Formal Response to the consultation regarding Education in the West of Northumberland

Following the informal consultation and the responses from Northumberland County Council regarding proposals for the education in the West of Northumberland, Haltwhistle Middle School would like to reflect on these proposals and offer the following thoughts, alternative views and proposal:

- **We welcome the opportunity for a second Secondary/High school in the West of Northumberland, as this creates inclusion, choice and genuine pathways for the young people in the local area.**
    - We question whether the Local Authority should fund a new build for QEHS, an Academy Trust, when other Local Authority schools are in need of Capital Investment.
    - If the Local Authority were to build a new school for QEHS then Haydon Bridge should also receive a new build too.
    - If the Local Authority were to fund a new build for QEHS then the PAN should be reduced to no more than 1200 (possibly 1000), therefore ensuring both schools are sustainable, financially viable through a fair distribution of children in the local area.
- **We feel that there is a missed opportunity for the West of Northumberland to have a parallel structure where both Haydon Bridge and Hexham Partnerships mirror each other?**
    - Either both Two-tier or both three-tier?
    - The retention of a pure three-tier system in the Hexham Partnership has allowed these schools to grow together. The creation of a two-tier versus three-tier system in the past within the Haydon Bridge Partnership has pitched schools directly against each other and resulted in too few children being spread across too many schools.
    - Have we missed opportunities to have the 'Good to Outstanding' system in the Hexham Partnership supporting and modelling within the Haydon Bridge Partnership? Hence the term 'Partnership'.
    - The hybrid system may cause confusion, dilemma and underhand tactics to enable parents/carers to beat the admissions system or drive children in the Haydon Bridge Partnership to move within the Hexham Partnership or to William Howard, Cumbria.
    - Education transition should be seamless, where curriculums, progress and pastoral systems knit together to support children and families. A hybrid system may only bring confusion.
- **Do the proposals go far enough to address and tackle the challenges introduced and shared at the beginning of the Informal Stage?**
    - **See Appendix A: The six external factors that drove the initial consultation**
    - Is this proposed model (two-tier in the Haydon Bridge Partnership) mapped out and sustainable for the next twenty-five years?
    - Is Northumberland County Council confident that it has addressed all the issues outlined in the six external factors and that their strategic plan will guarantee no further school closures in the near future?
    - How have these proposals addressed the issue of surplus places?
    - How have these proposals addressed the Financial Challenge?
    - Under the National Funding Formula the size of schools (primaries) still remain far too small to be sustainable. Have school leaders been swayed and driven by emotive thoughts rather than sound sustainable, educational and financial planning?
    - A three year plan has been put in place for Haydon Bridge, at a cost of £1.5m. We welcome and appreciate this investment.

- However, can we be clear how much money is being placed to support First and Primary schools that are heavily undersubscribed and over what period of time do these schools have to become sustainable?

- For example, there are suggestions that Primary school X with only 35 children has a deficit of £200,000. This equates to:
    - Haydon Bridge: £1.5m divided by 370 children = £4050 per child
    - Primary School X: £200,000 divided by 35 children = £5,700 per child

- Are there missed opportunities for a strategic plan to be put in place from this consultation to ensure that schools are not set up to fail and wither on the vine?

- Can Northumberland County Council justify this investment into establishments that may not be financial viable in the future and who may close within the next few years?

- Transport costs will be increased not decreased due to Year 7 and 8 travelling from Bellingham and Haltwhistle Middle school. Has this been calculated?

- **Support for children with Special Educational Needs and Additional Needs with behaviour**
    - Are there missed opportunities to create specialist provision enabling local solutions for children with Special and Additional Needs? Within the proposals it does not explicatively state what the additional provisions are to ensure inclusivity within local communities.

    - We have not seen a strategic plan for the transportation or support for children with Special and Additional Needs within the west of Northumberland. Is there one that could be shared?

- **Lack of Clarity in Communication**
    - Following the Informal consultation press releases made by Northumberland County Council were publically published that only one school (Bellingham Middle School) was proposed to close.

    - Although there is acknowledgement and appreciation that Northumberland County Council can only make decisions and comment upon Local Authority schools, and within the Outcomes of the Consultation on Education in the West of Northumberland, page 8 when outlining Haltwhistle First Academy and Haltwhistle Middle Academy it states, 'it appears to the local authority that any new sponsor would have to consider changing to a primary model', we feel the public comments have been very misleading in that only Bellingham Middle school is the only school proposed to close.

    - This has significantly confused the community within Haltwhistle and surrounding areas and in fact, the majority of the community are totally unaware that their Middle School is under threat of closing during future discussions with any incoming Trust. This may have an impact on the responses made from the community and may be interrupted that there is a lack of appetite for the Middle School to remain open.

    - Although Haltwhistle Middle School is not a Local Authority School, it is still part of Northumberland County Council's Consultation. As in the same context that Northumberland County Council have stated that they feel the need and responsibility to financially support the Hadrian Learning Trust in their new build, as the children who attend are Northumberland children, the children attending Haltwhistle Middle school are also Northumberland children, so there is/was a need for greater clarity and understanding of the situation to be shared.

- **Haltwhistle Middle School's Alternative Proposal**
    - We would urge all councillors to review their thoughts and to share their strategic plan on how they will address the issues below for the next twenty-five years:
        - Why the successful three-tier system works and remains in the Hexham partnership, but not within the Haydon Bridge Partnership? Is this purely down to pupil numbers?
        - Surplus Places: How are surplus places to be reduced in the primary schools?
        - Financial Challenges: Under the National Funding Formula is it not true that many small primary schools will not be financially sustainable and we will therefore be faced with unplanned school closures over the next few years? Without a strategic plan, will this cause great anxiety and a lack of co-ordinated school catchment and feeder schools?
        - Sustainability for the future: Has this been reviewed and planned?
        - How are we meeting the needs of all children, including those with Special Educational and Additional Needs with a local offer for all?

    - To address the concerns surrounding surplus places and present and future funding (which are directly linked to surplus places) we believe there has to be a discussion and decision made regarding the two-tier and three-tier system.

    - A mixture of two tier and three tier, as is currently the case in West Northumberland, creates a lack of clarity for parents and children. It equally creates competition for children between schools, which is not helpful. This hybrid system has contributed to the falling numbers in the Haydon Bridge Partnership due to too few children being spread across too many schools.

    - From the information shared, we believe there are a total of thirty-seven schools in the West of Northumberland. We believe this could be reduced to thirteen schools saving 1000 surplus places, addressing the financial challenge and providing parents with choice and a best-fit for community and local schooling offer.

    - We believe the focus should be very much on the development and shape of education in the whole West of Northumberland and not purely about Secondary education: Haydon Bridge and QEHS

    - When considering the whole picture we believe the following structure would address many of the concerns:

        - Retain (and reintroduce) a Three Tier System (consistently across the <u>whole</u> of the West of Northumberland.

        - This would include:
            - Six to Ten First Schools
            - Four Middle Schools
            - One 3-13 Provision incorporate First / Middle in Bellingham
            - Two High Schools

    - This would reduce the surplus places by just under one thousand places.

    - In a recent informal consultation, it is quite clear that there is not an appetite from parents, carers and professionals for a change in the three-tier system and a move to a larger two-tier model.

    - It would be vital that the Three-tier System was incorporated across the whole of the West of Northumberland, with very clear school sizes, and feeder schools identified, to ensure closer partnership and educational continuity.

    - Special Educational Needs should be incorporated in all three tiers and not centrally located. There should be a local offer and an inclusive approach to all wellbeing and disability issues. The majority of children should attend a mainstream school within their local area.

    - Transport and infrastructure must be reflected upon when making decisions on whether to retain an element of local offer - is there a transport and road network sufficient enough to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all children?

- **Restructure First and Primary to create six to ten First Schools**

    - There would be a need to review all first and primary Schools and reduce the number to six to ten first schools, ranging from 250 to 370 on roll (National average for Primary Schools is 273). Some work would be needed to make sure the combining of schools ensures the best locations, facilities and resources.

    - These first schools would now be large enough to be cost effective, without large numbers of surplus places, and with staff being redeployed where needed.

    - Transport and facilities would need to be reviewed and considered.

    - Some work would need to be done to upgrade buildings and it would be right and proper to offer some funding from the central pot which has been identified as in the region of £40m.

    - Although some younger children may have to travel a little further than at present to their first school, on the whole the vast majority of children will be placed in a school near to their home communities, and will only have longer travel as they grow older.

    - Children currently in smaller schools will now have a school where they can be in a class of similar age children, and not having to share classes with older and younger children due to financial constraints, as is the case at present.

- **Maintain Four Middle Schools**
    - Retain the Middle schools in:
        - Corbridge
        - Hexham RC
        - Hexham
        - Haltwhistle
    - Having a middle school structure means there is a stepped approach and children stay closer to their local communities than travelling to a big secondary. Although this goes against the national trend, the West of Northumberland needs a bespoke offer due to the size of the area we are serving and the travel that children will have to make out of their local communities. It is not correct to say that the three tier system is educationally less sound – we know this not to be the case.
    - By ensuring there is a structured and consistent three-tier structure in place, then all four middle schools would have enough children to be full, and therefore be financially viable.

    - Great opportunities for all Middle Schools to work together in partnership, sharing good practice and developing together.

    - In the Consultation Response Document there was a suggestion that there was not a real appetite for the three-tier system in the Haydon Bridge Partnership. This was mainly down to the fact that people were self-motivated and wanted to keep the status quo. In the Hexham Partnership most people represented the present system which kept schools and systems in place. First schools in the Haydon Bridge Partnership felt the only opportunity to remain open was by becoming a Primary school. This was not necessarily part of a long term strategic plan that is sustainable, but more to ensure individual schools remained open.

    - Some work would need to be done to upgrade buildings and it would be right and proper to offer some funding from the central pot identified as in the region of £40m.

- **Bespoke Offer in Bellingham**
    - To address the specific need in the Bellingham area, there needs to be a bespoke model, due to the remoteness.

    - We propose that they are still in line with the 3 tier system, and we propose there is an all phase school in Bellingham that caters for three-to thirteen year-olds on one site. This would address the surplus places and ensure there are clear pathways for the local children to attend a 'local' provision and then go into the 14-19 curriculum as other children do in the area.

- **Maintain the offer of Two High Schools**
    - At secondary level, the limited success of new government 14-19 initiatives, such as UTCs and Studio Schools is largely due to the fact that they compete for Year 9s (13 year olds) in a two tier system, where children are already settled into secondary schools from year 7 (age 11). However, these new 14-19 schools fit perfectly with a three tier system. It is vital that all schools have an identical entry age to avoid a disjointed system.

    - We propose that QEHS has a new build, but remains a 14-19 provision, as this supports the three tier system, identified as suiting the West of Northumberland best. Its size would be at a maximum of 1200 but could be 1000.

    - We propose that a second 14-19 High School offer (750 / 800 students) should be within the area west of Hexham, (also in a new build), either on the present Haydon Bridge Site or somewhere else within the west of Northumberland, to compliment the curriculum offer at QEHS and to ensure that there is a genuine parental choice. This would give the west of Northumberland a high school offer of 1800 places, with clear choice and pathways.

    - We propose that a second high school is vital to provide a broad educational offer in the west, at the same time as supporting those children who in our experience, are more likely to develop well and exceed expected progress in a smaller, more personalised environment. The second school will also provide some choice for students and parents.

    - It would be right and proper to offer this provision a new build too, funded from the funding of £40m identified.

    - The alternative secondary school in for children in the west of Northumberland, which is over the border in Brampton, Cumbria, has just announced that it is reducing each year group by thirty children, which will result in one hundred and fifty fewer spaces. Therefore fewer Northumberland children will be accepted in the future. This will create a lack of choice for the children in the extreme west of the County, if there is no offer west of Hexham.

    - The wellbeing of all children should be a key principle. The need to address attendance issues at Key Stage 4 and to look to long term solutions for the area regarding young people Not in Education, Employment or Training should be a key consideration when designing new educational establishments and offers, as should the need for quality vocational education for 16-18 year olds.

- **Summary**
    - We believe that Northumberland County Council, The Regional Schools Commissioner and Councillors have a duty to review the key factors for <u>all</u> the communities in the West of Northumberland and the needs of <u>all</u> groups of children.

    - There is an acceptance by all professionals that something has to change, given the surplus places and the financial pressures that go hand-in-hand with them.

    - This is a debate about the whole educational structure of the West of Northumberland and not purely about a particular phase or area.

    - There is a need to take into account the local offer of schools for all abilities and to address the inclusion agenda. Parent and community voice should be heard and respected, and parents should be given choice.

    - We propose a three-tier system to reflect the challenges and needs of the rural communities and the size of the area in which we serve. There needs to be a bespoke response to the unique challenges that the organisation of the education of children in the West of Northumberland brings.

    - We believe the re-introduction of the First schools, with a reduced number of establishments:
        - Addresses the surplus places
        - Ensures children are attending classes with children of their own age
        - Financial security helps ensure a good or better offer is given to all children
        - Upgrade in facilities, where needed, for all establishments from the £40m

- We believe the establishment of four middle schools allows:
    - Addresses the surplus places
    - Financial security helps ensure a good or better offer is given to all children
    - Upgrade in facilities, where needed, for all establishments from the £40m
    - Address the governments challenge at Key Stage 3 and the 'Missing / Hidden Years'

- The retention of the offer of two high school establishments that complement each other, with both having new facilities to serve their curriculums will enable
    - New building offer to QEHS for 1000/1200 on roll
    - New building offer for another 'more western' high school for 750/800 on roll
    - Curriculums that are designed to support the diverse challenges of the local area
    - Addresses the surplus places
    - Financial security helps ensure a good or better offer is given to all children
    - Allows parental choice, and an alternative if a situation 'breaks down' for a student at high school age.

- We believe the SEN offer should be retained at community level, where appropriate support and resources are built into the thirteen schools to address children's needs in their local school, with their local friends.

- We believe these proposals ensure that local communities still maintain school buildings that can be used as a central hub for community identity and use. Great schools have great parental and community support and in-put.

Haltwhistle Middle School: June 2018

Appendix A

In the document produced by Northumberland County Council, 'A Consultation About Education in the West of Northumberland – An opportunity to give us your views, six external factors were shared (Page 77 Outcomes of Consultation About Education in the West of Northumberland):

1. The potential closure of Haydon Bridge High School due to the withdrawal of the Bright Tribe Trust as a sponsor.

2. The consultation carried out by the Hadrian Learning Trust to seek authorisation from the Regional Schools Commissioner to change its age range.

3. The financial difficulties predicted by several schools if they are to maintain an appropriate curriculum offer.

4. The requirement from the Department of Education that there is an appropriate level of capacity for school places and that Northumberland County Council take action where there is over-capacity to reduce school places.

5. The physical state of many school and academy buildings is poor and significant investment is required to maintain and improve the school estate.

6. Due to the rural nature of the area transport arrangement are complicated and transport costs are high.