
SURPLUS SCHOOL SITES

**Responsible Cabinet Member(s) - Councillor Don Bristow,
Resource Management Portfolio
Councillor Chris McEwan, Children's Services Portfolio
Councillor David Lyonette, Regeneration and Planning Portfolio**

Responsible Director(s) - John Buxton, Director of Development and Environment

Purpose of Report

1. To consider the options available to the Council for the school sites and buildings about to become surplus to requirements. These are principally the schools vacated as a result of the opening of the Education Village. The report looks at the short-term treatment of the sites and longer-term options. A separate report on Part III of the agenda gives more detailed financial information.

Information and Analysis

Background

Schools Sites

2. The school sites¹ involved are:

Table 1: Sites and Availability

| School/Site | Reason for Vacating | Date Available |
|--|---|---------------------------|
| Harrowgate Hill Infants | Relocating | Sept 2005 |
| Beaumont Hill First/ Mayfair School | Relocating to Education Village | November/December 2005 |
| Beaumont Hill Middle/ Glebe School | | |
| Beaumont Hill Senior | | |
| Springfield Primary | | |
| Sadberge Primary | Relocation of E-Learning Team (temporarily using building) | Late 2005/Early 2006 |
| Eastbourne Nursery | Relocation of EOTAS ² Service | Early 2006 |
| Albert Hill Nursery | Closure (used as an annex to Gurney Pease School from July 2005 until completion of new classroom at Gurney Pease December 2005) | January 2006 |

¹ Rise Carr Primary School is not covered in this report because it is a Listed Building and because there are further issues to be considered. It will be the subject of a subsequent report.

² EOTAS – Education other than at School

Objectives

3. It is suggested that the following objectives are used as criteria for evaluation of the various options for these sites:
 - (a) maximise capital receipts to the Council;
 - (b) minimise revenue costs to the Council;
 - (c) enhance service provision;
 - (d) good planning of the area;
 - (e) contribution to Community Strategy/Corporate Strategy aims.
4. Some of these objectives conflict, of course; achievement of one objective may be to the detriment of another. In selecting options it will be necessary to clarify the implications of different options and so to determine a strategy.

Issues to be Considered

5. The following issues need to be taken into account:
 - (a) Security and holding costs: Children's Services Department has no capital resource for costs associated with declaring these sites surplus to requirements, eg demolition or boarding up, nor for fitting out for an alternative use. Similarly, no revenue funds have been identified for holding empty property or maintaining grounds.
 - (b) National and regional planning policies mean it will not be possible to gain planning permission for residential development of the school playing fields. It will certainly not be possible before a Playing Pitch Strategy and an Open Space Local Needs Assessment are completed for the Borough, and may remain very difficult indeed or impossible after the completion of the Strategy and Assessment. The level of current housing commitments compared with the strategic and regional housing requirement for Darlington could also act as a constraint on the release of further housing sites.
 - (c) Nevertheless, it is anticipated that substantial capital receipts, considered to be in a range of £7-£9 million, could be achieved if the 'footprints' of all the school buildings were sold for residential development. It is important to stress that this range of potential capital receipts assumes a number of caveats namely: cleared sites, satisfactory ground conditions, no contamination or remediation issues, no abnormal/extra over development or demolition costs. This sum will obviously be reduced if any of the schools are retained for Council usage.
 - (d) However, disposing of the school footprints will leave the Council with the liability of maintaining the playing fields.
 - (e) For each of these sites or buildings, disposal for a greater capital receipt for another use other than residential development is unlikely.

- (f) Use of the buildings for some other Council services could be considered.
- (g) There could be demand from community groups, the voluntary sector or some partners for use of the buildings.

6. The implications of these issues are described in turn below.

Analysis of Issues

Security and Holding Costs

- 7. Estimates of costs provided by the Community Services Department in respect of demolition are in the region of £540,000 for all schools boarding up about £56,000 and maintenance of the open space (grass cutting only) are in the region of £6,000 per annum.
- 8. In some circumstances, alternatives to boarding up, such as security patrols, community wardens or intruder detection devices, may be cheaper for a short period of holding than boarding up.
- 9. Having regard to the overall level of capital receipts from disposal for residential development, trying to avoid initial holding costs at the expense of a well-formulated disposal strategy may not be in the Council's best interests.
- 10. Early demolition by the Council could maximise capital receipts by reducing uncertainties for developers. This could be forward-funded, in anticipation of the forthcoming capital receipt covering the costs.

Planning Policies

- 11. There is a complex array of national planning policies, statutory instruments and directions designed to allow the Government to prevent the loss of playing fields and playing pitches. Disposing of and obtaining planning permission for development of school playing fields would not be possible this year.
- 12. A full Open Space Local Needs Assessment and a Playing Pitch Strategy (both covering the whole Borough) need to be completed before it can be determined whether any playing fields are surplus to requirements. Even then the opportunities for developing playing fields are likely to be small. Both the Needs Assessment and the Playing Pitch Strategy are substantial pieces of work, being done jointly by the Community Services and Development and Environment Departments, which will not be complete before late autumn 2006. It is not possible to expedite this work without undermining its value in defending future decisions, but a draft should be available earlier in 2006.
- 13. In addition, national planning policies set out a sequential approach to determining appropriate sites for housing development. Previously developed sites are preferred to greenfield sites, and the suitability of sites for development should also take account of their location and accessibility to jobs, shops and services by modes other than the car. When compared to housing requirements set out in the Tees Valley Structure Plan and draft Regional Spatial Strategy, Darlington already has a plentiful supply of housing sites allocated, with planning permission or likely to come forward. A good proportion of these

are previously developed land.

14. The Council therefore needs a plan to maintain the playing fields associated with these school sites (certainly until the implications of the Playing Pitch Strategy and Open Space Local Needs Assessment are accepted by other bodies, and probably for at least five years) or to plan for their permanent use as open space.
15. As part of the disposal strategy and preparation of development briefs, analysis of each site should be carried out to determine:
 - (a) How the footprint of the school can be developed without prejudicing the potential for development of the rest of the site. An initial analysis has shown this is possible for all relevant sites. (For some sites, such as Sadberge, future development of the playing fields is even less likely than others.)
 - (b) Whether there are any parts of the playing fields where future development is so unlikely that a beneficial long-term low-maintenance use (such as tree-planting through the Tees Forest) should be initiated from the start, for example on some parts of the Beaumont Hill Schools sites.
 - (c) Whether any parts of the playing fields can be used to meet the open space requirements arising from new housing developments or from a shortfall in provision within existing communities.
 - (d) An interim maintenance plan for other areas to be retained.
16. Planning applications would need to be referred to the Secretary of State only if they were contrary to Local Plan policy (for example by taking in open land) or affecting a Listed Building

Maintaining the Playing Fields

17. As the section on planning explained, the Council is very likely to have to provide for the maintenance of most of the playing fields for some time. The Open Space Local Needs Assessment will determine the appropriate long-term functions of the resultant open space. However, a site analysis of the open space should be carried out as part of the preparation of development briefs for each site (as paragraph 15 explains).
18. Some parts of the sites for which development would never be possible may be of interest to other bodies (such as Tees Forest or the Woodland Trust for tree planting) and this could reduce the Council's maintenance liabilities a little, as well as enhance the area.
19. If development of some of the playing pitches becomes possible, as a result of being identified as surplus in the Open Space Needs Assessment and the Playing Pitches Strategy, then there may be a requirement to provide enhancement of some pitches (for example provision of changing facilities) in order to develop others.
20. It might be possible through the planning process to require developers to provide a commuted sum for maintenance of neighbouring open space, or to dispose of the open space but require it to be maintained (as at Rockcliffe in Middleton One Row). However, any of these options are likely to reflect in a reduced capital receipt, and could reduce the

flexibility of the Council to reconsider use of the sites in the light of the Open Space Assessment and Playing Pitch Strategy.

21. Provision should therefore be made for the costs of open space maintenance.

Development Other Than Residential

22. Non-residential development of some of the school footprints (or use of the buildings) is possible. However the value would be lower than for residential development and the alternative uses would not be so beneficial to the good planning of the area to merit a lower capital receipt.

Other Council Uses

23. ***File Repository*** - A possible use for one of the surplus schools could be as a file storage facility to release more valuable space in the Town Hall and at Central House. However a rationalisation of the Basement at the Town Hall is taking place as part of the Contact/Call Centre project. Similarly at Central House an exercise to improve management, retention and retrieval of files is being undertaken including options such as electronic storage (some documents have to be retained for 75 years). It is suggested that any such usage of the schools as a file repository would nevertheless need to be restricted to the low capital value sites.
24. In considering the above it is recognised that there are already well established file storage and retrieval facilities available in Darlington and the fitting out, security and staffing costs associated with creating a file repository are considered to be cost prohibitive.
25. ***Office Relocations*** - In 2006 leases of the offices at 10 and 11 Houndgate and Hopetown House are due to expire July, August and October 2006 respectively.
26. There may be an option for new office accommodation to be provided in town centre development. Until decisions are taken on this, it is reasonable to expect that short term extensions on the above-mentioned leases to cover the period to availability of a new Town Hall could be negotiated.
27. The combined gross internal floor area extends to 1796m². Only Springfield and Beaumont Hill Senior schools match this floor area requirement, but the gross to net useable ratios is lower in schools than offices. Conversion of Springfield School to office use for short term occupation is not considered cost effective. Conversion of Beaumont Hill Senior school would not produce sufficient net internal floor space to accommodate staff from Hopetown House and Houndgate. Likewise fitting out costs, and double move costs would outweigh any potential rental savings, depending on the availability of any new Town Hall.

Community, Voluntary and Partner Uses

28. There have already been early approaches by Community Associations and voluntary groups for shared use of schools and having regard to security of tenure issues, such arrangements will need to be considered carefully.

Options Appraisal

29. Table 4 (**attached Appendix A**) assesses the options available against the objectives for the exercise set at the beginning of this report. The advantages of the various options obviously vary from site to site to some extent. However, this appraisal suggests that the best strategy for the Council to deal with these surplus school sites is:
- (a) Select for any Education uses school buildings which are:
 - (i) appropriate for the services, and
 - (ii) accessible to their clients, and
either
 - (iii) would generate a relatively low capital receipt from sale for housing,
or
 - (iv) through retaining in Council ownership, help to retain flexibility of potential future development of the associated playing fields.
 - (b) Dispose of the remaining school footprints for residential development (having assessed the sites and adjoining grounds for future development potential in the way set out in paragraph 15 above).
 - (c) Forward-fund the demolition of school buildings not retained as soon as possible after their closure. It is important that this is approved and takes place quickly, to avoid any possible vandalism.
 - (d) Look for opportunities to reduce the costs of maintaining the retained open space and enhance the environment, particularly where parts are very unlikely ever to be developed.
 - (e) Re-assess the future of the school grounds when the Open Space Local Needs Assessment and the Playing Pitch Strategy have been completed.
30. The last part of this report now examines how this strategy applies to the individual sites. The same strategy can be applied to other sites that become vacant in the future.

Options for Individual Sites

Harrowgate Hill Infants

31. The absence of playing fields and the location within the urban area make redevelopment for housing straightforward and appropriate.
32. Early marketing and disposal is proposed.

Beaumont Hill Schools

33. The Beaumont Hill Schools have the best potential for capital receipts.

34. Whilst each of the three school footprints could be developed satisfactorily for housing in isolation, there are some issues which link the sites. Off-site highways works are likely to be required once all three are developed. Looking at the three playing fields together (addressing the issues set out in paragraph 15) could lead to creative solutions. It is proposed therefore that these three (footprint) sites are marketed together, following the preparation of a development brief and following planning permission being obtained. Sale to a single developer could give flexibility to incorporate parts of the playing fields at a later date, should that become possible following the Open Space Assessment and Playing Pitch Strategy. Since these are the sites on which all the issues are most inter-related the Development and Environment's new planning/surveying framework partner has been asked to undertake an initial assessment of the issues and marketing potential of all the surplus school sites.
35. There may well be parts of these playing fields, particularly at the Middle School next to the railway line on the edge of the urban area, which would never get planning permission for development. It would be appropriate to look at the possibility of introducing planting through the Tees Forest, or a similar longer-term open space use of these parts.

Springfield School

36. This site could be considered for use by the Council, however, the opportunity cost of not disposing of the site now is substantial.

Sadberge Primary

37. It is very unlikely that the playing field of this school would ever gain planning permission for development. As well as the general planning issues set out earlier in this report, the playing field is outside the village's development limits and the site is obviously not as accessible as a site in the urban area.
38. In disposing of the footprint for housing, there will need to be discussions with the Parish Council about the long-term future of the pitch.

Albert Hill Nursery

39. With no playing fields and within the urban area, housing use is straightforward and disposal should be achievable by the time the building is available.

Eastbourne Nursery

40. Housing use of the footprint is straightforward and disposal should be achievable by the time the building is available.
41. It may be possible to maintain the small grounds as part of the adjacent Eastbourne Park.

Conclusions

42. The following overall strategy is proposed:
- (a) Dispose of the school footprints for residential development (having assessed the sites and adjoining grounds for future development potential in the way set out in paragraph 15 above).
 - (b) Forward-fund where necessary the demolition of school buildings not retained as soon as possible after their closure.
 - (c) Look for opportunities to reduce the costs of maintaining the retained open space and enhance the environment (eg through the Tees Forest), particularly where parts are very unlikely ever to be developed.
 - (d) Make revenue provision for maintaining and managing the retained open space in the Medium Term Financial Plan 2006/7.
 - (e) Re-assess the future of the school grounds when the Open Space Local Needs Assessment and the Playing Pitch Strategy have been completed.
43. Significant capital funding issues arise from this, and it will be necessary:
- (a) To recognise potential cash flow issues and capital expenditure in advance of the bulk receipts from disposals. Similarly advance demolitions, boarding up costs, feasibility studies, planning application fees and marketing costs being incurred in advance of a capital receipt.
 - (b) To consider earmarking a capital sum, after completion of the Playing Pitch Strategy, to enhance some pitches and allow others to be developed.

Timetable for Disposals

44. It is proposed that:
- (a) Harrowgate Hill Infant School be marketed early this autumn subject to approval by Cabinet.
 - (b) Sadberge, Albert Hill and Eastbourne Schools be marketed to tie in with their availability.
 - (c) Beaumont Hill and Springfield Schools require more detailed planning/development briefs (for the reasons explained in the report), which the department's partner consultant has been asked to prepare. Marketing will then take place on the basis of those briefs with disposals anticipated early 2006.

Outcome of Consultation

45. Consultation with affected residents will take place as part of the planning process..

Legal Implications

46. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

47. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Council Policy Framework

48. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework.

Decision Deadline

49. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

Recommendation

50. It is recommended that:

- a) The content of this report is noted;
- b) Decisions are deferred pending consideration of detailed financial information in Part III of the agenda.

Reasons

51. The recommendations are supported to rationalise schools considered surplus to the Council's requirements.

John Buxton
Director of Development and Environment

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the production of this report.

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