

**Northfield Primary Schools Feasibility Study**  
**March to June 2023**

**End of Feasibility Study Report**  
**10 July 2023**

**Introduction**

The Council carried out a feasibility study between March and June 2023, to identify potential options for reducing the number of primary schools in the Northfield Associated Schools Group (ASG). A summary of the brief for the feasibility study is included at Appendix A, below. To help inform the outcomes of the feasibility study, comments and feedback were invited from pupils, parents, staff, community groups and all other stakeholders, on the options available, and the potential impact of these options on individual schools and communities.

This paper provides a summary of the feedback received from stakeholders, and the key themes which have emerged from the feasibility study. The detailed findings of the feasibility study will be presented in an outline business case, which will be submitted to the Education and Children's Services Committee in September, with a recommendation on a preferred option to be taken forwards.

**Feasibility Study Summary**

The study involved a detailed review of the existing school sites within the ASG, to gather data on each school's circumstances, including building layout, condition, accessibility, overall size of the site, and how spaces are currently being used. This information was used to assess which sites could potentially be used to accommodate a merged school, either within the existing building or by constructing a new, larger building on the site.

Alongside this, school roll forecast data for each school was studied to gain an understanding of the size of building and site which would be required, if schools were to be merged together on each of the sites. This work helped to identify a number of potentially viable options for merging specific schools together on specific sites, and also helped to determine which options would not be viable, and which could therefore be discounted.

Analysis of the information gathered during the feasibility study will continue through the summer, with each of the viable options being assessed in further detail. Updated school roll forecast information is expected to become available during this time and will be fed into the process. The viable options will be presented in the outline business case, which will set out the advantages and disadvantages, and any cost implications of each option, before finally recommending a preferred option to be taken forwards.

**Feedback from Stakeholders**

The feedback submitted by stakeholders throughout the feasibility study has been invaluable, and has been used to help shape the direction of the study and in assessing how viable each option is likely to be. The key messages from stakeholders which have helped to influence the study have included:

- The need to maintain reasonable walking distances from home to school, if a school is to be closed
- The need to avoid the remaining schools becoming overcrowded, if a school is to be closed
- The importance of maintaining additional space in schools for children with additional support needs
- The value of the existing schools' sense of community, and the need to avoid breaking up communities if a school is to be closed
- The need for all pupils to continue to have access to good quality school facilities

**Emerging Priorities**

Taking into account the information gathered from the site investigations, the analysis of school roll data, and the important messages from stakeholder feedback, the following key priorities have emerged, and will be used to inform the development of the outline business case over the coming weeks:

- Maintaining sufficient space for ASN provision

It is recognised that adding more pupils into an existing building may put pressure on breakout spaces, which are needed for a range of purposes, including for use by children with additional support needs. It is likely therefore that in most cases where an existing building has been identified as having the potential to accommodate a merged school, because there is excess unused classroom space in the building, some minor works may also be required, to ensure there are sufficient facilities for breakout activities for the higher number of pupils.

- Maintaining a sense of community

The value of school communities was made very clear in the stakeholder feedback, and it is recognised that any recommended option would need to take this into consideration. Officers have therefore focused on options which would allow all pupils from a school to move to the same alternative school site, rather than being moved to several different school sites, so that the school community is not split up.

- Improving access to facilities

Across the schools in the Northfield ASG there is a wide range of building types and designs, with some buildings having been open since the 1950s, through to the most recent schools built in 2009/2010. Consequently the condition and suitability of these buildings for supporting learning and teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century also varies considerably. It has been recognised that any recommended options for closing a school will need to give consideration to how this provides pupils with access to improved facilities, and helps deliver educational benefits for pupils.

### Next Steps

Work is now under way to create an outline business case, which will use the findings from the feasibility study to consider each of the viable options in detail. A preferred option will also be identified. The outline business case will be presented to the Education and Children's Services Committee on 12<sup>th</sup> September, when elected members will consider whether to go ahead with the identified preferred option. Any recommendation to consider closing an individual school will require the Council to first carry out a full public consultation on the proposal, before a decision can be taken on whether the closure should go ahead.

## **Appendix A – Feasibility Study Brief**

Below is a summary of the Feasibility Study Brief. This outlines the objectives of the project, the options to be considered, and what information the final Feasibility Study Report needs to provide:

### **Project Objectives**

To be sure that the feasibility study can meet the requirements set out in the School Estate Plan, the options identified in the study should be aimed at achieving the following:

- A reduction in the number of primary schools operating within the Northfield ASG
- An overall revenue saving in terms of building running costs
- A positive impact on reducing carbon emissions and on the Council's net-zero ambitions
- The remaining primary schools to be maintained at between 80% and 95% occupancy for at least 6 years following implementation, as determined by the most recently available school roll forecast data
- All remaining schools to be below 2 miles' safe walking distance from all homes within the catchment area

### **Options to be included in the Feasibility Study (not exhaustive)**

To achieve the objectives outlined above, the following options will be considered in the Feasibility Study. Within each of the options below there will be several sub-options, which consider the various combinations of schools which could potentially be merged, closed or replaced:

- Option 1 – Close one school, and re-align catchment areas to provide pupils from that school with places at the remaining schools
- Option 2 - Merge two schools together, to form one new school in an existing building, and close the other building
- Option 3 - Merge two or three schools, to form one new school in a new building to be constructed, and close the existing buildings

Additional options may be identified and added to this list as the feasibility study progresses.

### **Questions to be considered by the Feasibility Study**

The feasibility study will address the following key questions, and a final report will be provided at the end of the study which sets out the answers to these questions:

- What are the benefits / dis-benefits of potentially closing each school site?
  - Consider costs / savings, benefits / dis-benefits of closing each site
  - Consider impact on carbon emissions and contribution to the Council's net-zero ambitions
  - How could the existing catchment areas be realigned to maintain reasonable safe walking distances to school?
- Which would be the optimal site to be retained and to 'host' a merger with another school?
  - Consider running costs, carbon emissions, accessibility, sustainable travel
  - Requirements for improvement / refurbishment of buildings
  - Consider forecast pupil rolls and capacity of existing sites to accommodate future pupil numbers
  - Consider benefits / dis-benefits of merging each combination of schools
- Which would be the optimal site for a demolition and rebuild to 'host' a merger of 2 or more schools?
  - Consider size of sites and requirements for a building to accommodate 2 or 3 existing schools
  - Consider impact on carbon emissions and contribution to the Council's net-zero ambitions
  - Likelihood of planning consent
  - Costs vs savings of replacement building
  - Likely timescales for demolition and construction
  - Likely temporary arrangements for accommodating pupils during demolition and construction