

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL

CABINET REPORT FOR PORTFOLIO HOLDER DECISION 4th May 2012

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SUBJECT: Closure of Llangedwyn Church in Wales School

REPORT FOR: Decision

Summary

Following a review of small schools in Powys by the Council's Learning in the Community Programme Board in January 2011, on 4th October 2011 the Council's Cabinet approved the commencement of a consultation process to close Llangedwyn C in W School.

At the time of writing there are 28 pupils at the school.

The financial costings and potential savings from closure of the school are shown at Appendix A and are approximately £58,000 per annum. The cost per pupil for 2011/12 is £4,785 which is 32.5% higher than the Powys average of £3,612.

A consultation meeting with staff, governors and the community was held on 8th February 2012 where the proposals were explained; this included a timetable explaining that the school could be formally closed by summer 2013. The Council must give one term's notice to a school proposed for closure as well as undertaking the formal statutory notice procedure.

The consultation period for comments to be received on the proposals ran from 8th February to 21st March 2012. A total of 56 separate responses to the consultation were received; a summary of the representations received by this deadline is shown in Appendix B. Information from a meeting with some of the school pupils held on 21st March is included at Appendix C.

An officer response to the main themes from these representations is given below. A copy of all letters and emails received is available in the Schools Service as are the agreed minutes of all the consultation meetings.

Comments from respondents

Comments from respondents focus on the following themes and an officer response is given in the paragraphs that follow:

- The school provides a high standard of education and good results.
- It is a safe environment for the children. Many pupils live within an easy and safe walking distance.
- New children are likely to start in the near future; two will be starting in September bringing the number up to 30. School numbers have not fallen despite the uncertainty of the review. Pupil numbers only dropped due to the retirement of the head; there is now a full time head teacher in post.

- The school is vital to the community as a focus for village life. There are out of school activities and evening classes held at the school.
- The children at the school have excellent behaviour and manners. The school caters for their emotional needs in a nurturing environment.
- The school provides a faith based education which respondents claim would not be available in alternative schools.
- There is a breakfast and after school club which is not available in the alternative schools. Many respondents made the point that this is a significant support to the local economy allowing both self employed and employed people to work outside the area. Loss of the school would result in extra time and cost to local people and would potentially put their employment and livelihoods at risk.
- The school has good Estyn inspection grades.
- The council's decision is based on erroneous data, is not within its own policy and has breached WG guidelines.
- The savings to the council's budget are not significant.
- There will be increased transport costs, disruption to children from additional travelling and an adverse impact on the environment. Alternative schools are on B or unclassified roads which may be closed in winter. There are concerns about shared transport with high school pupils.
- There is strong parental involvement in the life of the school.
- The proportion of children with additional learning needs is high and it provides a supportive environment for these children. 50% of these children have moved from other schools.
- Alternative schools need additional building work to make them suitable, whereas Llangedwyn's buildings are in good condition.
- There is a strong and committed PTA at the school.
- The school is in a good location on a main road which stays open in winter.
- Respondents believe the council's decision is financially short-sighted.
- The council doesn't own the site so there is no capital gain to be achieved in the closure of the school.
- The school offers local full and part time employment.
- The school has a healthy budget position.
- There is no basis for the council's view that there will be a 40% increase in staff costs in the future.
- Children from Llangedwyn go on to do well at high school.
- The school has excellent outdoor facilities.
- Pupils have a voice and there are clear lines of communication.

In addition the governing body of Llangedwyn C in W School has raised the following points:

- There was inconsistency in how Llangedwyn and Llanfechain C in W Schools were dealt with in the review and at Cabinet in October. For example, the lack of capacity in receiving schools was used as a reason not to close Llanfechain but not used for Llangedwyn. The same decision should have been reached for both schools.
- The financial saving for Llanfechain C in W School would have been greater and the vacant places were higher.
- Decision was based on incorrect information and this was not checked by the council.
- Confusion over the 30 or 35 pupil threshold for reviewing small schools. They believe the higher figure was introduced halfway through the review and other schools of less than 35 were not included in the review. Furthermore the threshold figure is not included in the policy document on primary modernisation.

- The governors provided evidence that pupil numbers would exceed 30.
- The projected increase in pupil numbers in Llanfechain was not explained in the report to Cabinet.
- Llangedwyn was not given as much time as Llanfechain to provide additional information.
- The governors dispute the surplus place figure and the distance to Ysgol Bro Cynllaith.
- Housing allocations in the UDP were used in the report about Llanfechain but not in the Llangedwyn report.
- The governing body contend that a large proportion of children live in the school's closest zone or did when they started school.
- Children at the school have not been consulted on the proposals.
- The school provides facilities that the village hall cannot e.g. IT and provides them at reasonable cost.
- The school is active in the production of Village Voice, in town twinning and there is a Friends of the School group.
- 90% of pupils use the breakfast and after school clubs.
- There is currently no PCC funding for school transport at Llangedwyn but 23 out of 28 pupils would need transport to be provided if alternative schools were attended. Furthermore transport costs are underestimated in the council's figures.
- 36% of children in the school have additional learning needs.
- The school provides a non-Welsh education option for parents locally.

Officer response

In terms of the procedural issues around the review raised by the governing body, officers believe that it has been handled objectively and fairly. Members of Cabinet were presented with the same information for Llanfechain and Llangedwyn C in W Schools in October 2011 and no recommendation from officers was provided. Officers are content that all schools of under 35 were part of the January 2011 review and the reference to 30 pupils was a mistake in the report rather than the policy being changed halfway through the review. The threshold figure for small schools of 35 was specifically referred to in the report to Board of 15th July 2008. Children at the school were consulted about the closure proposals on 21st March 2012.

The school and the residents of Llangedwyn have responded in large numbers to the consultation on the proposed closure of the school. They have produced some compelling evidence for the school to remain open, and it is important that this is properly considered against the council's need to make financial savings and provide the best quality of education for all children in Powys. The decision on the future of the school is finely balanced and in the end a judgement needs to be made weighing the financial savings against the impact on the school, its pupils and the wider community. In this case, officers are not convinced that the case for school closure outweighs the impacts of the decision as articulated by the respondents. Of particular significance in this finely balanced argument are the following:

- The numbers in the school are likely to rise to 30 by September and are projected to increase to 32 by 2014.
- The savings to be achieved are not as great as for other schools that have been proposed for closure recently - £58,000 as opposed to £100,000 for Cwmdru, Dolfor and Trefnanney. The savings for Llanfechain C in W School (considered at the same Cabinet meeting in October 2011) were projected to be £75,000.

- There appears to be some evidence that closure of the school, with its breakfast and after school clubs, would have a significant impact on the local economy by preventing people being able to maintain employment or run their businesses.
- The school appears to be truly embedded in its community. The Community Impact Assessment produced in conjunction with the governing body identifies a number of local impacts of school closure. There are other community facilities in the village such as the hall but, unlike other schools considered recently for closure, additional community activity occurs at the school.

Officers are of the view that Llangedwyn C in W School is sufficiently different from those schools that the council has recently considered for closure in terms of the savings to be made and the likely impact of closure on the community and the economy. In the future it is likely that larger schools than Llangedwyn will face the prospect of closure, but these are more likely to be within catchment reviews where enhanced educational opportunities are likely to be provided as part of the review and where a strategic educational case can be made for closure.

It is important that reviews of small schools demonstrate that they are open and transparent and that there is a genuine ability for schools and communities to challenge the process. Reviews also need to be consistent not just to illustrate fairness but also to allow the council to compare its decisions over time. At present, the only clear criteria set down by the council are the total pupil numbers in the school, the savings to be made from closure, school condition data and Estyn inspection grades. It is not clear what weight is given to these factors in making the final decision or what additional considerations are taken into account. A review of the council's policy on small schools is required in order to provide more clarity for schools, communities and elected members on the subject.

Proposal

In conclusion, it is recommended that the portfolio holder does not publish a statutory notice of closure for Llangedwyn C in W School but that pupil numbers are closely monitored and that officers work with the school to reduce the number of surplus places.

Corporate Improvement Plan

A priority of the Corporate Improvement Plan is to provide high quality educational opportunities for all and this priority has been encompassed within the Learning in the Community improvement priority of the Powys Change Programme. The proposals within this paper will also help to meet the efficiency priority targets within the Plan.

Options Considered/Available

Statutory notices of closure could be published and, assuming objections are received, the matter could be determined by the Minister at the Welsh Government. However, for the reasons identified above, it is considered that the savings that could be achieved by the school's closure are outweighed by the benefits of keeping the school open.

Preferred Choice and Reasons

For the reasons identified above, it is in the best interests of the pupils in the school and the local community that Llangedwyn C in W School remains open. The savings identified do not outweigh the impact on local education and the community.

Sustainability and Environmental Issues/Equalities/Crime and Disorder/Welsh Language/Other Policies etc

Where small schools are proposed for closure there will be some increase in travel and therefore carbon emissions.

The proposals are anticipated to impact on some vulnerable or minority groups; an equality impact assessment has been undertaken.

School closure proposals will have an impact on the services available in rural communities and these have been fully considered in this report.

Children and Young People's Impact Statement - Safeguarding and Wellbeing

The best interests of young people in these small schools will be safeguarded at all times particularly during this uncertain period of review.

Local Member(s)

Councillor Aled Davies has commented as follows:

Llangedwyn CW School provides an excellent education for children of all ability and is at the heart of the Llangedwyn community. I warmly welcome the decision not to close the school. With this decision not to close and the Llanfyllin catchment review not being started for some years, the school can now look forward to a period of stability, which is essential for the wellbeing of the school and its children.

Other Front Line Services

No implications identified.

Support Services (Legal, Finance, HR, ICT, BPU)

The Principal Accountant has been fully involved with the costings of the proposed closure of this school and confirms the savings identified are accurate based on the assumptions made in the report.

Legal - There are no legal implications at this stage.

Local Service Board/Partnerships/Stakeholders etc

No implications identified.

Statutory Officers

The Strategic Director, Law & Governance (Monitoring Officer) has no comments to make on the report.

The Strategic Director, Finance & Infrastructure (Section 151 Officer) has commented:-
I note that the Principal Accountant has agreed the financial data used in the report and would support the recommendation of the report.

Members' Interests

The Monitoring Officer is not aware of any specific interests that may arise in relation to this report.

Future Status of the Report

The portfolio holder is invited to consider the future status of this report and whether it can be made available to the press and public either immediately following the meeting or at some specified point in the future.

Recommendation:	Reason for Recommendation:
It is recommended that the portfolio holder does not publish a statutory notice of closure for Llangedwyn C in W School but that pupil numbers are closely monitored, that officers work	To ensure efficient use of resources within the schools service and to provide the best possible standard of education for local children. To review the position of the school in

with the school to reduce the number of surplus places and that the school is reviewed as part of the Llanfyllin primary catchment review.	the context of other primary schools in the catchment.
It is recommended that the small schools policy is reviewed and presented to Cabinet before the end of the current financial year.	To ensure that the framework for decision making is up to date.

Relevant Policy (ies):			
Within Policy:	Y	Within Budget:	Y

Relevant Local Member(s):	Councillor Aled Davies
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Person(s) To Implement Decision:	Head of Schools
Date By When Decision To Be Implemented:	31st May 2012

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Background Papers used to prepare Report:

Llangedwyn Consultation Paper February 2012

Llangedwyn Community Impact Assessment February 2012