Governing Body of: Wark First School

1) How do you think surplus places can be reduced in schools in Haydon Bridge and Hexham Partnerships?

Response:

The Governing Body of Wark First School understand the importance of looking at both Haydon Bridge and Hexham schools partnerships as a wider area due to the unique rural nature of the West of Northumberland. This is particularly relevant to Wark Church of England First School. Whilst falling within the Haydon Bridge partnership, the school has strong ties with the neighbouring faith schools of Humshaugh and Chollerton (within the Hexham schools partnership); furthermore roughly 50% of our children choose to attend a middle school within the Hexham Partnership. It is therefore important that Wark First School is considered within the context of both the Haydon Bridge and Hexham schools partnerships due to parental choice, geographic and commuting patterns of families within the area.

Wark First School catchment area covers a large geographical spread, with children attending the setting from other catchments to access the high quality of education and flexible childcare options offered (children currently attend from outside of our catchment areas). The children from within our catchment attend our school and 100% of parents would recommend the school to other parents. Within the Bellingham partnership, Wark First school saw the largest intake of reception children in 2017, including children from out of the area.

We feel it is important that NCC ensure that the provision of education in the west of Northumberland is sustainable. In some cases it has identified surplus places alongside financial predicted deficit or a shortage of capacity to increase child places where required, in these cases it would make sense to streamline how the education provision is delivered.

We strive to provide all of our children with the highest quality of education possible, in recent years this has seen a shift in choice of middle schools and a further shift in high school choice for our school leavers (currently 50% of our school leavers choose not to go to catchment middle school, with further numbers opting to leave through year 5-8 and in year 9+ opting to go to non-catchment high school).

Currently NCC's figures identify that we have capacity to expand our provision to accommodate an additional 44 child places. Furthermore we are able to provide an additional classroom within the existing building's fabric. The building is in good condition, is large and sited within extensive grounds which have been allocated for educational use by local land owners, this provides a fantastic opportunity to continue to utilise a safe, warm and welcoming environment for children to access their early education.

Our current financial model is sustainable, with the flexibility to increase our current pupil intake (Reception – Year 4) with little or no financial impact. If required the school could quickly adapt to encompass Years 5 and 6, remaining sustainable if we maintain or increase our current catchment. Wark First School is a flexible, enthusiastic and diverse body with staff and governors who embrace change and make impacts rationally and effectively, the most recent example being in 2017 when Governors embraced the opportunity to accommodate Nursery children following the withdrawal of service by the existing provider. Early reports from children, parents and external assessment (including Ofsted) have been very positive.

Supporting evidence: can be provided by request.

2) Will the current structure of schools in the west of the county remain financially and educationally viable for the next 25 years?

Response:

The Governors of Wark Church of England First School are committed to working with neighbouring schools and the LEA to assist in reducing the surplus space numbers. The information circulated by NCC for consultation indicates that in the main, the current structure will not be viable for the next 25 years. It would be helpful to understand the population estimates for the West of Northumberland in 2025 to ensure that a solution is sustainable for the next 25 years.

The Governors of Wark first school have closely scrutinised the indicative budget with key members of school staff, this has led to a surplus being identified during the three years of the budget.

Wark First School strives to provide our children with the highest quality of education possible through the broadest and balanced curriculum within our means. Currently NCC's figures identify that we have capacity to expand our provision to accommodate an additional 44 child places. Furthermore we are able to provide an additional classroom within the existing buildings fabric.

The school has a proven record of being proactive and flexible to react appropriately to given circumstances. Our dedication to provide all of our children with the highest quality of education possible has shown that in recent years there has been a shift in choice of middle schools and a further shift in high school choice for our school leavers.

Supporting evidence can be provided by request.

3) Should schools in the west of the county receive additional capital investment and if so, how should this be invested

Response:

The Governors of Wark Church of England First School believe that schools in the west of the County which are required to adapt to accommodate a change in the structure of education provision should be eligible for additional capital investment to enable them to provide the highest standard of education, (including addressing the additional staffing and resource costs as necessary), which is viable for the children in the West of the county over the next 25 years.

Wark first school is in a good state of repair, all works proposed are planned and accounted for in our 3 year budget plan. Our 3 year indicative budget indicates that the school will be in a surplus each of the three years.

Wark First School sits in extensive grounds which are in the hands of a charitable trust and dedicated for the provision of education within the village.

Currently NCC's figures identify that we have capacity to expand our provision to accommodate an additional 44 child places. Furthermore we are able to provide an additional classroom within the existing buildings fabric.

Supporting evidence can be provided by request.

4) Do colleagues see any merit in the establishment of a local authority Multi-academy trust and would your school want to join such an entity?

Response:

Wark Church of England First School are fully committed to becoming part of a financially viable and sustainable education system which provides the highest quality of education for the children in our school. Governors and staff are keen to explore all options, including a multi-academy trust, building on our existing high standards of education with a viable three-year budget. Our predictions for school intake numbers for the next three years illustrates that our school is viable at its current size, additionally there is capacity to expand the provision through additional children in the early years – year 4, or for the provision of years 5-6.

Wark First School work on a regular basis within the Bellingham Middle School partnership and continues to have discussions and transition arrangements with this group.

We have sought to work in partnership with Humshaugh and Chollerton First schools as a collaboration of First Schools, to ensure that children within the North Tyne have the opportunity to maintain choice of school, particularly a faith school within this rural area.

Our staff and governors at Wark First School are always seeking new opportunities in improving our offer. Our most recent example of this was in Summer term 2017 when our early years childcare provider announced it was withdrawing early years provision within the school. Governors made the decision to bring the provision in house and open an early year's unit within the school, supplemented with childcare wraparound for children from 3-13 years between 8am – 5.30pm. Early feedback from children, parents and external assessment is very positive and levels of use are high which indicate that the unit is a viable addition to the school.

Supporting evidence can be provided by request.

5) If you have any other ideas or proposals that do not fit with the questions above please attach them as additions to this document.

We would seek assurance that however this consultation is enacted, that the current standards of provision of education is maintained or improved whilst any changes are undertaken.

We would request the future predicted pupils numbers in all catchments affected by this consultation.

We would request clarification on criteria for any future school closures.