

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL

**CABINET REPORT
FOR PORTFOLIO HOLDER DECISION
14th November 2011**

REPORT AUTHOR: Gareth Jones
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SUBJECT: Closure of Dolfor Community Primary School

REPORT FOR: Decision

Summary

Following a review of small schools in Powys by the Council's Learning in the Community Programme Board earlier in the year, on 5th July 2011 the Council's Cabinet approved the commencement of a consultation process to close Dolfor CP School.

At the time of writing there are 17 pupils at the school of which 8 are in the top two year groups.

The financial costings and potential savings from closure of the school are shown at Appendix A and are approximately £100,000 per annum. The cost per pupil at the school is £5,886, 38% higher than the county average.

A consultation meeting with staff, governors and the community was held on 22nd September where the proposals were explained; this included a timetable explaining that the school could be formally closed by summer 2012. 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 19th September to 31st October. A summary of the representations received by this deadline is given in Appendix B and officer comments on the main themes of these representations are provided below. Copies of all letters and emails received are available in the Schools Service as are the agreed minutes of all the consultation meetings.

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

- Impact on community/rural life and on friendships – only facility in the village.

The closure of a village school will undoubtedly have an impact on community life; this is acknowledged in the Community Impact Assessment which has been amended by the community. This does however have to be weighed against the very small number of pupils and the cost to the County Council which is significantly higher than the county average. If the school were to close there is no threat to the independent and adjacent community hall which could still act as a focus for the community in Dolfor. If children transfer to the same school they will still be able to maintain local friendships.

- Pupils would be transferring to an urban school

Whilst the nominated school is undoubtedly larger and in a more urban environment than Dolfor, it is still the nearest and is a rural school in the context of Wales. Existing pupils travel to it from the rural areas around Newtown as well as from the town itself. Pupils living more than two miles from the new school would qualify for free transport.

- Safety of route to Newtown

Most pupils from the village of Dolfor would qualify for free transport to the nominated school as it is more than two miles away. For those that live less than two miles away the route would be risk-assessed and if considered unsafe, free transport would be provided.

- Impact on community hall and its finances

The Council will look at the configuration of the hall and the school so that, if the school closes, the hall will not be disadvantaged in terms of loss of car parking or access. Whilst there will be a small annual loss of income to the community hall through loss of school use, the community hall is understood to have quite healthy financial reserves which could sustain it while alternative sources of income are found.

- Support for pupils with SEN

The work that the school does with pupils with special educational needs is acknowledged but it is not the only school that makes significant progress with children with significant SEN/ALN needs, the smaller class sizes in Dolfor may be a factor that supports an increased level of small group work. If the school does close the authority recognises that the children currently in Dolfor with significant needs will need an individual plan to ensure they are successfully integrated into their new schools.

- Good school buildings

It is acknowledged that the school buildings are in good condition and so the ongoing maintenance costs are at a reasonable level. This however is not reason in itself to keep the school open especially with such low pupil numbers.

- School is closing for purely financial reasons

The financial cost to the County Council of keeping open very small schools is significant and is a major factor in the review of small schools. However the quality of education that is possible for children in these small schools compared with the alternatives available is also a major consideration in this review. It is preferable and more beneficial for children to be taught in larger classes and narrower age bands than those that are possible in schools with such low pupil numbers.

- Concern over process followed by PCC particularly the leak

The leak of the information about the small schools review to the press in January 2011 was regrettable and the Portfolio Holder for Learning and Leisure has apologised personally to the community on behalf of the Council. The number on roll in January however was 24, so the school was already at a low level of pupils when the small schools review report was leaked.

- Only small school remaining in Newtown catchment

Whilst this will be the case following the closure of Aberhafesp CP School, there is no County Council policy which seeks to maintain a choice for parents of small schools and large schools. The Council's existing policy seeks to maintain fit for purpose schools located in the right place preferably with single form entry and optimum class sizes rather than maintaining very small schools which are more expensive and do not have the same educational benefits for children. The policy does allow for maintaining small schools in a geographical remote area, but as Dolfor is less than 5 miles from Newtown this policy would not apply.

D11 and D23 refer to no response being given by the Council to comments from the governing body. All points in the original governing body's response have now been addressed in a letter from the Strategic Director Communities Skills and Learning.

D21 is the governing body's response to the Community Impact Assessment. This will be sent to the Welsh Government if the Council proceeds to publication of a statutory notice.

The Council does not believe that any of the issues raised during the consultation period should prevent it from proceeding to the publication of statutory notices for closure of the school.

Statutory notices

Statutory notices need to be published for one month and are subject to Welsh Government regulations. They must be displayed at all school entrances and published in at least one local newspaper as well as other prominent public places. They must be published not fewer than 15 school days before the end of a term; the last possible publication date before the end of the current term would be 30th November. If one objection to a statutory notice is received, the decision falls to the Minister at the Welsh Government to determine. The Council must make its comments on the objections received and send them to the Welsh Government within two weeks of the end of the objection period.

Proposal

To publish statutory notices for the closure of Dolfor CP School on or around 24th November with the closing date for objections being on or around 24th December with the receiving schools being named as Ladywell Green Infant & Hafren CP Junior Schools. This timetable would allow, subject to Ministerial approval, the school to be closed by 31st August 2012. Free transport to the named receiving schools will only be available for qualifying pupils.

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. Any recommendations to consult on the closure of schools will, if implemented, support the priorities for the Schools Service contained in the Plan.

Options Considered/Available

The school could remain open but this would be a very inefficient use of resources and the number of pupils is at a level where it will become increasingly difficult for a reasonable standard of education to be provided.

Preferred Choice and Reasons

It is in the best interests of the pupils in the school that statutory notices for closure are published as soon as possible.

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 not anticipated to impact on any 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 but the savings generated will help to maintain and improve services for the whole of the community of Powys.

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. In the case of small schools that will be closing, every effort will be made to ensure a smooth transition to new schools and safe and efficient transport to their new locations.

Local Member(s)

The local member Councillor Kath Roberts-Jones has commented as follows:

Whilst my heart tells me that there is a need for the school to continue in the village, having experienced a closure of a primary school in the recent past, knowing just how painful it is for the whole community, my head tells me that, with so few numbers attending it is difficult to see how it can continue as we have a duty to ensure that the best possible education is available for our 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 commented:-
The proposals need to follow the normal procedures for school closure and advice from Legal Services obtained as necessary.

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:
To publish statutory notices for the closure of Dolfor CP School before the end of November 2011 with the closing date for objections being before the end of December.	To ensure efficient use of resources within the schools service and to provide the best possible standard of education for local children.

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

Relevant Local Member(s):	Councillor Kath Roberts-Jones
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Person(s) To Implement Decision:	Head of Schools
Date By When Decision To Be Implemented:	31st August 2012

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Background Papers used to prepare Report:

Dolfor Consultation Paper September/October 2011

Dolfor Community Impact Assessment September/October 2011