

## Heritage Assessment

### **The Elms Primary School, Cranmer Street, Nottingham**



(The Elms Primary School in 2008)

April 2017

## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This document constitutes a heritage assessment of a proposal for demolition or partial demolition of the former Elms Primary School, Cranmer Street, Nottingham which is currently vacant, unsecured and attracting anti-social behaviour. The building dates from the late 1940s and is situated within the Elm Avenue and Corporation Oaks Conservation Area.
- 1.2 The heritage assessment describes the nature and character of the premises and establishes the heritage significance of the building together with the contribution that it makes to the special character of the Elm Avenue and Corporation Oaks Conservation Area.
- 1.3 The document goes on to set out the relevant national and local heritage policies, statutory duties and guidance material against which the proposals should be judged. Against this background the assessment draws conclusions on the impact that partial or total demolition of the building would have on the historic environment.
- 1.4 The document responds to the requirements of paragraphs 128 and 129 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which require that applicants for planning permission should describe the significance of any heritage assets affected by development proposals, including any contribution made by their setting, and that local planning authorities should take account of available evidence and any necessary expertise when considering the impact of a proposal on heritage assets.
- 1.5 The document has been researched and prepared by Thomas Street BA (Hons), MSc, IHBC of Nottingham City Council.

## 2.0 Historical context and significance

### Origins and evolution

- 2.1 Corporation Oaks and Elm Avenue were set out in 1845 following the second Enclosure Act which allowed Nottingham to further expand across the common lands to the north of the severely overcrowded town centre. Prior to this the area was used for agriculture and no records exist for any known archaeological remains or cave sites within the vicinity of The Elms Primary School. The 'Clay Field' as it was known was developed to form what is now known as the St Ann's area of the City. In order to fulfil its obligation to provide allocated open space for recreation, the Nottingham Corporation planned and created Elm Avenue, Corporation Oaks and Robin Hood Chase as a grand tree lined walk stretching from St Ann's Well Road to Mansfield Road and the Arboretum beyond. A covered reservoir circumvented by a circular pathway was sited at the top of Toad Hill as part of the overall concept.

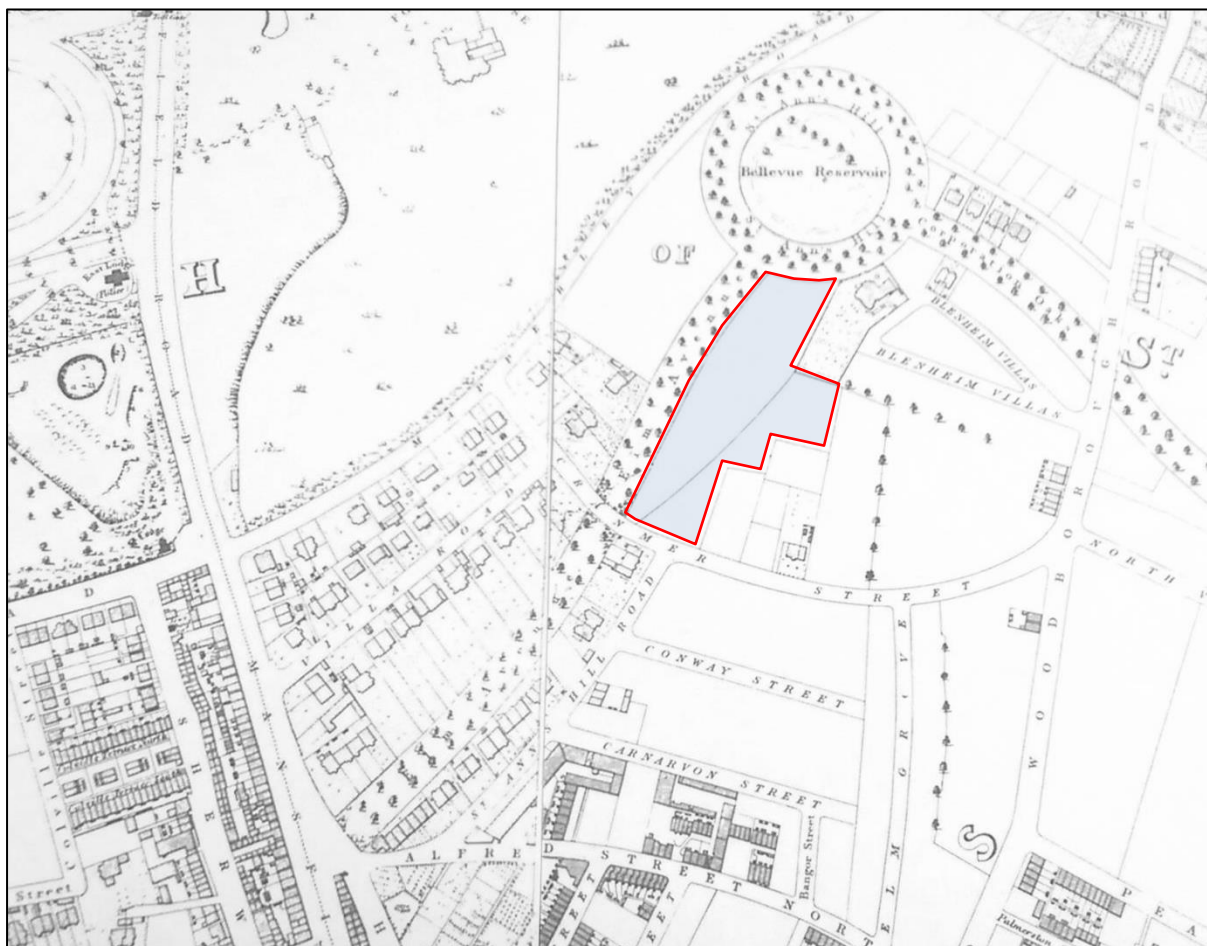


**Figure 1:** Staveland and Wood's map of 1831 shows the Clay Field to the east of Mansfield Road prior to the second Enclosure Act of 1845. The high ground of Toad Hill can be clearly seen at the top right of the image.

- 2.2 Bellevue Reservoir, as it became known, was part of Thomas Hawksley's pioneering high pressure water system consisting of three pumping stations and five reservoirs. Bellevue was so named because of the spectacular panoramic views afforded by the high ground of Toad Hill.



- 2.3 Lining the new promenades a neighbourhood of speculatively built dwellings were erected to cater for the range of middle class residents eager to escape the overcrowded conditions of the town centre. Most of these imposing detached, semi-detached and terraced properties were built between 1845 and 1877. The largest villas were built facing to the south along the lower stretch of Elm Avenue. These exclusive dwellings were set within deep plots overlooking substantial and formally laid out gardens. The garden wall to the Elm Avenue promenade was similarly substantial allowing only glimpsed views of the properties themselves. It is likely that these large properties housed a number of the rich industrialists who owned the nearby factories.
- 2.4 Elsewhere in the area plots were of a more modest size. Facing north along Elm Avenue a range of smaller houses was built including semi-detached and terraced properties. Along Corporation Oaks, six pairs of semi-detached houses were built along with four detached houses. The enclosure bounded by Villa Road and Mapperley Road was subdivided into similar sized plots and ten detached and five pairs of semi-detached houses were built.



**Figure 2:** Salmon's map of 1862. By this time the majority of the new Villas along Elm Avenue, Corporation Oaks, Villa Road and Mapperley Road had been built. The future site of the Elms Primary School (edged in red) remained undeveloped until the school's construction in the late 1940s. Blenheim House is the large property to the south of the circular reservoir.

- 2.5 The most substantial dwelling in the area was Blenheim House, which included a range of outbuildings and a coach-house. Blenheim House had the best views in the area, located directly below the reservoir, looking out over Nottingham. This property was demolished in the 1950s and replaced with a hall of residence for Trent Polytechnic College. To the south west of Blenheim House, the plot of land on the east side of Elm Avenue remained undeveloped until the late 1940s when The Elms Primary School was built in response to rising demand for school places. The school closed its doors in August 2008 and has remained vacant until the present day.

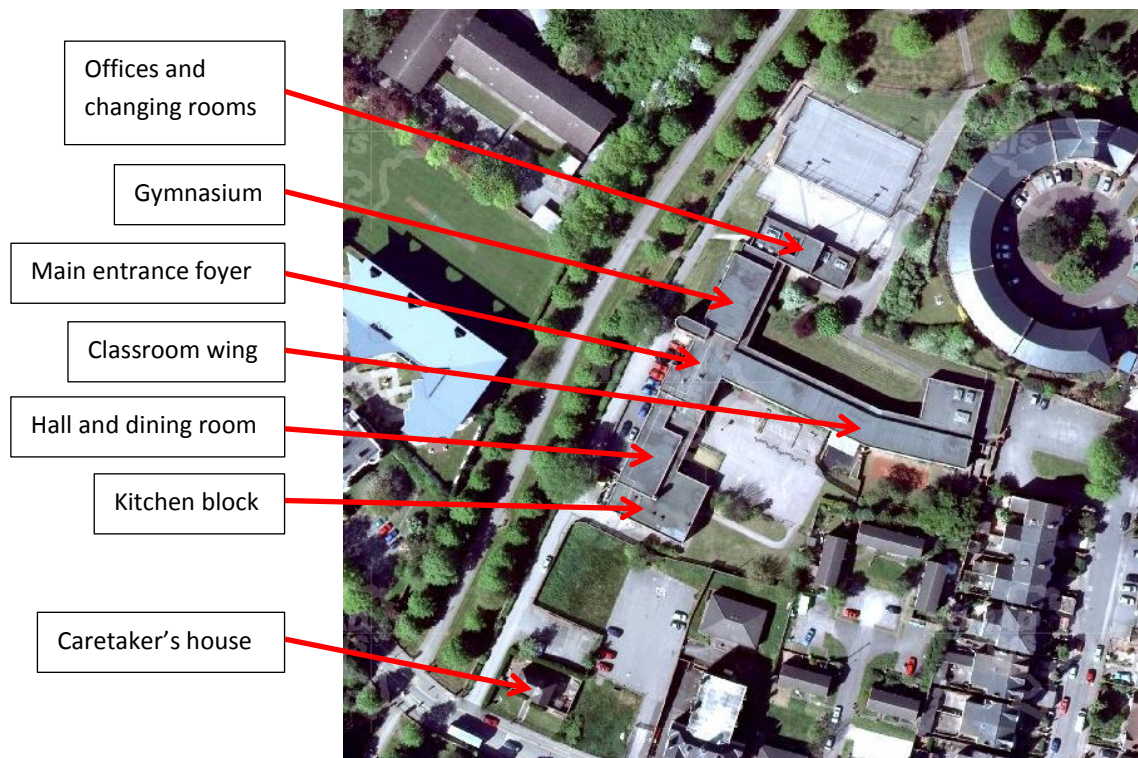
### **The Elms Primary School – general description**

- 2.6 As one would expect for a school built in the frugal post war years, The Elms Primary School was efficiently built from economical materials: brick walls with concrete floors and roofs and mass produced metal casement windows. The Ordnance Survey map from the late 1940s shows new school's roughly T shaped plan making good use of the available space. This layout has remained essentially unchanged until the present day. Facing Elm Avenue, the massing and Art Deco inspired architecture of the building's primary frontage steps down the falling ground. The most striking vertical feature of the otherwise horizontally arranged design is a curved fronted stair tower. This has full height, glass block, mullioned windows and stands centrally alongside a recessed main entrance foyer. The projecting wings to either side and to the rear are plainly but attractively detailed with light coloured concrete lintel and sill bands contrasting with the brown brick walls. The large windows are steel framed casements, mostly three lights wide and grouped in orderly horizontal lines across the elevations. These were most likely manufactured by Crittall Windows Ltd, and typical for this era of construction.



**Figure 3:** Ordnance survey map from the late 1940s.

- 2.7 The Elm Avenue façade extends for approximately 90 metres down the sloping site and is made up of a series of flat roofed blocks, each with different roof heights to compensate for the topography. At the northern end of the north wing is a mainly single storey block housing offices, changing rooms and other ancillary facilities. To the south of this is the school gymnasium, a double height space with full height windows facing Elm Avenue. Alongside this, the two storey entrance block with its distinctive curved stair tower is the central hub of the building. It is from this central block that a two storey classroom wing extends eastwards to the rear for approximately 70 metres. To the south of the entrance block, and balancing the gym to the north, is a double height hall and adjoining dining room. The south wing terminates in a single storey kitchen block.



**Figure 4:** Aerial photograph showing the various elements of the building

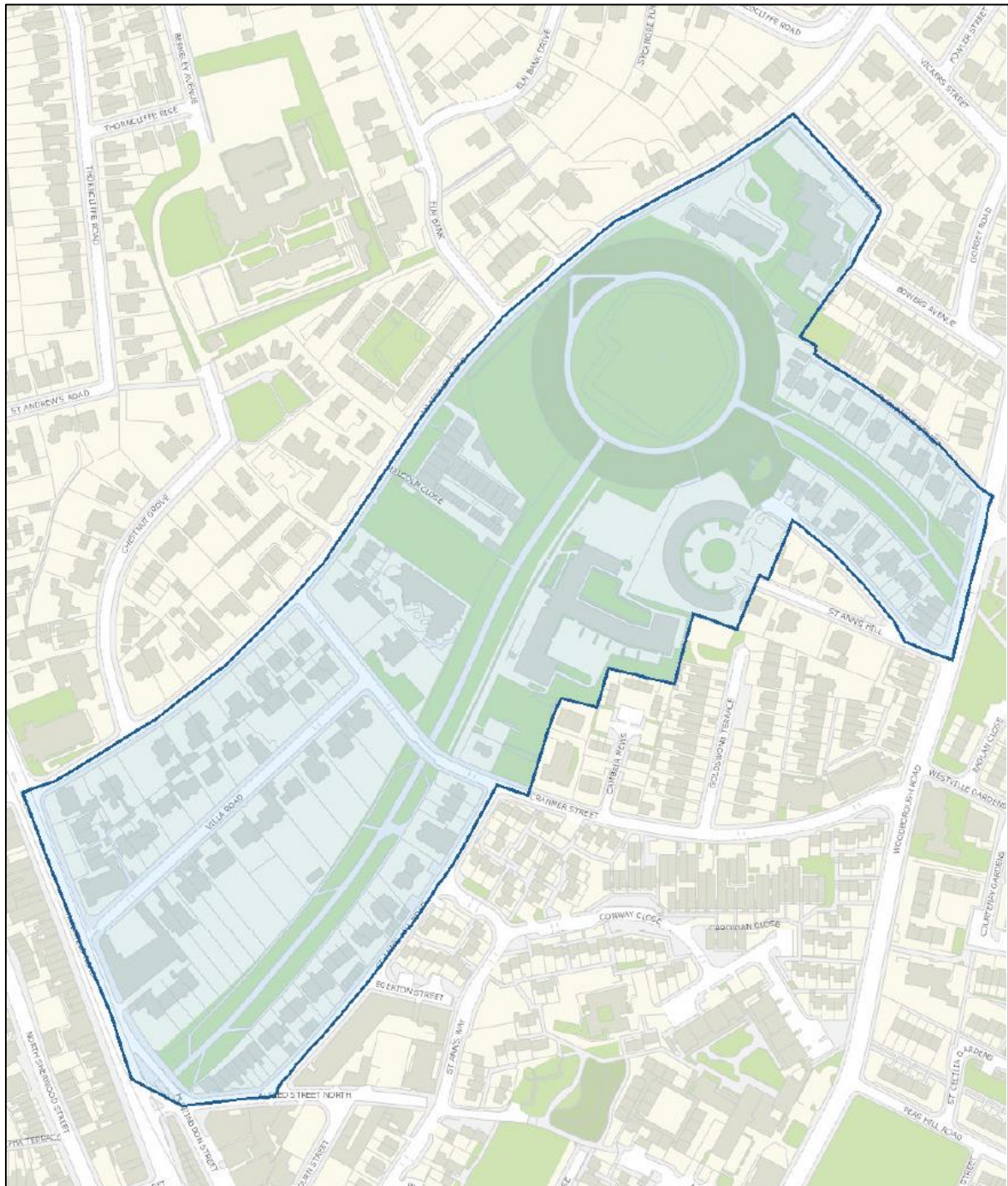
- 2.8 Internally the building is unremarkable and utilitarian in character with low ceilings in most of the rooms, partition walls of modular construction and painted brick structural walls. The floors in most rooms are carpeted, but the gym and hall have parquet wood floors. The walls and floors in the toilet and kitchen areas are finished with square white tiles.

#### **The surrounding area and the building's contribution to the character of the Elm Avenue and Corporation Oaks Conservation Area**

- 2.9 The Elms Primary School is situated within the Elm Avenue and Corporation Oaks Conservation Area which was formally designated in 1996. Once an exclusive residential area for rich industrialists, it has retained its tranquil character and the majority of its original Victorian villas.



- 2.10 Residential properties in the area are a mixture of imposing terraced, semi-detached and detached houses set within spacious grounds. Architectural expression varies, with classical designs faced in stucco render sitting alongside Victorian gothic properties in Nottingham brick with ashlar dressings. A number of early Bulwell stone boundary walls survive, many with their original gate piers and iron railings.



**Figure 5:** The boundary of the Elm Avenue and Corporation Oaks Conservation Area

- 2.11 The most distinctive features in the Conservation Area are the tree lined avenues, broad pedestrian spaces which rise gently uphill towards the circular pathway around Belleview Reservoir, the Conservation Area's highest point.





**Figure 6:** The view northwards along Elm Avenue looking towards Bellevue Reservoir. The Elms Primary School is on the right of the image, screened by the avenue of mature trees.

2.12 The Elms Primary School stands in a prominent location at the north end of Elm Avenue where it is clearly visible in views from Bellevue Reservoir and the tree lined pathways. The modest height of the building's façade, its simple yet elegant Art Deco inspired design and its effective response to the sloping land of the site make it a sympathetic neighbour to the Victorian villas and open green spaces of the Conservation Area. A wide gap in the tree line on Elm Avenue allows the central entrance block and north wing of the building to feature most prominently in views from the public domain. It is these parts of the building that contain the most distinctive architectural elements. The south wing, although it mirrors and balances the north wing, is of lesser prominence, being more heavily screened by the line of trees on Elm Avenue. The east wing to the rear of the building has very little presence in key views, even from the higher ground around the reservoir.



**Figure 7:** The School as seen from Elm Avenue where a gap in the tree line enhances the prominence of the central block and north wing.



## Significance

- 2.13 The Elms Primary School dates from the late 1940s and is a good example of an Art Deco style school of the period. The design's effective use of cheap materials is indicative of the frugal times in which it was built, but demonstrates a refusal to compromise on good design principles. The architect of the building is unknown, but it is assumed that it was designed 'in house' by the local education authority. It is a competent architectural composition on a difficult sloping site and is of good aesthetic value, despite its current dilapidated condition. Whilst the building could not be considered an architectural rarity it is felt to be of local architectural interest and contributes to the character of Elm Avenue as a place.



**Figure 8:** The central block and north wing of the School. Note the steeply sloping ground.

- 2.14 The building's presence in the Conservation Area is noticeable from the public domain and the central block and north wing in particular are considered to make a positive contribution to the character of the area. The south wing provides balance to the Elm Avenue frontage, but it is not as visually prominent from the public domain and its contribution to the character of the Conservation Area is felt to be of lesser importance. The east wing of the building is the least prominent part of the school and therefore makes only a minor contribution to the special character of the Conservation Area. Internally the building is of low significance.
- 2.15 As the largest and most significant building dating from Conservation Area's 20<sup>th</sup> century phase of development, the school demonstrates a strong commitment to the educational needs of a growing population. The building's association with the population boom and austerity which followed the Second World War afford it a moderate degree of historic interest. The original extent and external character

features of the building, though damaged, have been little altered since the initial phase of construction. The School's fabric therefore possesses a high degree of authenticity and integrity, contributing to its significance.

- 2.16 The School will undoubtedly figure prominently in the collective and living memory of its former teachers, pupils, parents and neighbours. Having operated as a school for around 60 years the building has been experienced by a large number of people which affords the structure a higher communal value than the majority of structures in the Conservation Area.



## 3.0 Decision making context

### Statutory duties

- 3.1 Section 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 states that, in the exercise of planning functions, *“with respect to any buildings or other land in a conservation area ... special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area”*.
- 3.2 The courts have held that *“preserving means doing no harm”* and have established that, where a proposal would cause some harm, the desirability of preserving the character and appearance of conservation areas, should not simply be given careful consideration, but should be given *“considerable importance and weight”* when the decision maker carries out the planning balance.

### National Heritage policy

- 3.3 National heritage policy is set out in section 12 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), published in March 2012. The policies in section 12 are predicated on the understanding of the significance of heritage assets. Significance is defined as *“the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset’s physical presence, but also from its setting”* (Annex 2: Glossary).
- 3.4 Paragraph 128 of the NPPF requires planning applicants to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected by their proposals. This document seeks to satisfy that requirement. Paragraph 132 of the NPPF states *“when considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation”*. In this case the designated heritage asset is the Elm Avenue and Corporation Oaks Conservation Area. The policies in NPPF paragraphs 132-134 set out criteria by which proposals that cause harm to significance should be judged.
- 3.5 The policies in the NPPF are not restricted to the protection of heritage assets from harm. Paragraph 126 states that local planning authorities should take into account:
- *“the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;*
  - *the wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits that conservation of the historic environment can bring; and*
  - *the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness”*
- 3.6 Furthermore, paragraph 137 states that local planning authorities should look for opportunities for new development within conservation areas or the setting of heritage assets *“to enhance or better reveal their significance”* and states that

*“proposals that preserve those elements of the setting that make a positive contribution to or better reveal the significance of the asset should be treated favourably”.*

### **Local heritage policy**

3.7 Local heritage policy is contained within the Greater Nottingham Aligned Core Strategy (part 1 Local Plan) adopted on the 8 September 2014 together with residual saved Local Plan policies which were adopted in November 2005.

3.8 Policy 11: Historic Environment states:

1. Proposals and initiatives will be supported where the historic environment and heritage assets and their settings are conserved and/or enhanced in line with their interest and significance. Planning decisions will have regard to the contribution heritage assets can have to the delivery of wider social, cultural, economic and environmental objectives.

2. Elements of the historic environment which contribute towards the unique identity of areas and help create a sense of place will be conserved and, where possible, enhanced, with further detail set out in part 2 Local Plans. Elements of particular importance are listed.

3. A variety of approaches will be used to assist in the protection and enjoyment of the historic environment. Specific approaches are listed.

4. Particular attention will be given to heritage assets at risk of harm or loss of significance, or where a number of heritage assets have significance as a group or give context to a wider area.

3.9 Saved Local Plan Policy BE12: Development in Conservation Areas states: Planning applications for new development in Conservation Areas, applications for advertisement consent and applications for proposals in the vicinity of a Conservation Area which affect its character or appearance, will be granted where:

(a) the proposal preserves or enhances the character or appearance of the Conservation Area, including the siting, scale, urban grain, building form, massing, height, materials and quality of detail, and the relationship of the proposals to the historic street pattern, topography, urban spaces and gardens, views and landmarks; and

(b) the development demonstrates high standards of design appropriate to the historic environment.

3.10 It should be noted that the above policies are stated in absolute terms and do not contain any provision for balancing harm against wider public benefits. They are therefore likely to be considered as out-of-date with regard to the NPPF.



## 4.0 The proposals and their impact

- 4.1 Due to its dilapidated and vacant condition the Elms School is currently acting as a magnet for anti-social behaviour and vandalism. Multiple break-ins have been reported and boarding installed to prevent unauthorised entry has been repeatedly removed. The interior of the building is understood to be contaminated with asbestos. In advance of the site's potential redevelopment the option of demolishing the building has been proposed.
- 4.2 Given the positive contribution that the building's exterior makes to the character of the conservation area (which is the designated heritage asset in this case) the complete demolition of the building would result in a harmful impact on the historic environment. Complete demolition would also result in the total loss of the building's significance and the historic and architectural interest that it possesses, as identified in section 2 of this document. In accordance with paragraph 134 of the NPPF this harm would need to be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal.
- 4.3 The main public benefit of demolition is the removal of the nuisance factor and expense that the derelict building currently causes to neighbouring residents and the authorities. However, this alone is not felt to outweigh the harmful impact of the School's complete demolition.
- 4.4 A preferable option which mitigates much of the harm on the surrounding Conservation Area is a proposal for partial demolition which retains the portion of the building facing Elm Avenue. Given the lesser visual prominence and importance of the east wing, the demolition of this part of the building could be more easily justified. Partial demolition would result in a more manageable impact on the heritage significance of the building and a smaller envelope to secure against unauthorised entry. By integrating the remaining part of the building into a scheme for the site's redevelopment, the building's positive contribution to the character of the Conservation Area would be preserved.
- 4.5 Although more visually prominent than the east wing, the south wing of the building is of secondary importance in views from the public domain and the demolition of this element could also be considered as an option of last resort. The impact on the integrity of the building and its architectural interest would be significant, but less severe than the loss of the central entrance block and the north wing. Pursuing this option would result in an even smaller remnant of the school to protect against unauthorised entry.

## 5.0 Conclusions

- 5.1 This heritage assessment has established the origins, development, setting and heritage significance of The Elms Primary School and its contribution to the Elm Avenue and Corporation Oaks Conservation Area. The late 1940s building is of local architectural interest and good aesthetic value. It is also of moderate historic interest, high communal value and possesses a high degree of authenticity having been little altered since its original phase of construction.
- 5.2 The building's complete demolition would result in a harmful impact on the special character of the Conservation Area and the total loss of the building's heritage significance, something that would not be justified by the public benefits. A scheme for partial demolition which preserves the Elm Avenue frontage would mitigate the harm to the Conservation Area to a significant degree and retain the most important architectural elements of the structure. A proposal of this nature would be in conformity with Section 12 of the NPPF, Policy 11 of the Greater Nottingham Aligned Core Strategy and saved Local Plan policy BE12.