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Dear Mr Smith

Options for the future of North Clifton Primary School

I am writing on behalf of Newark & Sherwood District Council (NSDC) in response to Nottinghamshire County Council's consultation on options for the future of North Clifton Primary School.

Local Context

North Clifton is one of the northernmost settlements within Newark & Sherwood District, close to the border with West Lindsey. North Clifton village itself is built up around High Street and Silver Street, and situated less than 1km east of the River Trent and approximately 0.3km west of the A1133. This is the main road passing through Collingham and connects the A57 (north) to the A46 (south).

North Clifton Primary School does not actually sit within the defined built-up area of the village, but is located on Church Lane, over 1km to the south (walking distance along the road), making it roughly equidistant between North and South Clifton. The Primary School therefore serves both of these villages and the surrounding rural area, including the settlements of Wigsley, Spalford and Thorney. Despite being a bus route for a limited service, Church Lane, on which the school is located, is a narrow country lane with a wide grass verge and shared footpath/cycleway. While North Clifton has no other community facilities of note, South Clifton has both the Coronation Hall and Sports Pavilion. NSDC officers understand that these facilities are relatively well-used, although it is doubtful that either premises is operating at capacity, given the relatively low catchment population.

The school was built in 1876 for 70 children, and extended in 1887. It was built close to St George's Church, an important Grade II* listed building to the west. The school building has historic and architectural interest, with significance derived from its representativeness of education vernacular and composite nature. Being considered to have group value with the church, the

school premises is regarded as a non-designated heritage asset (NDHA), in accordance with the District Council's emerging Criteria for identifying NDHAs (2020). This would not, however, typically cause significant constraint on the use of the premises either in its capacity as a school or if proposed for redevelopment in the future if necessary.

In planning policy terms, with an extremely limited range of services, North Clifton is regarded as an 'Other Village' and while Spatial Policy 3 of NSDC's Amended Core Strategy (ACS) (adopted March 2019) does not in itself prohibit growth in this area, there are no housing allocations in this part of the district that would increase the number of pupils entering the school in the short to medium term. Furthermore, the core areas of both of the villages are identified on the Environment Agency's Flood Map as areas of medium-low flood risk, due to their proximity to the River Trent. The school site itself, however, is not identified as being at risk of flooding. Notwithstanding other requirements of ACS Spatial Policy 3, Core Policy 10 'Climate Change' aims to steer new development away from those areas at highest risk of flooding. Applying a sequential approach to identification of potential development sites in this location, without strong demonstrable unmet need there is limited opportunity for new residential development, while there is no Neighbourhood Plan in place or being prepared for North or South Clifton that might seek to promote development here.

The relatively isolated nature of this area means that it exhibits traits common across rural Nottinghamshire, including that the comparative cost of rural homes to those in towns and cities reduces their affordability for many younger families, resulting in local populations with higher average ages and fewer children of primary school age.

Options Appraisal

NSDC is cognisant of the challenges that the current circumstances of the school present to the County Council. However, in assessing the options presented in this consultation, the community implications – particularly the prospect of closure – are of great concern for the District Council.

Being well aware of the complex process and the conditions required to deliver new education facilities, even in areas of high growth and great need, the District Council perceives that once lost such services are largely irreplaceable. NSDC is therefore obligated to seek protection of existing services, maintaining the stance of the DfE presumption against the closure of rural schools and giving great weight to the role that the school plays in meeting the community's existing and future needs, and in contributing to rural sustainability.

ACS Spatial Policy 8 seeks to protect community facilities from development that would result in their loss. Although the circumstances in this case are more symptomatic of a lack of development in the surrounding area over an extended period, the District Council's strategic planning objectives nonetheless seek to sustain a network of sustainable communities which offer a sense of place, that are safe, balanced, socially inclusive and can respond to the needs of local people. Indeed the rationale behind Spatial Policy 8 identifies the need for a good variety and geographical spread of community, sports and cultural facilities that add to the quality of life for residents.

Of the five options put forward as part of this first stage consultation, it is accepted that to continue with no change is unviable and indeed the District Council is sympathetic to the view that this does not represent a realistic option in terms of use of resources. As such, whilst the inherent difficulties of facilitating Academisation, Federation or Amalgamation of the school are acknowledged, it is nevertheless considered imperative that all avenues for pursuing these options should be fully

explored. Likewise, other measures that can enhance the school's offer to both existing and prospective pupils and parents, beyond what is currently in operation should also be investigated. Based on officer-level discussions with local ward members, it is understood that the school's governing body is already progressing work on this matter and seeking external funding to help deliver its ambitions.

Notwithstanding the increase in homeworking due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the relatively isolated nature of this area increases the likelihood that parents living in surrounding villages would need to commute to towns such as Lincoln, Gainsborough, Newark or Retford and beyond for employment. At present it is understood that North Clifton does not provide a 'wrap-around care' facility, but in identifying this as a need the school is actively seeking funding to provide this. The flexibility that such arrangements offer in terms of parents' ability to work full-time and within normal office hours can therefore be a decisive factor when making choices about which school their children may attend. It is recognised, however, that even if this were available in the forthcoming academic year (September 2021), it would not have an instant effect on pupil numbers, as any such facility would need to be allowed to become established and on offer to the cohort of children coming in to the school in the following academic year and potentially beyond. While it is noted that at present a decision has not yet been made on the future of the school, monitoring the rollout of a wrap-around care offer may go beyond the timescale in which the County Council would seek to make a decision on the school's future.

In addition to the above matter, ordinarily it would be prudent to give consideration to what other community services and facilities could be offered in the school premises outside of school time. However, considering the range of functions provided through other community facilities in other nearby villages and that these premises are not believed to be operating at capacity, it is difficult to see what benefit the school could deliver without eroding the viability of these other facilities.

Impacts of Closure

With regard to the possibility of closure, as set out in Option 5, the District Council reiterates its strong concerns about the detrimental impact this would have on the sustainability of the surrounding communities in the future. While existing service provision in the area is already limited, closure of North Clifton Primary School would exacerbate the perceived isolation of this part of the district and harm any future potential to support even limited levels of growth.

Noting that Dunham on Trent School is referenced as the nearest Nottinghamshire Primary School, which existing pupils could attend in the event of closure, accessibility is regarded as a significant obstacle, given the logistical and cost related challenges associated with pupils relocating here. Being significantly beyond the statutory walking distances outlined in DfE guidance and in recognition of the Education Act 1996 duty for local authorities to promote the use of sustainable travel and transport for journeys to and from schools, it is understood that some form of organised transport would be needed for existing/future pupils to get to Dunham on Trent from North and South Clifton, and surrounding villages such as Wigsley, Thorney and Spalford. Were such provision not made available, parents who work either at home or in places east of the Trent would have to cross Dunham Toll Bridge, on a return journey, up to twice a day. At a cost of 40p each way, every household required to make this journey would incur over £300 in additional costs over the course of the school year, on top of increased fuel costs and emissions. This must therefore be factored in to future decision making.

Conclusion

In conclusion, NSDC recognises the significant challenges associated with maintaining schools and providing a broad and balanced curriculum in areas of low population and therefore low annual intakes. Whilst once again emphasising the District Council's preference for ensuring the longevity of North Clifton Primary School, NSDC is committed to working with both the County Council and the school's governing body to explore all available options and to finding an acceptable and workable solution.

Yours sincerely

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