

Saving Our Schools – Why it Matters to the Community

Where does this all begin?

Dorset County Council have been asked by the Department for Children, Schools and Families to look at the issue of 1000 surplus places in the Purbeck Pyramid of schools – that's the First Schools and the Middle Schools feeding in to Purbeck School. Dorset County Council's Education Department's solution is to move to a two tier system of Primary and Secondary school education. The Proposal argues that with a forecast drop in school-age population in Purbeck the Purbeck School will struggle to deliver the quality of service that is required. It is interesting to note that seven of the twenty state secondary schools in Dorset currently have the same number of children or less than is forecast for Purbeck School¹.

How does this affect Swanage?

Dorset County Council's Education Department is proposing to close Swanage Middle School as part of the move to a two tier system. Swanage First School and Swanage St Mark's CE VA would be closed and a new primary school would be formed on the Middle School site. The proposal is unclear on whether the new primary school would be a faith school (like St Mark's) or a community non-denominational school (like Swanage First School) – this is the 'preferred status' as mentioned briefly in the proposal document. St Mary's RC VA School would be given the option to take over the Mount Scar site, clearly proving that the Mount Scar site is suitable for use as a Primary School. St George's would be unaffected but would have to remain on a site described as 'confined'.

Why does this matter to the wider community?

Swanage First School is in the heart of the community which benefits both our children and the people of Swanage – moving to the edge of town would stop the children accessing many local facilities.

It is widely accepted that poor behaviour by young people comes about as a result of their disengagement from the wider community. We are very lucky in Swanage to have a town centre that is lived in by a large number of families as well as by older residents, and this mix is what helps to make the town such a vibrant and friendly place.

Families want to live near good schools². Many vacant or underused properties in the town centre have become family homes over recent years, and if the school is removed from the town centre to the edge of town this trend may cease.

¹ Schoolsnet, 2008: State secondary schools in Dorset - www.schoolsnet.com/uk-schools/best-state-secondary-school/top-dorset-schools/16180339/0/1/10/51.html

² Dorset County Council (DCC), 2008: "Developing a Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy" - www.dorsetforyou.com/media/pdf/5/2/Sustainable_modes_of_travel_to_school_strategy.PDF

What are the community arguments against the proposal?

- The proposal does not show how it will improve educational attainment for children in Swanage
- The proposal takes no account of the needs of a coastal community 10 miles from a Secondary school
- The proposal will reduce diversity and choice for people in Swanage
- The proposal will have little or no effect on surplus school places in Swanage
- The proposal document is poorly researched, biased in its scope and is written in a misleading way
- County Councillors were not given all the facts before voting to go ahead with the Public Consultation
- The proposal will squander ratepayers and taxpayers money to achieve very little
- Traffic in Swanage and between Swanage & Wareham will increase massively
- Parents do not want a new Primary school in Swanage and must be listened to

The detailed arguments:

The Educational Argument

Swanage First School is an outstanding school in all areas according to Ofsted in July 2007³. Government aims are for the most successful schools in an area to be given the opportunity to “expand and spread their ethos and success”. DCC propose to close the most school rated most highly by Ofsted⁴. Nowhere in the document is the Ofsted result for any school discussed – something which should be a vital piece of information for the public to see if they are to make a judgement on the validity of the proposal. While the proposal can argue that there may possibly be an educational benefit from a change to a two tier system in parts of Purbeck, they have given no educational argument whatsoever for the proposed changes to First Schools in Swanage. The proposed new Primary could not guarantee the same level of excellence.

The Effect on Children

Any disruption in the educational life of a child can have detrimental effects. The proposal for Swanage means closing three schools and moving one, leaving only one school on its current site. The stress induced in children by a re-organisation of the schools in Purbeck has not been assessed.

Aside from this, many parents are unhappy with the idea that their children will be attending small Primary Schools (very small in the case of many village schools) and will then transfer to an enormous Purbeck School at age 11. In a predominantly rural area it has not been demonstrated in the proposal that a vast city-sized school is appropriate for the needs of our children. The school would be the second largest in the County after Thomas Hardy School in Dorchester.

Diversity & Choice

We are lucky to have in Swanage a mix of Community, Church of England and Roman Catholic education. Swanage First has publicly stated that it wants to maintain the diversity of parental choice, keeping the balance of schools as they are. No school has to close and other options have not been explored with relation to the specific needs of our coastal

³ Ofsted 2007: Section 5 Inspection Report - [www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu_reports/display/\(id\)/86686](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu_reports/display/(id)/86686)

⁴ Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 2008: Closing a Maintained Mainstream School - A Guide for Local Authorities and Governing Bodies - www.dcsf.gov.uk/schoolorg/data/guidance_Documents/ClosureGuide%202008-02-20.pdf

community. The Department for Children, Schools and Families says that a local authority “**must** also ensure that there are sufficient schools in their area and promote diversity and increase parental choice.”⁵

Those Surplus Places

Surplus places are measured on floor-space – the school’s capacity to accommodate children⁶, rather than on the number of teaching staff. According to the figures in the proposal document (at least one of which is questionable in its accuracy), in Swanage there are currently 210 surplus places using this measure, including 148 at Swanage Middle.

Should Swanage Middle be closed and the existing First school buildings be re-modelled to become Primary schools (so no **new** Primary), there would be a surplus of 102 spaces remaining in the town, based on current numbers.

The new Primary would be built with the capacity for a ‘two-form’ entry, or 60 children per year. It would open with a 1.5 form entry of 45 children per year, with a surplus of 105 places built in, based on surplus capacity of 15 spaces over 7 year groups.

If Swanage First and St Mark’s were to close and St Mary’s to move and a new primary be opened, DCC would have spent millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money and disrupted the lives of a generation of Swanage children to achieve precisely nothing.

The Proposal Document is Biased and Misleading

The review process openly states that there is a “presumption against the closure of rural schools”. This displays a clear bias against schools in towns – the Review becomes a review of town schools, ignoring surplus places in villages. This does not mean that village schools should close, but it does mean that the review process is incomplete and unfair.

Throughout the document schools are shown as admitting a given number and it is stated that they have been ‘consistently close to admitting this number’ with a conclusion drawn that the future of the school is secure. Information given in the document about Swanage First and St Marks omits the information about admissions and ignores the capacity and flexibility of the Mount Scar site. It could be assumed that either the school is failing or that the site is unsuitable.

The issue of whether the new Primary should be a faith or a community school is brushed over with the vague and uninformative phrase “We welcome views from all sections of the community on the preferred status of the proposed school”. The meaning of the words ‘preferred status’ is not spelled out, and no specific question is asked in either the printed or online questionnaire. Most people will not know what this means.

Figures given for Swanage St Mary’s show a significantly lower intake than they currently admit – showing that the school is very popular but also that the Review Body have not done their basic research.

There is no detail on how Purbeck School would be made suitable for an additional 700 children or where the money will come from.

The proposal specifically states that St George’s may be able to expand on to land belonging to The Old Malthouse, despite the land being unavailable as the Old Malthouse has already agreed plans to re-open as a science centre for the Cotthill Trust⁷.

⁵ DCSF 2008: Closing a Maintained Mainstream School - A Guide for Local Authorities and Governing Bodies - www.dcsf.gov.uk/schoolorg/data/guidance_Documents/ClosureGuide%202008-02-20.pdf

⁶ DCSF, 2002: Assessing the Net Capacity of Schools - www.dcsf.gov.uk/netcapacity/docs/DfES-NetCapacity.pdf

A Denial of Democracy

Dorset County Councillors were not told all of the facts of what the consultation would be about before they voted for it. Minutes of the County council meeting of the 3rd December 2008 and the documents⁸ they were given show that the information was focussed entirely on the change from a three tier to a two tier system and failed entirely to mention that First Schools would close at the same time causing huge community disruption and ever more negative publicity for the County Council.

Had County Councillors seen been aware of this, the discussion may have been entirely different. County Councillors should now be asking the officers responsible for the Review why the Council is again being brought into dispute with its own electorate.

The Financial Cost

The Review body now state that “By tackling the falling rolls, no money will be saved but it will ensure much better use of the funding we do have”⁹. So no money will be saved, but what is the financial cost of the proposed re-organisation?

The cost of preparation of the proposal document is not known but must be assumed to be huge.

All surplus places could not be removed, as a system has to allow some flexibility.

No figure is given for the increased cost of bussing year 7 & 8 pupils to Purbeck School who currently attend Middle Schools outside Wareham.

The cost of new school buildings is brushed over in the document by saying that Government will provide the money. Ultimately, that is still us, the taxpayer. Dorset County Council’s Education Department also has a track record of massive overspend on new school provision^{10,11}. These questions need to be asked, especially in the current economic climate¹². Even if the current school sites were to be used, without a new primary being built, it has to be wondered whether the county can afford the re-modelling costs for each expanding school.

Transport & the Environment

Few parents in Swanage would be willing to allow their 11 year old child take the 18 mile round trip to Wareham daily on a bus. Closing the Middle School will mean hundreds of new car journeys a week between Swanage and Wareham.

Most parents at Swanage First live within walking distance of Mount Scar and want Swanage First to remain on our site – a move would mean massively increased car use on the already congested High Street. Those children old enough to be able to walk from the town centre to the Middle School site would be put at even greater risk than they already are. No provision is made in the proposal for the massive improvements in pavements and crossings that would be needed to facilitate a safe walk to school.

⁷ Daily Echo, 09/07/2008: Old school to become ‘centre of excellence’ - www.bournemouthcho.co.uk/news/2386962.old_school_to_become_centre_of_excellence/

⁸ DCC, Purbeck Review of School Provision, 2008 -

[www1.dorsetforyou.com/council/COMMIS.nsf/10CB8A7A0AC08EA08025750E003934B9/\\$file/DEC08%209%20Purbeck%20Review%20of%20School%20Provision.pdf](http://www1.dorsetforyou.com/council/COMMIS.nsf/10CB8A7A0AC08EA08025750E003934B9/$file/DEC08%209%20Purbeck%20Review%20of%20School%20Provision.pdf)

⁹ DCC, 2009: Purbeck FAQs - www.dorsetforyou.com/media/pdf/t/o/Purbeck_Future_School_Provision_FAQs.pdf

¹⁰ Daily Echo, 06/06/05: Council's Overspend of £2m ‘Not a Crisis’ - <http://archive.bournemouthcho.co.uk/2005/6/6/55222.html>

¹¹ Daily Echo, 14/11/2008: Are they Queen Elizabeth’s Fools? -

www.thisisdorset.net/search/3846626.So_are_they_Queen_Elizabeth___s_fools/

¹² Guardian, 07/01/2009: Cuts to cause ‘austere’ future for schools - www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/jan/06/recession-school-funding

The environmental impact of transporting huge numbers of children across the district from their communities to a vast new Purbeck School is not addressed either. The proposal contradicts Government¹³ and Dorset County Council guidelines¹⁴ on encouraging children to walk to school by removing the school from the centre of town, where the bulk of the population live.

Location & Community

Parents and children at Swanage First School love the Mount Scar site. It isn't just a sentimental attachment to the views, the gardens, the wildlife and the Victorian buildings. Parents have a great involvement in the school because it is in the heart of the community. If the school moves, it won't be within walking distance for most existing parents, and those parents who currently help out because the school is local will be far less likely to do so – a huge loss to the education of Swanage's children¹⁵.

It appears that the Officers behind the proposal are unaware of the fact that the Middle School site is in Herston, on the farthest edge of 'Swanage'. If the plan were to build a supermarket, it would be described as 'out of town'.

Further information and how to object

Copies of the proposal are available in Purbeck libraries as well as online at www.dorsetforyou.com/purbeckreview

Swanage First School has put together a website at www.sos-swanagefirst.co.uk which will include links to other Purbeck school campaigns as they come online and which has a list of actions to take.

If you object to Dorset County Council's proposal there are three ways to let them know. You can write to:

Director for Children & Young People (Ref:RP/CC)
Dorset County Council
County Hall
Dorchester
Dorset DT1 1XJ

Or email: purbeckreview@dorsetcc.gov.uk

Or you can complete the online questionnaire at www.dorsetforyou.com/index.jsp?articleid=390869

Dorset County Councillors will also be interested to hear objections as this another case of Council Officers proposing unpopular plans which makes the County look at odds with its electorate. Addresses can be found at local libraries or through the website at www.sos-swanagefirst.co.uk

The Public Consultation ends on the 25th February 2009.

¹³ Department of Transport, 2005: Department for Transport - School travel strategies and plans: a best practice guide for local authorities - <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/sustainable/schooltravel/localauthorities/schooltravelstrategiesandpla5745>

¹⁴ DCC, 2008: "Developing a Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy" - www.dorsetforyou.com/media/pdf/5/2/Sustainable_modes_of_travel_to_school_strategy.PDF

¹⁵ DCSF, 2007: Parental Involvement in Children's Education - www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RR034.pdf