they're really quite concerned. They want to know where they're going to have transport to, transport is quite a big issue.

Marianne Evans: In terms of the 'closest school', parental preference comes in anyway. They could choose any school, and if there's space in the school, then they can have a place. However, we know there is pressure on places in Llanelwedd and Newbridge.

In terms of transport, we would only provide transport to the closest school, that's what the Transport policy states.

Member of staff: Is it as the crow flies? The road distance?

Marianne Evans: It's road distance, which you can work out, or maybe we can send it to you.

Member of staff: I'm sure parents just want to know.

Member of staff: Some schools are full through, like Newbridge.

Marianne Evans: It depends if the year group is full. Parents would need to submit an application. Then if the year group is full, if the admissions process says no and we can't give you a place, you can appeal. We've just had this situation with another school.

However, with the admissions code, which is the guidance around admissions, there is some leeway for exceptional circumstances. When the Council is proposing to close a school, and then not allowing them into another school, in my view that is an exceptional circumstance.

Member of staff: With transport, if they couldn't go to say Newbridge, they had to go to Llanelwedd, how would transport work? They would be missing out on transport, but it's not their choice.

Marianne Evans: That's something we'd have to look at when they're applying for a place. We'll see if we can get you a list of current pupils and their closest schools if that helps, and then you can share that with each individual family.

Member of staff: I think so. Lack of information is the biggest thing we're hearing. We need to be making an informed choice and although it might not happen, actually we need to be thinking now and preparing ourselves.

Member of staff: The reason why numbers dropped so quickly was that parents were panicking. They heard a rumour the school was going to close, they were trying to find a place quickly so they could go where they wanted.

Also going back to parents not wanting their child to be spoken to, I think this is partly because they don't know the information themselves, so they can't answer themselves. They don't want children coming home and saying this, that and the other when they don't know the information themselves. They don't know what school they're going to. They don't know if they can get transport.

Member of staff: I think that's the parents overriding feeling. They're extremely worried about where their children are going to go and they think the Council will ultimately take away their first choice of school, and they might not want to go to another particular school but that would be their closest. They feel they're being manipulated, as you're taking away their village school. I think that's the frustrating thing for them.

Member of staff: Especially when the catchment area is Llangammarch, and they've got loads of houses going up at the moment. Some of the schools are already full, so where are children going to go once this site is sold off and turned into more houses?

Sarah Astley: Housing developments has come through already in the consultation responses, so it's something we'll have to look into.

Member of staff: Can you tell us how many responses you've had?

Sarah Astley: We'd had about 18 online responses when I looked earlier today.

Member of staff: We're really aware that there are people within the community and further afield who can't access the online consultation, and would actually rather come and air their views. Could we get paper copies out to Llangammarch, to the post office there and the village hall?

Sarah Astley: Often we have a bit of a flurry of responses towards the end of a consultation. It may be that we get more responses as we get to the end of the consultation – responses tend to come in early or late, and there are another couple of weeks left.

And if there is anything we can do to help in terms of paper copies or anything, please let us know – we can print copies and arrange to get them to you.

Member of staff: It's difficult if people in the community haven't still got children in the school, they feel like they haven't really got a right to have an opinion about it all. But I know there is a lot of feeling locally that it's a very sad thing. It's been a really lovely school for such a long time. It's still a lovely school but it does just feel like the decision has already been made.

Member of staff: It is really hard. I've had people say to me, well, I know the decision has been made and that's it.

Member of staff: If the Transformation Strategy has been in place for a number of years as you mentioned in the presentation, why is it only now that we've become aware that we're on a list? A lot of schools used to be on a list for closure for a good few years, but we seem to have been really fast tracked compared to other schools.

Marianne Evans: It's because your numbers fell so dramatically, so quickly. There is a published work programme for the transformation programme and Llfon Valley wasn't on it. It was added because, as we say in the documents, your pupil numbers fell so dramatically, which has had a significant financial impact.

Member of staff: They fell because people already heard that it was shutting anyway. Am I right in thinking we would have been part of the next phase, which was 24/25?

Marianne Evans: We are looking at Ysgol Calon Cymru, and part of that work would have included looking at the primaries in the area.

Sarah Astley: Even if something isn't on the work programme it doesn't mean it can't be added into the work programme. There are some other things that have come through recently that have happened more quickly than we thought they would because of certain circumstances. So although there's a work programme it's still subject to other changes.

Member of staff: Is it to do with the roof, possibly, the fact that that's going to need a lot of money to fix, which doesn't give time to build the numbers?

Member of staff: The numbers have been dropping for a while, but nothing has been done beforehand. Why was nothing done when the numbers started dropping? The numbers went from 50 to 40 fairly quickly. And then obviously they have dropped again. But why was nothing done 4 years ago when the numbers started declining? Why weren't you able to help then? Then this might have been prevented. It wasn't that long ago that there were 100 pupils here...

Marianne Evans: If you look across the county, the pattern is that pupil numbers are decreasing, and the projections are still heading that way. It's happening in rural areas, but pupil numbers are dropping in the towns as well.

Lynette Lovell: Back to the children, you've got five Year 6 pupils leaving in the summer. In terms of year groups, you were talking about places earlier, and the groups. Some families would probably prefer their children to go together to a school. What are your year groups in the other years?

Member of staff: We have one in Reception, 6 in year 1, 4 in year 2, then 2 in year 5. Some of the pupils have younger siblings too.

Lynette Lovell: That's something for us to consider as well in terms of admissions. I know that it's a difficult process. We recognise the difficulty. But when you put those cohorts together, we need to look at how we can help facilitate them staying together.

Teacher: The pupils didn't want to leave. However, there were situations where the sibling wouldn't have another girl in that year, so the parents took her sibling out and then there was a gap in another year. You could see who was going to go and who the next one was going to be.

Lynette Lovell: Those cohorts in year 1 and year 2, the 6 and the 5. Where do you think their preference would be for alternative schools? Do you have any idea where parents might want their children to go?

Member of staff: Newbridge. They seem to want to go to Newbridge.

Lynette Lovell: So not down to Ysgol Dolafon?

Member of staff: Most parents don't work that way.

Member of staff: If they're not going to get transport they've got to work it out family-wise. How they would manage pick up and drop offs.

Lynette Lovell: Have you had anyone come to Ysgol Dolafon to look at the school?

Member of staff: Not from Irfon Valley, no. Other people have been, but not from here.

Member of staff: They tend to head the other way.

Marianne Evans: So they're working in Llandod or Builth?

Teacher: Yes.

Marianne Evans: Llanelwedd is full. But there are places in Builth, Newbridge is full.

Member of staff: The admissions for next year for reception children, does that get taken into account? If we did happen to have a magical number of children wanting to come...

Member of staff: Finance said we would need to find between 20 and 25.

Member of staff: But what if we had 6 or something similar for the infants?

Marianne Evans: When that happens, the admissions team would have to inform them that the school is under review when they put in their application. The two processes are difficult to align sometimes.

Lynette Lovell: Sometimes you've got an idea anyway of the number of applications that are likely to come in. People have been around to see the school.

What are the numbers in your setting?

Member of staff: We've got a pretty good setting here at the school. Numbers have dropped to four at the moment because we had a big influx go to school. We have a few more due to join throughout the year, but some people have obviously been put off coming because of the rumour that we're shutting. They're automatically presuming that's us gone as well.

Lynette Lovell: What are your numbers normally in the setting?

Member of staff: We were up to about 10. We run three mornings a week.

Member of staff: Llanelwedd school actually floods quite often. Where are the children going to go if the school's full and it floods?

Marianne Evans: Llanelwedd has flooded twice since we've been involved, but it wasn't due to the river. It was a blocked culvert apparently which has been fixed. But who knows when Llanelwedd will flood again?

Member of staff: Are they planning to build a super primary around here? Or no, just muddle along with what we've got?

Marianne Evans: If we could afford to build new primaries everywhere, then we would.

Member of staff: What about the Welsh all through school?

Marianne Evans: The plans for Ysgol Calon Cymru are the same, we're just working on them. It takes time to work through.

Member of staff: That's another thing that parents have been talking about, whether they put them in the Welsh stream or English Stream.

Member of staff: Yes, because they would get free transport to the Welsh unit.

Marianne Evans: Have pupils stayed in the Welsh unit once they've gone there, do you know?

Teacher: I don't know, but I've also heard that some pupils that have been in the Welsh unit since the start have had support taken away from them to help the children that have now gone in at a later date.

Marianne Evans: Going back to you as a group of staff. Is there anything you want to ask HR, to help you understand what will happen should the proposal go forward and what it means for you?

Sharon Nicholls: We can only talk about the principles at the moment because no decisions have been made yet. In theory, HR wouldn't get involved until we have a final decision, then we would become involved in a formal capacity. However, we will support and help you, because we appreciate that this is an unsettling time.

If the Council was to proceed as proposed at the moment, then we'd be looking at a management of change process. Usually this involves consulting with staff for 30 days for feedback to consider the proposal. However, in a school closure environment that decision has been made, so the management of change process is more about you as individuals – there would be discussions about the impact on you, what you're thinking, redeployment, support with CV or interview techniques, where you are if you were considering redundancy. It's more about the impact on you personally and what we can do to support you going through the process.

You saw from the timeline that we're currently looking at implementation on the 31st August 2024. However, we have a legal obligation to give notice correctly, so our timeframes within the HR world may not align with the timeline for the reorganisation proposal in terms of notice periods, depending on when any final decision is made.

In the past we've had situations where schools have closed but there wasn't time to give staff the required notice period after the final decision was made. However, we've still got to give you that notice period. In that situation, we redeployed some staff to other areas for that notice period. Alternatively, we can pay a payment in lieu of notice, which is paying you for your notice period. It's about having those discussions all the way through the process.

We're not quite there yet though because we need decisions to be made so we know how to navigate our way through this.

Member of staff: We're really concerned about how unsettling everything is for the children at the moment. If anything changes in school over the next few months, that would have an impact on them. The children are going to be really unsettled. I've already got little ones talking about it and being worried about moving to new schools and being anxious and frightened. If other things change in the meantime, it will add to this.

Member of staff: It is difficult at the moment, even just for health and safety, if someone has an accident or something, there's only one member of staff. It's not only the impact on children, it's also the impact on staff because we've got to think about our wellbeing, and it's really difficult when things change. We are very, very close here. We're a very close-knit team, a very nurturing school.

Marianne Evans: So two things are coming out here: staff wellbeing and pupil wellbeing. In terms of pupil wellbeing, there are things we can do to help.

Lynette Lovell: Yes, there are. There are a couple of things we can do. We've got a really good team of educational psychologists in the local authority. We don't want to bring them in to cause any further upset though – it's a measured approach, because in my opinion as a teacher myself, the best people to deal with the children's wellbeing are the teachers and teaching assistants as you are the ones that know them. But if there were huge concerns around anything, then we have got the Ed Psych team that may be able to support if you.

For the children though, I do think you are the best people to support them. So then it's about us providing you with the support you need to be able to work with the children. We do have an independent ex-headteacher who was involved in transformation of her own school when she was working here in the local authority. She's independent of us and we buy her in, if you like, to work with schools. I know she's already been in touch with the Headteacher, but she's available to support you too. And then there are HR as well.

Sharon Nicholls: We are available to support you, and also there is the employee assistance programme, Vivup. That's accessible at any time. It's private and confidential, it's not shared with anyone. It has a whole range of things, including things like money matters and things like that because we realise it is an uncertain,

unsettling time. There's a lot of really good financial support as well if you were looking at a redundancy element or a pension element, I could signpost you to that. I will ensure that my email address is shared with you all so that you have that contact if you want to ask any generic questions.

Lynette Lovell: Also, most of you are probably in unions as well. I'm in a union, I need support from my union when I'm going through things. Your teaching unions, your non-teaching unions, you can have those discussions with them as well. That's really important too.

Marianne Evans: Even though we're still in the process, Sharon could come and spend some time here and do individual one to ones with you.

Sharon Nicholls: Yes, going forward I can come down again.

Member of staff: It's going to be a really busy year. It's going to be really difficult. We're not going to have much time to be thinking about applying for jobs and we don't want to abandon ship.

Lynette Lovell: Going back to what Sharon said, it is difficult. We know that it is difficult. But in terms of staff and processes, it has to follow a set timeline, as Sharon said earlier. If the school closes, it isn't necessarily the fact that your job would finish at that time. There have been times when a school has closed and the staff have had another term working, up to Christmas, and a lot of the clearing is done at that point. We don't even know what the decision is going to be yet, which is why we can't provide more detail on this.

Marianne Evans: This is the issue. Without wanting to rush the process, we know that the best way for anybody going through this is to make sure the decisions can come quickly so that there is some direction, because it's this, it's this limbo land. So obviously we can prioritise that.

Sarah Astley: We can do what we can to make sure that the decisions are made as soon as possible.

Member of staff: There are going to be a couple of children that are really going to struggle with transition due to ALN issues and English as an additional language and it does take a long time for the process of Tyfu applications and so on to go through. We've started processes, but are they actually going to get the support they need in the time they are here? They are going to need somebody to hold their hand to get into that new school. They're going to need the support there. So, it would be helpful if the ALN issues that we have get fast tracked as well so that those children have got some support moving on.

Lynette Lovell: For the transition, and particularly for those pupils with ALN, there would need to be extra arrangements in place to ensure everything is right for them

wherever they may go and to make sure that, if the school closes, the receiving school, is prepared. This is essential, particularly around ALN. Even for Year 6 pupils going to secondary school, it's really important to have that extra transition in place for the ALN pupils. I used to do it myself, I'd make sure I had extra meetings to ensure those transitions are right. Everything's on the system, so we'll need to ensure that we have the right arrangements in place.

Member of staff: It's so difficult to get hold of people. Every year it's like you get further away, they never seem to come to schools anymore. You never seem to get the extra funding for children with ALN needs. It can be quite a battle these days.

Lynette Lovell: I understand that, however the reason is that we've got increased demand and it's really difficult to try and recruit educational psychologists. They're not coming through, even though we have been advertising for a long time.

Member of staff: We've also got things like English as an additional language, where parents don't speak English or speak very little English. I don't know if they understand the process.

Lynette Lovell: How are you communicating currently with these parents? Do you have anybody translating?

Member of staff: We use Google Translate.

Lynette Lovell: Some schools with more EAL pupils have LSAs that can speak the other language, which is working well. I'm wondering if we can ask one of those teaching assistants to come and speak to the parents to help them understand. I'm just wondering what you do normally at school?

Member of staff: We're trying to explain it's not definite that the school will close and the pupils will have to move. However even trying to explain this is difficult.

Lynette Lovell: Welshpool Church in Wales for example have got a number of pupils, and they have teaching assistants, who are Ukrainian, Polish etc. I think with Teams we could see if we could arrange some kind of meeting.

Member of staff: What happens if the decision is made and the children that are already here frantically leave because they want to make sure they get a place in their year group in February? And we end up with hardly any children again. Would the closure be brought forward?

Marianne Evans: No, we would have to stick with the proposed date regardless of how many pupils would be left in school should pupils leave.

Member of staff: Another thing with parents is that they would like to be able to 'book a space', so to speak, in a different school for September, because they don't want to dump us now and leave us in the lurch.

Member of staff: Obviously numbers are quite restricted in other schools. They said they don't want to leave us and be like the parents that have already done that. But they don't want to lose their chance to secure a place in the school they choose.

Marianne Evans: I don't think there's a way around it actually, until the decision is made.

Member of staff: That should be allowed. There are extenuating circumstances, surely.

Sarah Astley: We can look into whether or not anything would be possible.

Marianne Evans: Once the final decision is made, should we get to that point, then admissions officers and officers dealing with home to school transport could come to meet with parents and do an information sharing session. But we wouldn't be able to do that until after a final decision. That used to happen, but hasn't happened recently, however it is something we need to bring back.

Member of staff: At parents evening I felt this huge sense of guilt and responsibility that these parents are really struggling with this, their children are really going to struggle with it, and I've got no answers for them.

Marianne Evans: We'll see if we can get information to you about the closest schools, what the current situation is in terms of capacity, and if they are eligible for transport.

Member of staff: Some families might decide to move from the area.

Marianne Evans: To finish the meeting, we'll just recap on how to respond and timescales. The minutes will then come out to you, and you can share them with the staff who have been unable to attend this evening. We would also encourage you to respond to the consultation.

Member of staff: What about all the resources that are in the school? A lot of them have been brought by parents and children. Or even given by the local community. Are we able to make a decision about where some of that's able to go? Could we donate to the village hall where the children in the community will still benefit from things that have been here.

Sarah Astley: If it belongs to the school, it's part of the school. In these kinds of situation, there's a process we go through to redistribute equipment. We try and redistribute as much as we can, in many cases resources go with pupils, they follow

the pupils to the schools they transfer to. That's generally the starting point, but if there's anything specific, then we can look at that at the time, if we get there, and work with you to do what we can.

We do what we can to redistribute as much as we can, whether to other schools or the local community. In many cases a lot of the resources do follow the children wherever they've gone, and normally the first opportunity for resources is given to the schools the children have gone to, so it would be those nearby schools initially.

Marianne Evans: The other thing is the packing up and all of that would happen after the school is closed, should the decision be to close. There wouldn't be a situation where you would need to pack up before the end of the summer term.

Sarah Astley: In the past the approach was to get everything cleared by the end of term, which was difficult for everybody. We've moved away from that now. Normally we ask the school to deal with personal information, archiving of personal information and that sort of thing.

Member of staff: Would there be some support with that, as current staff wouldn't have the time to do this?

Sarah Astley: Yes, we'd fund additional hours if that would work here. However, there are a number of different ways we've done it and again, if we get there, we'll talk about it at that time.

Apart from the archiving, we generally wait until the following term, the September, to redistribute other resources, so that things stay as normal as possible for pupils and for you as staff.

Marianne Evans: Thank you for your time this evening. Just to reiterate, you can respond to the consultation by emailing us, filling in the form or writing to us. It's important that we hear everybody's views, so please send them through before the 7th December.

Consultation meeting with Governors of Irfon Valley CP School

23 November 2023

Present:

Staff:

Rhoanne Clark, Executive Head Teacher
Clare Anthony, Assistant Head / Class Teacher / Teacher Governor
Nina Davies, Chair of Governors and LEA Governor
Sophie Tranter, Parent Governor
Darren Hartley, Parent Governor and Vice Chair
Claire Jones, Clerk

Officers:

Lynette Lovell, Director of Education and Children
Marianne Evans, Service Manager Schools Transformation
Sarah Astley, Strategic Programme Manager, Transforming Education
Amy Radford, Transforming Education Programme Officer
Mari Thomas, Finance Business Partner (on Teams)

Lynette Lovell welcomed everyone to the meeting. She explained that a meeting had already taken place with staff, during which the arrangements for consulting with pupils had been discussed. Everyone in attendance introduced themselves.

Lynette Lovell explained that there would be a brief presentation, followed by an opportunity for discussion, comments, and questions to the officers. Sarah Astley explained that the meeting would be recorded for minuting purposes but the recording would be deleted once the minutes had been typed up and agreed.

Sarah Astley gave a Powerpoint presentation which outlined the background to the current proposal and explained that in October 2023, Powys County Council's Cabinet gave approval to proceed with a proposal to close Irfon Valley C.P. School. The consultation commenced on the 26th October 2023 and will continue until the 7th December 2023.

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- To close Irfon Valley CP School from the 31st August 2024 with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative school.

Following the presentation, governors were given the opportunity to ask any questions or to make any comments in relation to the matter.

Governor: On the timelines, you say that you expect the Consultation Report is to be considered in February. In your experience do they usually go back on time or do you ever move it forward? I'm just mindful that there isn't much time between the

expected final decision date and the proposed closure date. Is there a chance that it would be considered sooner?

Sarah Astley: It depends on the level of response. Often if there's less responses that we expected when we started to work through the timeline, we can bring the report back quicker. However, in some situations we've had many more responses than we had anticipated, in which case it takes longer. I don't think we can say one way or another until we've got to the end of the consultation.

This came up with staff as well, they wanted some certainty about the way forward. We did assure them that we would do all we could to take the process forward as quickly as we could to minimise the uncertainty.

Governor: With the size of the school relative to others, it's likely that there will be a lower level of responses.

Sarah Astley: We've had about 18 responses to the online questionnaire so far. But we do often see a bit of a flurry towards the end of a consultation period, so until we get to that 7th December we won't really know.

Chair: Can I ask why there isn't a meeting offered with parents and members of the community?

Marianne Evans: We haven't been holding public meetings or meetings with parents as part of school consultations for a number of years now. We meet with governing bodies which include parent representatives, we meet with staff and we meet with pupils. We've had legal challenges previously, so this approach has been tested. In previous consultations the fact that we didn't have public meetings or meetings with parents didn't stop parents or anybody in the community from responding in their hundreds to the consultation. This is the approach we've taken for a number of years.

Chair: Is that a Powys approach or a Welsh Government approach? It is in line with, or contrary to the statutory expectations?

Marianne Evans: This is a Powys approach, however it's in-line with the expectations. Other authorities do the same, some don't have public meetings, some do. We did have public meetings in the past, and their effectiveness could be questioned in terms of how effective they were for the public or parents, and how effective it was for the authority. We haven't found any issues by not having consultation meetings because the information still comes through to us.

Chair: I think it's not about whether it works for you. I'm thinking about whether it works for parents and members of the community.

As a governing body, we are concerned about the consultation with pupils. I think it would be helpful if you could fill us in with the discussion that's happened with staff and where you are with that.

Lynette Lovell: In the staff meeting earlier some concerns were expressed around the effect discussing the issues would have on some of the learners. We asked them to suggest the best way of doing this.

For me, the staff here, teachers, teaching assistants know the children best. So we're looking to work with the school so that they can facilitate consultation with pupils in the way they think is best. We do want to hear from the pupils, so we're going to provide the staff with the questions Marianne and Sarah normally ask when they speak to pupils, so that they can choose what they think is right to ask the children, then they can provide the information to us. So we won't come in to speak to the children as we normally do. We'll work with the school, so that the school can facilitate this and provide us with the feedback.

Chair: So, there wouldn't be anybody from the team coming in? It would just be the members of staff known to the pupils who would be asking the questions?

Marianne Evans: Yes.

Governor: I still think we'd have to offer that opt out clause because some parents might not want their children to be involved.

Vice Chair: I have concerns about the impact on pupils who are already upset about the school possibly closing. I'd be concerned about a stranger coming in to ask them about this, and I would question the utility of that approach, particularly for very young children. Perhaps it's different for older children, but realistically what we've gained? 'Do you like your school?' Yes. 'Do you like your teachers?' Yes. 'Do you want the school to close?' No. What do you get out of that? You're not going to get any meaningful feedback. And I know there was some suggestion of older children being involved, but actually 5 out of the 7 are about to leave to go to high school anyway and will not be impacted.

Marianne Evans: That's what we heard at the staff meeting. It's raising the anxiety levels of the children who are already anxious. The School Organisation Code does require us to consult with pupils, and says that governors should help facilitate this. We have issued published information for pupils and think it's really important to hear the pupil voice. But as you say, how relevant would that be?

Sarah Astley: There are different ways of pupils providing feedback. Speaking with them is one way, it could be in writing, it could be drawings. We've had a variety of different things that have been submitted in the past. Whatever you, as a governing body and staff think is appropriate and would work here, then we're happy to work with you on this.

Lynette Lovell: And there isn't a problem at all with anybody wanting to opt out. There's not a problem with that at all.

Chair: Thank you for that. That's really important isn't it? As a governing body it's one of our agreed principles, to make sure we do all we can to work with the staff to minimise the impact on the children throughout this consultation and any potential future process regarding the school. That's our priority.

Marianne Evans: We discussed pupil wellbeing in the meeting with staff, but also staff wellbeing, and there are a few things we can offer to help with this.

Lynette Lovell: In terms of pupil wellbeing first. We do have a team of educational psychologists who can support. However, for me the best people to be with the children and young people are the staff here who they know and trust.

But we need to make sure the staff wellbeing is catered for, so that they are able to work with the children as we move through this process. In terms of staff wellbeing, we have an ex-headteacher who is independent of the local authority that we employ to come in and work with schools if they are going through transformation, to work on wellbeing, have conversations with staff. She herself has been through a transformation process, so has a full understanding of what it is, what it means and has that independent voice. She's available and has been in touch with the school, and would be available as much as the school wants or as little.

We've also got HR support. Sharon Nicholls was here for the staff meeting and she's going to make herself available. She shared general information with the staff today, we don't have the detail yet as the decision hasn't been made, it will be up to Cabinet. But whatever decision Cabinet makes, if it's to close the school, then Sharon will work with individual staff, teachers, etc on a one-to-one basis to provide that support for them, which includes wellbeing but also looking, with them, around options etc moving forward. There will be a full suite of support and also we have an employee assistance programme called Viv Up to support staff and wellbeing.

So that's a suite of support that we have available for staff as they go through the process, before the decision is made. The consultation process is difficult, we know that, but support is available.

Chair: Thank you. I think that's really important and appreciated. Support for staff was one of the next points on my list, because obviously it's a very anxious time for everybody, and it's very important that they all have the chance to discuss what it means for them individually – what the process will be, what the timescales will be, and just having the chance to ask those questions, get that clarity so they can understand what's going to happen as well as when.

Governor: And for them to start doing it now. Sharon mentioned she could start the “what if” conversations so that they can plan ahead.

Chair: Thank you.

Lynette Lovell: In the staff meeting, Sharon was here from HR. Whatever the decision from Cabinet, if it is to close the school then in terms of staffing there are processes and timescales to follow as well, and different arrangements that have been made. Depending on the timing of when decisions are made, we have had situations where teachers and staff have been employed for an extra term until Christmas, still working in the local authority. So all of that would be worked through whatever the decision is by Cabinet.

Chair: Does anybody have any more on the consultation process? I think we’ve discussed it at length and we know what will happen and when and everything.

I just want it noted that this is a really good school. It’s a really supportive, loving school that really nurtures our young people and our pupils and our children, with excellent educational attainment and everything.

For me one of the disappointing things at the start of this process was a little bit of miscommunication, and I want it to be made really clear that this potential closure is not about any poor attainment or delivery of education by this school or this set of staff. I’d also like to note as Chair of Governors what an excellent team we have here of teaching staff and non-teaching staff. The whole team is really fantastic at this school.

But I do have to note how sad it has been over the last few months to see the numbers plummet in the school. I think we’re at 18 now, and that’s been really hard as a governor, and the implications of that have been hard for us as a school financially, with moving to one class. As a governor that’s not what we want to see for our school. I don’t know how to express it really, but it’s just really sad because this is such a lovely community school which has delivered fantastic outcomes for our young people and the community. It’s just really sad to be in this position.

Vice Chair: There is a big loss for the community, not just for now, but for generations to come that there won’t be school provision if the outcome of the consultation is as recommended.

Lynette Lovell: It’s really important to say that. Earlier the staff mentioned 3 inspections and they’ve all been good, and that’s important to note. I totally understand that for you as a school going through this consultation process is difficult and expressing the sadness is absolutely pertinent, because it’s not an easy process, we totally understand that. It’s really important to recognise the work the school has done. It’s up to Cabinet to make decisions about the school’s future. You mentioned the numbers, that is a key factor, at one point the school had 100 pupils.

But across the whole of Powys we're seeing numbers in schools going down, it isn't just this school. There are other schools where numbers are reducing, and we have to look at it across the board as Estyn said in 2019. We appreciate how difficult it is for you as governors and staff, but we will do everything as a local authority to be there to support and take you through the process. And then it's up to the Cabinet whatever decision they make based on what comes in through the consultation.

Chair: Could I also say a real massive thank you to the staff again, teaching and non-teaching, because throughout all of this, and it's a massively anxious and unsettling time for the staff, but they are not letting that affect what they're doing, the job they're delivering, the care they're giving to our children and young people, and all credit to them because it's fantastic to be working like that through such an unsettling and really difficult time. I'd just like to register my personal, and on behalf of all the governors, our absolute thanks and acknowledgement of that.

Marianne Evans: I think we recognise that as well. And in the conversations we had with staff earlier, you could really see how much they all cared for the school and the children and our duty is to support you throughout this process and get to that position.

Vice Chair: Could I make a request in terms of the communication in the future, that they could have a degree of honesty? All these things about 'oh we have to think about the education of the children and the best interests of the children'. Actually let's be frank about it, it's a reduction in school numbers and it's just not feasible to be able to do it financially, to maintain a school with 18 pupils. It's not a message that people can't buy into. You've got 18 pupils in the school, you can't sustain the size of the school with that number of pupils. But then to say it's all about their educational interests, well actually, especially for the kids already in the school who are going to have to change. It probably isn't in their educational interests. There's a lot of political rhetoric about trying to pre-empt and be defensive about adverse criticism. I don't know what you can do, but it's a request for a degree of additional honesty in the communications in the future.

Governor: I don't think the press releases helped. It was very upsetting for the staff that the provision of education could be better somewhere else with better opportunities. There are really good opportunities here. They do have a good education. And many people have said to me, oh gosh, we've seen your Facebook page. You do so much stuff in Irfon Valley. And sometimes in smaller schools you can provide those learning opportunities and those experiences better than you can in a big school.

Governor: This was fully recognised in the Estyn report too.

Governor: Staff know every single individual pupil and that counts for an awful lot.

Governor: It might be a wake-up call for other schools. If they start seeing their numbers drop, what can they do to stop it? There's fantastic education.

Marianne Evans: I agree with you. The strapline from the strategy has always been to improve learner entitlement and experience. Fine. But actually the issue is financial sustainability and educational sustainability and people can understand that argument, can't they?

Governor: We thought it was excellent at Irfon Valley. That's why we sent our children there and, lo and behold, it's actually they'll get a better education elsewhere if they go elsewhere. For the staff, it really impacted on us.

Vice Chair: I've had feedback from parents who have taken their kids out of the school and the message is the education is not quite as good elsewhere, they felt their child was ahead of the children in the other schools, but they do have an after-school club or whatever.

Marianne Evans: We'll take that on board, it's something about the messaging, and getting that messaging right on a political level as well.

Governor: It did initially make staff feel like they had failed. And we hadn't. We had a fantastic Estyn report and look at our children, see how happy the children we have got left here, how well they are doing.

Governor: And since then, as we know, our school improvement adviser comes in every term and every term we have good feedback in those termly reports, even since then, subsequently.

Marianne Evans: We'll definitely take that on board.

Governor: I'd like to say that I didn't feel the consultation document produced reflected the positives of the school. It felt like it was pushing a narrative of 'larger schools are better'. I personally don't agree with that narrative. I was in a large primary school and transferred to a very small secondary school in the private sector and I would say that was beneficial. Obviously the private sector is built on small class sizes. That's how that whole system is built. And I don't think Powys recognise the value of any small school. I think that's been a real shame.

Marianne Evans: Within the consultation document, we're required to address a number of different elements, we're required to provide that sort of response. We work with a number of colleagues on these, the school improvement team, the ALN team, finance, HR. There are a lot of people who contribute to the documents. We rely on the views of those professionals in terms of what goes in those consultation documents. Everybody has different experiences of schools and we have excellent small schools, we have excellent large schools. We have less excellent small

schools and less excellent large schools, and the mix in the middle as well. We are not saying that small schools are not delivering a good education.

Governor: Research proves that small schools deliver, in some ways, better than large schools. There's evidence and research out in the public domain that pushes that small schools are perhaps better than large schools for various different reasons. I don't feel like that's being addressed.

Lynette Lovell: That is certainly something that could come in as part of the consultation for us to address. Any question that's asked will need to be responded to. As Marianne said, it varies. You have some larger schools where provision is really good and some small ones are good. However when the numbers are getting lower it becomes more difficult to sustain because of the level of staffing that's required, even for things like safeguarding, you need certain numbers of staffing for various things. And also for headteachers, the workload, the new ALN Act, all of that is quite challenging. Having the staffing numbers to be able to deliver is really important as well. So when the numbers are going quite low, it becomes more of a challenge in terms of workload for staff. That isn't saying anything about the standards, but it does become more difficult the lower the numbers get.

Chair: I understand the feasibility of a school with 18 pupils is difficult obviously. But it doesn't devalue from that quality of education they receive, whether there's 18 or 28.

Marianne Evans: When numbers drop, small schools can become very vulnerable to a staff member being off sick or to cleaners not being in. There are all kinds of things. There is a school that hasn't been able to open for a day because they couldn't staff. You get below a threshold and then it gets really challenging.

Governor: I've been a governor here now for quite a few years and have seen as the numbers have shrunk, the workload on the staff and the head and the teachers is just huge. That is going up and up and up, the ask, the demands, the expectations. And if we were to remain open, going down to a one class school next year, that would be so difficult for staff because, like you said, that resilience isn't there. Because all of those things need to be done, whether you've got one pupil or 100. You're absolutely right in terms of pupils and education and everything but the ask on the staff in very small schools is, for me, really, really unacceptable at times.

Governor: I don't think that's something that the wider public understand. They think that if you've got one pupil to look after you've got one workload. But actually whether you've got one pupil or 10 pupils, the workload is still massive. I don't think the wider public understand that and I've heard comments off the public about it. They've still got to do a certain amount. It doesn't matter how many children there are, there's a certain amount of work however many children there are to a certain extent.

Governor: There's the challenge of Estyn still coming in and wanting to see the books, scrutiny, the monitoring the governors are doing which is expected throughout the year. And the policies. There are still the same amount of policies!

Marianne Evans: One of the other things staff brought up is concerns from parents about where children would go should the school close – is there a place available in alternative schools and what is the transport policy. We've agreed to try to share information about which is the closest school for the children remaining here, and what that looks like in terms of admissions.

Chair: Will that be provided before the end of the consultation?

Marianne Evans: We'll try and get this to you before the end of the consultation.

Chair: That would be really helpful because as a parent, it's where your mind jumps to.

Marianne Evans: Especially as this proposal is to close and pupils to transfer to their closest school. In other cases we've named a receiving school and that's different.

Vice Chair: I had a specific question about that, so it's probably timely. The proposal says the nearest alternative school, so I guess the question is, if the school closes, would there be a degree of parental choice, or parental choice subject to availability? I appreciate that two of the schools are probably at full capacity and there are two schools which are not. But at the moment, you have to go to the nearest one. As a parent, when I was choosing which school we go to, we had a choice. So actually you have choice when you go in and then these events happen and then there isn't choice. So we're disadvantaged through the process.

Sarah Astley: In terms of the practicalities, the wording in the proposal is the nearest alternative school, but in practice parents would choose whichever school they wanted to apply for a place at, and then that would be dealt with through the admissions arrangements. Transport is the issue, isn't it, because the transport entitlement would be to the nearest school.

Vice Chair: But it wouldn't necessarily, that's why I'm saying this, because transport only to your nearest school would have been the policy anyway. So when I was choosing the school my child went to, I knew if I chose the school that wasn't the nearest, I wouldn't get transport, but I chose to make that decision. So if the school that is the nearest available one is made unavailable to you, there is a separate issue about whether places are available and the process through which is followed to that. As I understand the applications policy is that you would do that two terms in advance to choose your school. But that's not going to happen. So anybody else who's applying or moving will have been able to go through that process and make an application and maybe secure a place, if there was a place in that year, whereas

our children won't be able to do that because we're going to be too late in the process so we'll be at the back of the queue. There is a question as to whether there are going to be places that would be made available to facilitate parent choice? The alternative is I could say, actually I'll ring the school up now and they've got a place now. So we'll move the child now.

Sarah Astley: Yes, this did come up in the staff meetings too, the same points around booking places.

Marianne Evans: The process would be an in-year transfer, which you make any time to any school and if there's a place then you get allocated the place. There is a slight disconnect between this process and the admissions process. And what we are trying to do is make sure they are better aligned. We're a bit out of sync with the timings of both. And the other thing is parents can choose. Parental preference is still a right. Maybe we need to make that clearer in our consultation documents, rather than parents thinking, oh, we're forced to go to that school because that's my closest school. Maybe we need to look at the wording.

Sarah Astley: Even when there is a named receiving school, it doesn't follow that all pupils will go there. There's still the option. Parents can still choose to apply for a place in a different school.

Marianne Evans: In some schools, some of the year groups are over their admissions number. But there's an exception clause in the Admissions Code which means that exceptional circumstances. We believe that if the Council is proposing to close a school then we must make sure there are no barriers to parents being able to access a place at a receiving school.

Chair: You could give an assurance that our parents could pick any of the schools and you will find them spaces in those schools even if they're oversubscribed in the exceptional rules circumstance.

Marianne Evans: They would have to go through the admissions process, which is a separate process, so there are no guarantees. But what we are saying, and we're making clear to the admissions team, is that there is a clause that can be used.

Chair: That feels like the least you could do, to be honest.

Vice Chair: If there is going to be some communication about the nearest schools, it would be good if there was an explanation that this is the transport policy, and something about the interplay with the admissions policy. As far as I see, the admissions policy is we have to do by the end of term if we want to try and secure a place.

Lynette Lovell: Yes we do need to do some work around all of that because the admissions code and the transformation process are not speaking to each other and

we need to follow both. We do need to make that representation to Welsh Government as well, and we need to work with you to ensure it's the best for the learners. The exceptional circumstances clause in the admissions code, we would need to seek legal advice on this. We've used this in one instance where we have had to have it all written out as to why we think these are exceptional circumstances. That is something we will definitely take away tonight and have a look with our monitoring officer around how we can work to try and bring that alignment. They really are not speaking to each other at the moment, which isn't helpful. There are processes we have to follow by law, and our process of transformation has been tested in the court five or six times so we know that that's right. In terms of admissions we have to follow the guidance there but using that exceptional circumstances we can be taken to court over that too. We've done it in one instance, and it is something we would have to, as a local authority, be able to defend. It's something definitely that we will take away.

Governor: My concern practically on that matter would be, if hypothetically parents decided to try and keep 4-5 children together to make the move easier, as parents if we group together and all move our children to this school then we would all try and choose that school and then, some may not be eligible, or not eligible for transport, or there's only three spaces and you want four. Then the purpose of moving them together would be completely eradicated.

Governor: That's how it would play out practically. It's alright talking about in court, but let's be realistic in a 5-year-old sense. How it plays out for a 5-year-old is different to how it plays out in a court.

Mariane Evans: Do you think that would happen? Is there a feeling that the remaining pupils would want to go together if the school closed?

Governor: There's some parents that would. I don't want to talk on behalf of every parent here, because I wouldn't like to assume, but I've been talking with other parents about if we could keep the children together in their friendship groups, it would ease the anxiety of their moving. But I wouldn't want to think, right, we've all made this big decision for our children and then, when it comes down to it, because of the admissions policy, or you can't get transport, oh actually I don't want to drive my child to that school because it's not our nearest school. Oh, there's only space for three and there's four of you that want to go there. Actually, practically it wouldn't work.

Lynette Lovell: And that's a separate policy again.

Governor: How do we make it coherent?

Chair: Are there exemptions within the transport policy because, again, I feel closing a school, keeping pupils together to aid and assist with the transition, for me feels relevant. Is there an exclusion within there?

Sarah Astley: There's an appeal process.

Governor: It just feels like, why should they appeal? Why should parents battle for something that somebody else has forced on us? That wasn't our choice.

Marianne Evans: In the past, in specific circumstances, we have made special transport arrangements for pupils if a school is closing due to specific circumstances. If this goes forward then we would do that via the statutory notice. We can look at this, but we won't be able to look at that in detail until we know the decision. But it's definitely something we can do, based on what comes through during the consultation.

Lynette Lovell: In one recent situation pupils from a school that closed moved to another school en bloc. There was really good transition work going on once the decision had been made. But we haven't got a decision and whatever decision Cabinet make, if they do make the decision to close, then the admissions team will look at those children and work with the school to try and get them to be altogether somewhere if that's what they want. There may be schools around this area where they could all go en bloc. Certainly we were successful for the other school and that was something that came through in the consultation, that they wanted the children to be together going forward. We were able to work that one through and transition was good. It was a bigger group of pupils than we are talking about here, and they did all go and the transition was really successful.

Chair: If the decision is made, do we have another meeting with you after that? Because I think that for us as a governing body we would be really keen to make sure that it's as smooth and stressless as possible. I think it would be really important for us to make sure we're doing all we can to support our pupils and our staff.

Sarah Astley: We don't normally, but we could.

Marianne Evans: The other part as well once a final decision is made is that we ask the admissions team and the transport team to come and meet parents. That used to happen in the past but hasn't happened more recently – we hit the pandemic so we couldn't have those meetings, but I think this needs to happen. Once a decision is made, as soon as possible the admissions officer and transport officers would meet with parents, discuss individual circumstances and explain what they need to do etc.

Governor: That's really important. I've tried to go on the Powys Council website and find various things and I've just not been able to find a thing, to be really honest with you. I've just struggled to find anything, so a face-to-face conversation is probably quite valuable to parents. To discuss options, not just read a policy that there's this exception or that exception.

Sarah Astley: And everyone's situation is different of course. The admissions arrangements is the first part, and then when we know where pupils are going, the transition arrangements can be looked at.

Marianne Evans: With staff we also discussed what would happen to equipment currently in the school. If it gets to that position and the school is closing then there's a separate process again and Sarah will explain this to you.

Sarah Astley: We try and leave things as normal as they are. If the school is going to close we would leave things until the end of term, whereas in the past there was a push to clear everything from schools before the end of July which was difficult for everybody. And then there's a process of redistributing resources. We try and redistribute as much as we can. Normally we try and ensure that resources go with the pupils as much as possible, so we work with the schools that the pupils transfer to initially. There were some questions earlier about specific things that had been bought through fundraising and we can work with you as a community if and when we get to that stage to see what we can do with those items. But in general we try and redistribute as much as we can. The first choice goes to the schools that the pupils transfer to, so we do try and keep things with the pupils.

Chair: I think it's important to say I don't want any other schools coming in this year, when pupils are still here. We would refuse to allow this.

Sarah Astley: Generally we leave that until the September. We ask the school to deal with personal information, archiving, that sort of thing – generally the school deals with that part of it, and there's additional funding we can provide for additional hours to do this, or there are different ways that that's happened in different situations. But again, if we get there, in terms of the resources and so on, we generally leave that until the autumn term.

Governor: Our financial position is such that we have almost run out of money. Even if we keep to a budget on everything, by the end of August, if there are any unexpected costs we have to cover, our budget would go under. So I guess the question is if we maintain a dialogue with you, if any of those events do arise, is there a mechanism through which there might be additional support as part of that process?

Mari Thomas: Certainly we would be more than happy to have an open dialogue with you and be as supportive as we can around that. In terms of additional support that's something we need to discuss with Marianne and Sarah, as the budget holders on the transformation side. So it would all need to be tied up with some of the earlier discussions that you were having around other areas for potential financial support. And we need to consider each request on its own merits really. But yes, more than happy to have that open dialogue with you and we appreciate the way that you are working with us at the moment in terms of trying to manage that budget as well. I know it's a really difficult position to have been in.

Lynette Lovell: It seems like we are coming to the end of the questions. If you do have any other queries, you can always contact us after the meeting tonight and at any point. The consultation will also be open until the 7th December as explained earlier. Thank you for your time and for coming in tonight to meet with us. It's really beneficial for us to be here. We realise how difficult this is for everybody but we do appreciate you coming to meet with us.