

# **Broomhaugh C of E First School**

## **Response to questions asked as part of Education in the West Tyne Consultation**

### **Introduction**

The responses below have been discussed and agreed by the Acting Chair, Head and Governing Body of Broomhaugh C of E First School.

We would like to draw attention to the letter sent by Dom Aldred, Acting Chair, via email on Friday 19 January and the letter sent by email Thursday 25 January. These were both sent to key officers and members of Northumberland County Council.

Although written initially to express personal concerns about the rigour, credibility and timings of the process and sent urgently, due to timescales, both Jen Stephenson (Head Teacher) and all Governors at Broomhaugh have subsequently read and reviewed Dom's letters and are in agreement with the points made and concerns raised. These are therefore attached as an appendix to our response to ensure the content is given due consideration as part of our overall response.

We are writing our response against an extremely tight timescale. While we appreciate the extension of one week to the original deadline set for submissions, the timings remain exceptionally tight and fast.

In essence there are three factors to be considered – not least a potential emergency situation regarding Haydon Bridge High School and the fact that NCC could be issued with an order to close the school, then the question of Hadrian Trust's consultation on two-tier and finally the question of surplus places and financial sustainability across the Hexham partnership.

It is our view that there are different needs to be addressed in each of these areas and at this point it feels very much as if all three are being bundled together in a rushed and poorly thought out approach that is unlikely to win the trust and engagement of desired consultees, while potentially jeopardising the long term prospects of thousands of children across the Hexham Partnership now and long in to the future.

An emergency situation should not be allowed to dictate an emergency response across the entire partnership – in our view this is not an appropriate way to tackle the questions that we recognise exist and need to be addressed proportionally and appropriately over the coming years.

There is a very worrying lack of evidence, modelling and scenario planning to date that has been made available. Crude measures of surplus places and financial deficits have been used to date (and these are far from robust as Dom Aldred's email has raised and aspects of our response below will reiterate). We need to see better data and insight provided for a discussion that has such wide ranging potential implications. We have highlighted some of the areas in which this is required throughout our response.

One of our major concerns is not necessarily the need for some form of change in and of itself, but rather the way in which the roadmap (or lack of) for change is being set out and managed.

As experienced professionals, many of whom have long-standing experience within education, we struggle to make sense of some of the ways in which these issues are currently being set out and discussed – what hope then for genuine engagement with a public who may be disinterested in yet more local authority consultation (especially when set against the backdrop of a parallel consultation from Hadrian Trust).

Recent change of administration within NCC has already raised many questions within the community about priority and focus (witness the debates around the aborted move, potential costs, suggested hikes in Council tax, the closure of Arch) and, while it would be a mistake to believe that the local community will willingly and easily participate in a consultation – there is much work to be done to present information in a way which is both fair and genuinely engaging.

If information is not presented to the community in ways which are tailored to their needs and which puts the questions in a fair context then further questions and challenges will undoubtedly arise.

If this is genuinely a once in a generation opportunity we all owe it to future generations to give the matter proper time and consideration.

While the Council has published a six month timeline, the windows within this for production of scenarios and feedback are very tight. Indeed more time was allocated to allow Members the decision of whether to launch a consultation than to feedback from all heads and governing bodies, or time to develop scenarios (unless of course the options are already there and the consultation is simply a box ticking exercise).

We appreciate the point made by Andy Johnson at the meeting on 24 January that there is scope throughout the consultation period for feedback and input, but at the same time would point out that in reality there are only a few bites at the cherry in terms of putting out information to the public and getting a response back.

There is already a significant and serious issue with the fact that many parents seem convinced already that this is a 'done deal' and the Council must take major steps to address this in its consultation communications or risk losing the confidence of the public before the consultation has even begun.

For these reasons the Governing Body of Broomhaugh C of E First School express their grave concerns over the credibility, robustness and rigour of the consultation as currently proposed by NCC.

## QUESTION 1

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

This is such an open ended question as to be almost impossible to answer. There are many moving factors that influence any sensible answer.

The following set out our thoughts and views on the question as it is:

- What is the Council's acceptable surplus capacity? It is impossible to operate at 100%, so what modelling has the Council done to identify an acceptable and appropriate level of surplus on a rolling basis? How does this take into account future population shifts? We note from Government published data that NCC is not predicting massive growth in school places in the coming decade, but nor is it predicting a significant fall – how does this play out across the County?
- We need to be very clear how the 'surplus figure' is calculated – is this, as we have been informed, actually based on number of pupils in the catchment area? Or is it based, as most parents and educational leaders have naturally assumed, on the gap between PAN and allocated places? If the former, why is this figure being used when the reality is very different? We would ask the council to publish data showing how these figures have changed over the past ten years – is the attraction of pupils outside school catchment a new phenomenon? Or a well-established, predictable trend that should be factored into the case? We would also ask the Council to respond to the interpretation that actually this shows parental choice is vital to the performance of the system and that many parents are actively choosing to send their children into a three tier, high performing system?
- What is NCC doing to look at this issue in other areas of the County and can you show some evidence and maybe ideas that would help us? When you look at PAN/Allocated Places gaps (measuring like for like across the county – the only school as far as we can see at the moment that has an alleged significant difference between capacity and PAN is Beaufront) there is no real difference between surplus places at first and primary schools in Hexham compared to the rest of the County. So the first question is do we need to reduce surplus places? If so, on what basis and to what extent? Reducing by a few percentage points might mean one thing, reducing by a large percentage might mean another.
- We also need to be mindful of the fact that there are two partnerships at play here and one should not necessarily bear the burden of solving the problems of the other. The majority of surplus places is in the HB Partnership. According to LA data (we are not sure how up to date this is) there are only 923 surplus places in the Hexham Partnership and it would appear that 400 of those are at Hexham Middle and Hexham High School. There appear to be only five spare places at Corbridge Middle School. So one theoretical option is to remove Hexham Middle School, fill the other two middle schools and cut QEHS costs – although of course the academy structure of HLT makes this almost certainly impossible to consider, reflecting the reality of the nature of the debate.
- Another option is to consider a new, smaller more fit for purpose school at Haydon Bridge. There is a view that many of the children from HBHS have relocated to QEHS as a result of the long-standing issues at HBHS that little was done to address for many years. Maybe the solution is to create the right kind of school in Haydon Bridge and rebuild the community and its faith in the local education provision?

- For many smaller schools the relatively low sample size can show dramatic shifts in percentage points that can be misleading when taken out of context – as a Governing body we have learned to take this into account when reviewing our school data. We have a much smaller than expected reception this year, but when you look at the PAN data for all first and primary schools for 2017 you'll see county-wide a massive drop in admissions. However, we suspect that things may be very different this year based on our own calculations of expressions of interests, visits from prospective parents and knowledge of the children in our local village and families with children already at the school.
- If you cut capacity too hard you're going to end up with the reverse problem – crowded classrooms, children having to travel further, over stretched teaching resources and the end result is a far poorer quality of education.
- Without more detailed financial and social modelling we cannot possibly comment on what the surplus places means and to what extent it needs addressing. You're asking for ideas in a vacuum of context and data.
- For example, what do surplus places cost, measured against fixed and running costs – are there schools where surplus places are more expensive per place or not? How many places will you need in 5 or 10 years' time and where will you need them? How does this link to the NCC planning and housebuilding strategies?
- This is not an issue particular to the Hexham Partnership, it's true across the county if you look at PAN/Capacity figures. So it feels to us very disingenuous to make it such a focus of the debate at this stage.
- And what is the cost of removing those surplus places as a headline-winning, cost-cutting exercise? We would like to see robust and rigorous risk analysis provided by NCC to reassure Governors that the futures of our schools, pupils and taxpayers' money is being credibly and wisely invested and managed?
- The question of cutting surplus places is a very simplistic approach to what is a complex problem. For a start, building more affordable housing to encourage and facilitate more young families to move in to the area or even more housing in general could be considered to increase take up at what are obviously proving to be very successful and attractive schools.

## QUESTION 2

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

Sadly we find ourselves in the same position as the first question to be honest. As a Governing Body we've struggled to understand how this question can be meaningful and why it's being asked.

- No-one can predict this credibly and robustly. What does the Council think?
- Given the recent news around the viability of academies (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jan/27/schools-academy-trusts-warn-pay-staffing-public-spending>) and the fact that around a third of state schools are already in deficit (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-41388079>) there is a question as to whether the entire education system is financially viable. This is not a Northumberland or West Tyne specific issue.
- What is the current structure of schools (bearing in mind that this is very unclear as a result of the pending Hadrian's Trust consultation)?
- What do you mean by financially viable? That's not the same as asking a business if it's profitable because there are variations in economic factors at play that none of us can foresee that far into the future. In fact, with our private sector experience at play as well here, you couldn't even predict whether a business will be financially viable in 25 years and it's not a question that a commercially minded business leader would ever ask – they may ask what are the trends that may affect whether we can remain financially viable, but not this empty question, unfortunately.
- And what is meant by educationally viable? What is your criteria for educational viability? This can be looked at in many ways. Are all the schools operating at standards well below the majority of those in the Hexham Partnership educationally viable? Are we talking about attracting great talent to great schools with classes of a size at first school to give children every opportunity to be heard, understood and engaged with at a level that is not often possible in larger class sizes?
- We fully expect our school to be 'educationally viable' given the right support and opportunity. The question is whether educational viability is really at the heart of this consultation.
- Is this question perhaps a veiled two-tier/three-tier question? While the statistics can be used to make theoretical arguments about the relative benefits of two-tier vs three-tier, we'd suggest looking at the evidence as it stacks up right now. While there may be national averages that swing one way or the other, what's right for a large urban population in an area with high deprivation indices, is not necessarily true for a smaller, rural area. What matters is the outcomes for children as we keep being told in the press and in consultation events.
- So without a definition of educationally viable provided by NCC, this question has no real sense. If you want us to define educationally viable then we would say there is much of the current structure of schools that not only can, but perhaps should, remain educationally viable. In fact, it's probably a lot more educationally viable than other schools in the county who have had vast amounts of money spent on them and still provide their children with a failing and below acceptable education.

- The Hexham Partnership has operated way beyond the lines of 'educationally viable' for many years now – witness the quality of education provision in the partnership for a long time and witness the outcomes for children that lead in to the outstanding results and performances that QEHS currently, rightly, is so proud of. Those results are not made solely at QEHS, education is a journey. There is considerable evidence about the importance of getting children off the best start possible right from EY provision. The results that QEHS achieves are a testament to the work of the Hexham Partnership and its extremely strong community of heads, teachers and governors who all work together (although this has eroded sadly to a little degree in recent years as a result of changes brought about by Hadrian Trust) to provide the best possible education for children.
- The schools could all be financially viable if investment were made in education and the Government chose to invest instead of cut. NCC has made many decisions over the years to invest in education in Northumberland, sadly, just never in the Hexham Partnership area. We have a current national Government with an apparent agenda, but this is far from a fixed state of affairs. A change of Government could result in a complete change in the parameters of education in the next few years, let alone the next 25.
- We would be curious to know what work has been undertaken by those at NCC responsible for decision making to engage and understand the work carried out by the Hexham Partnership and how this information and insight is being collated and reviewed. At the consultation event on 18 January we did not once see the lead member at our table to listen to views, while we appreciate local councillors can provide that feedback to some extent it would be more encouraging to see a greater desire and depth of engagement than a 50 minute 7 flipchart exercise. What about asking for a meeting with heads of the partnership to talk through and review the way things currently work?

### QUESTION THREE

**Should schools in the west of the county receive additional capital investment and if so how should this be invested?**

- Yes. Fairly, where needed and with the best interests of pupils at the heart of decision making.
- We should have received this a long time ago.
- It is unacceptable how long this area has been wilfully underfunded and ignored. And it is a testament to the points made earlier, that the outcomes for schools in the West Tyne have performed so well given the lack of investment that has been a consistent factor for so long.
- While we agree as a Governing Body that the interests of the children must come first, there will be some important questions to be asked should a multimillion pound investment in an academy out of the control of the LA be made by NCC. This will be a focus of questioning for any future plans if proposed. Especially when the premise of academisation was to help address these issues.
- There is a strong feeling that years of under investment have been politically motivated in part and possibly because other areas have been louder in calling for it. We now face the challenge of catching up with where we should be now, let alone planning for the future. QEHS has been calling for funding for years and fallen on deaf ears at County Hall, so why should we believe claims being made about the Council's strategic oversight and ability to manage a MAT?
- How capital investment should be made depends, once again, on access to the relevant business cases, financial modelling and data that we simply do not have as a Governing Body.
- It will also depend on what scenarios are proposed. If there is a move to two-tier then clearly there will be capital investment required to convert some first schools into primary schools, but at this stage it's hardly relevant for us to comment on that as there is nothing on the table for us to review or base our decisions on.
- Equally, capital investment is purely one, albeit important, part of the picture. There is also the need to understand the fixed and running costs that emerge from any new structure or model in order to feel confident this is financially sustainable.
- Just under two years ago Hadrian Trust converted to an academy. At this point, as we understand it, there should have been a business case proving financial sustainability for a period of time. Any deficit over £100K should have been highlighted and the application either delayed or a DFE programme put in place to manage. In a very short space of time, the trust now finds itself declaring a very worrying financial position. This surely demonstrates the importance of a rigorous and credible financial case to be made for any investment.
- Do we want extra space? Yes. Is our small team of talented, passionate, experienced and utterly dedicated teachers making an amazing of job of working within tight spaces and less than ideal physical environments? Yes.

- Can we tell you right now what's needed and where it should be spent? No. Are we prepared to follow the obvious and call for a new high school in Hexham to be built? Not at the moment, no. Not until the case has been made more fully and appropriately if that's the direction of travel to be taken.
- Any investment in HLT needs to be done on the basis of open scrutiny of all financial data – there are big question marks hanging over the current situation and the public deserve to have the details to make their judgments. They should not simply be asked to approve investment without understanding why it is needed and why HLT has so far failed to deliver on promises made when it appeared to ignore the wishes of many in the local community and proceed to academisation in the first place.



#### **QUESTION FOUR**

**Do colleagues see any merit in the establishment of a local authority MAT and would your school want to join such an entity?**

With respect and regret our Governing Body cannot see the relevance or value of this question in any way shape or form.

- From what we currently understand there is a big legal question mark over whether this is even possible? We understand that the Council is proposing a MAT in partnership with other organisations and will be interested to see what happens.
- If the Council can make proactive movements around the establishment of a MAT then what other moves could the Council be making, as other local authorities have in the past, to seek and encourage potential providers of other alternative solutions?
- Secondly, it's like asking if we'd like to be in your club without telling us what sort of club it is, or offering you a job at our company without telling you what the company does or what the job is.
- What kind of MAT are you proposing? How do Church schools fit into it? What are the advantages? How would you sell membership to us?
- Would it allow the system to be maintained as it currently is? Would it be focused on saving money or saving schools? Would it help children to achieve even better outcomes than they already are? What would be the impact on travel distance, closure of pre-schools, class sizes, leadership, heads, governance structures?
- Our Governing Body stands ready to review a well thought out proposal for a MAT that answers the relevant questions and makes it clear what we'd be asked to sign up for.
- Until that point we cannot make any further comment whether in principle or in practice on the subject.

## QUESTION FIVE

**If you have any other ideas or proposals that do not fit with the questions above please attach them**

The following, in no particular order, are additional observations.

- We need to see the issues framed appropriately, with the right emphasis in the right places. As Andy Johnson stated that we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Haydon Bridge, what is being considered with other partnerships, e.g. Haltwhistle?
- We need to consider the choices parents make for their children and the extent to which parents deliberately choose schools for their children (cf NCC data on pupils and catchment areas) – many parents come here for the three-tier system and it's seen as a point of differentiation for many people moving out of urban areas (e.g. Newcastle) with young families. Remove this differentiation and that may have wider and currently unforeseen consequences for the economy of the area as a whole.
- We need to consider the mental health of young children – children may find themselves going from small, rural and strong communities into much larger class and school environments and travelling greater distances, affecting learning and social cohesion. This needs to be reviewed and discussed.
- It is our experience as Governors that being a smaller school enables our teachers to take a much more in depth approach to each individual child and address issues sooner and in greater detail. Larger class sizes at larger schools will reduce the effectiveness of this. At the last Chairs/Vice-Chairs meeting much was made of rising exclusion numbers and a lot of this was put down to children getting 'lost' or 'ignored' in the system at key transition stages, along with the pressures of time and resources to consider alternatives.
- This also applies to SEND issues (another factor also highlighted as part of the exclusion conversation) – SEND children achieve more in smaller situations where staff and children know and understand their needs.
- If NCC is set on a trajectory of school closure at First School level then the impact on small rural communities will also need to be taken into account. Selling school land for housebuilding may address 'budget deficits' but at what cost? This needs reviewing carefully.
- Any consultation that does take place needs considerable work to frame it in ways that make sense to parents and genuinely engage them. We are all aware of the traditional approach to consultation and existing documents show at times an obtuse language, lack of context for the data and methods that are stuck in the last century.
- What about a Facebook page to gather thoughts? How will you present the information in an interesting and relevant way? You cannot just put surplus places and predicted deficits four years hence in front of the public and expect them to understand that these figures are not atypical and understand what they mean.
- You will no doubt be aware that at time of writing the Hexham Courant has been running a poll on its home page to gauge the feelings of the local community in Hexham – 90% of those responding have stated they are opposed to HLT pushing

ahead with its plans to consult on two-tier – what is the Council's official response to this as this affects the Council's decisions? Investment does not have to go to HLT and it would be interesting to see the reaction if council tax payers' money was to be approved for a scheme that the community felt so strongly opposed to.

- Our concern is that we do not give enough time to review the value that already exists, explore fully the options and make sure that we engage properly and have the right conversations at the right time in the right way.
- There are many possible outcomes and our Governing body wants to ensure that we do not sleep walk our way into a pre-determined, headline grabbing quick fix that may not be the best solution. Hadrian's Trust should serve as a warning of how quickly grand plans and exciting futures can unravel...
- We also need to see detail on how the process will be managed. There will be considerable disruption during any period of change – how will this be managed, where is the risk assessment and what is the likely impact on outcomes for those thousands of children who will be caught in the middle of this disruption?
- What resources is NCC proposing to allocate to manage the project? How will teaching staff be retained? How will transitions be managed? It's all very well to propose major changes, but the devil lies in the detail and we are expecting NCC will provide a clear, detailed and robust roadmap so that parents can be clear what their children will be facing during the process.
- One option to consider is:
  - **Haydon Bridge School Years 9-12**  
Enable Haydon Bridge to develop its own unique identity through the introduction of a more creative/vocationally- based curriculum structure, which has the potential to grow a strong apprenticeship base. This innovative approach could inspire engagement with local businesses.
  - **b. Queen Elizabeth School Years 9-13**  
Retain the existing Year 9-13 structure. Parents may opt to send their children to QE to follow a more academically-focused curriculum

Potential advantages of such a solution include:

### **Inspiring, complementary but contrasting curricula**

Provided there is a robust, forward-thinking management structure in place, this approach could generate healthy competition between both schools, holding both schools to greater account and driving up standards. QE, for example, is already under competition from Newcastle College and there has been a steady drain of pupils away from QE, attracted by Newcastle College's facilities and greater opportunities. If it is to be financially viable, a more proactive approach is urgently needed by QE to identify why it is losing pupils at sixth form level

### **Giving back control to parents**

Giving parents the choice of two different curricula, tailored more to the needs of their child, is an attractive proposition for parents in west Northumberland, giving them back control.

**Cost-effective, financially prudent approach; greater emphasis on financial probity**

This proposal would mean that no additional building work, which is not necessarily delivered on time and within budget, would need to be undertaken. The existing buildings would need to be refurbished and updated but the cost of this would be at a much lower figure, would cause less disruption, and could be undertaken within a much tighter time-frame.

**Putting the needs of the local community first**

The uniqueness of the predominantly rural nature of the local community is a major factor. Retention of the existing first/middle school structure, which has a proven track-record of success throughout west Northumberland, would guarantee the continuance of the richness and diversity of local communities.

**Greater emphasis on standards and quality of education for all. Pupils take precedent over 'state of the art' buildings**

This approach places greater emphasis on the quality of education, standards and overall educational experience for the pupils. These take priority over questionable 'state of the art' new builds. People matter more than new buildings. Pupils are not commodities.

## APPENDIX 1

Copy in full of letter written by Dom Aldred, Acting Chair of Governors, Friday 19 January. This letter was written from a personal point of view and has subsequently been endorsed by the Head and Governing Body and should be considered as additional information as part of our formal submission.

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**From:** dom aldred

**Sent:** 19 January 2018 12:29

**To:** 'andy.johnson@northumberland.gov.uk'

**Cc:** Jen Stephenson (jen.stephenson@broomhaugh.northumberland.sch.uk); 'Paul.Rickeard@drmnnewcanglican.org'; 'wayne.daley@northumberland.gov.uk'; 'anne.dale@northumberland.gov.uk'; 'guy.opperman.mp@parliament.uk'; 'teamoppy@gmail.com'; 'educationconsultation@northumberland.gov.uk'

**Subject:** Major Concerns over Consultation Timings

**Importance:** High

Andy,

Firstly let me thank you and your team very much for the hard work and effort that has gone in to the consultation in education in the West Tyne area to date. I recognise the challenges that exist for the Council in managing this process and the fact that none of want to be in the position in which we find ourselves.

I also appreciate that efforts are being made, finally, to try and find the right solutions. I genuinely hope the best interests of children are at the heart of this process and not facts, figures, finances and places. These are part of the picture of course but they are not the only lens through which to view this process.

Secondly let me make it clear that (due the sharp timings at stake here) I'm sending this email from my own personal, perspective as current chair of governors at Broomhaugh First School and a parent with two children in years 4 and 1. As the disclaimer goes, these views are my own! However I am copying Jen in as head of Broomhaugh and she may well want to add her own views.

Thirdly, let me apologise for the length of the email, but the issues that came out of last night's meeting are too important to ignore or accept with question.

Fourthly, I have copied in your consultation mailbox and others, but because I feel this does need some urgent consideration – as was highlighted last night by many others and I want to shortcut some of the usual processes for communication due to the timescale. I hope you understand.

The point of this email is to challenge the timings of the consultation process and the impact I believe this is already having and may continue to have on the end result.

- It is clear that there is an untenable situation at Haydon Bridge and something needs to be done to protect the interests of those children. It is also clear that any decisions made by the Hadrian Trust may have a huge impact across all our schools and require a response.

- Change itself is not the issue, managing change in the right ways for the best outcomes for children is the heart of the issue. I have no inherent resistance to any solution, provided we can all be convinced it is the right one and the best one for tens of thousands of children over the coming years.
- As someone who was unfortunate enough to be flooded out of my home in 2015 and losing most of our belongings and having to move out of our home for a year, with two young children, I experienced first hand the strength of community in West of Tyne. There is an incredibly strong and resilient spirit and this is evidenced by the way the local Hexham Partnership schools have worked together for a long time, through many challenges, to continue to provide an excellent outcome for the children for whom all of us – teachers, governors, officers of the council, members of the council - are ultimately responsible.
- We will find a way to make the right decisions, but only if we go about it in the right way.
- This is why, for a number of reasons, I have major concerns about the way the consultation is proposed to run.
- Yes, the current timescale runs over six months, but what is more pertinent to me is to look at the timescales at key moments of truth along the way.
- Last night we had seven questions to answer in 50 minutes, each question had at least two and up to four sub questions. With a number of different perspectives around each table, you're simply not going to gather anything especially meaningful in that format I'm afraid. It feels like superficial consultation at best.
- I question the time allocated for pause and reflection on making sure we ask the right questions in the right way because that's crucial to the debate – to provide, for example, a question asking us (in your hand out) whether we believe schools will be financially viable for the next 25 years is, I'm sorry to say, daft at best. If you went back 25 years to 1993 who could have predicted the changes that we've witnessed in social, economic and educational terms?! No point in asking many schools if they've considered joining the Hadrian Trust MAT as they made it perfectly clear that they were not open to other schools joining them. It all feels very rushed and not as well considered as it could (that's not a criticism of the work of your team, it's a point about time and reflection).
- I equally question the time allocated to prepare for the public consultation – there is a lot of work and reflection to be done on making sure that questions and scenarios taken to the public are framed in the right way to help them understand the issues and provide them with appropriate ways to engage. Just uploading documents and asking people to submit written responses is a very old fashioned and unengaging way of getting interest. Public meetings tick a box but don't take into account those who don't feel confident speaking about complex issues in front of 'experts'.
- You had vastly experienced educational experts unable to answer some of the questions that were posed last night across all 7 flipcharts, which does not at this point fill me with confidence that the questions and scenarios taken out to the wider community will be focused, phrased and contextualised appropriately.
- We need to see current academic successes included to remind people of how strong the partnership in its current form is educationally, we need to see evidence of

travel times not just distance to school because in a rural area distance can be deceptive. We need to inform people that if certain proposals go through we'll be creating one of the biggest secondary schools in the country in a predominantly rural area, we need to see evidence of the impact on educational achievement in larger classes and primary settings, we need to see evidence of mental health and wellbeing for children in larger schools, with older children, stats on exclusions, behavioural issues etc.

- There's a big difference between being able to say 'we consulted' and actually delivering the right opportunities for people to engage. As I said last night, there's a need to put this in context for people – the gaps in capacity are the same across the county if you look at PAN vs allocated places data for first and primary schools for the last two years. In fact the Hexham partnership this year is showing a slightly better than county average. I assume that if you factor capacity figures in for all first and primary schools you'd probably find a similar correlation. Similarly, all schools are facing budget issues – in fact Government data shows that a third of all state schools are currently in deficit, not just predicting it a number of years into the future.
- In my business we carry out cashflow forecasting on a monthly rolling 12 month basis and have done so for 20 years. Our cashflow forecast always shows a worst case scenario and we are mindful of that, but we never hit it, because that's not how things work in the real world. So we need time and some expert views to put the data into context for people, just as we are able to put our forecasts into context.
- The current timescale allows a period between 26 January and 5 February to put together a consultation document and scenarios that will affect the future of education for the next 20 years. This has been repeatedly called a 'once in a generation opportunity' and so it is. I am deeply uncomfortable with the disparity between the proposed impact and reach of this process and the amount of time and scrutiny allocated, I'd be taking a lot longer than a week or so to be working out my options if I was planning for even my small business for the next 20 odd years. I think this would be open to a more formal challenge about process and robustness. I simply don't see how this allocation of time is in the best interest of educational outcomes and children's aspirations and opportunities.
- We've been asked to gather the views of our Governing body by a week today. Firstly Haydon Bridge have had a couple of extra days on us, so technically we're not being treated fairly, which may be open to a more formal challenge. While it may seem odd to pick over a couple of extra days, trust me right now this makes a big difference in time to discuss, find availability and write a considered response. Secondly, how is that going to be possible given that we have a meeting next Wednesday and, as so many people pointed out last night, many Governors are busy people who give up a vast amount of their time already but cannot all reasonably be expected firstly to be available at such short notice and secondly to have sufficient time to reflect, discuss, document and agree a submission response – I think we need a little real world perspective here. Otherwise this becomes both little more than a lip service consultation and misses the opportunity to get well considered and reflective insight from those close to the ground.
- I understand well the processes required in managing a consultation from a legal and statutory process and that Council mechanisms must be followed, but at the moment there seems to be more emphasis on giving the council and its members respect and time to hold its relevant meetings than in giving those you're consulting with the due respect and time to prepare and share their thoughts.

- We cannot ignore the very real prospect of another, parallel consultation from Hadrian Trust, potentially running at the same time. I appreciate the legal requirements for both, but that's not enough as a reason to then put the wishes, needs and considerations of parents, teachers, governors and ultimately the needs of the children second to process and box ticking. It is going to be an absolute joke if there are two separate consultations running concurrently and what message will that send out to parents and the wider community about where the interests of their children actually sit? More discussion is required on the best way to manage this collectively.
- I understand these are not easy questions to tackle. I appreciate there is pressure from the local media – maybe we should have a collective discussion with the relevant parties to present a united front and engage them more effectively?
- Haydon Bridge needs a resolution – there has been much talk of reclaiming the £1m paid to Bright Tribe. How creative can you be in finding an interim solution while the needs of all the other children across the two partnerships are properly considered and resolved? Is it possible to keep the school open for longer (with a clear way forward to be shown to DfE and RSC, that highlights the importance of carefully considering all options for the long-term)– yes at a cost, but what is the cost-benefit analysis on making such quick decisions on such a big issue?
- It takes time to be creative, it takes time to explore options. At the moment, to me, it feels, despite what is being officially said, that there is an unspoken assumption that Haydon Bridge High School will have to close – for sure that's a scenario that could be foisted on you by the DfE or RSC – but are all the options being properly considered? Back to my point about time and engagement.
- The current administration has made much of unpicking some of the errors and issues of the previous administration – witness Arch and the new Council HQ as two examples. I'm not making any judgment on those decisions, but I am going to highlight just how much more complex it would be to unpick a decision as major as the one we stand on the brink of right now. I respect the absolutely the role, responsibility, remit and experience of the officers and members of the Council. But there are many passionate, talented, experienced and creative people involved in education who need the right time and methods of engagement to make their contribution to this process too.
- We have had no discussion on predicted future numbers (I've looked at Government published data that shows the number of first and primary places predicted to remain pretty much constant in Northumberland for the next 10 years or so), we've had no scenario planning work to look at the key drivers shaping education (financials, population trends, social trends, urbanisation, Brexit, etc), as Jo Holmes mentioned yesterday, there are a number of other strategies that have a potentially very significant impact on the future of education around housing, planning etc.
- But we seem to be rushing on with some lightweight questions, asked in a very rushed format, with no time for Governors to engage that will be absorbed and turned into a proposal for my children's future and those of many thousands of other children, tens of thousands in fact if we factor in the next 20 years, within two weeks. That has to be called into question.



- It may be that this is not possible. It will certainly not be easy, but I think it is critical. Much has been said about not making this political and not shirking or hiding from the hard decisions. Maybe the first hard decision is to rethink the approach to consultation and scenario development?
- If this was a private sector business considering making an investment that will run into the tens of millions, with the wellbeing of tens of thousands of customers at stake and would frame the success of the business, there would be a far more robust business case and strategic planning process underpinning it.
- Otherwise all we're going to get is a document on a website, a few meetings in village halls, some coverage in the Courant, all underpinned by an assumption that we need to close HBHS, build a new school for Hadrian Trust, close a lot of successful and vital community schools, a lack of engagement from the community, a reinforcement of the belief that what we think doesn't matter and a high profile project for the Council to celebrate. That may be the best option. Right now there are many people far better qualified than me to be the judge who have major doubts.

I will conclude by thanking you again for all your hard work and the work of your team and apologising for the length of this email. I accepted a responsibility when I became a Governor to challenge where necessary, to review things from all angles and to put the best interests of the children and their outcomes first.

That is why I am sending this email and I hope it prompts some reflection.

Dom Aldred  
Acting Chair of Governors  
Broomhaugh First School

## APPENDIX 2

Copy in full of letter written by Dom Aldred, Acting Chair of Governors Thursday 25 January. This letter was written from a personal point of view and has subsequently been endorsed by the Head and Governing Body and should be considered as additional information as part of our formal submission.

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**From:** dom aldred

**Sent:** 25 January 2018 08:43

**To:** 'andy.johnson@northumberland.gov.uk' (andy.johnson@northumberland.gov.uk)

**Cc:** Jen Stephenson (jen.stephenson@broomhaugh.northumberland.sch.uk); Sue.Aviston@northumberland.gov.uk; 'educationconsultation@northumberland.gov.uk' (educationconsultation@northumberland.gov.uk); 'anne.dale@northumberland.gov.uk' (anne.dale@northumberland.gov.uk)

**Subject:** Follow on from last night

Andy,

Thanks again for your time last night, I hope you didn't get into too much trouble with a later than planned return home.

It was helpful to have representatives from the two partnerships in the room together and I was encouraged by the declared willingness from HLT to work as collaboratively as possible with NCC, though the proof of that particular pudding will be very much in the eating and my personal jury remains out for the time being.

There are a number of questions that arise for me at this point out of the meeting and I would be interested in a response to them:

### 1. Presentation of information

While you were at pains to emphasise that the consultation remains open right up till the last minute and that may be technically true, we all need to recognise there are in reality a few key bites at the cherry along the way. The first proposal taken to the public will set the context for the debate, once figures, facts, interpretations, first possible solutions are out there, many will make their mind up very quickly. So we have to get it as near to right first time as we all can. Yes, schools can and will play their part in communicating with parents but it will be in everyone's interest to make sure we don't slide into a view that NCC or schools have got it wrong. I appreciate your frustration at what

you described as sniggers relating to information errors, but perhaps you can acknowledge that this reaction is may be a reaction to an ongoing frustration at the accuracy of data? We are being asked to make very significant decisions based on information provided and if this isn't right, then it doesn't set a great tone. We have been trying to get simple errors in our school budget addressed (e.g. incorrect paygrades allocated despite numerous attempts to correct this) to no avail.

Equally, as I have said before, we need to be very careful about the presentation of information - £350m/week for the NHS sounded like a great headline grabbing figure that made simple sense of a complex debate at the time. That's not worked out so well since. My concern is that the surplus figures and budget deficit figures could become your £350m a week. We all recognise that some change is required and schools face a tough time in years ahead (when has it been any different?). However, I would like to be reassured that the correct context will be applied when data is given as part of the consultation.

For example. A number of schools are predicting a deficit, we are among them. However, it should be made very clear that a prediction of deficit is no guarantee of deficit even under the current structure. For years our school has carefully managed its budget, used all available options to roll budget over and manage costs to avoid this ever becoming a reality. People need to be aware that the deficit predictions highlight potential problems, but not that they are a guarantee of deficit.

Surplus places. Much has been discussed about this. We need to see figures presented that show where these gaps are and what they mean in actual numbers – for a small school a little variation can have an apparently dramatic effect on percentages. If four families with two children move to our village and put their children into the school at years 1 and 3, for example, that's over 10% of our total places filled. So let's be clear about where these places are, because they're far from evenly distributed across the schools and the partnerships as we all well know.

I'd also like NCC to be very clear about what a surplus place means. Right now, council communications has already resulted in figures being widely bandied about in the media on surplus places. However, I have been led to understand that your calculations on what a surplus place is are derived from looking at catchment pupils living in the area, rather than actual, physical surplus places in the school right now. That's potentially very misleading to the vast majority of people – most of the heads and governors I've spoken to made the reasonable assumption that 'surplus places' means those not currently filled. NCC must be 100% clear on what is meant by surplus places and must also show current surplus places (as in PAN vs allocated places gap) as a comparison. I believe this is, if the actual source of figures is calculated in this way, let's call it naïve at best as to how a less well informed audience will read your figures and misleading at worst. Let's show the numbers as well as the percentages. I learned a long time ago how percentages on their own were not a viable way to understand data at a smaller school in particular.

## **2. Source of solutions**

I felt there was a clear call from you last night for schools to come up with solutions. I think the feeling I got from the room and from conversations is that schools are willing to do what they can to propose other options. However, I would like to point out a few issues with that.

NCC does have a role to play in proposing alternative options – you made much of the strategic oversight and cohesion offered by NCC and this, if ever there was, is a time to put your money where your mouth is. I take your point about explain and explain again on the role of the LA, but let me play that back to you with my own explain and explain on the reality of running a successful and strong school (heads) and volunteering your time (Governors) to remind NCC that many don't have either the depth of strategic experience at NCC nor endless hours to devote to devising solutions and modelling them with the level of strategic insight NCC has declared it has. Yes we need to keep remembering what the Council can and can't do, but that works both ways. It is, I understand, for example absolutely the opportunity of the LA to invite alternative providers to the table, I believe this is exactly what happened in Newcastle. What more can be done to help schools consider options, who at the LA is looking at the alternatives from a strategic oversight and cohesion point of view and feeding them in?

So I'm afraid I feel deeply uncomfortable with the level of expectation and pressure being put on schools and governors to come up with alternatives. It's important to say that if (and I'm sure it won't) a document is put to the public at the next stage in mid Feb and makes any reference to schools being asked to come up with options and not doing so there or that simply that schools have not put forward alternatives then there will be an immediate and very public challenge.

Without a fuller understanding of the legalities, financial implications and other issues it's a very challenging task. You pointed out how hard it was for the LA, that doesn't make it easy for schools. Yes, difficult conversations need to be had, I quite agree, but we need a collective leadership to drive it from NCC.

## **3. HLT funding**

I know that we need to find solutions to very pressing problems. And I agree that politics should not come into it wherever possible. I would argue that it is precisely politics that has led us to where we now with years and years of politically motivated criminal underinvestment in the Hexham partnership and some pretty questionable decisions across both partnerships at political level, but let's leave that for now.

I am very uncomfortable with this idea that NCC should just write a cheque to HLT. I was reassured to some extent by Sue's response to my question, but many questions still remain. Ultimately, I would like to know what the potential scope for terms and conditions could be should tens of millions of pounds be invested in a school that only recently chose to cut itself off and paddle its own canoe.

There are many questions about the financial viability of HLT that need to be scrutinised more transparently to ensure the community understands what it is being asked to support, should a proposal be made to invest local tax payers money in an academy that cannot be called to account. If you do due diligence on a business before making an investment you need to demonstrate that to all potential investors who have a stake. All tax payers have a stake as they are all potential investors in HLT, so I would like to know exactly what information would be requested from HLT, what you know about the way the school is run, what you have seen about their financial planning. To be clear, I'm not pointing blame or making assumptions, but there are some major concerns about the way HLT is currently reporting figures, and questions will be asked along the way.

Here's a specific question (and I may be showing my naivety here) – can an academy reverse its decision? I've seen suggestions that where an academy is struggling this may be an option. Fair to say that HLT is struggling right now. Could that be made a condition of funding? I'm not asking whether it would ever run that way, but from a purely legal standpoint is that an option? I know you can't tell the academy what to do, I get that. But I'm interested to know what powers as a Council you do ultimately have available to attach to large payments. This is about exploring all available options and testing the water with what may be new and untried solutions – being creative. Much has been made by the current administration of financial mismanagement and bad deals made by the previous administration – so what can we do to protect our investment, should one be made. If the view is that we have to give HLT the money but we can't do much beyond retain an interest in the buildings and give them free rein to run the school as they like then I think that's a concerning position to be in.

Would be very interested to hear your thoughts.

Dom