

**CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.**

**CABINET EXECUTIVE  
23 November 2021**

**REPORT AUTHOR:** County Councillor Phyl Davies  
Portfolio Holder for Education and Property

**REPORT TITLE:** Churchstoke C.P. School

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**REPORT FOR:** Decision

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**1. Purpose**

1.1 Further to the decision made by Cabinet on the 9<sup>th</sup> February 2021, the Council has carried out consultation on the following proposal:

- To close Churchstoke C.P. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to attend their nearest alternative schools

1.2 The purpose of this report is to inform Cabinet members of the responses received to the consultation and to determine whether or not to proceed with the statutory process to close the school.

1.3 The report is supported by the following appendices:

- **Appendix A** – Consultation Document
- **Appendix B** – Consultation Report
- **Appendix C** – Minutes of meetings with School Council, Governors and Staff
- **Appendix D** – Updated Impact Assessments

**2. Background**

**Strategy for Transforming Education in Powys**

2.1 On the 14th April 2020, a new Strategy for Transforming Education in Powys was approved by the Leader via a delegated decision.

2.2 The Strategy was developed following extensive engagement with a range of stakeholders during two separate periods between October 2019 and March 2020. The Strategy sets out a new vision for education in Powys, as follows:

*'All children and young people in Powys will experience a high quality, inspiring education to help develop the knowledge, skills and attributes that will enable them to become healthy, personally fulfilled,*

*economically productive, socially responsible and globally engaged citizens of 21st century Wales.'*

2.3 The new strategy also sets out a number of guiding principles which will underpin the transformation of education in Powys. These are as follows:

- *A world class rural education system that has learner entitlement at its core*
- *Schools that are fully inclusive, with a culture of deep collaboration in order to improve learner outcomes and experience*
- *A broad choice and high quality of provision for 14 – 19 year old learners, that includes both academic and vocational provision, meeting the needs of all learners, communities and the Powys economy*
- *Welsh-medium provision that is accessible and provides a full curriculum in Welsh from Meithrin to age 19 and beyond*
- *Provision for learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN)/Additional Learning Needs (ALN) that is accessible as near to home as is practicably possible, with the appropriate specialist teaching, support and facilities that enables every learner to meet their potential*
- *A digitally-rich schools sector that enables all learners and staff to enhance their teaching and learning experience*
- *Community-focused schools that are the central point for multi-agency services to support children, young people, families and the community*
- *Early years provision that is designed to meet the needs of all children, mindful of their particular circumstances, language requirements or any special or additional learning needs*
- *Financially and environmentally sustainable schools*
- *The highest priority is given to staff wellbeing and professional development*

2.4 The new strategy sets out a number of Strategic Aims and Objectives, to shape the Council's work to transform the Powys education system over the coming years. One of the Strategic Aims of the Strategy is to '*improve learner entitlement and experience*'. Within this aim, the Strategy sets out a Strategic Objective to '*rationalise primary provision*'.

2.5 On the 9<sup>th</sup> February 2021, the Council's Cabinet considered an options appraisal paper in respect of Churchstoke C.P. School, and agreed to carry out consultation on the following:

- To close Churchstoke C.P. School from the 31st August 2022, with pupils to attend their nearest alternative schools

## **Background**

2.6 Churchstoke C.P. School is an English-medium community primary school located in the village of Churchstoke, in north Powys, close to the border with England. The school primarily serves Churchstoke and the surrounding area.

2.7 The challenges facing the school as outlined in the Consultation Document are:

### **i) Low pupil numbers**

Current pupil numbers<sup>1</sup> at Churchstoke C.P. School are as follows:

	<b>R</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Churchstoke C.P. School</b>	5	8	5	5	3	11	2	39

The Welsh Government defines a ‘small school’ as a school with less than 91 pupils. Pupil numbers at the school are significantly lower than this and the latest projected pupil information suggests that they are not expected to increase significantly for the foreseeable future.

The school’s low pupil numbers have also resulted in a high number of surplus places at the school.

### **ii) High budget per pupil**

Based on the Council’s Section 52 Budget Statements:

- 2020/2021  
Churchstoke C.P. School: £7,475  
Powys Average: £4,264
- 2021/2022  
Churchstoke C.P. School: £6,932  
Powys Average: £4,617

### **iii) Building condition and suitability**

The Welsh Government’s survey of school buildings carried out in 2009 identified issues with the building condition and suitability of Churchstoke C.P. School. The building condition was assessed to be condition C – Poor, whilst its suitability was assessed to be condition B/C – Good/Poor.

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<sup>1</sup> Teachers Centre November 2021

**iv) Leadership**

Whilst there is permanent leadership in place in Churchstoke C.P. School, the headteacher has a significant teaching commitment, which limits the time available to focus on leadership of the school.

**v) Combined age classes**

The small pupil numbers at the school mean that pupils are taught in whole key stage classes, with Key Stage 2 in one class and Foundation Phase in another class. Because pupil numbers in each year group are small, it is more difficult to ensure all pupils are appropriately challenged.

**2.8 Closest schools**

The nearest school for pupils attending Churchstoke C.P. School based on PLASC 2021 data is as follows:

<b>School</b>	<b>% of Pupils</b>
Churchstoke C.P. School	76%
Bishop's Castle Primary School	11%
St Michael's C. in W. School	5%
Montgomery C. in W. Primary School	3%
Long Mountain CofE Primary School	3%
Welshpool C. in W. Primary School	2%

If there was no school in Churchstoke, the nearest alternative schools for pupils attending the school would be as follows:

<b>School</b>	<b>% of Pupils</b>
Chirbury CofE Primary School	74%
Bishop's Castle Primary School	11%
St Michael's C. in W. School, Kerry	5%
Montgomery C. in W. Primary School	5%
Long Mountain CofE Primary School	3%

Welshpool C. in W. Primary School	2%
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### **The Consultation Period**

- 2.9 Consultation on the proposal to close Churchstoke C.P. School commenced on the 21st April 2021 and ended on the 9th June 2021.
- 2.10 The consultation document was available on the Council's website throughout the consultation period. The document was also distributed to stakeholders as required by the School Organisation Code (2018). The consultation document that was issued is attached as Appendix A.
- 2.11 Consultees were asked to respond to the consultation by either completing the online consultation form, filling in a paper copy of the form and returning it to the Transforming Education Team, or by writing to the Transforming Education Team.
- 2.12 During the consultation period, virtual meetings were also held with the following:
- Staff of Churchstoke C.P. School
  - Governors of Churchstoke C.P. School
  - School Council of Churchstoke C.P. School

The minutes of these meetings are attached as Appendix C, and the issues raised in the meetings are included in the Consultation Report (Appendix B).

### **Consultation Responses**

- 2.13 347 respondents completed the consultation response form which was included in the consultation document. This included paper copies as well as responses submitted using the online response form. In addition, 163 written responses were received from respondents including Estyn, by e-mail or post.
- 2.14 The written responses also included an online and paper petition to 'Save Churchstoke CP School Now - Urgent', which received 1,744 signatures.
- 2.15 As well as responses from parents, pupils, staff and governors at Churchstoke C.P. School and members of the local community, responses were received from the following organisations:
- Churchstoke Community Council
  - Chirbury Parish Council
  - Worthern with Sheleve Parish Council
  - Welsh Language Commissioner
  - Russell George MS

- Churchstoke Little Explorers
- Churchstoke Recreation Association
- Churchstoke Football Club
- St Nicholas' House Residential and Nursing Home
- Barcud Housing Association
- We Do Tennis
- Churchstoke Tennis Club
- Active8Kids Ltd
- Language Magnet
- Abbey Construction
- Kerry Vale Vineyard
- Montgomery Waters Limited
- Girlguiding Montgomeryshire
- Co-operative Food Centre Churchstoke
- St Nicholas Church Churchstoke
- Bryn Coed Homes Limited
- Churchstoke Women's Institute
- Churchstoke Football Club
- Early Years Wales
- Inspired Building Techniques Limited
- Powys Council's Schools Budget Forum

2.16 Estyn's response to the consultation is provided on page 15 of the Consultation Report (Appendix B).

2.17 The consultation response form asked respondents to answer a number of questions. The findings are provided in full on pages 7 to 9 of the Consultation Report (Appendix B).

### **Consultation Findings**

2.14 As part of the consultation, a consultation response form was issued, which was completed by 347 respondents. 76.7% of respondents indicated that they were associated with Churchstoke C.P. School, 5.8% indicated that they were associated with another school and 17.3% of respondents indicated that they were not associated with any school.

2.18 The issues raised in the written responses to the consultation and those raised in the consultation meetings, are listed in the Consultation Report (Appendix B) from page 18 onwards, along with the Council's response to these issues.

2.19 The issues raised relate to the following headings:

1. Comments about Churchstoke C.P. School
2. Comments about current / future pupil numbers
3. Comments about early years provision

4. Comments about small and rural schools
5. Impact on pupils
6. Impact on protected characteristic groups
7. Impact on parents / families
8. Comments about other schools pupils might transfer to
9. Comments about impact on the community
10. Travel implications
11. Comments about impact on the Welsh language
12. Comments about impact on staff
13. Financial implications
14. Comments about Council strategies
15. Comments about Welsh Government initiatives
16. Criticism of Powys County Council
17. Comments about the consultation process
18. Comments about the consultation documentation
19. Alternative options
20. Other comments

### **3 Advice**

- 3.1 Based on the findings of the consultation, and further assessment of the options in accordance with the requirements of the School Rural Schools, the advice of officers is that the Council **should not proceed** with the proposal to close Churchstoke C.P. School.
- 3.2 During the consultation exercise, further information was obtained about the fact that a significant number of pupils (approximately 80) from the area travel to schools in Shropshire, even though Churchstoke C.P. School is their closest school, therefore it is apparent that pupil numbers at Churchstoke C.P. School aren't as high as they should be. There are also a significant number of completed and planned housing developments in Churchstoke and the wider area which has the potential to put pressure on school places. Many comments were also received about the impact on the Welsh language and culture if parents chose schools in Shropshire instead of a Powys school for their children.
- 3.3 Given the above, the advice of officers is that the Council should not proceed with the current proposal to close the school. However, concerns remain in respect of the school. The Council will further consider options to address these concerns, and a further report will be brought back to Cabinet in due course.

### **4. Resource Implications**

- 4.1 There are no additional resource implications.
- 4.2 The Head of Finance (Section 151 Officer) notes the content of the report.

## **5. Legal implications**

- 5.1 Legal: The recommendations can be accepted from a legal point of view
- 5.2 The Head of Legal and Democratic Services ( Monitoring Officer ) has commented as follows: “ I note the legal comment and have nothing to add to the report”.

## **6. Comment from local member(s)**

- 6.1 Cllr Michael J. Jones (Churchstoke):

I support the recommendation of the Portfolio holder for Education and the Schools Transformation Team to keep Churchstoke C.P. School open.

Firstly I would like to thank the transformation team for their hard work and diligence in producing a full and comprehensive report. The consultation has been a long process and a very difficult, some would say a traumatic, experience for the community of Churchstoke especially the pupils, parents and staff of the school. Although many thought the process was unnecessary, what it has done is bring the community together to fight to ensure the survival of the school. This is evident in the unprecedented number of responses from the public, local organisations & stakeholders and the amount of evidence submitted. I would especially like to pay tribute to the pupils, parents, staff and governors of the school and the people of Churchstoke and district for, hopefully, a successful campaign. Also a special thank you to the members of the Save the School group who did a tremendous job leading and co-ordinating the campaign.

There is still work to do, as the report suggests, especially in encouraging families to choose Churchstoke school over cross border alternatives. If the Cabinet agrees with the reports recommendation the community will have a new beginning in an expanding, vibrant village, a growing school and pre-school and a new curriculum. The future is bright for Welsh education in Churchstoke.

Finally I would respectfully ask the Cabinet to endorse the recommendation of the Portfolio holder to keep Churchstoke School open.

## **7. Integrated Impact Assessment**

- 7.1 An initial impact assessment was considered by Cabinet on the 9<sup>th</sup> February 2021.



7.2 In addition, a range of draft impact assessments were produced as part of the consultation documentation. These included an Integrated Impact Assessment, an Equalities Impact Assessment, and a Community Impact Assessment.

7.3 These draft impact assessments have been updated to reflect issues raised during the consultation period, and are attached in Appendix D.

## 8. **Recommendation**

- To receive the Consultation Report in respect of the proposal to close Churchstoke C.P. School.
- To end the current process in respect of closing Churchstoke C.P. School.
- To further consider options to address issues identified in respect of the school.

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