

13th September 2021

Agenda Item: 9

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, EDUCATION, LEARNING AND SKILLS

OUTCOME OF THE CONSULTATION ON OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF NORTH CLIFTON PRIMARY SCHOOL AND RESPONSE TO PETITION TO KEEP THE SCHOOL OPEN

Purpose of the Report

1. This report informs Committee of the responses received to the stage one consultation seeking views on the future of North Clifton Primary School. In addition, the report seeks Committee approval to defer a decision on the proposal to close the school until June 2022, thus allowing the governing body and wider community to secure the viability of the school. Finally, the report requests approval for a review of the small school estate in partnership with any relevant dioceses with the objective of strengthening the viability of Nottinghamshire's small schools.
2. The report also recommend to Committee the responses to the issues raised in a petition, *North Clifton Primary School; request to keep school open* (Ref 2021/0418), which was presented to the County Council at its meeting on 22nd July 2021.

Information

3. This report is written within the context of Department for Education Statutory Guidance which presumes against the closure of rural schools. North Clifton Primary School is designated as a rural school. Nottinghamshire County Council will therefore follow the guidelines regarding the presumption against the closure of rural schools. This is enshrined in the prescribed process described in 'Opening and closing maintained schools: Statutory guidance for proposers and decision-makers' Department for Education, 2019 which states that

'... the Department expects all decision-makers to adopt a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This doesn't mean that a rural school will never close, but that the case for closure should be strong and clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area.'

Proposers should provide evidence to show they have carefully considered:

- *alternatives to closure including: federation with another local school; conversion to academy status and joining a multi-academy trust; the scope for an extended school to provide local community services and facilities e.g. child care facilities, family and adult learning, healthcare, community internet access etc;*
- *transport implications i.e. the availability, and likely cost of transport to other schools and sustainability issues*
- *the size of the school and whether it puts the children at an educational disadvantage e.g. in terms of breadth of curriculum resources available*
- *the overall and long term impact on the local community of the closure of the village school and of the loss of the building as a community facility*
- *wider school organisation and capacity of good schools in the area to accommodate the displaced pupils.*

4. North Clifton Primary School serves the small villages of North and South Clifton and is alone in a rural Planning Area in the Newark district. The school is isolated; the next nearest Nottinghamshire school is Dunham on Trent Primary, which is 4.3 miles away by car. North Clifton Primary School is a small school with a Published Admission Number of 8, maintained by Nottinghamshire County Council. The last Ofsted inspection of the school (January 2018) rated the school as 'Good'.

5. There are significant concerns about declining pupil numbers at North Clifton Primary School. The past five years have seen the number of children on the school roll reduce from 36 to 26. In October 2020, only 3 pupils were in the school's Reception year, despite a Published Admission Number of 8. This number is expected to reduce to 2 Reception pupils for academic year 2021/22 in September 2021. There is no new housing proposed for the immediate area in the Newark Local Plan. It is therefore not expected that admission numbers will increase in future years.

6. With such low numbers on roll, the school's Governing Body, Headteacher and Council officers have serious concerns about the school's viability given the small size of future pupil cohorts. Following discussions between North Clifton Primary School's Governing Body, Executive Headteacher and Council officers regarding concerns over the sustainability of the school, it was agreed that options for the future of North Clifton Primary School should be explored.

7. On 21st June 2021, the Children and Young People's Committee approved the undertaking of an initial statutory consultation to explore options for North Clifton Primary School including possible closure.

8. The consultation period opened on 23rd June 2021 and closed on 23rd July 2021. Interested parties were invited to respond to the following questions either online, by email or post:

Please state your preference for which of the options outlined in the accompanying report should be adopted.

- **Continue with no change**
- **Academisation**
- **Federation**

- **Amalgamation**
- **Closure**

For the Stage One consultation document published on 23rd June 2021 see **Appendix 1**

9. On July 12th Council officers held four meetings with the school staff and members of the public to listen to community views and answer questions about the statutory process currently taking place. For a summary of questions and issues raised at these meetings and responses later provided by the Council for public consumption via the school’s website, see **Appendix 2**.

10. On July 23rd, the Corporate Director of Children and Families Services wrote to parents and carers, thanking them for their attendance at the public meetings and stating:

‘I write therefore to offer my opinion that any judgement or view that the school inevitably faces closure would be premature, and to urge any parent or carer currently considering their child’s future school place to bear with the school. This first period of consultation is due to close today, 23rd July, after which we will consider the representations made and determine the necessary next steps.’

11. During the consultation period 146 responses were received.

- 114 (78%) indicated a preference that the school remain open with no change
- 5 (3%) indicated a preference that the school academise
- 5 (3%) indicated a preference that the school federate with another school
- 6 (4%) indicated a preference that the school amalgamate with another school
- 15 (10%) indicated a preference for the closure of North Clifton Primary School.

Further details of the consultation responses can be seen at **Appendix 3**.

12. In addition, during the consultation period a petition signed by 1,052 people was presented to the meeting of the County Council on 22nd July 2021 by Councillor Maureen Dobson, the local County Councillor, requesting the Council to ‘assist the governors and the community in retaining the school’.

13. The petition raised two issues of note relating to:

- residence and status of signatories
- reasons cited for wishing to retain North Clifton Primary School.

14. It was clear that many signatories were family members of existing or former pupils at North Clifton Primary School, while others represented members of the local community. It was also clear that a proportion of signatories had no direct connection with North Clifton Primary as such, but supported the general principle of retaining small rural primary schools.

15. The petition comprised two parts:

- a) a handwritten signed petition containing 48 signatories with addresses in the areas of Newark and Lincoln.
- b) an online petition containing 1,004 names of which:
- 54% gave postcodes within Nottinghamshire and areas of Lincolnshire adjacent to North Clifton
 - 44% gave postcodes from elsewhere in the UK
 - 2% gave addresses outside the UK.
16. 26 signatories of the online petition added comments giving reasons for wishing to retain this rural primary school.
- 9 of these, with Newark or Lincoln postcodes, commented very positively about the school's ethos, performance and characteristics, expressing the hope that, post-Covid, its pupil numbers would grow again
 - 15 others with postcodes elsewhere in the UK, or in one case USA, mainly expressed the view in more general terms that small, rural schools should be preserved and nurtured for the benefit of the children and communities that contain them.
17. **There is overwhelming community support for this school to be viable as a small school serving two rural communities.** The public meetings held on 12th July allowed residents of the two villages, North and South Clifton, to express concern about the impact on the rural community should the school close. The school is viewed as valuable and following the closure of the remaining pub in 2012, the school, along with the parish church, is seen as among the last remaining key facilities within the community. Without a school available for local families, any children who may live in the catchment in the future would be scattered to other schools - thus eroding further the sense of 'community'.
18. It was clear that the North Clifton governing body is committed to increasing the popularity of the school through, amongst other initiatives, setting up a before and after-school club providing wrap-around childcare. The governing body has requested additional time and would need an academic year to allow this plan to bear fruit.
19. Other options considered by the consultation included federation, amalgamation and academisation. The government remains committed to schools being part of strong Multi-Academy Trusts. This is set out in the Department for Education guidance for academy trusts and prospective converters (May 2021) and is listed as a background paper. This suite of documents includes a model service level agreement which supports maintained schools to agree short-term service level agreements with a Multi-Academy Trust to allow them to explore the benefits of academisation before formally committing to it.
(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/980753/Trust_partnerships_service_level_agreement_template.docx)

Finance

20. While this consultation was running, officers learned additional information that will affect the school budget from financial year 2022/23. On 19th July 2021, the Education and Skills Funding Agency published school-level provisional funding allocations for 2022/2023 through the schools national funding formula. These funding allocations are notional and

for illustrative purposes but showed that if pupil number and characteristics remained constant from the 20th October census date, North Clifton could expect to receive an additional £61,000 in its school's budget for 2022/23. This additional budget would primarily be due to changes in criteria for attracting sparsity funding which, based on the pupils on roll in October 2020, would see North Clifton Primary School receive £55,000 for which it would not previously have been eligible.

21. It must be noted that local authorities will continue to determine final allocations for all local mainstream schools in 2022/2023 based on the October 2021 school census data. Any significant change in the geographical areas from which North Clifton admits pupils could cause its eligibility for sparsity funding to change in the future.

Transport

22. A key issue highlighted by parents/carers at the school during consultation referred to school transport. Precisely, *could the school bus that collects children from Collingham and Besthorpe and transports to Harby, Queen Eleanor, be diverted to serve North Clifton, thereby increasing the possibility of out-of-catchment families making applications to North Clifton?*
23. The Council's Transport & Travel Services officers report that, as a school bus already goes to North Clifton, the route could be revised to pick up at other stops along the route, but if timings had to be changed, an additional vehicle would be required at an additional cost.
24. Free travel could be available by making North Clifton part of a coterminous (overlapping) catchment with Harby, which would involve statutory consultation on altering the admission arrangements of both schools but could not be resolved until at least 2023/24. However current Home to School Transport policy meets the statutory entitlement for pupils attending their nearest school. A discretionary entitlement to their catchment school, where an address is covered by more than one catchment entitlement, is assessed to the nearest catchment school. It is likely that this would disadvantage Harby Primary School, as any pupils from Besthorpe and Girton would then be eligible for free travel to North Clifton but not to Harby.

Admissions

25. Officers will monitor admissions to North Clifton from September 2021 and report back on any change in the number on roll. It should be noted that, according to the Council's data, in the school year 2020/21 there were only two children from North Clifton's catchment who attended school elsewhere. It should also be noted that parents/carers from any catchment, both within or outside Nottinghamshire are free to apply for places at North Clifton Primary School should they wish.
26. Currently, admissions arrangements for North Clifton Primary School rest with the admission authority, which is the Council. Should closure of this school be proposed according to the statutory procedure, the County Council would also then make a proposal for the catchment of North Clifton Primary School to be distributed between the catchment(s) of neighbouring school(s).

Other Options Considered

27. The stage one consultation asked interested parties to state their preference on which of the following options should be adopted for the future of North Clifton Primary School and the outcomes are detailed in **paragraph 11**:
- Continue with no change
 - Academisation
 - Federation
 - Amalgamation
 - Closure.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

28. The statutory conditions of consultation allow Elected Members 12 months in which to consider a decision in this regard: *'A statutory proposal should be published within 12 months of the initial consultation period being completed. This is so that it can be informed by up-to-date feedback'* *Opening and closing maintained schools: Statutory guidance for proposers and decision-makers, DfE, 2019 p.21.*
29. Following analysis of the responses received to the stage one consultation, it is proposed that Elected Members request officers to review the situation of North Clifton Primary School and report back to Committee in June 2022, at which point an informed decision will be made based on the latest available information.

Statutory and Policy Implications

30. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

31. It is anticipated that there will not be any costs for future consultation identified at this stage.

Human Resources Implications

32. The following posts would potentially be impacted by a possible closure:

0 Headteacher
2 Assistant Headteachers / Class Teachers (both part-time)
1 Class Teacher (part-time)
3 Teaching Assistants (all part-time)
2 Midday Supervisors
1 Administrator (part-time)

33. Work is being undertaken with the Governing Body to address the various contractual issues which will arise if the school closes using the existing agreed policies and procedures around redundancy and redeployment with appropriate consultation and involving the recognised trade unions.

Implications for Service Users

34. There are currently 27 pupils on roll at North Clifton Primary School.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee:

- 1) supports North Clifton Primary School governing body's commitment to securing the viability of the school during 2021-22 in order to inform the Committee's decision on this matter in June 2022 when further information will be available.
- 2) requests that the lead petitioner be informed of the outcome of the Committee's consideration and that this be reported back to Full Council.
- 3) recommends a review of the small school estate in partnership with the dioceses to ensure that rural schools can be sustainable into the medium and longer terms.

Marion Clay
Service Director, Education, Learning and Skills

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Constitutional Comments (LPW 02/09/21)

35. The recommendations fall within the remit of the Children and Young People's Committee by virtue of its terms of reference.

Financial Comments (MDN 26/08/21)

36. It is anticipated that there will not be any costs for future consultation identified at this stage.

HR Comments (BC 31/08/21)

37. The staffing implications are contained within the body of the report and detailed in **paragraph 33**.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

[Proposed consultations on options for the future of North Clifton Primary School and the alternative use of the Manners Sutton Primary School site – report to Children & Young People’s Committee on 21st June 2021](#)

[Department for Education \(DfE\) Guidance ‘Opening and closing maintained schools; Statutory guidance for proposers and decision-makers’, November 2019](#)

[Building strong academy trusts: Guidance for academy trusts and prospective converters May 2021](#)

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

Collingham Division

Councillor Maureen Dobson

C1508