

**PUBLIC QUESTIONS
UNDER STANDING ORDER 35**

**ITEM 5: TRANSFORMING LEARNING COMMUNITIES: REPORT ON THE
OPTIONS IDENTIFIED BY THE LOCALITY REVIEW FOR ALASAGER,
CONGLETON, SANDBACH AND HOLMES CHAPEL – OUTCOMES OF
THE FORMAL CONSULTATION**

CHURCH LAWTON PRIMARY SCHOOL

Questions from Mrs Kate Lawton, Parent

Point 1. Given the following information:

- The 'Securing Learning for the Future' document clearly states that "*only where absolutely unavoidable*, the closure of some schools will take place".
- January 2008, *The Times*, reported that schools minister, Jim Knight, was to urge Local Authorities to consider more '*creative*' alternatives to the closure of primary schools.
- Information provided by the Dcfs shows the number of maintained primary schools to close in England between September 2007 and August 2009 to be 336, with a further 157 proposals published since 1st September 2008.

Based on the information contained within the TLC's 'Securing Learning for the Future' document, the Schools Minister's recommendation, and the fact that already a large number of primary schools in England are already set to close;

QUESTION 1: What alternative ways of effectively managing surplus school places in the Alsager area have the Council actively considered and carried out before deciding to put forward an option to close Church Lawton Primary School?

RESPONSE:

The Council's document "A Case for Change" makes it clear that:

***"... SUCH DECISIONS [CLOSURES] WILL BE TAKEN ONLY
WHERE THE LOCAL AUTHORITY DOES NOT BELIEVE THAT THE
SCHOOL IS VIABLE OR REQUIRED ..."***

As far as Church Lawton Primary School is concerned, the closure proposal is being made because it is felt that this point has now been reached.

The LA has previously agreed to recalculate net capacity at the school and has reduced it from 210 to 105 places, thus potentially freeing up accommodation for alternative uses such as extended services. Nevertheless, the school currently has significant surplus capacity, which is set to increase.

Other measures have included adjustment of net capacity at other schools (and using the accommodation for alternative uses) and school amalgamations (Cranberry Infant and Junior). There have been no primary school closures in the Alsager area for some years.

The underlying and inescapable fact is that pupil numbers across the area have been falling for a number of years – and are likely to continue to do so into the future – which means there is simply too much provision and therefore, in the case of Church Lawton where a significant number of surplus places have become concentrated, it is necessary to pursue the option of closure.

QUESTION 2: What measures have the Local Authority taken in actively supporting Church Lawton Primary School in addressing the capacity issues either prior to, or during the TLC process?

RESPONSE:

The LA has previously co-operated with the Governing Body in the downward adjustment of the school's net capacity. 105 places have already been discounted.

The Governors are responsible for the overall control and management of their premises and, while it is recognised they cannot control overall demographic decline in the area, there are other measures to do with alternative use of the premises and overall promotion and marketing of the School which could have featured strongly as part of their core strategic planning. Schools are, by law, self governing and self managing. Local Authorities are prevented from interfering in either aspect of school life, but offer Headteachers and Governors advice and support which they themselves choose whether or not to accept. Church Lawton has been treated in exactly the same way as every other Cheshire school in this respect. Equally, parents must by law have their preference met, if possible, when deciding which school to send their children to. The ability of Local Authorities to act in the way envisaged in the question is therefore limited to the role described above.

QUESTION 3: If not, then why not?

RESPONSE:

Please see answer to previous question.

The 'alternative proposal' and the 'two year recovery plan' presented by the School's governing body both provide viable and effective means of addressing the surplus places within the school and in supporting Cheshire's target of local surplus places, following the 10% guideline from the Dcfs.

QUESTION 4: Why therefore have the Council continued to disregard these plans by continuing to recommend the school closure?

RESPONSE:

The Local Authority has provided Governors with feedback on their plan, and suggested how it might be improved. The revised version of the plan has been made available to Council and to this meeting.

Nevertheless, the view of the officers is that the additions made to it do not provide convincing evidence of the deficiencies communicated to the School Governing Body in ways described in the report to today's meeting of the Children's Services Executive.

However, even if the Governors' action plan were to prove successful, Church Lawton would remain a very small school, and would only achieve the increased pupil numbers envisaged in the plan by recruiting from other local schools which would then suffer under-capacity problems themselves.

QUESTION 5: Why is the school not being actively supported by the Council with these proposals to address the capacity issue?

RESPONSE:

Please refer to answers to previous questions.

Point 2. The housing within Church Lawton is, at present, predominately occupied by an older generation of home owners. Over time homes will inevitably become vacant and, as the majority of housing within the village is family-orientated, then it is envisaged that more families will eventually begin to filter into the area.

Also, given that there is evidence from the County Council that birth rates in Cheshire are on the increase and statistical data from the Health Authority confirms a recent up-turn in the number of births in Church Lawton and in the event of the Council reducing the net capacity and pupil admission numbers within many of the other local schools;

QUESTION 6: Where do the new Cheshire East Unity Authority envisage these new-borns and children of families moving into the area will attend for their education if there is no longer a local primary school based within the village of Church Lawton and the capacity within other local schools is reduced?

RESPONSE:

There are 7 primary schools within two miles of the School which will be able to offer good quality provision for the small numbers of children in the area who otherwise might have attended Church Lawton, should the school close.

All current known housing proposals have been taken into account in the forecasting of pupil numbers.

Point 3. Local Government Re-organisation 2009

QUESTION 7: Why hasn't a decision been made in Cheshire to put the TLC process on hold until after the local government re-organisation has taken place in April 2009?

RESPONSE:

There has been thorough consultation with Cheshire East Council over the course of the last year. There is a clear indication that the new LA recognises the need for TLC to proceed as planned and therefore have endorsed Cheshire County Council's course of action. Members recognise that the issues to do with mismatch of provision to demand are already significant and the current situation involves a wasteful and ineffective deployment of the resources available to the LA and its schools. Delay will do nothing other than to make the position more acute.

QUESTION 8: Would it not be more appropriate for the new incoming authority to be given the opportunity to make it's own decision, based on it's own process, data and information thus providing the Cheshire East with a more solid foundation upon which to base a final decision?

RESPONSE:

No. The data and information available to the new LA will be no different to that currently available to Cheshire County Council. The TLC process has been initiated and the new LA will be in a position to determine the outcome if statutory closure notices are published.

Point 4. Many of the parents at Church Lawton School have more than one child currently attending the school. There is currently a distinct lack of surplus places within local schools in the current Year 5 group. If the school closes then the friendship group of this current year 5 will have just one year left at the primary stage of their education. If these children have to attend an

alternative school, not of their choice and without being transferred alongside their already established friends, at this absolutely crucial stage of their lives, this could prove to be potentially emotionally and educationally devastating.

Therefore if it is finally decided that Church Lawton Primary School is to close by September 2009, and as the new Cheshire East Unity Authority will be ultimately responsible for the final closure and management of school transfers then:

QUESTION 9: What guarantee is there from the new Authority that it will effectively manage the transfer of pupils to schools of choice, especially when it has already been established that many of the year groups within other local schools are already full to capacity?

RESPONSE:

It is not the case that many of the year groups within other local schools are full. If the School closes, the LA will operate its managed transfer process and through that will aim to meet as far as is possible all parental preferences. This has been very successful in the past. It must be recognised, however, that as in all admissions arrangements no absolute, copper-bottomed guarantee can be given about places or the destination of individual children. That said, the LA will do its utmost to meet parents' wishes and enable, facilitate and broker places wherever it is possible to do so.

It may be possible to explore an arrangement to keep the current year 5 (or as many as their parents wish this) together in a local school, together with any younger siblings.

QUESTION 10: What guarantee is there from Cheshire East that siblings will be able to transfer together to the same school of choice?

RESPONSE:

Please see response to previous question.

QUESTION 11: What guarantee is there for 'friendship groups' already well established at Church Lawton to be able to transfer together to the same school of choice, but to also attend the same transfer school with their siblings?

RESPONSE:

Please see response to previous question.

Point 5. In recent years the importance of effective participation of pupils in school development has gained increasing recognition. The TLC has acknowledged that it is committed to the involvement of pupils in Cheshire and the 'TLC Pupil Engagement Protocol' strategy suggests a mechanism for involving young people throughout the process. Also that the

involvement of School Councils will be fundamental to the success of the strategy.

It is highlighted in this strategy document that as a general principle, the involvement of young people should:-

- start at the very beginning of the process
- be conducted in a way which is meaningful and comprehensible to them
- be realistic, focusing on decisions over which they can genuinely influence the outcomes
- result in any agreed proposals being implemented and,
- conclude with feedback to the young people about the results of their involvement

The strategy quite clearly states that “the challenge to involve Primary age pupils is even greater, simply because of the far greater number of schools. Once again the most efficient and effective conduit is likely to be through the School Councils”.

Church Lawton Primary School has a School Council.

QUESTION 12: Why, therefore, has the TLC not implemented their own strategy by consulting with, and addressing the needs, views and the rights of all the children currently attending Church Lawton Primary School from the very outset of the TLC process?

RESPONSE:

The view of the LA is that judgement has to be exercised regarding the way in which these matters are dealt with, particularly where young children are involved. The usual practice has been to treat each case where there is the possibility of a closure on an individual basis according to the particular circumstances at the school and the advice of senior staff. Some schools have dealt with the matter through the school council, others have used registration groups.

Although the consultation document has been written pre-dominantly for an adult audience, pupils are identified clearly as a category of respondents on the response form. A significant number of Church Lawton pupils have taken that opportunity to respond directly, we assume after discussion within the family. There have also been direct responses from young people who were formerly pupils. Some adult respondents have also taken into account the views and feelings of children at the school. Children have also attended the drop-in event and have been able to feed back their views which have then been reported to elected members on exactly the same basis as other responses.

Reading the responses leaves no doubt about the views of a significant number of children. The consultation, in that respect, has clearly been effective and meets statutory requirements.

Article 13 of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that “Children and young people have the right to get and to share information as long as the information is not damaging to them, or to others”.

QUESTION 13: As the pupils at Church Lawton Primary School have not been consulted, or involved, from the very outset of the TCL process is this because the information surrounding the possible closure of the school is considered to be ‘damaging’ to them, or others?

RESPONSE:

The LA does not accept that pupils have not been consulted, and believes that the manner in which pupils have been kept informed and their views sought has been appropriate to the circumstances.

QUESTION 14: If so, why is the Council still considering the option of closing a school with such a high level of vulnerable children on its roll?

RESPONSE:

The work the school does with all of its pupils is recognised, but it is not the case that Church Lawton Primary School has an exceptional proportion of vulnerable children, or that it has exceptional expertise in supporting such children. The needs of all children currently at the school would be fully met at other schools, were it to close.