Northumberland County Council

Jacqui Pearson <jacqui.pearson@northumberland.gov.uk>

Fwd: Bellingham Middle School

1 message

Lorraine Fife <lorraine.fife@northumberland.gov.uk> 7 June 2018 at 14:25
To: Jacqui Pearson <jacqui.pearson@northumberland.gov.uk>

Hi Jacqui

For standard response and filing

---------- Forwarded message ----------
From: **Andy Johnson GCSX** <andy.johnson@northumberland.gov.uk>
Date: 7 June 2018 at 10:15
Subject: Fwd: Bellingham Middle School
To: "Aviston, Sue" <Sue.Aviston@northumberland.gov.uk>, Lorraine Fife <Lorraine.Fife@northumberland.gov.uk>

Best Wishes

Andrew Johnson

Project Director (Education and Skills Service)

Wellbeing and Community Health Services Group

Northumberland County Council

County Hall

Morpeth

NE61 2EF

Tele: 01670 622764

Email: Andy.Johnson@northumberland.gov.uk

Website: http://www.northumberland.gov.uk

PA – Deborah Anderson

Tele: 01670 622764

Email: Deborah.Anderson01@northumberland.gov.uk

---------- Forwarded message ----------
From: **Karen & Carl Hamilton** <curlewridsdale@yahoo.co.uk>
Date: 7 June 2018 at 09:42
Subject: Bellingham Middle School
To: "Peter.Jackson@northumberland.gov.uk" <Peter.Jackson@northumberland.gov.uk>, "Wayne.Daley@northumberland.gov.uk" <Wayne.Daley@northumberland.gov.uk>, "Nick.Oliver@northumberland.gov.uk" <Nick.Oliver@northumberland.gov.uk>, "Richard.Wearmouth@northumberland.gov.uk" <Richard.Wearmouth@northumberland.gov.uk>, "Glen.Sanderson@northumberland.gov.uk" <Glen.Sanderson@northumberland.gov.uk>, "John.Riddle@northumberland.gov.uk" <John.Riddle@northumberland.gov.uk>, "Cath.Homer@northumberland.gov.uk" <Cath.Homer@northumberland.gov.uk>, "Veronica.Jones@northumberland.gov.uk" <Veronica.Jones@northumberland.gov.uk>, "andy.johnson@northumberland.gov.uk" <andy.johnson@northumberland.gov.uk>, "cath.mcevoy@northumberland.gov.uk" <cath.mcevoy@northumberland.gov.uk>, "dean.jackson@northumberland.gov.uk" <dean.jackson@northumberland.gov.uk>

Cc: Helen Samuels <helen.samuels@bellinghampartnership.uk>, "rsc.north@education.gov.uk" <rsc.north@education.gov.uk>

Re: Potential Closure of Bellingham Middle School

The current formal consultation by Northumberland County Council on education in the west of Northumberland which proposes the closure of Bellingham Middle School and a move from a three tier to a two-tier system of education would be a complete disaster for the families and children of North Tynedale and Redesdale. **It is simply unfair and unjust to treat families here differently to families in Hexham who, following the informal consultation before Easter, have rightly been allowed to keep their middle schools and all the undoubted benefits of three-tier education.**

The prime reasons that the closure of Bellingham Middle School and the loss of three tier education would be catastrophic are as follows:

Travel times and distances for eleven and twelve-year olds:
The government guidance is that travel times for secondary school children should not exceed 75 minutes, I spoke to one woman at the parents meeting at the middle school a couple of weeks ago who's child was looking at approximately two hours travel each way and whilst this is the extreme, travel times of ninety minutes or more for the children of Byrness, Falstone and Kielder would be the norm. Would the decision makers want this for their children?
The three-tier system of education is the only model which takes into account the rurality and remoteness of these areas and mitigates the impacts of long journeys to school for as long as possible. The closure of Bellingham Middle School will see children as young as eleven, subject to daily journeys of between two and three hours for the round trip to school in Haydon Bridge. This move will expose young children to needless extra risk in making long bus journeys, a risk which is increased significantly throughout the winter months when travel is more dangerous due to icy roads, it will impact upon their education and indeed will lead to them missing school on occasions due to severe weather.

This time spent in travel on the bus could be much better spent in completing homework, by taking part in after school clubs and activities and in developing social capital by interaction with friends etc. It is bad enough that these journey times are necessary at age 13 to access high school education but it is completely unacceptable to impose these on children aged eleven and twelve when this does not need to happen. The new proposal appears to display a complete lack of understanding of these vitally important issues, issues which will have a direct and detrimental impact on young children's lives.

The impact of journey times can not be overstated. Indeed, the negative impact of long daily travel times was thought to be so great that, until recently, it was felt necessary by NCC to provide boarding facilities at Haydon Bridge to mitigate the impact. Now however, a short time after the boarding facilities have closed, this proposal feels it acceptable to impose these daily journeys on eleven and twelve-year-old children. It is not.

Indeed, the impact of travel times is recognised by the Department for Education. Their 'Home to School Transport and Travel guidance (2014) Statutory guidance for local authorities', states best practice suggests that travel time for pupils aged eleven and upwards should not exceed 75 minutes. This guidance clearly states that this should be seen as a maximum, therefore presumably not treated as the norm or as routine, as this proposal appears to do. Most of the children of this area would be facing, from age eleven onwards, a daily travel time to school very close to or greater than the best practice maximum. Clearly, in citing a current maximum of 80 minutes, this proposal demonstrates little understanding of the real travel times involved. Simply talking to parents has indicated travel times of much more than this for the children of Byrness, Falstone and Kielder for example. This will result in many of the children from this area having no free time during the week once travel, homework, and mealtimes have been factored in. The adoption of this proposal will steal time from eleven and twelve-year-old children. We wish to

maintain the three tier system here so our children can be educated as locally as possible for as long as possible.

Access to clubs, after school activities and sports:
Our eleven and twelve-year-old children will be unable to access clubs, take part in after school activities or be a part of school sports teams as they will need to be collected by bus for the long journey home at the end of lesson time. These children will be completely disenfranchised and unable to enjoy the opportunities open to their peers who live more closely. The only way that our children would be able to access these after school activities would be if parents were able to make a round trip, to collect their child, of 70 miles or more for families in Byrness or Kielder and 50 miles or more for families more local to Bellingham. The financial and time implications are obvious and would hit those families who can least afford it the hardest.

Lack of parental choice:
If the two-tier system was to be implemented here it would, in effect, remove parental choice as it would be very difficult and disruptive to choose QE High School in Hexham (the only other high school in this area) as this would mean moving a child at Year 7, after finishing Primary School, to Middle School for two years and then to have them transition again after just another two years to High School. Would the middle school want an influx of new Year 7 pupils, probably not, and the Hexham schools are, we believe, oversubscribed so there would probably be no room for our children.

Uncertainty over the future of Haydon Bridge High School:
It is still not known what is to happen to HBHS. Is it going to go back to Local Authority control or will the Regional Schools Commissioner be seeking another sponsor to continue with its academisation. If this happens, what if the sponsors vision for the school is at odds with the Local Authority or not what parents want? Again, as above, we won't have any choice. We hear in the local press that the LA will take back control of HBHS for 3 years, does the LA have permission from the RSC to do this? If so, what happens in three years' time - more uncertainty? There are too many questions which remain unanswered and it is wrong to commit children into a situation of such complete uncertainty and into a school which has just been judged by OfSTED as inadequate. The appointment of yet another IEB at HBHS does nothing to reassure. We have seen successive IEB's fail to make the desired impact. How will a school with such an uncertain future be able to retain quality teachers or attract the quality of teachers our children deserve?

Impact on remote communities:
As families inevitably move away to be closer to education (we've already seen it happen), and families choose not to live here in the first place due to the impact of the above points, we will see a further erosion of the scant services we have access to in this remote area as village shops and pubs, already struggling, will suffer more from lack of custom and begin to reduce hours or close. There is a danger that our remote communities in North Tynedale and Redesdale begin to become retirement communities and possible die out altogether without the lifeblood and vibrancy provided by young families coming in. This would also obviously impact on the wider rural economy, not least on property values and make it more difficult to sell homes. It would also impact upon the new Primary Schools which would not have the numbers coming in at the bottom end and could end up closing as a by-product.

Benefits of Three Tier education:
Children have access to subject specialist teachers and specialist teaching spaces such as science labs, design and technology classes, food technology classes and computer suites from Year 5 onwards. This they would not have for a further two years under a two-tier system. Three-tier education also prevents the dip in performance, observed nationally, when children transition to Secondary School at Year 7. It further allows for a period of stability for the child following the stresses of SAT's in Year 6 rather than going straight from SAT's into the difficulty of a transition to a new, much larger, school. Three-tier also provides an important staging point whereby children don't have the shock of a move from small cohorts (some year groups are just 2 pupils for some of our remote and rural schools) into big classes of potentially thirty plus children. BMS allows this adaptation to larger classes to happen incrementally as class sizes and year

groups are smaller than in a Secondary School. It also gives a much more personal and individual education experience for our youngsters as staff really get to know and understand the children very well and are able to deliver education to meet the needs of each individual rather than the group as a whole.

As a qualified teacher and a parent of a child currently in Year 5 at Bellingham Middle School (BMS), I cannot speak highly enough about the education and care provided by BMS. I appreciate that at the last OfSted inspection the school was rated as Requires Improvement, however, I feel that in the two and a half terms my daughter has now been a pupil at BMS, the school has been excellent in meeting her needs educationally where she is both supported and challenged and pastorally where the systems in place have also been excellent. It has been a pleasure to watch her confidence grow and see her academic achievements develop and we are grateful for all that BMS have done. Bellingham Middle School is a very good school which, in my experience, cares a great deal, has the wellbeing of pupils at its core and has aspirations for the best possible educational outcomes for all.

Education in the Interim Period
If the new proposal were to be adopted and BMS was to close in September 2019, I have great concern for the quality of education the children would receive in the intervening year. The schools impending closure will inevitably and understandably lead to staff seeking employment elsewhere and they cannot be blamed for that, however, it will lead to much disruption for the children as staff begin to leave and a likely long list of ever changing supply teachers. This inevitable consequence, overlooked in the report, hardly ensures the best educational experience or outcomes for a whole cohort of children, in fact it does the opposite, thus further penalising and disenfranchising them. These children, staff and communities deserve better and should not be made to suffer in this way.

Fair and equal treatment:
Parents and families in Hexham have been allowed to maintain the three-tier system of education there as it was thought to be too disruptive to change this. I think it is wonderful that they have been allowed to stay as they wished in Hexham but to suggest that it would be too disruptive to change the system there is frankly insulting to all of us who live out here. Change of this sort in our area though is truly and catastrophically disruptive for all the reasons stated above. **Children and families of North Tynedale and Redesdale deserve to be treated fairly and on an equal basis with those children and families in Hexham.**

The number on roll at HBHS has declined recently but is obviously reflective of the uncertainty surrounding the school's future and parents, understandably, have elected to send their children elsewhere. If there is investment in HBHS and a secure future is evident then the NOR will rise once again as parents are able to make a choice which ensures stability for their children.

Our Year 5 and Year 6 children should not be used to 'shore up' Haydon Bridge High School and become further victims of the failed attempt to academise this school and the mess which education in this area has been allowed to get into. This is unfair and unequal treatment.

Respectfully, I would appeal to you to please respect the wishes of children, families and the wider community in this area and keep Bellingham Middle School open.

Yours faithfully,

Carl Hamilton.

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Lorraine Fife
School Organisation Manager
Northumberland County Council
Tel: 01670 624050