

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **CABINET**

DATE: **TUESDAY, 12 JUNE 2012**

REPORT BY: **DIRECTOR OF LIFELONG LEARNING**

SUBJECT: **REVIEW OF OPTIONS: YSGOL RHES Y CAE**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

To seek approval from the Cabinet for Officers to renew consultation with relevant groups on options for the future of Ysgol Rhes y Cae.

2.00 BACKGROUND

2.01 The County Council's Executive approved the implementation of the School Modernisation Strategy in October 2009, which set out criteria for the review of Flintshire Schools. The strategy recommends a review if the school has more than 25% surplus places and has fewer than 15 pupils in Key Stage One and/or fewer than twenty pupils in Key Stage Two, over a period of 3 years in succession.

2.02 Ysgol Rhes y Cae meets with these criteria in having a surplus of 80% (the highest in Flintshire) and a total of 9 pupils.

2.03 A report seeking approval for officers to review the school and consult on options was submitted and approved on 21st September 2010.

2.04 An initial three meetings were held with Staff, Governors and Parents of pupils in early October, followed by a more formal consultation meeting and presentation to Parents, Governors, Staff and representatives of the wider community. Feedback from the meeting was recorded, and written responses were agreed at the meeting to be returned to the Authority by the 8th November. All of the written responses, and the notes of the consultation were made available to members in the members' library.

2.05 It is a requirement that any options put forward for consultation should be realistic and that unrealistic expectations should not be raised. A practical guide to managing School Reorganisation in Welsh Local Authorities (2010) states that if there is a preferred option, this should be clearly identified so as to enable consultees to focus on it, taking care to avoid an impression that the Council has decided the outcome in advance. It also states that if a clear preferred option seems to be

the only sensible way forward, it is unwise to float unfeasible possibilities, simply to avoid the appearance of prejudging the outcome.

2.06 Four options were put forward to initiate discussion are as follows:
follows:

1. No Change
2. Possible amalgamation with another school
3. Possible federation with other school/s
4. Possible closure of the school and the integration of pupils into neighbouring schools

Option 1 is not sustainable and the reasons are due to low pupil numbers, the consequent costs involved, and issues relating to the quality of educational provision at the school.

Option 2 would involve technical merger with another neighbouring school, and the establishment of a single school on a split site, with one Headteacher, one Governing Body and one budget.

There would be issues with the management of a small rural school on a split site, and the budget would be reduced due to the loss of an element of small schools protection.

There would be some saving, but this would be confined to the salary of one Headteacher, as the other functions of the school in terms of local management, administrative work etc. would remain the same. Infrastructure costs would be unchanged.

Option 3 relates to the establishment of a Federation with another school. Federation is an arrangement that is proposed by Governing Bodies of schools agree to dissolve their existing Governing Bodies and to establish a new body which would govern the federation. The Local Authority would be a consultee in the event of such a proposal being put forward.

In a Federation, the schools would share a Headteacher, but would retain their budget, although the new governing body could decide to pool the budget if they felt that it was appropriate to do so.

A Federation established with Ysgol Rhes y Cae would not address the central issue of low pupil numbers, and the consequent levels of surplus places.

No proposal for federation has been received at any stage in the review process from the Governing Body.

Option 4 would require careful consultation and engagement with parents and staff to appropriately manage a move to another

appropriate school. In terms of ensuring continuity of provision and efficiencies in terms of resources, this is the preferred option.

2.07 As the Authority is unable to propose a federation, any proposal to establish a federation would need to come from the Governing Bodies of the prospective Federation. No proposal has come forward during the extended period of review for a federation from the Governing Body.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

3.01 The review has been initiated due to low pupil numbers, high costs per pupil and concerns over the educational experience of learners. As the School is a controlled school, close liaison with the Church in Wales Diocesan Director of Lifelong Learning has been maintained. The number of children admitted to the school continues to depend on the preference expressed by parents.

3.02 As the original consultations were carried out in October 2010, it is reasonable to require a new consultation process.

3.03 Key issues for consideration by elected members include:

- the effect on the standard of education to be provided in the area including provision for pupils with additional learning needs, delivery of the Foundation Phase and the 14-19 Transformation Programme (Educational Impact Assessment);
- the need for the particular type of provision that is proposed, for example the level of parental demand for Welsh medium education or impact on the proportion of places in faith schools in the area (Demography and Demand Assessment);
- the effect on compliance with equality legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act 2002 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, and the Welsh Assembly Government's strategy for tackling child poverty (Equalities Impact Assessment);
- the effect on accessibility to schools, particularly in rural areas and on the journey times to school (Sustainability Assessment);
- the effect on the Welsh language, its maintenance in the community and the extent to which proposals would contribute to the aims of Iaith Pawb (Welsh Language Impact Assessment);
- whether the proposal includes additional community focused facilities or with the impact on the local community

- and on social cohesion (Community Impact Assessment);
- the views of those most directly affected, such as children, young people, parents, staff, governors and other schools or providers in the area;
- whether the proposal contributes towards achieving the County Council's agreed strategy for making all its school buildings fit for purpose; and
- the cost-effectiveness of proposals and whether adequate financial resources are available to implement them.

3.04 Educational Impact Assessment:

The latest Estyn inspection in 2008 resulted in the school receiving six grade threes and one grade two against key questions. Grade two is good features with no important shortcomings. Grade three is good features outweigh shortcomings.

In July 2010 the school was placed on Stage 3 (this is a school with weaknesses in important areas, and a school in need of an increased level of support to address specific issues) of Flintshire's Monitoring, Challenge, Support and Intervention Policy. This procedure had led to a monitoring visit to the school by the Principal Primary Officer of Flintshire County Council and two Senior Learning Advisors. The report produced following the visit on the 10th June 2010 indicates the following: -

"As standards and quality of teaching remain a concern, in particular KS2, the school has been placed at Stage 3 of the Monitoring, Challenge and Support Policy".

In August 2011 due to ongoing concerns the school was placed on Stage 4. A school at Stage 4 is one in need of significant improvement.

Recent Estyn inspections of neighbouring schools show the following for the 7 key questions:

Rhosesmor Rhos Helyg - 7 grade 2 outcomes.

Lixwm - 7 grade 2 outcomes.

Brynford - 7 grade 2 outcomes.

Alternative schools also have facilities for before and after school care.

3.05 Demography and Demand Assessment:

The pupil numbers at the school are 7 full-time with 2 children in the nursery. One pupil is presently in Year 6 and will leave the school

at the end of the academic year.

The capacity of the school is for 45 pupils, and the present surplus is 36, therefore 80%. Current 2012 admissions data indicate that there will be 8 full-time pupils with no pupils in the Nursery being admitted resulting in 37 surplus places (82%) from September 2012.

3.06 Equalities Assessment:

Access to alternative provision would not be affected by a proposed closure. Other schools have sufficient capacity, and specialist provision is available at other schools for pupils with special or specific needs.

3.07 Sustainability Assessment:

The attached map shows the current home locations of registered pupils. Although some live close enough to walk to school, many more travel by car. Some pass schools nearer to their homes.

In the event of a school closure, there would be consequent savings both in financial and energy terms, and alternative schools already have sufficient space without the need for any further cost or increase in the use of energy.

It is not possible to predict which alternative school would be preferred by parents, but given the number of local suitable schools with surplus places, it is not expected that either distances travelled or journey times for pupils would be increased significantly.

3.08 Welsh Language Impact:

Ysgol Rhes y Cae provides Welsh medium education in accordance with the Welsh National Curriculum. All other schools in Flintshire are required to provide this prescribed level of Welsh medium education.

3.09 Community Impact Assessment:

Rhes y Cae has a Community Hall which should be able to continue to provide a Community focus for non-school activities. The school accommodation is used principally for teaching purposes.

3.10 Consultation Assessment:

The issues raised at the meetings in October 2010 included the following:

Option 2 would involve the technical merger with another neighbouring school and the establishment of a single school on a split site, with one Headteacher, one Governing Body and one budget. There would be issues with the management of a rural school on a split site, and the budget would be reduced due to the loss of an element of small schools protection. There would be some saving, but this would be confined to the salary of one Headteacher, as the other functions of the school in terms of local management,

administrative work etc. would remain the same.

Option 3 would involve the proposal of a governing body/ies of neighbouring school/s to form a federation. In this arrangement, one Headteacher would provide the leadership and management of the schools in the federation. However, the individual governing bodies and separate budgets could be retained in the federation, and decisions would be made by the Governors as to how the budgets were delegated.

Option 4 would involve the closure of the school and integration of the children into other local schools. An analysis of the local schools and the location of the home addresses of pupils indicated that pupils came from a wide area where some pupils were travelling past schools nearer to their homes. A map showing the distribution of pupils and local schools is included as **Appendix 1**.

Responses at the meeting included the following:

- that parents were happy with the education that was provided by the school, and that the school played an important role in the community;
- that the school was a welcoming environment for the children, and that the small classes were advantageous to the children. There were several consultees, who stated that the community would suffer if the school closed;
- some parents stated that the access to the school from the locality was good, and that some children were able to walk to school, and that this would not be possible if the school was to close. Some consultees felt that the area could increase in terms of residential development, and that this would have a positive effect on the numbers who would attend the school;
- change in staffing was cited by some as a reason for the decline in numbers, and that after a time, parents would again send their children to the school as opposed to the current trend for parents to express a preference for other schools in the area;
- references were made to the Estyn inspection (2008) which highlighted the role of the school in the community and the value for money aspect of the school.

Written responses to the consultation include:

- mixed age classes being beneficial, and the greater attention that children receive from parents due to the numbers involved;

- the adoption of the foundation phase, and the ability of the school to remain within its budget;
- that the school building is in the ownership of the Church, and that no capital receipt would be available to the Council;
- that the school was one of the first to receive the Eco flag award;
- that the savings made from the closure of the school would be a small % of the total education budget.

Many consultees felt that the consultation had not fully explored alternative options to closure, and that the closure was made out to be the only viable option. No specific alternative proposals on amalgamation, federation or other options have been received by the Authority.

A copy of the review timeline handed to consultees is attached as **Appendix 2**.

Responses to the points made above

Although many of the consultees supported the concept of a small school, there are many positive features of a larger school. These include the larger teaching groups that avoid the teaching of four year groups together. Larger groups allow for increased social and educational interaction between pupils.

All schools were required to introduce the foundation phase,

Any perception about increases in population of the village are not backed by the Local Development Plan.

References made in Estyn inspection reports to 'value for money' refer to the management of the delegated budget by the school. The judgement does not refer to the comparison of value for money with other schools.

Comment was made in the feedback from the consultation in relation to the options put forward, and that the consultation tended to assume that closure of the school was the only viable option. The four options put forward were to initiate discussion, and each was discussed in turn. Each option was assessed in terms of the potential to increase the pupils numbers, which is the focus for the review. Neither Amalgamation nor Federation would address the issue of pupil numbers, and the consequent issues of costs.

The surrounding schools have surplus places that are more than adequate to absorb pupil numbers if the decision was made to close Ysgol Rhes y Cae These are:

Caerwys - 30 places (Church in Wales Aided)
Rhosesmor Rhos Helyg - 31 places (Community)
Nannerch - 36 places (Controlled)
Lixwm - 7 places (Community)
Brynford - 10 places (Community)

3.11 Asset Management Assessment:

Although the school is Controlled, the Local Authority retains the obligation to maintain and repair the building, and to be responsible for any liabilities associated with the School.

In the event of closure, the building would revert to the ownership of the Church in Wales.

3.12 Financial Assessment:

From the latest Section 52 statement of the Council's budget, the average annual cost for a pupil in Rhes y Cae is £14,029 as opposed to the Flintshire average of £3,139.

Financial implications are set out at 5.01.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

That members approve consultation relating to the options outlined with a clear preferred option to propose the closure of the school in accordance with the statutory process.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.01 The estimated savings from a proposed closure of the school would be £119,328 per annum.

5.02 Teaching staff would have their salary protected for a period of three years if there are staffing redeployments that result in a post being offered in another school of lower salary. If redundancies occur as a result of proposals, the relevant policies for teaching and non-teaching staff in Flintshire schools would be operated.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

6.01 The reorganisation of schools is subject to the policies relating to transport and other benefits available to parents.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

7.01 Local schools are available in the area. Some pupils travel past other schools to Rhes y Cae at present.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.01 The proposed reorganisation will not have a negative impact on the educational opportunities available to children in the area.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.01 In the event of school closure, staff will be redeployed to other schools as a first option. If redundancy can not be avoided, the relevant Flintshire policy will be used.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

10.01 A statutory period of two months will be provided to consultees to lodge formal objection to the proposal.

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 Three initial meetings held with the relevant groups of Parents, Staff and Governors of the School, followed by a formal consultation meeting with Parents Staff Governors and representatives of the local community.

12.00 APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Map

Appendix 2 – Copy of the consultation documentation handed to consultees

Appendix 3 – Financial Implications

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

None

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