

# **The Parks Special Needs Nursery Consultation**

## **Independent Review for Rutland County Council**

**Commissioned review of the Parks Special Nursery Consultation running from November 1<sup>st</sup> 2023 to December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2023 undertaken by Maureen Morris OBE**

### **Background**

I am a parent carer who has been involved in Co-production work since 2007, firstly for my own Parent Carer Forum, as a Regional Representative for the National Network of Parent Carers Forums (NNPCF) and latterly as one of the Co-chairs of the NNPCF. I retired from the NNPCF in 2019. I have also undertaken work for a number of Local Authorities and Parent Carer Forums both directly commissioned or on behalf of the charity for disabled children Contact.

### **Context:**

I was approached by Rutland County Council on November 6<sup>th</sup> 2023 to ask if I would be able to provide independent oversight into the public consultation regarding the possible closure of the Parks Special Nursery provision. I was commissioned to provide an independent review of all responses as they came in, identifying where feedback to the public would be beneficial through the Questions and Answers provided on the Council website. I was also asked to collate an overview of key themes and to independently inform the Council if any viable option proposed through the consultation could be considered.

The launch of the public consultation was held on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2023 at the Wisteria Hotel, Oakham and the request for Independent Oversight was made at that launch meeting. Owing to a technical issue with the hosting website, the inbox designated for responses to be made to the Council was not available immediately and it was agreed for the Consultation to therefore be extended to run until 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023.

Following the initial meeting requesting my support it was agreed to hold weekly Teams meeting with a named officer from Rutland County Council and it was envisaged that my work would amount to around 3.5 hours per week depending on the number of responses from the public that were received. I would also provide suggestions to queries received based on my experience. With a final report when all the consultation period finished.

I was sent the briefing paper outlining the situation with the Parks and also notified of a Facebook group set up "Save The Parks special school Oakham". I have had two Zoom meetings with Rutland Parent Carer Voice and am grateful for their time and input. The members of Rutland Parent Carer Voice I spoke to did not express any views either for or against the proposal.

### **Review of responses received:**

Between November 13<sup>th</sup> and December 4<sup>th</sup>, I was sent 92 responses from 80 individuals. Some were follow-on emails, and some were sent twice. A number were copies of a template letter posted on the Save the Parks Facebook page and while I do not discount these responses, they added nothing to the consultation other than 6 people had taken the time to send them in. A small number came from people who did not live in Rutland and, upon reflection, I have included them in the responses. Where there was a response from an education practitioner either within Rutland or from outside the county,

I made the suggestion that someone from Rutland County Council should engage with the sender. These education practitioners were:

1. The Head Teacher of a school outside of Rutland who currently takes a number of children from Rutland and was concerned that the school would be asked to accommodate a larger number of children due to the closure of the Parks and this would be detrimental to the children in which is the school catchment.
2. The manager of one early education provision within Rutland who expressed concerns about children with significant needs having an impact on staff and children in their provision without substantial increase in funding and staff training
3. The governing body of Oakham C of E Primary school asking for clarity regarding the future if the Parks were to close

I have been told that these practitioners have been contacted by officers of Rutland County Council to discuss their concerns, with assurances provided, or to ensure that the relevant information was made available to them. A response was also received from an independent provider of Alternative Provision who was exploring the possibility to expand into the area.

Suggestions from the responders who wished to ensure that the Parks Special Nursery School remained open included:

- A) The Parks could be used during the holidays and evening as a holiday club to enhance provision in the area.  
I cannot see that this would be a practical solution to the situation that Rutland County Council finds itself in currently. The difficulties include staffing adequately during the evenings and holiday. Also, repurposing the classroom during the evening and holidays then returning them to be used by those attending the Parks during school hours along with funding for such a venture would be impossible.
- B) Rutland County Council should offer places to neighbouring local authorities, with responders saying other LAs “would snap their hand off” to obtain a place.  
Neighbouring LAs have already got the opportunity to commission places in the Parks and none have taken up this opportunity.
- C) A number of responders quoted the fact that the Parks is currently rated Outstanding by OFSTED and that Rutland County Council should use this as an opportunity to “showcase” the model.  
However, it is my understanding that there is no other Special Needs Nursery in England, if there was a perceived need for such a provision by other LAs then surely other LAs would have taken the opportunity to investigate the model since its last full inspection by OFSTED in 2016 when there were 8 pupils on role.

A number of responders have indicated that, in their view, Rutland County Council has in recent times have made it more difficult for parents to apply to the Parks, referring to “moving the goal posts” “discouraging parents from applying for the Parks”, and “raising the threshold for entry into the Parks which has been done with a view to making it easier to close the school.” I have seen no evidence of these allegations and can therefore make no comment.

There were also queries raised about the decision regarding the closure of the Parks not going before a full Council meeting. Rutland County Council constitution identifies this as an executive decision; as an executive decision it must be made by Cabinet and can't be made by Council.

Conclusion from the independent review of responses:

Closing any much loved and valued provision was always going to be emotive, however on reading the responses the large majority were talking about the experience of pupils who went to the Parks Special Nursery School some years ago there were only a very few who had current experience of the Parks as it is now, and I feel more weight should be given to the responses of these people. It is my understanding that families of children who may have been candidates for the Parks, as with all Rutland resident children who are identified as potentially requiring additional support, are currently being supported by officers of Rutland County Council while going through the EHCP (Education Health and Care Plan) process or whose children have been recently diagnosed, and this will continue even after a decision regarding the future of the Parks is made. This is a statutory process that all Councils must adhere to - the recent Local Area Ofsted identifies that this is a successful approach in Rutland.

I looked carefully through the responses and found nothing to indicate that the consultation was not done in a lawful way or that there were any innovative solutions given or suggested to ensure that the situation at the Parks could be changed.

**Maureen Morris OBE**

**27<sup>th</sup> December 2023**