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5th June 2018

Dear Sir/Madam,

Proposed Closure of Bellingham Middle School

Corsenside Parish Council's Response

Corsenside Parish Council, in response to your current formal consultation on the future of Education in the west of Northumberland, would like to know why they have not been contacted directly to alert them to this consultation and ask for their response as happened with the informal consultation before Easter. This leads us to wonder if any other of the stakeholder parish councils, whose children feed in to Bellingham Middle School, have been formally consulted and if not, why not? This proposal would clearly have a direct impact on children and families in our parish and we feel that we should have been afforded the formal opportunity to respond. We are also concerned that the consultation period appears to be the statutory minimum time scale allowed for such things. It has taken no account of the fact that one week of the period has been taken up by the half term holiday. The consultation appears ill considered, poorly planned and flawed in it's execution which concerns us greatly, especially given its wide-reaching implications for children, families and the wider community.

We would like to have the above points addressed and answers provided as soon as possible. In the mean time please accept the comments below as the formal response of Corsenside Parish Council.

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 disastrous for the families and children of the Parish of Corsenside and also those in the wider communities of North Tynedale and Redesdale, of which we are a part. **We feel it is 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 impact of travel times is recognised by the Department for Education. Their School Transport and Travel guidance states that 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. Simply talking to parents has indicated travel times of much more than this. Indeed, one woman, at the parents meeting at the middle school a couple of weeks ago, said her 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. Young children, travelling for such lengths of time, may well need to use the toilet, has this been taken into consideration? The adoption of this proposal 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 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 cannot 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 excessive daily journeys on eleven and twelve-year-old children. It is not.

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 to be taken 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 real choice for most) 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. Middle schools probably would not want an influx of new pupils in Year 7 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. It has just been judged as inadequate by OfSTED.

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, parents won't have any choice. We hear in the local press that the LA will take back control of HBHS for 3 years, do they 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 we feel 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 us as 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:
We know that access to education is a key decision point in family's choices of where to live. 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, post offices and pubs, already struggling, will suffer more from lack of custom and begin to reduce hours or close. There is a danger that without the lifeblood and vibrancy provided by young families coming in to our remote communities in North Tynedale and Redesdale that they begin to wither and possibly in the longer term die out altogether. This would also obviously impact on property values and make it more difficult to sell homes and also impact upon the new Primary Schools which, without young families living here, 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 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 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 classes of potentially thirty plus children. BMS allows this adaptation to larger classes to happen incrementally as class sizes and year groups are much 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.

Safeguarding:
Young children of eleven and twelve will be travelling to school, unaccompanied by a responsible adult, with older pupils who are aged up to and into adulthood at age 18-19 for Year 13 pupils. Bus drivers are unable to provide adequate supervision as their concentration and focus should rightly be on the road and on getting our children back and forward to school in safety.

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.

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. 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 those families who live in the BMS catchment area. Change of this sort in our area though would be truly and catastrophically disruptive for all the reasons outlined 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.**

Yours faithfully

K. Traill

Corsenside Parish Council Clerk