Appeal from the Governing Body of the Bellingham Partnership of Schools in response to the proposed closure of Bellingham Middle School in August 2019

The governing body wishes to appeal against Northumberland County Council's decision to close Bellingham Middle School, effective from August 2019, and offers counter-argument to reasons cited as follows

Reason 1: these changes across the maintained schools in the Haydon Bridge Partnership best support the long-term viability and quality of all the schools in the partnership.

On the contrary, Ofsted evidence suggests that the Haydon Bridge partnership existing primaries have fared less well since converting from first schools, and certainly do not provide strong evidence to support further conversion from firsts to primaries in the north of the region. Furthermore, Haydon Bridge High School is a failing school. Turnaround for such a school represents an enormous task, yet only three years has been given by Northumberland County Council as a support package. If Haydon Bridge High School were to close at the end of the three years, children would suffer yet more disruption to their education by having to move school for their GCSE courses, with potentially devastating consequences in terms of academic results and emotional well-being. As the quality of educational provision at Haydon Bridge High School has been rated as inadequate by Ofsted for the last four years, and is still rated as such following a reinspection during the NCC West of Northumberland School Consultation period, it would be far better to retain Bellingham Middle School to strengthen the high school over time, with the fresh leadership at both schools ensuring that staff work more closely together to secure high quality outcomes for pupils. Indeed, according to Nigel Wyatt of the National Middle Schools Forum*, 'students in three tier systems nationally achieve higher outcomes in both the combined measure for A* - C in English and maths, and in the broader measure of the Ebacc. It may well be that the broader curriculum that many middle schools continue to provide, without the well-known deficit on progress associated with transfer at age eleven, provides a firm foundation for later achievement at age 16.'*

It is also illogical and discriminatory that the council has decided to deny three-tier education to the more remote areas of Northumberland whilst retaining middle schools in the Hexham partnership because it would be too disruptive for the pupils who live there. Why are the pupils of Bellingham Middle School being used to prop up a failing school with the largest and most rural catchment area in the country? There is a genuine need for accessible middle education in Bellingham, serving the remote communities across the North of the region and ensuring that an appropriate level of social, emotional and academic challenge is provided for the children who live there.

Reason 2: There would be an exciting opportunity to invest £5.1m into the fabric of schools in the Haydon Bridge Partnership, including: significant investment in a newly created Bellingham Primary School, including enhanced facilities for art/technology and community spaces that could be used by all schools to deliver an enhanced primary curriculum.

Whilst significant investment is welcome, Bellingham Middle School already has facilities for art/technology and community spaces, which can be used by any school. The Bellingham Partnership of Schools would welcome opportunity to develop, including other schools across the partnership and North Tynies. Just because North Tynies are moving into the building does not mean that the middle school needs to move out. There is enough space for everyone. Surplus places are inevitable in rural catchment areas, and the population will change. The Bellingham Partnership of Schools deserves special consideration as educational provision in the capital of the North Tyne. It is an opportunity missed to exclude Bellingham Middle School from the fabric of schools in the Haydon Bridge Partnership.

Reason 3: Parents and students would retain a choice of secondary education in the west of the county, while parents would retain the right to apply for a place for their child in any school.

There is no genuine choice for parents in the Haydon Bridge Partnership. Only parents who have the means to send their children to Hexham, opting for the three-tier system, actually have a choice. Parents who do not have the means are forced to send their children to Haydon Bridge High School, which has been and remains a failing school. This is unfair discrimination against less privileged

rural children. Bellingham Middle School should remain open to support less privileged rural children for longer, therefore improving their life chances educationally. As a minimum, if a further three years has been given to support Haydon Bridge High School, then it makes better sense to retain Bellingham Middle School during this time frame to support the high school's improvement journey and ensure parents of the affected pupils caught up in this transient and anxious time do have a choice.

Reason 4: The Governing Bodies of Kielder, Otterburn, Greenhaugh and Wark have indicated they support the change to a primary structure […] pupils would not have to make a transition and travel to Bellingham at age 9 or 10.

Y5 and Y6 primary aged pupils benefit significantly from leaving extremely small village first schools to become part of a larger school community at Bellingham Middle. Socially, emotionally and academically, children of this age are ready for greater independence and challenge over time as they prepare for SATS and high school. This is especially the case for this partnership, where pupils together come from remote villages and outlying farms. These rural children should be afforded middle education, a context ideally suited to their developmental needs. Many pupils do travel by bus to the middle school, but their journey times are manageable, well within the maximum limits and enable pupils to access a broad and balanced curriculum with specialist teaching/facilities, enrichment and extra-curricular programmes.

Reason 5: The proposed Resilience Programme will attempt to support the good and outstanding schools in the North Tynedale and Redesdale area to work together and across the partnership and beyond to increase sustainability through building on and sharing good practice.

Despite promoting its 'Resilience Programme', where schools are expected to work together and across the partnership, forming federations and/or MATs, the council has made no acknowledgement of the fact that Bellingham Partnership of Schools is already a hard federation and could take tough decisions to become stronger; cut costs and cut staffing to make one school, with one budget. This in turn would strengthen the viability of remote first schools. This was under discussion prior to the consultation, yet within the consultation period, time scales were shifted by the council with closure

moved forward by a year. We have strength and experience already as a hard federation, which could be developed and built upon.

Reason 6: A review of transport routes to Haydon Bridge High School will be undertaken to assess the impact of the implementation of the statutory proposal on individual children living in the North Tynedale and Redesdale areas, particularly in relation to pupils in Years 7 and 8 who would travel to Haydon Bridge High School.

The current infrastructure is one of rural roads, often dangerous in winter. Children living remotely will face a long, tiring journey, which no review is going to help. It would be preferable for this journey to be made when the children are older. Keeping Bellingham Middle School open would avoid imposing daily commutes of over three hours on many young children, which most working adults would never choose to undertake.

Conclusion: The consultation on this statutory proposal and the wider informal consultation has been very extensive, reasonable and robust, and has attempted to preserve small rural primary and secondary education.

Northumberland County Council's consultation has not attempted to preserve small rural primary and secondary education because this implies a two-tier system already exists within the Haydon Bridge partnership. This is misleading. The decision to close Bellingham Middle is a departure from how we are, not an attempt to preserve. What is being preserved is the three-tier system for the children of the Hexham partnership. The Haydon Bridge Partnership is being short-changed by Northumberland County Council. This decision limits parental choice now and in the future as smaller schools become unviable, leaving remote communities to suffer the subsequent economic decline. The council's decision should be overturned because it is ill-conceived, unfair and discriminates against rural children, rural communities and rural life.

Finally, the council excluded the Bellingham Partnership of Governors from the list of bodies with the right of appeal in its final report to cabinet on 10th July 2018 and did not officially notify the governing body until 30th July. As both the first and middle schools at Bellingham are foundation schools, the governing body has the right to make this appeal within four weeks of a decision being made.