

A vibrant school at the heart of the community

A response to the consultation on the future of Stoney Middleton CE (C) Primary School from members of the School's Governing Body and Friends, Parents and Teachers Association

Summary

- Stoney Middleton school is at the centre of the community it serves. The closure of the school would be a serious and irreversible blow to the whole of that community. The worse affected initially would be less advantaged parents and the community's older and less mobile members. Ultimately, the entire character of the community would be changed for the worse.
- The education provided by Stoney Middleton School, as measured by the achievements of its former pupils, is of a high quality. The governing body and staff are committed to working together to deliver further improvements.
- Stoney Middleton, unlike many surrounding villages, has no village hall or other communal village space, and the school premises fill this role. They are used for local democratic activities, voluntary and charitable organisations, and serve as the designated evacuation centre in the event of emergency. The closure of the school would lead to a cessation of these community activities and a consequent decrease in social cohesion.
- The suggested alternative provision involves a dangerous journey along a busy main road. The closure of the school would lead to increased congestion, as well as severe difficulties for parents who are disabled or who lack the use of a car.
- The numbers of pupils on the roll over the last twenty years has fluctuated widely around an average of about 35. The current numbers are at low ebb, but there is no evidence to believe that they are destined to fall further, and the experience of other small schools in the area shows that a substantial recovery in numbers is just as likely.
- The Governing Body has managed the finances of the school prudently, delivering good education within the budget available. The savings that could be achieved by closure are estimated to amount to not more than 0.04% of the county's primary education budget, and even this small saving could be halved if, as is likely, due to the dangerous nature of the route transport needs to be provided to a neighbouring school.
- In bringing forward this proposal, the county has failed to follow its own procedures, supporting documents have been inaccurate or missing entirely, and the appearance has been given that the council has obstructed the democratic process. A full appraisal of all the options for the school has not been made.
- We urge the council to put aside this ill-considered and damaging closure proposal, and instead to work together with the Governors and the local community in finding ways to deliver cost-effective education which preserve the social cohesion of our community.

Introduction to the school and the community

Stoney Middleton Church of England (C) Primary School is at the heart of the village community that it serves. It was built in 1835 by public subscription on land donated to the village by Lord Denman. There are still residents in the village today whose ancestors contributed to the building of the school, and some families can recount 5 generations who have attended there. The tradition of community involvement and investment in the school continues to the present day; in 1997 a mezzanine classroom was added, thanks to the parents and the local community who raised more than £17,500 in less than 3 years towards the cost.

Stoney Middleton is a working village with a small but mixed population, consisting of workers from the local quarrying and mineral processing industries, local agriculture and small businesses, as well as retired people and commuters to nearby towns and cities. There are around 200 dwellings, almost all of which are in year-round occupation. The School is the heart of our village, where our children are taught up to the age of 11, and where the community meet for many village activities and traditions. The School is located on High Street where the children are safe and away from the very busy A623, and where the children enjoy the short walk to school accompanied by an adult. The school has always been successful in developing a strong sense of community in its pupils, which is reflected in very low levels of vandalism and youth crime and disorder in the village.

Stoney Middleton, unlike many surrounding villages, has no village hall or other communal village space. Thus the school premises have to fulfil this role. The school is used for local democratic activities, such as Parish Council meetings, for local voluntary and charitable organisations, including the well-dressing and Women's Institute, and for social activities, usually connected with fund-raising for the school, which bring together villagers of all ages and backgrounds.

In the event that the school is closed, the ownership of the premises will revert to the Church of England, which will have a statutory duty to sell it at the full market price. It is unlikely that this price would be within the reach of a relatively small village. In the absence of any alternative community buildings, it is inevitable that many village activities will cease, leading to increased isolation of older and less mobile inhabitants and a decrease in social cohesion.

Educational quality and achievements

The quality of the education provided by the school is best judged by the attainments of its pupils. Pupils from Stoney Middleton School generally go on to Lady Manners School in Bakewell, where they outperform the already high average level of achievement in this school. This is illustrated by the table below, showing the percentage of pupils achieving 5+ A* - C grades at GCSE between 2002 and 2006. Note that even the worst performing Stoney Middleton pupil showed a performance substantially better than the national average, and that the average performance of former Stoney Middleton pupils comfortably outperforms the overall average for the school.

| | Average for 5 years | Lowest | Highest |
|--|---------------------|--------|---------|
| National results | 56.7% | | |
| Lady Manners, total | 75% | 72% | 78% |
| Former Stoney Middleton pupils at Lady Manners | 82% | 67% | 100% |

Key Stage 2 SATS results show a generally positive picture.

KS2 SATs results for last 5 years at Stoney Middleton School:

| | English | | Maths | | Science | |
|--------------------------|---------|------|-------|-----|---------|-----|
| | 4 + | 5 | 4+ | 5 | 4+ | 5 |
| National results | 76% | | 76% | | 87% | |
| Stoney Middleton results | 87% | 8.7% | 70% | 13% | 87% | 13% |

Of course, despite these positive results the School's Governors and staff recognise that there is room for improvement, and are continually striving to improve standards further. The SIRR reports for the last 2 years make it clear that the school is continuing to move forward.

- 'The school has worked hard over the last 12 months to improve teaching and learning.'
- 'The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum for children, which is enriched with visits, visitors and first hand experiences.'
- 'The school can show clear evidence of improvement in identified issues over the past year.'
- 'This very small Christian school works hard to ensure the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of learners.'
- The school recognises the need to rely less on external evaluation and to develop its own internal monitoring and evaluation.

The OFSTED report – SMALL SCHOOLS: HOW WELL ARE THEY DOING? (March 2000) has been used by the authority to provide general evidence of grounds for concern in the education of children in small schools. However extracts from this report have been presented in a selective and tendentious way.

The overall OFSTED position is made clear in the summary, which states:

- 'The majority of small schools achieve standards which are higher than the national average at the age 7 – 11.'
- 'The quality of education provided by small schools compares well with what is provided by larger schools.'
- Small schools 'have a positive ethos with a family atmosphere, close links between staff and parents, an important place in the local community, and good standards of behaviour'.

- Higher unit costs notwithstanding, a good case emerges for the place of small schools in the education system as a whole, when the quality of their educational performance is added to the broader contribution they make in their communities.’

In the case of Stoney Middleton, all these advantages are realised. The ethos of Stoney Middleton School has always been to educate children, not just to pass SATs, but also to prepare them for their future lives and to be responsible and caring members of their community. The school now looks forward to building on these achievements with fresh impetus under new leadership.

The Impact of School Closure on the Community

In Stoney Middleton we have a possibly unique situation in that our school provides the only public meeting space in the village. Consequently, our school is the nucleus of our community and is an integral part of village life.

During the day our primary aged children receive a broad and balanced education in school. During evenings and weekends our school provides the venue for Parish Council business, school fund raising activities, village organisations and committees and numerous social events. Our school is also the designated evacuation centre for the village in the case of an emergency situation like fire, flood or serious accident.

The following quotations, from some of the organisations that use or link with the school, demonstrate quite clearly that closure would have a profound and irretrievably damaging effect upon our close knit community:

“For more than 30 years we have enjoyed the welcome, comfort and warmth of the school, not only for our monthly meetings, but also for the many classes, entertainments and social activities we have held. Stoney Middleton WI, after nearly 50 years, still provides education, friendship and a great sense of community. We are proud to say that a large number of members have served in the village in many capacities throughout these years and that we still have founder members who still regularly attend”.

J M Lennon, President of Stoney Middleton Womens Institute

The school was absolutely buzzing on Saturday morning (11.11.06) as people from toddlers to octogenarians came together to enjoy a lovely morning in school when they could buy their Christmas cards, presents and even have them gift wrapped before relaxing with a coffee and a piece of cake. Our school is well used and much loved by all. The volume of people attending our functions and volume of money raised bear witness to this. Indeed, the fund raising successes of our FPTA are the envy of surrounding schools. We have a very loyal and dedicated band of volunteers who work tirelessly on behalf of the school and would like to continue doing so for many years to come”.

J Hobson, Friends and Parents of Stoney Middleton CE Primary School

“If a decision is made to close the school the parish council will have nowhere suitable to meet in the village let alone encourage residents to participate in local decision making. Given the encouraging signs from Ruth Kelly, MP about increasing

the power and responsibility of parish councils, any decision, which limits accessibility to local decision making, seems to be a retrograde step. The closure of Stoney Middleton School will profoundly affect not just the children but will disempower almost every person in the village”.

J Bettney, Chair of the Parish Council

“We use the school extensively during Well-Dressing week for many events; these bring in not only money to the area but a community spirit. We organise cinema evenings, quiz nights bingo, cakes and teas and other fund raising events”.

J Slater, Chair of Stoney Middleton Well Dressing Entertainments committee

“Last year we celebrated the 70th anniversary of Well Dressing at Stoney Middleton. The children play a significant part in Well Dressing activities; each year they design and petal a well, take part in maypole dancing and attend the flower service in Church. To design a well dressing picture the children need to know about maths, art and design and nature. Petalling the well, alongside adults, is also part of the educational process. The children learn how to interact with peers and adults and this enables them to develop a sense of belonging and pride in their community. If the school ends then so will these fine local traditions and our village will be a less special place for it”.

D Thorpe, Art teacher, Artist and well dressing designer in Stoney Middleton for 27 years.

Our School children make a significant contribution to the safe keeping of our village through the environmental work they do in conjunction with the Peak Park Vision Project. Our children have worked on several projects to improve biodiversity in the local area, including a wet meadow installation where they have cleared land and planted seeds to help regeneration. Our children have planted bluebells as part of the woodland restoration project at the Roman Baths in the centre of the village and at the time of doing this work made a major discovery when they unearthed a set of stone steps at the back of the baths that had been lost and overgrown for generations. At the moment the children are working on panels to be put up for the public giving information on flora and fauna in the area.

The children take great pride in the work they have done with the Peak National Park over the years and we can see the evidence of their long-term commitment to protecting and caring for their local environment here in Stoney Middleton.

Stoney Middleton is a cohesive community and without a doubt, the closure of our school would destroy the nature and identity of our village and deeply affect the quality of life for young and old alike.

Environmental and safety impact of alternative provision

The authority is obliged to consider social and environmental impact of any decision to close the school. One major factor to be considered is the nature of the journey to the Authority’s suggested alternative provision, Curbar Primary School. Although the distance to this school, at 1.4 miles, falls within the definition of “walking distance”

under section 444(5) of the Education Act 1996, there are serious reasons to doubt that this route is safe.

The route to Curbar School follows the A623 for its whole length. This road is one of the busiest roads in the county, and it is particularly busy during the hour between 8 am and 9 am, when in addition to substantial car traffic there is considerable movement of heavy lorries, many from the local quarries. In a recent traffic survey, 707 vehicles were counted between 8 and 9 am, of which 83 were heavy goods vehicles. This amounts, on average, to one lorry every 43 seconds and one car every 6 seconds.

Although the route does have a pavement, this is narrow, in many places single file only, and is not separated from the roadway. For a considerable distance, a high stone wall adjoins the pavement, leaving no possible escape from any vehicle that mounted the pavement, and magnifying the strong draught from passing lorries. At one point, at the entrance to Combs Dale, a serious seasonal flooding problem remains, despite attempts from the Highway Authority to remedy it, meaning that for a significant part of the winter pedestrians are at risk of a soaking from passing traffic.

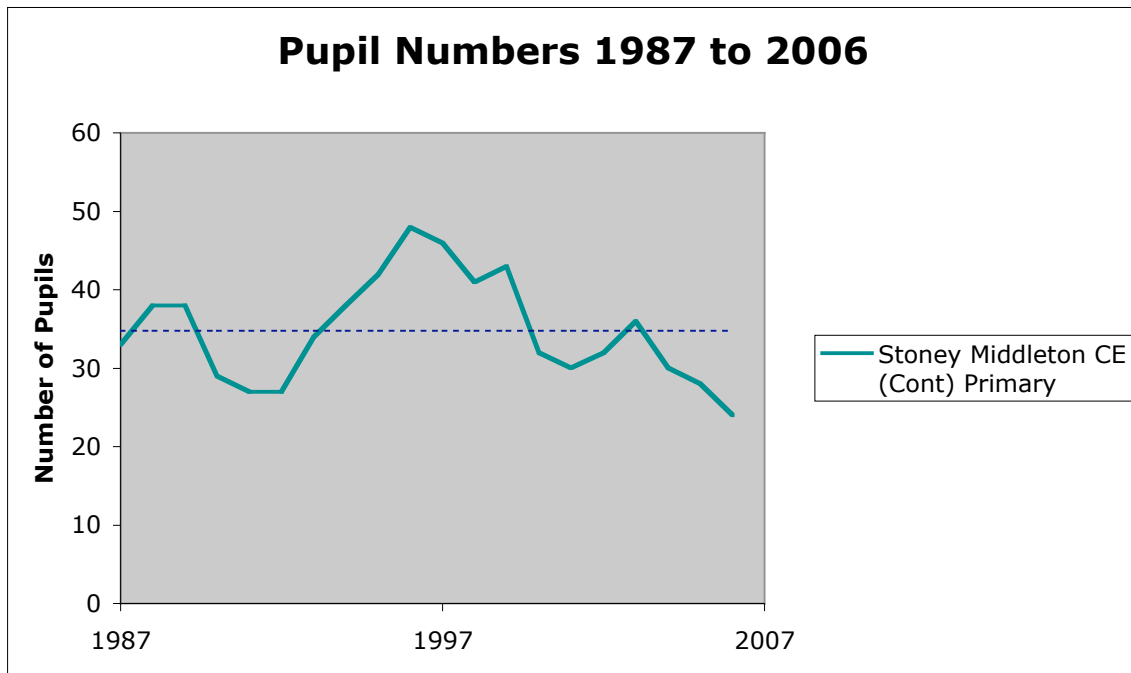
This journey would provide formidable difficulties to parents who are disabled, to single parents or parents without access to a car. Currently the school includes parents in all three categories. Those parents who were able to drive their children to Curbar School would significantly add to that school's existing congestion problem. Curbar's school travel plan, with a goal of reducing congestion at the school, has been accepted and funded by Derbyshire County Council; this progress would be completely reversed by the substantial increase in car traffic that the closure of Stoney School would bring.

We understand that the authority would, if the closure plans went ahead, carry out a formal assessment of the dangers of the route. If this assessment does, as seems overwhelmingly likely, conclude that the route is not safe for children to walk along, then transport will need to be provided. On the basis of our local knowledge of the cost of school transport in the area, we estimate that this cost will be in the range £140-£150 a day, giving an annual total cost in the range £27,000 to £ 29,000. The cost of this transport would offset a large fraction of any saving that would be made by closing the school.

Pupil numbers and pupil number projections

A key argument in the case for closure is that the current low pupil numbers will inevitably decline further, in line with overall falling rolls nationally and over the county. This argument is unsustainable in the context of a small village school, in which substantial fluctuations in numbers are inevitable and to be expected. A single family moving into or out of the village, one family from the village exercising their freedom to choose another neighbouring school for their children, or a family from a neighbouring village choosing to send the children to Stoney school; each of these unpredictable events can cause a significant change in numbers.

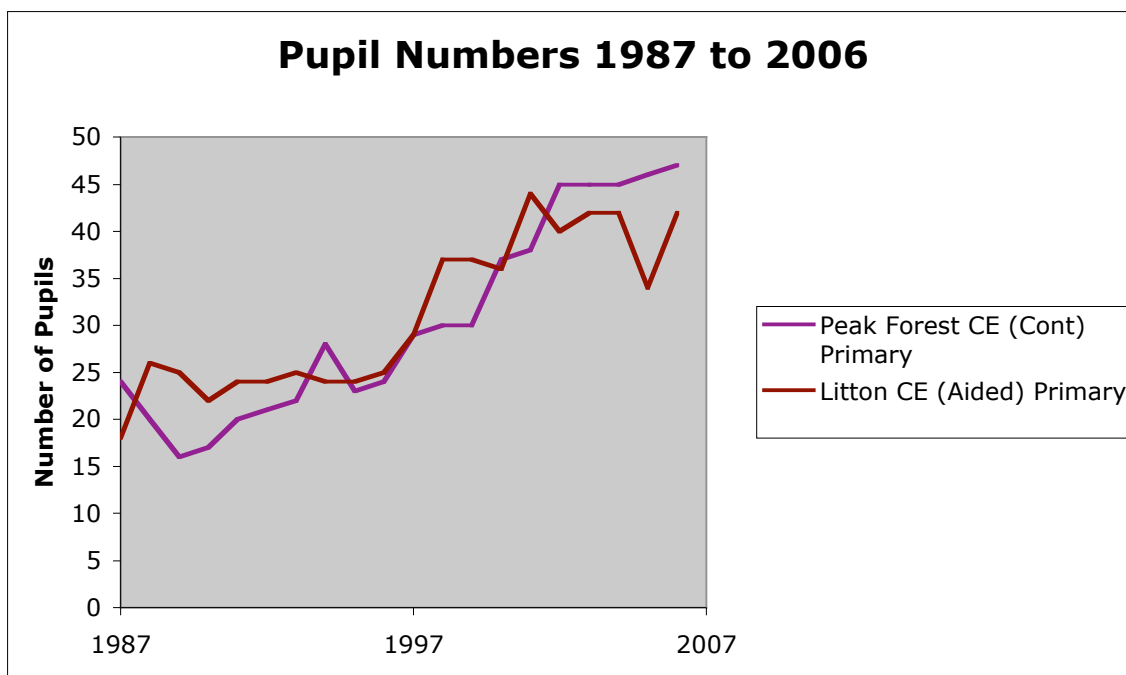
The historical record bears this out. The graph shows the numbers on the roll of Stoney Middleton School over a 20 year period. Far from showing an inexorable decline in numbers, the figures are entirely consistent with relatively large fluctuations around an average roll of about 35.



The current roll is undoubtedly a low point; however projections for the next two years show a stabilisation, or indeed a small increase.

Beyond this period, the authority’s projections show a continued decline. Given the uncertainties outlined in the first paragraph, no confidence can be attached to these figures. Currently there are 15 houses for sale in the village, and there is one housing association property vacant. In fact, it is just as likely that there will be a reversion to the mean, or indeed a sustained period of growth, if the school enters, as we intend, a fresh phase of development under new leadership.

The idea that numbers in small schools are inevitably set to decline further is refuted by the figures for other schools in the area. The graph below shows rolls for two other local small schools, Peak Forest and Litton, over the same 20 year period. The substantial increase is striking. In neither case would predictions based either on national or county-wide trends, or on local demographics, have picked up these substantial increases.



In conclusion, predictions of future rolls based on demographic information may be invaluable aids to school planning in urban areas or in aggregate over a wide rural area. But at the level of an individual small village school, in the context of the mobility of parents and prospective parents, and in an environment of parental choice, the historical record shows that the basis of these predictions is utterly unreliable.

Finances

It is clear that all small village schools have relatively high unit costs, and that this unit cost fluctuates strongly with the numbers on the roll. But the converse of this is that the total savings from closing a single school are small.

The current school's individual school budget share is £136,043 and this very carefully managed with a projected end of year surplus of £7,447. This surplus is further estimated to remain at £5,843 by the end of the 2007.2008 financial year. This is achieved despite ensuring that a strong teacher/pupil ratio is maintained which enhances the overall educational experience at the school.

An essential element of maintaining this balance is the commitment of the local community to support additional funding for the school. It is worthy of comment that the Section 52 Outturn Statement for 2005 -06 shows our school generated additional income of **£18,101**. This additional income figure compares to £8,826 at Eyam and £12,077 at Curbar, both being significantly larger local schools.

The total spending by primary schools in Derbyshire in 2005 – 06 was £176M. The Council Officers "best estimate" of the saving that the school closure could produce was about £60,000, which amounts to less than **0.04%** of the county's budget for primary schools. This is in a wider context of healthy increases in the County's overall education budget, which is set to increase by **£17m**, from **£442m** in 2006/7 to **£459m** in 2007/8.

This “best” estimate is an upper limit. The saving would be almost halved if, as is likely, there proved to be a need to provide transport to alternative schools, and would be even further eroded by the loss of community contributions to the budget.

In conclusion, the financial savings to be achieved by closing Stoney Middleton School are negligible, in the context of the county’s overall school’s budget, and are overwhelmingly outweighed by the negative social and environmental consequences that would follow closure.

The process by which the closure proposal was brought forward

School Governors and the local community have been dismayed by the way this proposal has been brought forward. In several instances, the Education Service’s own policies have not been followed, the formal consultation document was demonstrably inaccurate (as the Council has itself conceded), and, during the consultation process, the appearance has been given that the democratic process itself has been obstructed.

Governors were particularly shocked at the news of the closure proposal, because they had been led to believe that the authority’s policy was to support small village schools. In the words of the Council’s School Organisation Plan 2004/5- 2008/9, *"The Authority has recognised for some time the special needs of isolated village communities and has committed itself to supporting small primary schools, serving such communities, ...unless school governors themselves take the view that a small school is no longer viable."*

Councillor Charles has explained that this protection is not extended to Stoney Middleton School: in his words *"We would class communities as being isolated if there is no alternative provision for children aged under eight within two miles, or over eight within three miles, these being the distances which determine the provision of free school transport."* (Email of 17 October 2006 to Mrs Dulcie Jones). However, he was unable to point to any written DCC policy that applies this definition of *isolated* in the context of the School Organisation Plan, stating *"The authority has not defined ‘isolated village community’ in a document to the best of my knowledge."* (Email of 18 October 2006 to Mrs Dulcie Jones). In fact, this ad-hoc and undocumented definition would exclude from the protection offered to village schools significant numbers of rural schools across Derbyshire, many of which would undoubtedly consider themselves to be isolated. A few examples include Buxworth, Crich Carr Infant, Westhouses Primary, Wessington Primary, Apperknowle Community Primary, Litton Primary, Elton Primary and Biggin Primary.

The School Organisation Plan also states, in the section "Strategy for Removing Surplus Places", that *"If situations develop where there are a number of schools within the same area with a significant number of surplus places, a rationalisation of such places will be considered in full consultation with the Governing Bodies prior to any consideration of a public consultation exercise."* It is clear that this is the situation in this part of the Derbyshire Dales; schools with significant numbers of surplus places include, not only Stoney Middleton, but also Curbar, Eyam,

Grindleford, Pilsley, Litton and Tideswell. However, there was no such consultation with Governing Bodies.

The suggestion was made, by a DCC officer, that Stoney Middleton School might wish to consider federation with Curbar School, who, the Governing Body were led to believe, would be receptive to such an approach. The Governing Body at Stoney Middleton were entirely open to this idea, but when the issue was raised with Curbar it turned out that the information given to the Governors was incorrect, and that there had been no suggestion from the Governing Body at Curbar that they would be willing to consider federation. This has been confirmed by Councillor Charles, who wrote: *“Following my inquiries I can now confirm that Bob Ashford only raised the issue of federation with the Head at Curbar. The Head did respond that there was sufficient capacity at Curbar to absorb Stoney Middleton children should it close.”* (email of 31 October 2006 to Mrs Dulcie Jones). Thus the Governing Body showed themselves to be entirely open to the possibility of exploring a variety of options for the future of the school, but the Authority entirely failed to facilitate such discussions, which in any case were confined to the Governing Body of one school and the Head of another.

This miscommunication from DCC around the federation issue caused considerable delay in the advertising of the vacancy for a head-teacher. Thus, it was particularly galling to the Governing Body to read in the consultation document the sentences *“Despite the intensive support of the Local Authority, the governing body has been unable to recruit a permanent Head Teacher for this school,”* and *“The previous Head teacher retired in July 2006. The Governing Body has advertised the post twice but failed to shortlist and therefore has been unable to interview for a new Head Teacher.”* Far from providing *“intensive support”* (and such support that the school did receive from the authority was a routine, paid for, service), the actions of the authority substantially delayed the recruitment process. In fact, the second of these sentences is factually incorrect; due to the delays introduced by the abortive federation discussion the post was only advertised once.

In response to a formal letter from the Chair of the Governing Body pointing this error out, Councillor Charles publicly, but verbally, apologised both to the Governing Body, and, in the open meeting of 2 November, to the community of Stoney Middleton. However, the error, made in a formal cabinet paper, remains uncorrected in the public record of the meeting and in the document accompanying the consultation (although the error is noted on the website).

The cabinet paper which introduced the closure proposal at the cabinet meeting of 17 October also contains the statement *“In preparing this report the relevance of the following factors has been considered:- prevention of crime and disorder, equality of opportunity; and environmental, health and property considerations.”* In the light of the very serious environmental and social implications of closure discussed above, one might expect that this statement would be backed up by substantive facts and arguments. We have been astonished to learn that no documents supporting these claims were prepared. In response to a request for the written impact assessment statements that would document the claim that proper consideration has been given to these factors, a council officer replied *“Regarding the report to Cabinet of 17th*

October, there are no distinct documents to which we can refer” (Letter from Mr Anthony Smith to Miss Hannah Bettney, 24 November).

The closure proposal has generated huge local opposition, and people in Stoney Middleton and elsewhere were very anxious that council members were aware of the strength of local feeling. For this reason, a large number of letters were written to councillors in advance of the 1 November council meeting, which was the only opportunity for this closure proposal to be discussed by the full council. The letters were delivered, by hand, to the council offices in Matlock on the Monday morning preceding the council meeting, following telephoned assurances that this procedure would ensure that councillors would receive the letters in advance of the meeting. It only emerged on 2 November that the letters had not been opened or delivered, for “*security reasons*”. Once again, the Council has not been able to produce any written policy specifying that hand delivered letters should be treated as a security risk, and indeed other letters hand-delivered to the council around the same time were opened and delivered without delay. In fact, the county solicitor, David Tysoe, wrote “*There is currently no policy covering such an incident, but one is to be developed*” (Letter from Mr David Tysoe to Mrs Sue Bettney, 22 November). This action has been construed by many people in Stoney Middleton, and (thanks to the widespread publicity the incident attracted in local print and broadcast media) elsewhere in Derbyshire, as a deliberate attempt to suppress discussion of the closure proposal at the only full Council meeting at which such discussion would be possible.

The history of this closure proposal, then, has been one of procedures not followed, alleged policies for which no supporting documentation exists, and inaccuracy in formal documentation presented to Councillors and the public. The reaction of the council to the legitimate demands of local people to make elected representatives aware of their views has been nothing less than obstructive. This unhappy chain of events does not show Derbyshire County Council, which claims to be “*an ‘excellent’ council working to improve the lives of local people*”, in a very good light.

Options appraisal

The Consultation paper, in the section “Options Appraisal”, states that there are two clear options, closure and status quo. However, these are not the only options. The Authority itself raised the possibility of federation, so this is clearly a third option, one which the experience of many small schools across the country shows can be a very effective way to retain quality at lower cost.

The Governing Body showed themselves to be perfectly willing to consider federation as an option. The fact that the proposal to federate with Curbar did not come to fruition arose because the conditions were not created for the partnership to succeed, a situation for which the authority themselves bears some responsibility.

Nonetheless, there are a number of other schools in the area which would make very natural partners for Stoney Middleton in a federation agreement, and if the authority had followed its own procedures, as set out in the Schools Organisation Plan, for consulting widely with Governing Bodies of schools in the area before any

consideration is made of a public consultation exercise, then it is very likely that a concrete federation proposal would have emerged.

Conclusion

If the closure of Stoney Middleton CE (C) Primary School does take place, the character of the community of Stoney Middleton will be irreversibly changed. The immediate losers will be less advantaged parents, who will be burdened by the significant cost and difficulty of travel to alternative schools. Older and less mobile members of the community will suffer from the loss of community activities in the village, leading to increased isolation and a loss of social cohesion. In the longer term, the entire character of the village will change. Families with young children will be less likely to want to move into the village, and the character of the settlement, as one of the most mixed, socially diverse and yet coherent communities in this part of Derbyshire, will be irrevocably lost.

Everybody recognises the difficult choices Derbyshire County Council has to make, to ensure that services are delivered fairly across a diverse county. However, we believe that this proposal has been brought forward in a way that is hasty and ill-considered, that has failed to take into account the central role the school has in the community and the considerable difficulties and social costs that would follow from its closure. We urge the Council to reject this closure proposal, and we look forward instead to a time in which the authority seeks to work together with the school and the community to ensure that cost-effective services are delivered to local people in a way that preserves the special characteristics of village life that make Derbyshire such a distinctive and unique part of the country.

Mr Peter Hobson, Chair of Governors

Mrs Sue Bettney, acting vice-Chair of Governors

Mr John Spalton, Community Governor

Ms Lyn Holyoake, Foundation Governor

Mr John Lloyd, Community Governor

Mr John Bonsall, Parent Governor

Mrs Dulcie Jones, Parent Governor and Chair, Friends, Parents and Teachers Association

Mrs Jayne Hobson, Secretary, Friends, Parents and Teachers Association

Mrs Beth Ely, Member, Friends, Parents and Teachers Association

Mr Richard Jones, Parent member, Friends, Parents and Teachers Association

Ms Marija Nicholson, Parent member, Friends, Parents and Teachers Association, and Governor elect.

Mrs Sarah Bowring, Parent member, Friends, Parents and Teachers Association, and Governor elect.

26 November 2006