



9th June 2023

Informal Consultation: School of Religious Character

Dear Parents and Carers,

In September 2023, Crickhowell High School will celebrate its 40th anniversary.

The Board of Governors, in ensuring high standards of achievement for all students and setting the school's vision and strategic direction, has been reflecting on issues such as changing demographics, changes to catchment boundaries, and financial constraints, and is considering options to support the future viability and continued success of the school.

One option that is available, and on which we would now like to engage informally, is a potential change in the school's status to a School of Religious Character. Information is attached which describes the nature of this change. Importantly, this is *not* a faith school, rather, it is one in which all religions – or none – are respected and valued. The change in status could offer enhanced opportunities to build on the school's culture of inclusivity, allow control over admissions and the size of the school, safeguard our Sixth Form provision, present potential new sources of funding, and enable the High School to continue to thrive for the next 40 years.

Process and timeline

As a first step, the Governing Body is running an informal engagement exercise to gauge views and feedback on this potential change in status.

All stakeholders will have the opportunity to express their views and ask questions via an online form, which you can access using this link: <https://forms.office.com/e/auREz5W28R> or the QR code at the bottom of this letter, and through a series of Open Meetings in coming weeks. The feedback and views gathered during this process will be collated and considered by the Governing Body, and a decision will then be taken whether to proceed to a formal consultation, organised in the autumn term.

Meeting for Parents and Carers on Monday, 3 July at 6pm

Community Meeting on Monday, 10 July at 5pm

Both these meetings are open to all and will take place at the High School. Please indicate your attendance on the form so we can ensure sufficient space for participants. Separate briefings and consultation will also take place for students and staff.

We look forward to welcoming you to the information sessions and to engaging with you in order to ensure the continued success of Crickhowell High School.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Fryer".

Mr Andrew Fryer
Chair of Governors (on behalf of the Governing Body)
Crickhowell High School



Crickhowell High School

Vision

Crickhowell High School is an outstanding educational institution. It is currently one of the highest-performing schools in Wales (across both state and independent sectors), is formally recognised as sector leading, has grown in numbers over the last decade from 525 to 950 students, and provides high quality learning at all stages from 11-18 years across a broad curriculum. It is inclusive and innovative in its approach.

Community

The school serves the town of Crickhowell and surrounding area, and attracts students from both within and outside the Powys Local Authority. Students come from 27 primary schools and the school works with all these including the four Powys feeder primary schools to provide a smooth transition for children into secondary education, as well as to support primary education in the cluster.

Its flourishing Sixth Form ensures this close community focus continues to the end of secondary education. It is also part of the Powys Sixth Form collaboration providing post-16 education to students in a wide area.

The school is an important community asset, in the centre of the thriving town, and provides a well-used sports and community centre which is open to all. It makes a significant contribution to the local economy through the employment it provides, and the goods purchased by students, employees and the school. It provides an attractive site in the centre of town.

We want the school to be able to continue to provide a high-quality learning environment for local children through to age 18, so that they can grow up and be educated close to home and continue to be part of our community.

Culture

Crickhowell High School offers high-quality pastoral care for students delivered in partnership with a wide range of specialist provision. It has an open, inclusive and outward-looking culture with a focus on celebrating diversity. It sets and maintains high standards of behaviour and supports students in taking ownership for their own and others' well-being. Students are encouraged to think about and take responsibility for the future of the world.

We support Sixth Form students to play leadership roles and model the values of the school. A significant number of Sixth Formers are peer mentors across different subjects, including extra-curricular activities. The presence of a large Sixth Form enables the teaching staff to advance the school's ambitions to provide a high-quality and well-rounded education and is critical to the school's long-term success.

Staff have developed local, national and international networks and stakeholder links, encompassing all four teacher training universities in Wales.

Curriculum

We encourage research and inquiry amongst staff and students. The school is at the forefront of educational development in Wales, as a pioneer for the new Curriculum for Wales and being progressed with the Additional Learning Needs transformation.

We nurture and support students with various learning requirements and a wide variety of qualifications are taught.

The aims of the Curriculum for Wales are to develop:

- Ambitious, capable learners
- Enterprising, creative contributors
- Ethical, informed citizens
- Healthy, confident individuals.

We have developed the Welsh Baccalaureate programme as a staff specialism. It is compulsory for Welsh schools to age 16 and the school has chosen to follow it to age 18. It adds richness to the students' skill sets, provides broader destination pathways and strengthens community partnerships.

We achieve this despite the school being one of the lowest per student in the entire UK.

Infrastructure and sustainability

The original school buildings are forty years old. The school estate needs renewal if standards of education are to be maintained. The 40-year-old design is in a poor state of maintenance, is not suitably for running a 21-century curriculum and is expensive to heat.

The school is at capacity in terms of its student numbers. It requires a planned renovation to deliver the strategic vision and bring its design up to date.

We need to update IT infrastructure to keep pace with developments in both teaching and learning. Other specialist teaching spaces such as Science, Design Technology, Art, Expressive Arts, Food & Nutrition need investment to provide the best learning and teaching experience.

The Sixth Form needs better facilities including catering, social and study spaces if it is to continue to attract and retain students, which in turn impacts the wider provision offer.

The school has had some capital investment of a temporary nature, but there is currently no strategic site plan to support one of the highest performing schools in Wales and we do not anticipate any funding will be available for any such investment in the near or medium term under our current status.

Staffing, leadership and governance

The school delivers its high performance through specialist staff. This is unusual in Powys. Its reputation enables it to recruit and retain high-quality staff, and turnover and staff absence rates are very low compared to other schools in Wales.

The current Leadership Team has driven effective leadership in all areas required to sustain the school's record of high achievement.

Transition: why change?

The Board of Governors, taking into account all the issues outlined above, believes consideration should be given to a change in school status for Crickhowell High School to become a School of Religious Character. We feel this change could offer a number of advantages in taking the school forward for the next 40 years, in order to continue to provide the young people of our community with the best possible educational provision and, in particular, could address some of the challenges we are currently facing:

1. A risk of falling numbers on roll from already planned or future changes to catchment areas and the subsequent impact on range of curriculum offered; ability to attract specialist teachers; and on the viability of the Sixth Form and the advantages that confers;
2. The persistent underfunding on a per student basis which Crickhowell High School currently receives and its impact on the school's ability to provide high quality education for its students; and,
3. The deteriorating learning environment due to no foreseen capital investment in buildings or equipment.

A change in status to a School of Religious Character could address these challenges as we would have control over our admissions, would not be restricted by catchment areas as defined by the Local Authority, and would be eligible to access new funding streams.

Of course, any change to the status quo does elements of risk, the main one being potential greater administrative burden in running our own admissions process and managing finances, with subsequent demands on the school leadership.

In exploring this change in status, we have met regularly with the Local Authority to explain our position and have, thus far, been assured they are supportive of Crickhowell High School exploring and potentially pursuing this option.

The following section provides initial information in response to some questions we anticipate could arise, and we will be conducting an extensive, formal consultation process before any change is implemented.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Why is the change of status to a School of Religious Character being considered?

The Governors of Crickhowell High School believe partnership with the Church in Wales, in full compliance with the new National Curriculum for Wales, is an option worthy of serious consideration in order to maintain and develop a vibrant and successful 11 to 18 age school in the Crickhowell area, with the ability to accommodate 1000-1250 students as is necessary to ensure broad provision of subject specialisms, direct management of admissions, and provide improved funding for future development. The Church in Wales has subscribed fully to the multi-faith/non-faith model defined by the Welsh Government for the establishment of schools of religious character which will teach the new Curriculum for Wales in full.

Who is leading this process?

The Governing Body. A Task and Finish Group has been set up to advise Governors, who will make decisions and recommendations as a full Governing Body. The Headteacher is a member of the Governing Body but remains neutral. The Governing Body is liaising with the Local Authority, the Church in Wales and other experts to ensure all processes are carried out in full and are legally correct.

What exactly is a School of Religious Character?

A school of religious character teaches tolerance and understanding of different religions and non-religious philosophy in line with the new National Curriculum for Wales. It is not a faith school.

Will the curriculum change?

No. If Crickhowell High School were to become a school of religious character (SoRC), the curriculum would be maintained in compliance with the National Curriculum and Education National Mission, as it is now. As part of this, all students aged 3 to 16 in Wales are taught Religious Values and Ethics (RVE) as part of the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience. RVE must be objective, critical and pluralistic both in content and how it is taught. The Curriculum and Assessment Act Wales 2021 ensures that all learners must be offered opportunities through RVE to engage with different religions and non-religious philosophical convictions, considering their own locality of Wales as well as the wider world.

Will RS be required at GCSE or A level?

Students are currently required within the Welsh curriculum to study RVE until the age of 16 and can choose to sit a short or full GCSE. This will continue under the 2021 Act when the new Qualifications Framework comes into force in 2025, with examinations in 2027.

Religious Studies will remain a subject option at A level.

Will the school remain subject to the same Estyn inspection regime?

Yes.

Will there be prayer in school?

Currently, assemblies include references to prayer under different world religions and/or consideration to atheist or agnostic viewpoints as part of our annual assembly programme, which will continue. Students will not be expected to pray unless they wish to do so privately. All religions and no religions will continue to be supported.

Will students participate in religious celebrations?

The Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE) curriculum in Wales gives the opportunity to explore and understand religious celebrations for all world religions in our pluralistic society. Through assemblies and RVE lessons, students learn about celebrations and tolerance of religious and non-religious diversity. This approach will continue.

Will there be religious symbols in school?

Only in teaching of understanding of religious symbols in RVE or where it may be directly relevant to the curriculum, such as in Art or History.

Will the application process for enrolment change?

As a SoRC, the admissions process would be directly managed by the school, not Powys Local Authority or any other education authority. Parents will apply directly for their children and the Governing Body will manage the admissions process with agreed criteria.

Will existing students need to re-apply if the school changes its status?

No, students will automatically transfer to the new school.

Does the proposal affect school transport arrangements?

No.

Will the catchment area change?

The school would continue to serve its immediate catchment area and receive students from its existing feeder primary schools in Powys as a priority. The school has a significant number of students from a broader geographic area whose parents will be able to apply directly to the school for admission.

Can students outside existing catchment area in Powys be enrolled at the school?

Yes. Parents can apply directly to the school.

Who will set the admissions policy?

The Governing Body, instead of the Local Authority.

What admission issues are causing the Governors to want to exercise control over the process?

About 40% of Crickhowell High School has always come from outside Powys, and we draw students from 29 primary schools. Most schools only deal with 4 or 5. We also deal with 4 children's social services departments and 2 health boards (for mental health issues). Over time, our intake has moved more out of Powys. If the school was to run its own admissions, we would do this via an agreed admissions policy which would still give priority to looked after, forces and Additional Needs students. School run admissions are not allowed to use religious involvement or academic attainment in prioritising admissions in any way. The change is likely to make for a far simpler and more predictable process, and a more local intake.

Will students from Church in Wales primary schools who attend church or practise religion regularly be given preferences in admissions?

No. A SoRC is a pluralistic school not a faith school, and all students within our catchment will be admitted as they are currently. No preference will be given to those under any specific religious choosing.

Will the school become significantly bigger in future?

No. 1000 to 1250 students is the optimum size consistent with supporting a full range of specialisms, specialist teachers and support staff. The aspiration is to keep numbers high enough to enable a broad range of curriculum numbers but to cap this, ensuring the community feel and individualised focus on students remains.

Which students will be entitled to free travel to and from the school?

All students within the current catchment area will continue to be entitled to free travel. In addition, students admitted to the school as the nearest School of Religious Character will be entitled to free travel in line with Welsh government policy, whether they are elsewhere in Powys or other areas.

How would the 11 to 18 SoRC school relate to local primary schools?

After the decision to retain separate primary and 11 to 18 provision in the recent Powys consultation, the High School is committed to continuing to support the primary schools closely via teaching and administrative collaboration. The current collaboration between the separate schools will continue.

Will the change impact annual funding of the school?

Powys Local Authority would continue to fund the school budget using its existing formula, but the Church in Wales will be able to provide additional resources of grant funding for key projects.

Does changing the school in this way lead to better funding for the budget?

These proposals do not directly lead to more funding per student. We will continue to be funded through the Powys funding model, which has recently been improved to make it more generous to larger schools and Powys has an intention to continue to change the model over time. The church has funds available to fund projects in their schools.

Why are you not continuing to fight for a better deal on funding from Powys?

Powys capital reserves have been prioritised for other sites. There are currently no plans to substantially rebuild or improve the site at Crickhowell High School and this situation has not changed in 20 years. The recent improvements of temporary classrooms was obtained after a long period of discussion led by the school. The school borrowed money to rebuild the school's all-weather sports pitches and is still paying it back. No other secondary school has had to do this. The current funding scheme for new school buildings provides 65% of funding from the Welsh Government if the school is an LEA funded school, and 85% funding if the school is a school of religious character.

What other options would be available? Could more funding be obtained from businesses as with Academies in England?

In Wales, Academies are not allowed and there is no legal provision for schools to enter into long-term arrangements with businesses. There is no other option in Wales for school structures.

Will there be a new school building?

There are no current plans for a new school building, however, should this be agreed in future, funding would be available for 85% of a new school building or building elements, subject to a business case, from Welsh Government.

Will the school calendar remain the same as Powys?

Yes.

Will the school continue to participate in non SoRC school extra-curricular activities and sporting fixtures?

Yes.

Will school facilities remain available to the wider community?

Yes. Welsh Government recommendations encourage wider community engagement.

Will the school still run the sports centre and library?

Yes. This will continue in line with the agenda for wider community engagement.

What is the time frame for change?

Informal engagement with parents and the wider community will take place in June and July 2023. A formal consultation would be conducted in autumn 2023. If this supports a change to a SoRC, the school would formally change its status on 1 September, 2024.

Will the school change its name?

Yes. A new name would be chosen by the school community. The change of name would be effective from 1 September 2024 and include the words School of Religious Character.

Will there be a new school uniform?

Minimising cost is a key priority. The name change may need a change to the school badge but parents and students will be part of consultation over a six-month period. Any change would only affect new students, as existing uniform may be worn by continuing year groups in line with legal requirements for school uniform in Wales. Sew on badges will be provided for current students who may want them and a phased transition would be supported over time.

Will school leadership or staff change whilst this consultation takes place?

No. The headteacher's post is being extended as Acting for another year while this process concludes, along with the rest of the school leadership team. The role for permanent Headteacher will be advertised once the formal consultation period has ended, with the selected candidate being appointed in readiness for September 2024. This will happen whatever the results of the consultation.

Will the governance of the school change?

5 additional Foundation Governors, selected from the wider community, will be appointed by the Church in Wales to join the existing Governing Body of 20 governors which represents parents, staff, the Local Authority and the community.

Will all church nominees for Governors be CIW members?

Nominees for the Board of Governors from the Church in Wales are expected to include leaders from other religions and/or an atheist. They will be in a minority on the Governing Body with other categories of governors continuing in their role.

Will the employer of staff change?

Yes, but the terms of employment for staff will remain the same.

Who will set school policies?

The Governing Body, as is the case now.