

Top councillor has sympathy over fate of St Guthlac School

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A LEADING county councillor sympathises with Crowland residents upset over the possible axing of St Guthlac School, but says low pupil numbers mean it cannot survive on its own.

People in the town were shocked to hear that their secondary school could shut in 2014 as part of plans to give the George Farmer Technology and Language College in Holbeach an £18m revamp, turning it into an academy.

Lincolnshire County Council's executive member for children's services Patricia Bradwell says funding for schools is based on cash per pupil - and that with only 320 students St Guthlac struggles to attract the specialist teachers needed to deliver all aspects of the curriculum.

She said that struggle forced the school into partnership with the George Farmer.

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- Coun Patricia Bradwell

Coun Bradwell added: "At the moment the school is viable because the George Farmer is supporting it. It could not stand alone as a school without the George Farmer helping with staff and sharing administration.

"I do sympathise. The closure of a school is so difficult. I think you do have to balance that against what is good for the young people."

She said that the "upside down" nature of the school funding system may have caused some confusion - but promised that consultation work will be carried out on the academy plans if they go ahead.

The council has to gain government approval for an academy before it can ask for

the views of the public.

The county council announced that Holbeach was to become an academy - but plans then had to be put on hold when the new coalition government decided to review money set aside for school building projects.

The authority is waiting to hear if cash for the academy will be at risk, leaving campaigners and the two schools in limbo.

Coun Bradwell said: "It is terrible really because we announced this, the bombshell hit Crowland, and now we are still in the middle of the sea neither going out to shore or further out to sea."

Coun Bradwell added that a small secondary school in Billingham, her own ward, is

closing in July because of the struggle to attract funding with low pupil numbers.

A Facebook group set up for people to air their views has attracted 352 members and a petition has been put up in Crowland to oppose the school closure.

Fears have been raised about the upheaval of pupils having to move midway through their spell at secondary school, the "culture shock" of going from a 320 pupil to 1,200 pupil school and the distance they will have to travel get to Holbeach.

Crowland county and district councillor Paul Przyszlak said he will campaign to try to keep the school open.

He said: "I think it is imperative that it stays open. I drove from the George Farmer back to St Guthlac last week. It was 14.8 miles and it took 26 minutes with no lorries, tractors or anything in the way.

"In terms of a school bus I reckon you could double that."