

Parklands Residents' Association

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16 March 2006

Dear Lyn Hodgkiss

Consultation on Sale of School Playing Fields at Northampton School for Girls East Site (formerly Parklands Middle School)

I am writing on behalf of the residents of the Parklands community regarding the proposed sale of the Northampton School for Girls East site (formerly Parklands Middle School).

Cllr Kirkbride, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People at Northamptonshire County Council (NCC), recently addressed a meeting of Parklands Residents' Association. During the course of the meeting, she advised that the County Council has committed £200 million to a private finance initiative to build and run schools across Northampton. However she then went on to explain that NCC can only cover £115 million of this contractual obligation and proposes to raise £65 million through the disposal of 'surplus' school sites. At the meeting on 28 February 2006, Cllr Kirkbride indicated that sale of the playing fields at surplus sites is the only method that the County Council has to fund the PFI deficit, and that the organisation does not have alternative funding streams if the sites cannot be sold.

The residents feel strongly that NCC has been remiss in developing over-ambitious plans for the provision of education services across Northampton without first ensuring that it has the necessary funding in place, and that by entering into a PFI contract before consulting on the sale of school sites, the Council has pre-empted the outcome of any such consultation exercise.

The community is concerned about the inadequate consultation on the disposal of school sites. The County Council has an e-government obligation to provide details of all public consultations on line. Although this section of the website has been up and running for a number of years and is regularly updated, no details of this, or indeed any, Section 77 consultations have ever been shown.

On her own initiative, our Member of Parliament, Sally Keeble, recently undertook a full survey of the views of constituents regarding the proposed disposal of school playing fields within her constituency. She sent a copy of a 13 page report containing the results of this consultation to NCC for comment. The one page response received from the Chief Executive of NCC contained the following statement,

"I agree with you that it is a great shame that these sites could not be applied to the use of the local communities.

However, the financial conditions of the schools PFI scheme (placed upon us by both Ministers and circumstance) have required the Council to realise the maximum value from the sale of the sites. The disposal of these sites and the staged capital payments are an integral part of the signed contract. Therefore, regrettably, not selling them – or selling them for less than full market value – was never an option.

You will appreciate that in such circumstances, raising expectations by a wide ranging consultation about possible alternative options would have been inappropriate.”

It is a clear requirement of the Schools Standards and Frameworks Act 1998 that prospective applicants carry out a full consultation, in accordance with the Guidance, prior to any application for Section 77 consent. Residents find it difficult to reconcile these Government requirements with the comments made by the Chief Executive of NCC and the actions of the Council.

Peter Gould's letter is further evidence that the Council has no option other than to sell these sites at full market value and that the findings of any consultation are a foregone conclusion. The community of Parklands were particularly concerned that the Chief Executive believes wide ranging consultation to be inappropriate.

Despite the opinions expressed by the Chief Executive of NCC, and in the spirit of the Schools Standards and Frameworks Act, the 4,000 residents of Parklands would still like to give their response to the proposals in anticipation that proper account will be taken of their views by the School Playing Fields Advisory Panel and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills.

The issues raised by the Parklands Residents' Association are laid out in accordance with the guidance contained in DfE-1017-2004: The Protection of School Playing Fields and Land for Academies.

Criterion 1: School Needs

Under Section 77 of the Schools Standards and Frameworks Act 1998, only sports pitches that are surplus to the needs of local schools and their communities are approved for disposal. The community of Parklands is of the opinion that the facilities at the Northampton School for Girls East site (NSG East) are not surplus to requirements and are still needed by two local schools.

Under the old 3 tier schools system, Parklands Lower School, Parklands Middle School and Northampton School for Girls together accommodated 1858 pupils on 3 sites. Under the new 2 tier system Parklands Primary School (formerly Parklands Lower School) and Northampton School for Girls will together accommodate 2120 pupils on 2 sites. This increase in pupils has necessitated considerable building work at both schools, which, at Northampton School for Girls alone, will reduce the available playing field area by approximately 15%.

The Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 sets out a formula to determine the minimum area of playing fields to be provided by a school depending upon the ages of the pupils. Considering the 2 schools in the local area;

Parklands Primary School

420 pupils (~180 over 8 years) – 5,000 square metres (sq m) required

Local authority approval has recently been obtained for development of the Parklands Primary School site. Plans clearly show the following playing fields:

- 1 x Mini-football pitch of 1,125 sq m
- 1 x Netball court of 465 sq m (double allowance 930 sq m)

Total – 2,055 sq m

NCC claims that the available playing field area totals 8,200 sq m. The residents of Parklands dispute this. A large area of the site (~2,000 sq m) contains an award winning nature area, including a pond and a copse of trees. In addition, over 2,000 sq m is on an incline that is considered by the school to be unsuitable for playing games, and is off limits to the pupils since the children cannot be seen by supervising adults. The remaining area contains a large number of trees and is therefore not available for playing games.

NSG East is a safe 400 m walk from Parklands Primary School.

Northampton School for Girls

1,700 pupils (all 11 years or over) – 70,000 sq m required

Local authority approval has recently been obtained for development of the Northampton School for Girls. Plans clearly show the following playing fields:

- 2 x football pitches of 6,400 sq m (12,800 sq m)
- 1 x rugby pitch of 6,800 sq m
- 1 x all weather pitch of 6,400 sq m (double allowance 12,800 sq m)
- 3 x tennis courts of 670 sq m (2,010 sq m, 4,020 sq m if all weather)

Total – 34,410 sq m (36,420 sq m)

NCC claims that the available playing field area totals 47,000 sq m. The residents of Parklands dispute this. The plans submitted to the local authority for permission to erect new buildings to house 700 additional pupils only describe the playing fields outlined above.

NSG East is a 560 m walk from Northampton School for Girls. Northampton School for Girls currently operates from both sites with pupils and teachers moving between locations.

Consultation with Parents and School

Parklands Residents' Association has obtained a copy of a letter sent by Penny Westwood, Headteacher of NSG, to all parents. In it she advises that the need for reinvestment from the sale of the playing fields at the old Parklands Middle School site is vital to the facilities at the new school, which will include a multi-gym to compensate for the shortage of team playing fields. She then urges parents to vote in favour of the sale.

Residents are concerned that parents have been given a very biased view by the school. Consultation should be an opportunity for exploring all options. We are concerned that a multi-gym is seen by the school as being compensatory for playing fields. Whilst we acknowledge that a multi-gym does offer opportunity for exercise and is a useful facility to have in any PE department, it should never be seen as a replacement for outdoor team sports.

It should also be noted that in her letter to parents, the Headteacher advises that the school have tried to extend their playing fields by acquiring part of an adjacent nature reserve. We consider that by making such an approach to acquire the additional land, the school acknowledge that they would like to have more playing fields suitable for team sports.

We also note from the school's letter that the County Council agree with residents that playing fields should be retained at NSG East for use by Northampton School for Girls.

The school appears to have been put into an unenviable position of having to choose between retaining playing fields for team sports or generating revenue for a new school building. Surely this is the very reason why the Schools Standards and Frameworks Act 1998 was introduced?

Criterion 2: Community Use

There are a number of organisations that until recently had use of the facilities at NSG East. Permission to use the facilities was withdrawn shortly after Northampton School for Girls took over the site in 2004. The residents wish to bring this usage to the attention of the DfES to refute any claim by NCC that the facilities are not used by the community.

These organisations include:

Parklands Netball Club

Parklands Netball Club (previously located at Parklands Middle School) was disbanded when the county moved from a 3 tier to a 2 tier school system and they had to move out of the Middle School due to usage pressure on the facilities.

Parents of children in the Parklands area have tried to restart the club and have volunteers to run it, however they do not have access to a suitable site. They would like to make use of the courts at the NSG East site once more. If these were sold for development then there would not be adequate numbers of netball courts at the remaining 2 school sites to run a netball club. Additionally, Parklands Primary School in particular struggle with just 1 court and are unable to provide the out of school netball club that pupils have asked for.

Parklands Badminton Club

The Parklands Badminton Club used the Parklands Middle School facilities for over 20 years before the move from a 3 tier to a 2 tier school system. With the influx of extra pupils, the badminton club was forced to find alternative facilities, but would like to make use of the NSG East courts once more.

There are a number of organisations and clubs within the local area who have indicated to Parklands Residents' Association that given the opportunity they would utilise the extensive playing fields located at the NSG East site.

These include:

University of Northampton (formerly University College Northampton – UCN)

7,400 Students at Park Campus

3 x sports pitches of 6,400 sq m (19,200 sq m)

The University of Northampton is spread over 2 sites, Park Campus in Boughton Green Road and Avenue Campus in St. Georges Avenue. The University accommodates nearly 10,000 students, three quarters of whom are located on the larger Park Campus just 200 metres from the site of NSG East.

Although not covered by any regulatory guidance for sports facilities, 3 sports pitches are clearly inadequate for an institution the size of Northampton University. To date, the University has not had access to the facilities located at NSG East as they were used exclusively by the pupils of the school. However, we are aware that the University has generous funding available to develop its sports facilities, but lacks the necessary land.

Northamptonshire Association of Youth Clubs (NAYC)

The Kings Park Centre, owned and managed by the NAYC offers prestigious indoor sports facilities at their tennis centre and the adjacent Benham Sports Arena. This venue, located less than 200 metres from the NSG East site, is one of the premier indoor sports arenas in the East Midlands and offers a huge range of sports facilities, including gymnastics, trampoline gymnastics, aerobics, keep fit and martial arts, to individuals, groups and club organisations. Despite this success it has been identified that the site is too small to meet the demands made upon it, and last month it was awarded a large grant from Sport England in order to expand. This expansion is restricted to an extension of its indoor facilities, yet as an Olympic training venue it would benefit greatly from having a dedicated outdoor sports facility on its doorstep.

Northamptonshire County Council have recently announced plans to adopt a commissioning role to encourage district and borough councils, private and voluntary sector organisations to play a role in delivering youth services. NAYC will be a key partner in delivering these services. Increasing the area of sports pitches available to them will better enable NAYC to deliver the Council's requirements in the key commissioning area of sport and leisure.

Parklands Tigers Football Club (PTFC)

Parklands Tigers Football Club has a membership of over 400 players forming male and female teams for players from 5 years of age to adulthood. All home games and training sessions are held at the local football pitch located adjacent to the NSG East site. All available football pitches within the vicinity are over-subscribed, and the changing and toilet facilities are located in temporary buildings. PTFC would like to use the pitches and changing facilities at NSG East site, though this has not been possible to date.

Community Use

The local community have indicated many other sports that they would wish to see available in the local area, including cricket, hockey and tennis. Residents have also requested provision of a local bowling green.

Criterion 3 : Finance

We are unable to comment in this area since Northamptonshire County Council have so far refused to release to the residents of Parklands information relating to the disposal of the Northampton School for Girls East site.

Conclusions

The site proposed for disposal is

Northampton School for Girls East site (formerly Parklands Middle School)

Area of Playing Fields ~ 30,000 sq m Total site area ~ 56,000 sq m

The residents object to the disposal of the NSG East site for the following reasons:

- The consultation undertaken by Northamptonshire County Council in respect of the disposal of NSG East has not satisfied the guidance contained in DfE-1017-2004: The Protection of School Playing Fields and Land for Academies
- The sale appears to be motivated by financial necessity rather than the needs of the children and residents of Northampton.
- Parklands Primary School, which is located approximately 400 m from the NSG East site, does not have sufficient playing fields as defined in the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 to support the pupils it accommodates.
- Northampton School for Girls, which is located approximately 560 m from the NSG East site, does not have sufficient playing fields as defined in the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 to support the pupils it accommodates.
- Northamptonshire County Council recommended that land at NSG East be retained by Northampton School for Girls to augment their inadequate playing field facilities.
- Several community organisations that previously had use of the facilities at NSG East have not been consulted by Northamptonshire County Council with respect to the disposal.
- Several community organisations located nearby require the use of additional playing fields. The majority of these organisations cater for the needs of children and young people.

Although the residents do not believe it to be the case, should Northamptonshire County Council still feel that the facilities provided at NSG East are not required by local schools, the community of Parklands demand that the Council comply fully with 'Guidance DfE-1017-2004: The Protection of School Playing Fields and Land for Academies'. We also ask that consideration be given to the creation of a dedicated sports academy that would be available to:

Parklands Primary School
Northampton School for Girls
Northamptonshire Association of Youth Clubs
University of Northampton
Parklands Tigers Football Club
Parklands Badminton Club
Parklands Netball Club
and
The Residents of Northampton

We wish to place on record our strong objection to the way in which Northamptonshire County Council has conducted consultation in the matter. 'Guidance DfE-1017-2004: The Protection of School Playing Fields and Land for Academies' states clearly the Secretary of State's expectations in this respect. Consultation has focused on parents of pupils currently at Northampton School for Girls, many of whom do not live locally. By limiting consultation to this group, the Council has placed the emphasis of consultation outside our community. By ignoring guidance document DfE-1017-2004, the Council has failed in its duty to provide local residents and other interested parties with the opportunity to participate fully as described.

Contrary to the stated position of Northamptonshire County Council not to undertake 'wide-ranging consultation', the Parklands Residents' Association have invested considerable time and effort to collate and report the views of the residents of Parklands. We request that a full, un-edited copy of this correspondence be included in any application made under Section 77 of the Schools Standards and Frameworks Act 1998 to dispose of the Northampton School for Girls East site.

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Parklands Residents' Association request a copy of any future application submitted for the disposal of the Northampton School for Girls East site. The residents would also be interested to hear any response the County Council may wish to make in reply to any of the points raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely

Ken Dowsett

Ken Dowsett
Chair, Parklands Residents' Association
For Parklands Residents' Association

Copy Sally Keeble, Member of Parliament
Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education and Skills
Baroness Morris of Bolton, Shadow Minister for Children, Education and Health
Brandon Eldred, County Councillor
Headteacher and Governors, Parklands Nursery School
Headteacher and Governors, Parklands Primary School
Headteacher and Governors, Northampton School for Girls
Headteacher and Governors, Kingsthorpe Community College
Headteacher and Governors, Kings Meadow School
Headteacher and Governors, Raeburn School
Headteacher and Governors, Thomas Becket Catholic School
Editor, Chronicle and Echo
News Editor, BBC Radio Northampton
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