

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CABINET HELD AT BY TEAMS ON TUESDAY, 9 FEBRUARY 2021

PRESENT

County Councillor M R Harris (Chair)

County Councillors MC Alexander, G Breeze, P Davies, A W Davies, H Hulme, I McIntosh and R Powell

In attendance: County Councillors J Evans, J Gibson-Watt, S Hayes, D Jones, MJ Jones, H Lewis and J Morris.

The Leader expressed her condolences to the family of Emma Havard-Thomas, a member of the county council's cleaning team who had died of suspected COVID-19.

1.	APOLOGIES
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Apologies for absence were received from the Corporate Director Economy and Environment.

2.	MINUTES
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The Leader was authorised to sign the minutes of last meeting held on 26th January 2021 as a correct record.

3.	DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST
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County Councillor Rosemarie Harris declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 6 Llanbedr CiW School Proposal as a governor of Llangynidr CP School which was a potential receiving school.

County Councillor Rachel Powell declared a personal interest in item 7 Llanfihangel Rhydithon CP School Proposal as nieces attended the school.

County Councillor David Jones declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 4 Castle Caereinion CiW School Proposal as a governor of the school and of Guilsfield CP School which was a potential receiving school.

The Monitoring Officer reminded Members that there was a dispensation for councillors to speak and vote on school transformation matters affecting schools where they were governors.

4.	CASTLE CAEREINION SCHOOL PROPOSAL
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Cabinet considered a request to commence the statutory process on a proposal to close Castle Caereinion C. in W. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools.

The Leader confirmed that the Cabinet members had read the letters and emails received in respect of this and each of the schools reports.

County Councillor David Jones spoke as the local member and drew attention to the comments from the Diocese that no allowance had been made for the fact that this was a Church in Wales School. He noted that Covid had meant there had been no opportunity for the school to improve since the appointment of the headteacher and he argued that it would be unfair to send pupils to Berriew CP School which was under Estyn review. On that point Cabinet was advised that Estyn had just written to confirm that Berriew CP School was no longer under review. Cabinet was also advised it was a matter of parental choice if they sent their children to another Church in Wales school.

Cabinet asked about the arrangements for undertaking consultations during the current Covid restrictions. Officers confirmed that they had talked with unions and Welsh Government about the support that could be made available and on how the consultations would be undertaken. They would ensure that there would be other methods of engaging with families and learners not able to access digital platforms. Should there be any change to the guidance from Welsh Government for consulting during Covid this would be built into the consultation.

RESOLVED that Cabinet approves commencing the statutory process on the proposal to close Castle Caereinion C. in W. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools.

5.	CHURCHSTOKE CP SCHOOL PROPOSAL
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Cabinet was asked to consider giving approval to commence the statutory process to close Churchstoke C.P. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools in Powys.

County Councillor Michael Jones spoke as the local Member pointing out that Churchstoke was designated as a large village that had seen a number of recent housing developments that were projected to increase the number of pupils at the school. He also noted the survey of parents that had found 69% of parents would choose to send their children to schools in Shropshire if the school closed. Officers confirmed that the Council would have to provide free school transport to another school in Powys or Shropshire to transferring pupils if the school closed.

County Councillor Stephen Hayes speaking as the local Member for Montgomery pointed out that Montgomery CP school needed to take spending decisions which would have to be reversed if Churchstoke CP School closed. Officers confirmed that a meeting had been arranged to discuss the impact on pupil numbers.

Cabinet members noted the points raised on pupil numbers and transport by the local Member which had been also highlighted by correspondents on each of the schools reports being considered. Cabinet members also recognised that for a school located on the border the different education systems in Wales and

England were an additional consideration. Officers confirmed that these issues would be addressed in the response to the consultation.

RESOLVED to approve commencing the statutory process on the proposal to close Churchstoke C.P. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools in Powys.

6.	LLANBEDR SCHOOL PROPOSAL
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Cabinet was asked give approval to commence the statutory process on the proposal to close Llanbedr C. in W. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools.

County Councillor James Evans spoke in respect of this proposal and the proposal for Llanfihangel Rhydithon CP School. He said that while he understood why the Cabinet was in the position of having to consider school closures following years of poor Welsh Government settlements, the timing was very questionable as Covid restrictions meant that any consultation could not be as full and robust as face to face meetings. He therefore asked for a deferment.

County Councillor James Gibson-Watt speaking in respect of all four schools reports said that the proposals were piecemeal and not based on catchment areas. He questioned whether they complied with the Welsh Government school organisation code or its rural schools policy and he asked how pupils could be consulted with. He also asked what would happen with the school building if the school were to close citing the example of the former school at Rhosgoch which had been empty since closure. It was confirmed this building was no longer in the Council's ownership.

County Councillor John Morris speaking as the local Member said that the community was angered that the proposal had been brought forward during the pandemic. He questioned how the consultation could take place during lockdown and raised the issue of the additional burden being placed on pupils' mental health. He also queried why this proposal was being taken in isolation and noted there was no whole cluster plan. He pointed out that the school was not failing and that projections were for pupil numbers to rise close to the school's capacity.

Cabinet members asked about receiving schools and were advised that there were two other primary schools within three miles, one of which was a Church in Wales school and both of which were judged by Estyn to be of the same standard. They also asked about the cost per pupil which at nearly £6,000 per year was considerably higher than the Powys average. This was due in part to the number of surplus places in the school. It was also pointed out that equity of opportunity was an important consideration and that the school could only host two classes making it challenging to deliver the new curriculum and limiting opportunity for team sports and events.

Officers responded to the points made about why proposals for individual schools were being brought forward and advised that when there were issues such as low pupil numbers or building condition these needed to be addressed.

On the point of the pressure on children, officers gave an assurance that their voices would be heard in the consultation.

RESOLVED to approve commencing the statutory process on the proposal to close Llanbedr C. in W. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools.

7.	LLANFIHANGEL RHYDITHON SCHOOL PROPOSAL
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Cabinet was asked to give approval to commence the statutory process on the proposal to close Llanfihangel Rhydithon C.P. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools.

County Councillor Hywel Lewis spoke as the local Member. He noted that the school was ranked as good in all categories by Estyn who had commended the school for sharing its Headteacher with Llanelwedd CP School. He further noted that the nearest receiving school for the majority of pupils was Crossgate CP school which was ranked lower than Llanfihangel Rhydithon which was contrary to Welsh Government policy. He challenged the pupil number projections and the savings that could be achieved when pupils would have to be transported to other schools. He also raised the issue of a 90 year lease on the car park held by the hall committee if the Council tried to sell the school building.

Cabinet asked about the distance between schools and officers explained that they had done extensive modelling looking at where pupils lived and projections going forward and had taken into account travel times in line with Welsh Government policy. Officers would look into the point raised by the local Member about the 90 year lease on the car park.

RESOLVED to approve commencing the statutory process on the proposal to close Llanfihangel Rhydithon C.P. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools.

The Leader confirmed that the points raised by local members and in correspondence would be taken into account.

8.	AUDIT WALES REPORT - TRANSFORMATION AT POWYS COUNTY
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Cabinet received the report from Audit Wales on transformation at the Council. Audit Wales had completed a health check as well as a number of interviews with Cabinet and Officers and found that, overall, the Council was well placed to deliver its transformation programme, however COVID-19 presents new challenges and risks to the programme.

Three areas of improvement had been identified by Audit Wales:

- The Council should build on and develop its ongoing engagement with stakeholders.

- For the Council to aim to evaluate all projects and consider ways to demonstrate the impact the projects are having on local residents and communities in Powys.
- The Council should build on any learning from the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESOLVED Cabinet accept the findings of this report and agree to focus and commit the resources necessary to complete actions set out in section 3 of the report.

9.	AUDIT WALES ANNUAL SUMMARY
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Cabinet received the report of the Audit Wales audit summary for the Council. The summary contained information about the work completed since the last Annual Improvement Report, issued in January 2020. The report also confirmed that the Improvement Board were no longer needed because of the progress made by the Council.

The Chief Executive reported that the Executive Management Team had met all of the inspectorates in a joint meeting the previous week. The aim was to co-ordinate work for future years. The feedback from the meeting was very positive and it was clear that the inspectorates were very well aware of the progress the Council was making and the context that the Council operated in.

RESOLVED that Cabinet considers and notes the contents of the Audit Wales audit summary in Appendix one to the report and the findings of Audits conducted in Powys during 2020.

10.	DELEGATED DECISIONS TAKEN BY PORTFOLIO HOLDERS
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Cabinet noted the decisions taken by Portfolio Holders.

11.	FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME
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Cabinet noted the forward work programme.

County Councillor M R Harris (Chair)