

Philip Dunne MP
WESTMINSTER
Report



SCHOOLS SPECIAL

Shropshire
STAR

Editorial comment (page 8)
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Playing for high stakes

It's not often that four county MPs put pen to paper in a bold joint statement full of optimistic promises.

So when the four members of parliament with responsibility for Shropshire County Council's catchment area assure us in one clear voice that the future of our schools is "absolutely secure", we simply have to sit up and take notice.

For this is too important an issue for Philip Dunne, Mark Pritchard, Owen Paterson and Daniel Kawczynski to use for political point-scoring.

They claim to have a "black and white" statement from the Government, listing all the sites which schools minister Jim Knight does not want to shut down.

Short of abusing confidence by publishing the statement and pinpointing the sites he names, it's difficult to know how much more up-front they could be.

All four of these MPs are known for their campaigning spirit. None of them have a reputation for sitting on the fence.

Nor, however, are they known for making such specific assurances unless they are confident of ending on the winning side.

So for now, let's set aside talk of a merely temporary reprieve for Shropshire's rural schools and look forward to a bright, long-term future.

Because if it turns out not to be the case, our MPs will now have almost as much to lose as the rural communities they are seeking to reassure.



Photograph: Shropshire Star

Schools saved!

Philip joins protest with Morville and other schools

IN A dramatic change of heart by the County Council, after a combination of people power and the intervention of Shropshire's MPs with the Schools Minister, 22 village primary schools threatened with closure in January have been saved.

Some funding is expected from the Department of Education to help bridge the short-term funding gap. In the long-term the Government is consulting on a new funding allocation system which should take into account the cost of providing village schools.

All is not over for those schools on the list for amalgamation who do not wish to do so, in particular in our area at Lydbury North, whose fight continues. But for other schools it is time to get back into the classroom.



Clunbury



Lydbury North



Hope



Rushbury

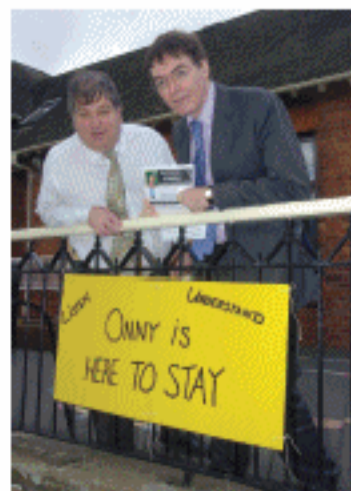
Onny

Kinlet

Hopton Wafers



Farlow



MPs assess the results of recent upheavals

Confident outlook for county's schools

Shropshire Star, 6th February, 2008

Why our schools are safe

By Shropshire's MPs Philip Dunne (Ludlow), Owen Paterson (North Shropshire), Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury & Atcham) and Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin)

JOINT LETTER TO THE SHROPSHIRE STAR...

Last week was a tremendous week for people power in Shropshire. We have stopped school closures. We have secured an offer of help from the Government both in the long term with a new funding formula and in the short term with various avenues of funding open to the County Council. We have a black and white statement from the Government listing all our schools that the Minister does not want closed.

For the past 10 years the Labour government has steadily shifted its allocation of the education budget, this year £50 billion, towards urban areas and inner cities.

Average

As a result this year Shropshire receives £3,551 per pupil, some £337 (or 9%) less than the average in England. It happens to be £212 less per pupil than in neighbouring Telford. The County Council gets £13.2 million less this year than if it received the average per child and an astonishing £42.5 million less than Ealing, an urban authority with an almost identical number of children. Yet Shropshire achieves above average results, thanks to maintaining empty spaces which allow parental choice, encouraging competition between schools.

Last November the Government announced funding per pupil for the three years to 2010/11. It abandoned a transparent formula for allocation between authorities, instead adopting a flat percentage increase. This locks Shropshire

and other rural areas into relatively low funding compared to urban areas for the next three years. Indeed Shropshire will remain fifth from bottom out of the 149 local education authorities, while the gap per pupil compared to the average authority will grow - to £385 by 2010/11.

The funding squeeze coincides with an apparent decline in the number of children entering schools in Shropshire. This reflects demographic trends where the resident population's birth rate has been slowly falling; young families are forced to move to towns and cities due to housing availability and cost pressures.

Migrants

Officials have used birth statistics from 2001, the bottom of the trough of local births, which are now slowly rising. Meanwhile the birth rate amongst newly arrived migrants from EU accession states and elsewhere is some nine times that of the resident population, so the population may soar in future years. If so, why cut schools now if we may need them in a few years' time? Once a school is closed it rarely re-opens.

1,207 primary schools have closed across England since 1997, almost 220 of them with under 100 pupils, despite Labour Education Ministers repeatedly claiming that schools should only be closed as a last resort.

We warned the Government about the looming crisis in Shropshire during our Adjournment Debate in December. Current Schools and

Learners Minister Jim Knight MP was only woken up to the political damage from closing schools by the furore of protest in Shropshire.

The Debate secured a meeting last week at which we made it crystal clear that a school closure programme is now politically impossible. The dire social and economic consequences for village life are too great. Once closed, young families are encouraged to move to our towns and cities, so our villages gradually cease to be sustainable and slowly turn into care homes for the elderly.

The Minister seemed genuinely shocked by the impact that the current funding allocation is having on rural schools. Closure threats forced him to announce the day after our meeting that the funding allocation will be reviewed, specifically to take into account the cost of providing schools in sparsely populated rural areas with pockets of deprivation. Your MPs and the County Council will contribute to that review, to be finalised by January 2010.

Letter

Immediately after our meeting he rushed out a letter to local education authorities last week confirming his presumption against rural school closures. He also published a list of those schools where the Government has designated a presumption against closure. Every single one of the schools threatened with closure and resisting amalgamation are on that list (see www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/otherdocs.shtml).

We fully expect that the funding review which emerges for 2011



and beyond, whichever political party is then in power, will result in more resources to rural authorities to reflect the added cost of more buildings and higher transport costs to village schools.

Shropshire County Council's funding gap required minimal savings in 2008/09. Some of the £1.4 million shortfall in 2009/10 could be found from the £500,000 to £600,000 savings proposed from the amalgamations on which consultation is to proceed. The precise savings will depend on which amalgamations eventually go ahead. Whilst we broadly support the amalgamations, some, such as Lydbury North/Clunbury and Oaklands/Longmeadow, remain controversial. Those opposed by the local community are hard to justify now closure of other village primaries has been abandoned. Those which are not controversial should account for most of the savings required.

This leaves a funding gap of some £1.3 million in 2010/2011. The Schools Minister identified four separate streams of unallocated funding within his departmental budgets for the next three years: Early Years; Extended Schools; Personalised Learning; and Training & Development. He undertook to help Shropshire's education officials to lay claim to some of this money. We urge all schools to write to us if these sources of funding are applicable; we will then liaise with the Minister's Private Office.

Budget

Also by 2010 Shropshire will have a Unitary Authority with a larger overall budget, from which substantial savings are due. This new local authority should be able to fund any residual shortfall. But if all else fails, fundraising could bridge the gap in the final year and from our own discussions with parents, we are convinced that PTAs could find the £50.25p per child (only 14 pence per day per child!).

Some siren voices are claiming that last week's decision is merely a temporary deferral and parents need to be on their guard. This is very dangerous talk which raises anxiety in parents. We have already seen how rumours and worries about the threat of closure can lead to the self-fulfilling decline of a school roll. There is nothing more corrosive for the continued health of a school than for parents and potential parents to fear that it may not be there to educate their child.

We are confident that the events of the last ten days have secured the future of our rural schools.

