Northumberland County Council

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# Fwd: Additional Important Information for Cabinet 8 May 2018

1 message

**Cath McEvoy** <cath.mcevoy@northumberland.gov.uk> 8 May 2018 at 11:45
To: Education Consultations <educationconsultation@northumberland.gov.uk>

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---------- Forwarded message ----------
From: **Joyce Knudsen** <jk.postbox14@gmail.com>
Date: 7 May 2018 at 22:10
Subject: Additional Important Information for Cabinet 8 May 2018
To: John Riddle <John.Riddle@northumberland.gov.uk>
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7 May 2018

Dear John

I realise that it is late in the day for forwarding to you background information pertinent to tomorrow's Cabinet meeting when recommendations are to be made to close Bellingham Middle School and convert the 6 First Schools that feed into it to Primary Schools, but I feel that there is no justification whatsoever for the closure of a perfectly good Middle School simply to ensure that Haydon Bridge High School has a viable future for the next 3 years, especially when after that its future is unclear.

Furthermore, the report indicates that there could be a "future review of age ranges at Haydon Bridge High School" and that keeping the School open offers parental choice between the two High Schools. What it fails to state is that once Haydon Bridge High School no longer offers an intake in year 9, then year 8 pupils in Middle Schools will no longer have the choice between two High Schools – they will have to make their choice to leave their Middle School at the end of year 6 if they wish to attend Haydon Bridge High School.

I believe that if the overall view of West Northumberland education been fully considered, then the conclusions drawn to date would have been very different. As things stand priority is being given to ensuring that Haydon Bridge High School becomes viable again, without it seems considering a number of relevant factors which include the possible reasons for the School's decline into Special Measures. That decline was identified by the Ofsted Inspection in December 2014, just over a year after the School had expanded to accommodate year 7 and 8 pupils following the closure of Allendale Middle School. Haydon Bridge High School did not appear to cope well with that expansion/change, and has spent a protracted length of time (over 3 years) in Special Measures, although it is now believed to be recovering well.

It seems now that the proposals for Haydon Bridge High School will include more expansion with the closure of Bellingham Middle School, and the potential closure of Haltwhistle Upper School if this is restored into the hands of the Local Authority (Key Issues 3.6 of the report on the outcome of the consultation failed to complete the sentence in regard to closure of academies?).

***It should be noted that the proposals put forward by Haydon Bridge High School itself, are understood to be designed to be flexible and able to deal with pupil number changes.*** They do not appear to be reliant upon closing middle schools in order to increase the number of pupils in years 7 and 8, which when combined with an annual intake of pupils to year 9, appears to have been what contributed to the decline there in the first place. It should also be noted that the School did not have any history of deficit balances until 2014-15, that is until after its expansion to 11-18 Secondary provision.

How the conclusion to close Bellingham Middle School and Convert the 6 First Schools to Primaries was ever reached is mystifying, and because I could see no sound reasons I started looking into the background of the schools in West Northumberland, and particularly those in the Haydon Bridge area. My findings are attached in the document **"Overview and Projections" (2 pages)** which has taken some considerable time to prepare as all the information had to be checked and double checked**. It includes Ofsted History and Finance.**

When proposing the closure of a school on the basis that it is necessary for the viability of a school that has been in Special Measures for more than 3 years, and whose future after 3 years is unclear, it is surely vital that all the evidence available to date is used to support an informed decision, and regardless of that, that the decisions to close a school and impose changes/expansion to Primary on other schools, is not taken lightly.

You will see in **"Overview and Projections**" how other local schools in the Haydon Bridge area were affected following the closure of Allendale Middle School, and this **reveals a somewhat disturbing picture,**

**particularly as the Council is planning to create even more Primary schools to feed into Haydon Bridge High School.**

In the report on the Outcomes of Consultation on Education in West Northumberland, Points 1 g) and 1 h) under Purpose of Report – make reference to establishing a resilience programme "that will support small rural schools to become financially and educationally viable for the future" and "the establishment of a multi-academy trust (MAT) across the whole county to enable small rural schools to build sufficient capacity to remain both financially and educationally viable." The Council appears to see Primary schools as the vehicle for educational and financial viability, in other words the 2 Tier system, which would facilitate an extra £600 per annum of grant funding paid for each year 7 and 8 pupil in the newly formed a Secondary Schools.

Living in an underfunded Local Authority like Northumberland, I have some sympathy with the desire to acquire the additional £600 per pupil per annum for each year 7 and 8 pupil in a newly formed Secondary School, but that is a separate issue that should be taken up with the funding agencies. It should not be allowed to overshadow the fact that West Northumberland has a widely established and very sound 3 Tier education system:

18 maintained First Schools rated "Good"(13) and "Outstanding" (5), and 1 academy First School in the Haydon Bridge area rated "Requires Improvement".

2 maintained Middle Schools rated "Good" and 1 rated "Requires Improvement", and 1 academy Middle School rated "Good" with another in the Haydon Bridge area rated "Inadequate".

1 academy High School rated "Good" and the second in Haydon Bridge (High/Secondary) rated "Inadequate".

The 2 Tier element of West Northumberland is comprised of Primary Schools and Haydon Bridge High School.

4 of the maintained Primaries are rated "Good" and 2 of the Primary academies are rated "Inadequate". All are located in the Haydon Bridge area.

West Northumberland overall has a predominantly successful 3 Tier system, the exception being in the Haydon Bridge area, where the Primaries and High School are failing educationally, financially or both, Newbrough C of E Primary School being the only exception to this. It is therefore illogical to suggest the creation of more Primaries and the most logical approach would be to **revert back to 3 Tier throughout the Haydon Bridge area bringing it back into line with the rest of West Northumberland. Haltwhistle Multi-Academy Trust made this proposal in response to the Phase 2 consultation. 3 Tier works well in West Northumberland, 2 Tier has been a disaster.**

With regards to the closure of Bellingham Middle School - the School is federated with the Bellingham First School and the Federation made a sensible proposal that the schools combined to form one 3-13 all through school on the existing site, with an intake from the 5 First Schools in year 5. Both schools are financially viable individually and have no history of deficits. Since June 2017 the Middle School has been working positively towards regaining its "Good" Ofsted rating. It is not the first Middle School to require improvement – Hexham Middle (2015) and Corbridge Middle (2013) also experienced this. The Federation approached Hadrian Learning Trust with a view to joining the MAT, but this was declined possibly due to HLT's desire to become a single Secondary (11-18**). There is no justification whatsoever for the closure of Bellingham Middle School.**

Although the consultation was conducted on the future of education in the whole of West Northumberland, it was limited by regarding West Northumberland as two separate entities/geographical areas – the Hexham Partnership of schools and the Haydon Bridge Partnership of schools. There is however no hard border between the partnerships and many schools in the Hexham Partnership are much closer to Haydon Bridge High School, than Bellingham Middle School and the First Schools that feed into it.

The question should therefore be asked, rather than closing Bellingham Middle School and transporting pupils aged 11 from the remote areas of Bellingham and beyond, along country roads that are reknowned as dangerous in all weathers (minimum distance 16.7 miles), why has no consideration been given to converting to Primaries some of the first schools in the Hexham area that are closer to Haydon Bridge High School and making them feeder schools for Haydon Bridge High School?
First schools that could be considered for change to Primaries and feed into Haydon Bridge High School are Acomb First (59 pupils), Beaufront First (70 pupils), Hexham First (113 pupils) and St Mary's RC VA First (107 pupils). If need be Bellingham Middle School could become a feeder school for Queen Elizabeth High School rather than Haydon Bridge High School.

The big advantage would be that travel times/distances for pupils at age 11 would be substantially less than for pupils travelling from Bellingham and beyond, and travel would also be along a major road. **The distance travelled would be less than 10 miles so transport costs would also be less.**

I have to say that I do not feel that the issues have been fully debated. Haydon Bridge High School has been given the green light, for which I am delighted and the Hexham Partnership has already been told it will be untouched by closures. Greenhead Primary, with a deficit of £200,000 has been told that it will be supported with a 3 year recovery plan. Cabinet is recommended "to instruct officers to begin work with Hadrian Learning Trust to establish a proposal for redevelopment of the existing schools on one of the current sites or on a new site in Hexham" – and without more ado Bellingham Middle School is to be closed.

I am decidedly uncomfortable that the Council appears to place more emphasis on the buildings of a Multi-Academy Trust "over which it has no control" than it does upon the ramifications of the closure of a remote rural Middle School. Also that the escalation in High Needs costs and the increase in the number of EOTAS pupils ("mainly from the independent sector") is not receiving a higher priority, especially as according to the Schools Forum this is expected to lead to a reduction in funding available for maintained schools.

As the High Needs transport costs are quoted at £4,000 per annum per pupil, and total over £4m per annum, would capital funding not be better spent on purpose built facilities within the County for High needs students so that transport costs and travel times could be reduced?

I trust that we can rely upon your support to make a strong case against the closure of Bellingham Middle School and the conversion of our local First Schools to Primaries, which should not be too difficult now that the extent of the failure of 2 Tier education in the Haydon Bridge area is known.

Yours sincerely

Joyce Knudsen

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**Overview with Projections.pdf**
229K