

Parklands Residents' Association

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18 May 2006

Dear Mr Gee

Response to the Public Consultation on the Proposed Disposal of Northampton School for Girls East Site

On the advice of Peter Burrell, we are writing to you in response to a letter received on 3 May regarding the proposed disposal of Northampton School for Girls (NSG) East site.

Cllr Eldred contacted Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) in mid-January regarding the proposed disposal of NSG East site, after hearing about the proposed disposal from our MP Sally Keeble. It is worth noting that the council did not approach either Cllr Eldred or the Residents' Association regarding the consultation, even though it is a clear requirement of the Schools Standards and Frameworks Act 1998 that prospective applicants carry out a full consultation, including with the local community, prior to submitting any application.

Following this contact a public meeting was arranged for 28 February, which was attended by Cllr Kirkbride, Peter Burrell, and Chris Borderick from NCC. The meeting raised a number of questions, and a request for information was made by the Residents' Association to NCC on 1 March. Chris Borderick responded to this on 3 March with specific information regarding the planned disposals.

In response to the public meeting and the information supplied by Chris Borderick, the Residents Association collated the views of the local community in a letter to Lyn Hodgkiss on 16 March. We did not receive a reply to this letter until 3 May, nearly 7 weeks later.

The council's response raised a number of points to which the residents wished to respond, however we were advised by Peter Burrell that the consultation period has now ended. Subsequently, you contacted us with an offer to include any reply to Peter Burrell's letter the residents' association wished to make, provided it was received by 2 June.

Below is our response;

1) Inadequate Consultation

The only effort made by NCC to consult with the local community was through a notice published in the Northampton Mercury and Northampton Chronicle and Echo newspapers. We feel that it is undemocratic to expect people to pay to receive notice of public consultations. We would also point out that using a free newspaper of

limited distribution is not a satisfactory means of ensuring communication of public notices.

No response was given to a number of points raised in our letter of 16 March, and so the residents would like to make the following complaints regarding the public consultation about the proposed disposal of NSG East.

- i) No explanation has been given for the fact that the council failed to display public notices in the Parklands area to alert the local community.
- ii) No explanation has been given for the fact that the consultation was not published in the Council's newsletter 'In Northamptonshire'.
- iii) Northamptonshire County Council's website has a section dedicated to public consultations. At no point was the consultation regarding the proposed disposal of the NSG East site, or indeed any of the proposed disposal sites, listed on the website. No explanation has been given for this.
- iv) No explanation has been given for the council's failure to contact the local County Councillor regarding the consultation.
- v) No explanation has been given for the Council's failure to contact the local residents' association regarding the consultation.
- vi) No explanation has been given for the comments made by the Chief Executive of Northamptonshire County Council regarding the "inappropriate nature of a wide ranging consultation" in his letter to Sally Keeble, MP.

2) Inconsistent Information

The information supplied by Chris Borderick in his email of 3 March 2006 lists the area of available playing fields at Parklands Primary School as 8200 square metres. However, seven weeks later in Peter Burrell's letter of 2 May, this figure has reduced by over 20% to 6495 square metres. There is no explanation for this discrepancy, and no diagram to illustrate how this figure has been derived.

Whilst the residents continue to dispute the figure of 6495 square metres, what is of greater concern is the gross discrepancy between the figure provided during the consultation period, and the revised figure presented once that consultation had closed. It is extremely worrying when the Project Manager of the schools disposal project and the Head of Buildings and Capital Development are apparently relying on wildly different information when considering whether or not it is appropriate to permanently dispose of educational facilities. Furthermore, we can find no explanation for such discrepancy without questioning either the probity or competence of the officers involved. The two scenarios that are immediately apparent are

- i) The Council has deliberately supplied incorrect information during the course of the public consultation in order to assist their case for disposal of the NSG East site

- ii) When considering the case for the disposal of the NSG East site, the Council have not conducted a thorough and accurate assessment of the schools affected by the proposed disposal, and the council do not have sufficient systems in place to control the storage and dissemination of information.

Either scenario is clearly unacceptable.

This is clear evidence that the council has not shown due diligence regarding the consistency and accuracy of information used during the decision making process.

In light of this, it is our opinion that it is not possible to know if wrong information has been relied upon during any of the planning for the disposal of any of the school sites across Northampton without a complete audit of all of information used throughout the process.

3) Incomplete Information

Despite requesting further information, both directly and indirectly, in our letter of 16 March 2006, there is a significant amount of relevant information outstanding. Examples of outstanding requests includes

- i) No further information has been provided regarding the origin of the data used in the assessment of Parklands Lower School.
- ii) No further information has been provided regarding the origin of the data used in the assessment of Northampton School for Girls.
- iii) No explanation has been offered as to why the area of available playing fields supplied by the County Council as part of this consultation differs significantly from that shown in the school plans submitted by the County Council to the borough Council as part of the planning process.
- iv) No specific information has been provided regarding the anticipated proceeds from the disposal of the NSG East site.
- v) No specific information has been provided regarding how any proceeds arising from the disposal of the NSG East site will be spent

4) Points of Clarification

In his letter of 3 May, Peter Burrell suggests that although local clubs and community groups had an opportunity to respond to the consultation, no groups did. We would therefore wish to take this opportunity to clarify that we consulted with members of these groups and they provided input into the response from Parklands Residents' Association.

The residents of Parklands do not on the whole dispute the predicted benefits of the proposed changes to the educational system in Northamptonshire. However whilst these plans appear laudable, it is clear that they are far beyond the means of the Council. Having already committed £65 million pounds that it does not have to a private finance initiative to build and run schools across Northampton, and in light of the Chief Executive's 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."

We are left wondering if there is anyone in the council capable of conducting an independent and objective assessment of what is in the best interests of the children of Northampton regarding the disposal of 'surplus' school playing fields.

We accept your point that some local schools have not objected to the disposal of NSG East in exchange for improved sports facilities. However, the residents feel that somewhat misses the point.

Whilst extra allowance is given in the Schools Standards and Frameworks Act 1998 for all-weather facilities, it is also a stated intention of the act that this clause should not be used to justify paving over all of the green space available to children.

If we do not receive a satisfactory response to the issues raised in this letter, it is our intention to take this matter up with the Local Government Ombudsman, the Information Commissioner, and the Department for Education and Skills directly.

Yours sincerely

Simon Hegarty

Simon Hegarty
Vice Chair Parklands Residents' Association
For Parklands' residents