

Bellingham Partnership Schools' response to NCC proposals June 2018

1. The Bellingham Partnership of Schools (First + Middle) serves an area in excess of 400 square miles. There is a single Governing Body.

Bellingham First School [BFS] provides education for most of the 4-8/9 year olds of Bellingham, the largest centre of population in North Tynedale and Redesdale.

Bellingham Middle School [BMS] has the second largest catchment area in England if not the whole U.K. and merits special consideration owing to this geographical situation.

Together with the pre-school provision on the same site, BFS and BMS offer co-ordinated care for children from 0-13 living in the whole of this deeply rural area which covers the full extent of Redesdale (Carter Bar to Elsdon) and North Tynedale from Wark to the Scottish border (just beyond Deadwater).

2. With many of the pupils living in remote locations, Bellingham Partnership of Schools offers a wide range of distinctively local Enrichment activities. These include Forest School with outdoor activities in the environs of Kielder village, the Horsley Organ Project at Rochester, dance (including traditional English ceilidh dancing) and folk music (with some pupils learning the Northumbrian pipes), singing, wildlife gardening and a wide range of sports such as orienteering.

As the children move on to the 9-13 Middle School age range they are offered further developmental opportunities. The many options introduced in the last two years have included STEM Challenges (Science, Technology, Maths and Engineering), drama (leading to fully inclusive musical productions), debating, first aid, fitness for life, boccia, bikeability, handball, children's yoga, textiles and Spanish.

In surroundings characterised by hill farming and forestry the Bellingham Schools' contacts can lead to work experience in agriculture, horticulture, woodcraft, tourism, the hospitality industry and openings for working with the disabled at the Calvert Trust adventure centre and with Kielder Observatory, VARC (Visual Arts in Rural Communities with artists in residence based at High Green) or wildlife conservation.

Amongst partners with which BMS has worked, one was Forest Enterprise managing the reintroduction of water voles. The school has also worked in partnership with Bellingham Heritage Centre, St Cuthbert's Church, Northumbrian Water (Kielder Reservoir), the National Trust, Hawkthirst Scout Activity Centre – as well as further afield with Kingswood and the Hexham Book Festival.

3. In the local culture children and adults work together on equal terms where pupils develop their music and drama and art in school whilst participating in the Tasset community ceilidh band or the Bellingham and District Dramatic Society.

The vibrancy of local life arises partly because of the remoteness from other centres of population. Some BMS pupils travel as much as twenty miles from their homes to get to Bellingham. It would then be almost another twenty to get to Hexham.

To get to Bellingham children aged 9-13 are already travelling more than an hour a day in each direction. It must be remembered that it takes considerable time to get from a remote farm or hamlet onto the public road to meet the minibus – which then takes several detours to pick up other children before arriving at Bellingham.

If BMS were to close, children as young as 10 or 11 would be travelling up to two hours each way – up to four hours daily out of their lives! If children had to travel all the way down to the Tyne valley to secondary school for year 7 aged eleven, there would be no opportunity for pupils to stay for after-school clubs and join in activities such as those listed in section 2 above. Not all parents can afford to take children that distance by car and there is no public transport to the outlying areas.

The distance to Hexham or Haydon Bridge is too far for 11-year olds on a daily basis. Safeguarding and duty of care responsibilities would be difficult to ensure on long journeys and the journey would be in breach of the 2014 Home to School Travel and Transport Guidance on enabling children to reach school “in reasonable safety and comfort and in a state that is conducive to study”. That would be difficult to achieve for younger children and those with special needs.

The detrimental impact of travel times on children's physical and mental health, wellbeing and successful progress cannot be underestimated.

4. If Middle Schools are to be kept in Hexham, then parental choice requires that a Middle School should also be available for North Tynedale and Redesdale. Removing that choice would be discrimination against the rural children whose parents live and work in Kielder Forest or the National Park, around Kielder Water or on the surrounding fells, all of which contribute to the tourism which Northumberland County Council is happy to promote. If families have to move out because there is nowhere near enough to educate and socialise their children, without this working countryside the economy of the whole area under discussion would collapse and the communities would die.

5. The Governors' initial response to Northumberland County Council's consultation was to support model A and to maintain the education of pupils on the Bellingham site up to 13 and beyond. It was a shock to find that the next stage of the consultation contained a very different final proposal.

Not all of the six First Schools involved can succeed as very small Primaries.

The timetable for implementing change is totally unrealistic. There are questions that need to be asked about the sustainability of our smaller rural schools; and there is real concern that

there is inadequate time for constructive changes to be achieved in a matter of mere months if a transition to Primary is brought forward by a year. That is a year earlier than the proposals previously presented to us. Key Stage 2 children could be seriously affected by this revised timetabling.

If Haydon Bridge High School are to be given three years to adjust, then justice demands that Bellingham Schools should be given the same length of time.

By sustaining 4-13 in Bellingham (and allowing for developments at either end of the age range) Bellingham Schools will be able to offer specialist support to the other five schools of North Tynedale and Redesdale, given that BFS has a retreat room dedicated to supportive and stimulating time out, and BMS facilities already exist to offer dedicated rooms for woodwork, I.T., science, maths, art, food technology, and proper stage facilities for drama and music. The three-tier system has served children living in this environment well and should be continued in these remoter rural areas.

That way Bellingham Schools will develop successfully as they continue to prepare local children to take their place in the community as happy, responsible and well educated members of society.