

Email Correspondence regarding missing modelling evidence

From: dom aldred

Sent: 02 March 2018 08:32

To: 'Andy Johnson GCSX'; Deborah Anderson

Cc: 'educationconsultation@northumberland.gov.uk'

(educationconsultation@northumberland.gov.uk); Paul.Rickeard@drmnewcanglican.org; Jen

Stephenson (jen.stephenson@broomhaugh.northumberland.sch.uk);

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(guy.opperman.mp@parliament.uk); 'anne.dale@northumberland.gov.uk'

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Subject: RE: Increasingly concerned about a lack of response

Andy,

Thank you for taking the time to respond to my questions in detail. I do entirely understand the pressure you and your team are under at the moment, as I'm sure you understand the pressure Governors and head teachers are under in responding to the consultation in the most responsible, appropriate and effective manner.

I don't think there is much point in meeting at this time, but, again, I appreciate the offer and your willingness to allocate some time to discuss.

My responses to the points you made are set out below and I would appreciate it if you can ensure that these views are taken into account as part of the consultation, but I do not expect a reply unless you feel that there is a misinterpretation that needs to be corrected.

While I accept that I cannot perhaps 'fully appreciate the process or circumstances behind the consultation or the ongoing work of the local authority', I have worked on many consultations for clients over the years and have a pretty good idea of what's involved. I also think that if I, as a very involved individual am, as you indicate, unclear about these things then there's also a challenge to the Council to help the wider community understand these issues better.

I do not expect to be fast tracked to the top of the list in the face of many, many other questions you're no doubt dealing with, which is why I aimed to simplify my request and I think the answers are actually pretty clear as put in your email.

You ask for me to quantify my 'evidence' on the matter of many parents feeling the information is not presented in a parent-friendly way and offers little in the way of genuine engagement opportunity. OK. I'm a parent, I'm a Governor, I am friends with Governors at other schools, I am communicating with Governors at other schools who I've not come across before, I run a football team for local children, I'm active in the community and a member of the local flood group, I have many friends and acquaintances that I meet on a social level, at swimming lessons for my kids, I work with people who have children in the local community. I am talking to lots of different people on a daily basis.

I consistently hear that people don't really understand the reasons for the consultation, they can read what the Council is putting out, but they don't understand how and why the issues relate to the proposed solutions. Many parents don't know whether the proposed options will actually deliver what they're intended to. More or less everyone feels that the Council will do whatever it wants regardless of feedback – witness what happened at HLT (not your issue but unfortunately you

cannot dictate to parents how they should feel about their wider experiences), witness what has happened in other local areas, witness the opposition to Bright Tribe at the time and subsequently. Many parents feel they're being asked to comment on options without being given the full picture of how these options will actually solve the problem. That's one of the reasons why I sent my original email.

So, I'm afraid I can't quantify and provide you with any form of specific evidence – but I'd suggest you look at the various petitions and campaigns being set up, the polls on the Hexham Courant website, the feedback being gathered by many schools. People don't understand why this has to happen, they don't want it to happen and they don't see how these options proposed will improve education in the area.

Finance and surplus places are largely what the Council have positioned as being at the heart of this through your two consultation documents. That's how it's been positioned and how it's being perceived in my experience as detailed above.

You have stated that you don't believe working up detailed financial models (and I'd include surplus places models although you made no reference to this aspect in your email despite it being a key question in my earlier correspondence) is the best way to bring about clarity.

I think it's exactly the best way to bring about clarity.

Later on in your email you state that the point of the process is 'to seek consultees views on what they believe would be the most educationally effective and financially sustainable model of education in the west.' This, I think, makes my point probably more simply than I could.

How can anyone state a view on what would be financially sustainable if you're not showing the financial impact? I don't know whether closing these schools you've proposed will deliver a surplus budget or still run at a deficit in places? You're proposing to close some schools that could be larger than ones staying open as I understand it. What level of surplus will be created, what could this be used for, how would it help improve the quality of education?

In essence we're being asked to trust that these models would deliver financial sustainability based, according to your email, on a general principle that closing some schools ought to save some money. But by how much? These are major changes and many parents I've spoken to are simply unwilling to accept the proposed changes without understanding what benefits it will bring in more detail. It's a general intent and nothing more at the moment and while I don't disagree with it, we need to understand what it means in practice.

Let's be honest, we're seeing in Brexit now the unravelling of promises and claims made with intent but no real understanding of the detailed implications. That's the world people are seeing and perhaps that adds to their suspicions right now. Increasingly people want to see evidence and detailed plans. They don't believe big claims and promises made without evidence.

That's maybe part of the issue with the way the consultation is being run. We're being sold a once in a generation, £50m, 'unique and innovative' solution, but being presented with what many feel is simply a blunt instrument, deployed on an intent and general principle that closing schools will save money, and absolutely no evidence to show the real implications.

That's why I think due diligence is exactly the right phrase to use at this point. There is the future of our children and a lot of money at stake. I take your point that modelling will need to be done at a

later stage. But either the views of people in this consultation matter or they don't and a decision or preferred option already exists. If the views actually do count and people have a chance to influence it, then it's no good to give them the implications once they've made a choice.

I think it's a nice idea that you want to look at what people would ideally want, not what's the most cost-effective model, but I think that's a little unlikely based on the fact that the council launched this consultation with a massive focus on cost-effectiveness. If you ask most people what they want I suspect you'd find (based on all the meetings I've been to, all the conversations I've had with other governors, school leaders, parents and community members) they'd say 'the same as what we've got now but with better investment in some school facilities.'

You've indicated that this is not going to be possible, and that budgets are a big driving force behind it, so I think it's a little naïve to expect people to respond without giving them a better insight into the financial viability of proposed options.

And I think it's important to focus on surplus places. I have no idea what your three options would mean for capacity at individual schools and the partnerships as a whole. I don't know what buffer you're building in based on your proposed closures and whether this is in line with predicted demand over the coming 25 years.

I appreciate your time and your work and I know this is a very challenging time for everyone involved, not least the Council. I maintain some major reservations about the process and the information being supplied. I did try and find the FAQs section on your website this morning and couldn't find a link to it anywhere, but that may say more about me!

I don't think we're going to reach a point of agreement on this. Ultimately I don't see how you can credibly ask people to make judgments on the educational and financial sustainability of models when you're not giving them the necessary information to make that judgment. Unfortunately I think the approach to the consultation, regardless of whether it's following due statutory process or not, is causing more harm than good— potentially setting schools against each other, causing concern and distress among parents and having a huge influence on teachers and Governors. The legacy within the community is likely to be significant.

However, I suspect that we both have better ways to spend our time and agree that lengthy email dialogues is not an appropriate way forward.

Thanks once again for taking the time to reply in some detail.

All the best,

Dom

Email from Andy Johnson, shared with Andy's permission.

From: Andy Johnson GCSX [mailto:andy.johnson@northumberland.gov.uk]

Sent: 07 March 2018 08:19

To: dom aldred; Aviston, Sue; Lorraine Fife

Subject: Re: Can I share your email please?

Dear Dom

It would not be appropriate to share the entire e-mail without the context. However I would be happy for you to share the main response outlined below, I have clarified a few points:

Response

We hold detailed financial information on all maintained schools. These details can be found in the minutes of the school's forum papers and papers and documents presented to the Family and Children's Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet over the last two years. However to work up detailed financial models on 30 schools over 4 potential options is not in my view the best way to bring about the clarity you desire for parents. While the detailed financial impact of these models is a key consideration, it is not the only one.

When the informal consultation concludes a detailed analysis of the proposals made by schools will be provided in the report that is published at the end of April. Please remember that no options have been decided upon and the 3 models are simply scenarios to stimulate debate - not options to choose from. A further alternative proposal may be arrived at or the cabinet may decide to take the consultation no further.

However some general principles are clear, for example that the merger of two schools could create annual revenue savings through reduced staffing, reduced fixed costs. The allocation of fewer lump sums, as part of the funding formula could potentially be shared with other schools in the county increasing their funding. While the school land and buildings of closing schools may generate monies through potential land sales that could be reinvested in school buildings; there may be some impact on the Home to School Transport budget also but all of these factors would be reported on at the next stage of the consultation in detail, if and when a preferred model for statutory consultation was reached or the decision was taken to not continue with the process.

However, financial planning would not end at the end of the consultation. Even if no changes are made at the end of the consultation there are some individual schools who currently have a financial deficit and are predicting a deficit for the next three years and do not have any plan in place to recover this position. So detailed plans would have to be put in place by individual schools to become a recovery plan with potential agreed deficit budgets to be agreed by the council

Academies are not able to have deficit budgets because the Department for Education does not allow this.

The point of this current informal process is to seek consultees views on what they believe would be the most educationally effective and financially sustainable model of education in the west, whether that happens to be one of the 3 models presented or an entirely different model or maybe no change at all, not what is purely the most cost-effective model based upon detailed financially modelling.

20 of the 32 schools in the west were in favour of a consultation (12 did not reply) because they expressed a desire to discuss the position and come up with solutions.

Should the consultation process move on to the statutory stage, the Council would have to put forward one preferred model for statutory consultation; this would have to provide the detailed rationale for the proposal, including its impact across a range of schools, local factors such as finance, community, educational standards and so on.

Frequently asked questions are now available on the council's website which address a range of issues.

I am still happy to meet with you to discuss these issues if you think that would be useful

Best Wishes

Andrew Johnson
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Wellbeing and Community Health Services Group
Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Morpeth
NE61 2EF
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PA – Deborah Anderson
Tele: 01670 622764
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On 1 March 2018 at 08:52, dom aldred <doma@gardiner-richardson.com> wrote:

Andy,

Thanks for getting back to me. I still feel the questions are being avoided to be honest. The ones posed in my last email are very simple yes or no questions that you and your team will already have the answers to and could easily have been responded to in your email below in a matter of seconds. You'll understand that this leaves me with the clear impression that the answer is no, and that modelling has not been carried out as part of due diligence.

Please do understand that I appreciate the challenges the Council is facing and I appreciate the work that is going in to the consultation. My aim is not to be confrontational nor disruptive and actually we're all looking for ways to work constructively with the Council to find the right solution.

However, you're aware of my concerns that have been raised throughout about the effectiveness of the management of this process. Many, many parents I've spoken to have found the consultation dry and hard to understand, despite repeated claims for the Council to present the information in a parent-friendly way. It offers little in the way of opportunity for genuine engagement at this point.

The information I'm after will enable us to respond properly and with our own due diligence and responsibility to the consultation.

I would like to meet with an officer of the Council to discuss these as a matter of some urgency, probably once the snow passes.

Please let me know how we can get this set up. The questions I will be asking are those set out below, three simple questions with a yes or no answer. I still feel it would be a much better use of my time to get a reply on email that should take about two minutes to send.

But if agreeing to a meeting is the only way to progress this then I am prepared to take time out to do so.

Many thanks,

Dom

On 1 March 2018 at 08:24, dom aldre <doma@gardiner-richardson.com> wrote:

Dear Andy and fellow officers,

I am now finding the lack of response (and even a basic acknowledgement) to my very reasonable and pertinent questions set out below both concerning and slightly dismissive and insulting to be honest. We want to engage and support this process, but cannot do so without crucial information vital to any sensible and serious discussion.

These questions make perfect sense in light of the approach the council has taken to the consultation and are questions that I know have been asked by many others.

I have heard it reported that officers have stated that no modelling has yet been done and that it is too early to do so because to publish these details might influence the perceptions of those responding to the consultation.

If this is the case then I think that it is incredibly concerning – the whole point is to influence people's views on which options they think might be best and to deliberately withhold or fail to provide information that could influence people's views is directly contradictory to the whole ethos and principle of an open, fair and robust consultation.

I will ask one more time, respectfully and politely, whether you can please respond to my concerns and request to provide either the information or state the council's position and if you cannot then I will have to take that to mean that essential modelling has not been carried out to back up the potential closure of up to 16 schools and the investment of c. £50m. I will also be left with no option but to take continued silence to indicate a lack of willingness to engage with Governors and education leaders despite claims made to the contrary in social media and the press.

Many thanks, as always, for your time and respect for the work that is being carried out by a vast army of non-paid volunteer Governors who are giving up enormous amounts of effort to respond.

Dom

From: dom aldred

Sent: 27 February 2018 09:03

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

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

Subject: Urgent follow up on request for analysis

Importance: High

Andy,

I hope the consultation event in Haydon Bridge went well yesterday, I look forward to hearing about the outcomes.

Following up on my email last week, to simplify a response in the short term and enable me to answer questions put by other governors and parents, can you please reply in the first instance to the following questions simply to confirm what planning has been done.

Your consultation asks whether respondents “believe that Model A represents a good option for securing sustainable and viable education in the west of Northumberland”. Without the necessary information on financial and surplus places modelling that supports each of your models it is simply impossible to answer this question to any meaningful degree and very major concerns are growing about the robustness of the consultation as a result.

1. Has the Council modelled detailed budget forecasts for all schools proposed to remain active (taking into account changes to the funding formula, impact of predicted additional pupil numbers and additional associated running costs) that show financial sustainability for each school under each of your three models? YES/NO (delete as appropriate).
2. Has the Council modelled detailed expected Capacity/PAN/Roll figures for each individual school proposed to remain active under each of the three models (including details of in vs out of catchment pupils) so that we can see the predicted surplus places figures for each school and the partnerships as a whole as a result of the changes you're proposing? YES/NO (Delete as appropriate).
3. Has the Council thoroughly modelled capital investment and building plans for all schools on a school by school basis based on the Capacity/PAN/Roll figures to create viable learning spaces that will take into account new facilities required, e.g. our school does not have the physical capacity to take on many more pupils so if we take on Whittonstall pupils and, under a primary model, two new year groups, what planning have you done for our school to allow for additional class room space, shared communal areas and enlarged staff room to take into account the proposed changes? As far as I am aware no-one from the Council has visited the school to look in detail at the physical space requirements under your proposed plans. YES/NO (Delete as appropriate).

At this stage I just need to know whether this planning and analysis has been carried out or not, so this should be a very simple and therefore speedy response, as it's a simple yes or no answer.

I look forward to a prompt reply in either the affirmative or negative to enable us to focus our considerable time and effort in engaging with our stakeholders and working to a response that does justice to the future of all our children in the West Tyne area.

Thanks for your time as always,

Dom

From: dom aldred

Sent: 23 February 2018 11:01

To: 'educationconsultation@northumberland.gov.uk'

(educationconsultation@northumberland.gov.uk); 'andy.johnson@northumberland.gov.uk'

(andy.johnson@northumberland.gov.uk)

Cc: 'anne.dale@northumberland.gov.uk' (anne.dale@northumberland.gov.uk);

'guy.opperman.mp@parliament.uk' (guy.opperman.mp@parliament.uk); 'teamoppy@gmail.com'

(teamoppy@gmail.com); 'Paul.Rickeard@drmnewcanglican.org'; Jen Stephenson

(jen.stephenson@broomhaugh.northumberland.sch.uk); Sue.Aviston@northumberland.gov.uk;

'wayne.daley@northumberland.gov.uk' (wayne.daley@northumberland.gov.uk)

Subject: Consultation Model Missing Vital Information

Importance: High

Andy,

Appreciate you're not doubt deluged with emails at the moment, but I would hope you or one of your officers will be able to respond with some urgency to this request.

Much of the premise of this consultation is being led by stated concerns with surplus places and financial deficits, much is made of this in the consultation document you have recently launched for obvious reasons.

However, at no point, anywhere in the proposed models put forward is there any detail on the modelling of how your proposed options would address these two main issues. This is surely a fundamental weakness in process and will be open to challenge if not addressed – you're giving people a problem and then asking them to respond to proposals without showing clearly and simply how these proposals will tackle the problem.

I am assuming that you must have carried out detailed modelling on the impact on both surplus places and predicted deficits of your proposed options, because that is essential for the proposals to carry any credibility with stakeholders concerned.

I think it is therefore essential that you publish as matter of extreme urgency two things:

1 – what you anticipate the surplus places would look like under all of your three options – across both partnerships, for each partnership and down to individual school level. You have published this for the 'now' so we must see your predictions for the 'next'.

2 – predicted 2/3/4 yr budget forecasts for all schools under the new model – this will need to take into account changes to the funding formula, impact of additional pupils at schools and a consideration of any additional running costs (e.g. extra teaching staff required etc). You've listed predicted deficits under the current model, so must surely have developed forecasts on a school by school basis for the future options.

Without this information in the public domain I personally struggle to see how any of your proposals can be credibly reviewed and assessed, because you do not make clear how your proposals will tackle the issues you dwell on at length in the document.

You make your case for the problem but not the solution.

We will be engaging with staff, parents, Governors and the local community imminently and a lot of people are preparing to put a lot of effort in to responding to your consultation but without this information it becomes largely a pointless discussion or at least one where the Council is not presenting a proper, fair, robust and credible response.

I am sure these proposals would not have been put forward to the public without this level of due diligence given everything that is at stake – not least the amount of money you're preparing to spend. I, and many I have spoken to, would hope that the current administration is taking a credible, responsible and thorough approach to the decisions and spend of public money – much has been made recently of the poor management of spending under the previous administration, which is why I am sure this information must surely exist as part of your planning under the current administration.

I look forward to a prompt response in order to enable us to consult on a meaningful basis.

Thanks again for your time,

Dom Aldred

Acting Chair

Broomhaugh C of E First School.

Email Correspondence regarding concerns with consultation process and management (before document produced)

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

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 Consulation 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 a 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

Email Correspondence with Guy Opperman's office regarding concerns with consultation process and management (before document produced)

From: Guy Opperman MP [mailto:teamoppy@gmail.com]

Sent: 01 March 2018 19:06

To: dom aldred

Subject: Re: Education Consultation in the West Tyne

Dear Mr. Aldred,

Many thanks for your recent message, which I passed on to Guy last week, in order to ensure that he was aware of your concerns.

Guy has asked me to share with you his formal response to the NCC consultation (attached), and to let you know that he has visited schools in Otterburn, Haydon Bridge, Ponteland and Mickley since we were last in touch. Guy has also met staff and students from Prudhoe's Adderlane Academy, and he was due to visit two further schools tomorrow, but these trips have been cancelled, regrettably, due to the adverse weather conditions.

I hope that this information is of use.

With best wishes,

Lewis Gray

Caseworker

Office of Guy Opperman MP

On 22 February 2018 at 13:29, dom aldred <doma@gardiner-richardson.com> wrote:

Hi Lewis

I would be interested in an update on Guy's plans to visit affected schools. You will be aware no doubt of the growing concerns among Guy's constituents about the Council's plans to close up to 16 schools in rural communities, with massive impact on the future of education in Guy's constituency. You said that Guy was planning to visit schools in the next fortnight – can you confirm which schools he has visited, bearing in mind that this email is now four weeks old and which schools he intends to visit in the future. Also can you confirm what, if any, conversations Guy is planning to have with his constituents around this topic?

Many thanks,

Dom

From: Guy Opperman [mailto:teamoppy@gmail.com]
Sent: 23 January 2018 14:36
To: dom aldred
Subject: Re: FW: Major Concerns over Consultation Timings

Dear Mr. Aldred,

Many thanks for your e-mail regarding NCC's ongoing education consultation in the west of Northumberland. I've passed your message on to Guy, in order to ensure that he is aware of your concerns.

There are over 40 schools in the Hexham constituency, and Guy has visited every one. He is particularly involved with schools that have recently experienced difficulties, such as Adderlane First School, Ponteland Middle School, Whitfield Primary School and Prudhoe Castle First School.

Since December, Guy has had multiple discussions with the local authority, parents and headteachers regarding the education consultation, though it has to be said that he does not have control over this issue, as the matter is devolved to NCC. Guy spoke to Council Leader Peter Jackson about the consultation on Friday, and he intends to visit over the coming fortnight some of the schools that may be affected. Guy also sent letters last week to the Department for Education and Ms. Janet Renou, the Regional Schools Commissioner.

Thank you again for taking the time to get in touch, and please be assured that Guy's first priority is to ensure the best possible educational outcome for the children of the Hexham constituency.

With best wishes,

Lewis Gray

Caseworker

Office of Guy Opperman MP

On 19 January 2018 at 16:49, dom aldred <doma@gardiner-richardson.com> wrote:

Hu Guy,

Would be particularly interested to get your thoughts on concerns raised below. The consultation on the future of education in West Tyne is arguably one of the most important debates we are likely to have in your constituency for many a long year and will affect every aspect of life in some way – from the impact of potential closures of rural schools, the relocation of vital pre-school places, standards, prospects, attractiveness of the area for new residents, etc etc.

As far as I can tell, and I may have missed something (!), there's nothing on your website or blog that refers to this. There may be statutory reasons why this is the case, in which case I for one would find it helpful to understand this and I know I'm not the only one.

We're talking about major investment, infrastructure, recruitment etc and this cannot be allowed to happen without the right discussions. Under current proposed timescales and working methodology I can't see how this will be achieved. In which case we're left with the distinct view that this is not a genuine consultation but a fait accompli to be spun as a consultation. I'm not sure members and officers have any real idea of the strength of the Hexham partnership and the challenges that lie ahead.

To be clear, I am not opposing the principle of change in any way at this stage, I am challenging the process for robustness, rigour, due diligence, responsible use of council funds and, most importantly, whether these timelines and processes genuinely have the best interests of our children and community – your constituents – at heart.

Look forward to hearing from you,

Dom