

Hexham First School Governing Body - Response to NCC consultation

Educational outcomes in West Northumberland are, overall, excellent. The results produced by Queen Elizabeth High School (2nd in the North East according to the Sunday Times Schools Guide for 2018) and, despite all the challenges it has faced, Haydon Bridge High School (8th out of 14 in Northumberland for progress and 5th for A-levels), provide clear evidence that the system is working well. This educational journey has its foundation in our first and middle schools. Our priority is to maintain (and, ideally, exceed) the excellence of this entire educational journey and to extend that experience elsewhere.

We welcome the opportunity to have a collective discussion about the future of education in West Northumberland and we recognise that there are some challenges that need to be addressed. However, we do not accept that the current consultation approach as set out and managed by Northumberland County Council is providing a fair, robust and appropriate opportunity for school leaders, parents and the wider community to create a unique and innovative vision for the future of education in our area.

We have expressed these concerns at every stage of the process so far, both in meetings and in dialogue with the Council. To date, we have seen little evidence that our views, based on our years of experience and actually working on the ground in the communities affected, are being taken into account. The more we talk to parents and our communities, the greater our concerns grow.

This is why we are now calling on the Council to:

1. Review and extend the timescale of the consultation. More time and engagement is required in order to consider properly the far-reaching implications of the proposed options, and any alternative options.
2. The Council has requested feedback on which models are a 'good option for securing sustainable and viable education in the west of Northumberland'. We believe that school leaders, parents and the community require the following information to enable a properly informed and therefore meaningful response:
 - a. The Council's vision for education in the West Northumberland area, beyond the financial and surplus places numbers. What are the key design principles of the proposed options?
 - b. A clear and logical analysis, supported by robust evidence, of the expected improvements in educational outcomes each model will deliver.
 - c. Detailed financial modelling for each option proposed in the consultation, based on hard National Funding Formula, to demonstrate the financial impact and enable respondents to judge the viability.
 - d. Impact analysis on surplus places and capacity allowed within the system for each model: (i) as matters stand; and (ii) based on future housing projections.
 - e. The data that demonstrates the impact of loss of income from out of catchment children under each model. Specifically, the loss of income from children who travel not just out of catchment but into Northumberland from other local authorities.
 - f. Rural impact studies to show the likely effect on each local community should each of the rural schools named in the consultation be closed.
 - g. The evidence used to support the Council's intent to seek to rebut the presumption against closure of rural schools set out in DfE Guidance.
 - h. Details of all information the Council has received from Hadrian Learning Trust in order to ensure any multi-million pound investment of tax-payers money in an academy outside local authority control represents the best investment
 - i. Details of any precedents the Council can show where a local authority has made an investment of this size in an academy
 - j. An update on progress made to claim back the £1m paid to Bright Tribe at Haydon Bridge High School, as per comments made earlier in the year by Councillor Daley.

It is simply impossible to answer the Council's own questions in any meaningful way without a better understanding of why any of the models represents an appropriate solution to the issues set out in the consultation document. Without the information listed above, we have no confidence that the consultation provides a fair and genuine opportunity for the public to respond to the consultation in an informed and meaningful way.

We are keen to see the future of education set up for success. Where there are genuine challenges to be overcome we are committed to working in an open and collaborative way to develop the most appropriate solutions. We also recognise that there is a pressing need to provide direction for what happens at Haydon Bridge High School. However, the right solution, not a quick solution, needs to be found. To make the scale of changes proposed, on a 'once in a generation basis', with such significant financial investment, requires more time and more depth of information.

We are fortunate in that Hexham First School remains in all three models suggested. However we are concerned for the communities whose schools are facing closure and we would urge the Council to look carefully at keeping as many schools open as is possible.

Should the three tier system of education remain in place we are confident that we can continue our journey towards becoming an 'outstanding' first school. However, if HLT change their age range we are confident that we could become an outstanding primary school. Hexham First School would need considerable financial investment in order to ensure all of our children are provided with the best possible educational experience.

We reiterate both our willingness and desire to work with all stakeholders.

Best wishes,

The Governing Body
Hexham First School