

Beaufront First School

Governing Body's Response to Northumberland County Council's Consultation about Education in the West of Northumberland

Part 1

These are the views of Beaufront First School's Governing Body in response to the Consultation about Education in the West of Northumberland. It is the response of the Full Governing Body.

Parts 2, 3 and 4 — Views on models A, B and C

1. Having read the consultation document thoroughly, we do not believe that any of the potential models represent a good option for securing sustainable and viable education in the West of Northumberland.
2. Whilst the response form asks for views on what are described as "proposed options", we note the assurance within the consultation document that these are merely "potential models" presented to aid the consultation process. We are grateful for the repeated assurances that have been given by councillors since the publication of the consultation document that (a) the Council is highly receptive to alternative ideas/proposals and (b) it is not, in fact, proposed that large numbers of schools will close in any new model of education provision. As such, it seems reasonable to conclude that NCC does not suggest that any of the potential models actually represent a good option for securing sustainable and viable education in the West of Northumberland.

Our Reasons

3. We do not believe that any of the potential models represent a good option for securing sustainable and viable education in the West of Northumberland because:
 - 3.1 There is no evidence that any of the potential models will improve educational outcomes.
 - 3.2 There is a serious risk that such dramatic changes, particularly the closure of many small rural schools and, in models A and B, a high school and/or five middle schools, will be detrimental to educational outcomes.
 - 3.3 The Hexham Partnership overall enjoys very good educational and pastoral standards. Those standards should be promoted and, ideally, exceeded. We should strive to improve on what we already do well and extend those standards to all schools in

Northumberland. None of these potential models is likely to fulfil that aim, but there is a significant risk that what is presently done well will be damaged.

- 3.4 Such extensive changes will be highly disruptive to the educational journeys of the children and to the strong partnerships of schools.
- 3.5 There is no evidence that any of the potential models offer greater financial viability either collectively or for individual schools.
- 3.6 On the contrary, every school closed will result in a loss of £110,000 capital funding from central government plus £16,000 PE funding for schools with primary age children. Taking sparsity funding into account, Model B produces the most significant loss of funding of circa £1,540,000 each year, whilst Model A produces the “best” loss of circa £990,000 each year. These are enormous losses in the context of our school budgets.
- 3.7 Whilst the consultation document contains no analysis of the impact that closure of large numbers of schools will have on the local communities that they serve, nor on the local economy more generally, it is overwhelmingly likely that such closures will have a profound and, in some cases, devastating impact. The schools suggested for closure/merger are in many cases an integral part of the local community, and often the very reason that families move to an area. We will discuss this further in relation to Beaufront below.
- 3.8 Part of the rationale for the proposal for change is the surplus of places overall within the 2 partnerships. We understand from discussions with NCC that this issue is driven by concerns raised by the Department for Education. We believe that there is an underlying lack of understanding on the part of the DfE in relation to the geographical challenges within this part of Northumberland. In the case of a small rural school, a small number of surplus places can appear as a large percentage: in practical terms, one or 2 families moving into an area (often because there is a good local school) results in those “surplus” spaces being taken. We trust that NCC will ensure that the DfE is provided with the necessary information to enable them to achieve a proper understanding of the situation. Ultimately what matters most is educational attainment and financial viability, rather than whether there are surplus places on the basis of PAN.
- 3.9 In any event, most surplus places actually lie in the larger schools. These might appropriately be reduced by rationalisation of buildings / sites, particularly in the context of the clear existing need for building works.
- 3.10 All potential models reduce dramatically parental choice in the appropriate school for their child. Reducing parental choice is wholly inconsistent with Government policy. In model B, there will be no choice at all in relation to secondary education and in model A there will be only limited choice up to year 8. Real parental choice is a necessity rather than a luxury, particularly in an area with the unique geographical challenges presented across west Northumberland. It inspires parental confidence and engagement, and promotes inclusion. One size does not fit all, as the experiences of many of the children

in our school have shown: a steady number of our pupils transfer to Beaufront having failed to thrive and progress in their catchment school; we are sure that this is also the case with other schools.

- 3.11 All models will result in significant travelling issues for many children and our local transport networks.
- a) Closure of small rural schools (all models) will result in very young children requiring school transport around rural areas. Aside from issues of cost, we believe that it is a highly undesirable situation for young children.
 - b) Closure of one high school (models A and B) and/or 5 middle schools (model B) will result in the need for transport of hundreds of children to and from Hexham. Assuming that local transport providers have the capacity to provide transport (we anticipate that this may itself be an issue), this will be costly, will increase substantially the already significant congestion in and around Hexham, will result in an extended school day for pupils, and will reduce the opportunities to participate in after-school enrichment activities.
 - c) There are obvious negative environmental consequences of a significant increase in the use of road transport.
 - d) The consultation document points to the fact that many parents already choose to transport their children to schools outside their catchment area: whilst this maybe correct, it is one thing for a parent to make such a choice for their child but quite another to have no choice in the matter.
- 3.12 Model A will result in one very large high school serving the whole of west Northumberland. Model B will result one of the largest secondary schools in the country. We have expressed our concerns in this regard in our response to the HLT consultation, a copy of which is attached at appendix 1. Good schools attract families to west Northumberland. In the event that the “super-school” formed in models A or B suffers a reputational / performance drop, there is a serious risk of wider economic consequences should west Northumberland becomes a less desirable place in which to live.

Concerns

4. NCC are already aware of the concerns that we share with many other schools with regard to the consultation process and the adequacy of information provided to potential respondents, as summarised in a letter from 15 schools dated 21 March 2018. We have been assured that NCC will take specific notice of this collaborative and consensual letter.
5. Individual responses received in relation to parts 2, 3 and 4 of the Consultation must be considered carefully in light of the information supplied to respondents because:
 - 5.1 The way in which the consultation is presented is such that many respondents do believe that they are being asked to choose one of 3 options, due to the way that the

response form is worded (see paragraph 2 above). We know this from the feedback that we have received from staff, parents and carers in our school, and from others in discussions at public meetings.

- 5.2 Whilst the majority of schools did agree that there should be a consultation, it is not the case that the majority of schools agreed to a consultation that anticipated such extensive closure of schools.
- 5.3 It has been a challenge to respond to this Consultation and that of HLT simultaneously but with different time lines. We appreciate that this unfortunate lack of constructive co-ordination lies in the hands of HLT. It is most regrettable that the assurance from HLT that they would work closely with NCC so as to “dovetail” the consultations has not been fulfilled. We appreciate that this puts NCC in a difficult position. NCC will no doubt appreciate that this also causes difficulties in responding to this consultation. It would be helpful to know how this will be factored into the NCC analysis of responses to the consultation.
- 5.4 There is an immediate and understandable inclination for respondents to “pick” the “least worst” model for their school, particularly in circumstances where they perceive these to be the options from which they must choose. This is particularly so in the context of the HLT consultation. This assertion is based on feedback we have received from parents and staff, and through discussions held at the public meetings in Haydon Bridge and Hexham.
- 5.5 None of the potential models include any analysis of the expected improvements in educational outcomes each model will deliver, nor of the potential risks inherent in such model.
- 5.6 None of the potential models include any financial detail or modelling that would demonstrate the financial impact of each and enable respondents to judge comparable viability.
- 5.7 The models do not take into account changes in Government funding for schools. The consultation document suggests that these changes will make the overall financial position of our schools worse and the case for change greater, when it is not at all clear that this will be the case.
- 5.8 None of the potential models include any information about the wider risks or benefits to their local community.
- 5.9 The lack of information set out in 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7 above has an impact on the ability of respondents to make an informed choice with regard to these models and has made the requirement that schools consider and develop their own alternative models particularly difficult.

Part 5 – Alternative Proposals

6. Beaufront is a popular, successful and sustainable school that delivers excellent educational outcomes and an outstanding educational experience within a nurturing, supportive and inclusive environment. We are a pro-active member of the Hexham partnership. As a governing body, we have planned that this should continue to be the case for the foreseeable future whatever system ultimately prevails, by further development of what we offer to the families choosing our school and what we can share with (and beyond) our partnership schools.
7. In this section, we set out our vision and proposals for securing sustainable and viable education in the West of Northumberland. We then discuss the position of and our plans for Beaufront specifically.

Securing sustainable and viable education in the West of Northumberland

8. Educational outcomes in the Hexham partnership are, overall, very good. The results achieved by our children at Beaufront (our KS1 results for all subjects were in the top 10% for attainment nationally) and in many other first schools, the results produced by Middle Schools at Key Stage 2, and the results produced by QEHS at the end of this educational journey provide clear evidence that the system for the education of our children in the Hexham Partnership is working well. We must strive to exceed these achievements and extend them elsewhere.
9. These outcomes have been achieved in a 3 tier system. For the reasons set out in the response to the HLT consultation (see Appendix 1), we continue to believe that the 3 tier system best suits west Northumberland, given the nature of the population spread and the numbers of small first schools. We must remember that accessible and appropriate education may, of necessity, look different in different areas.
10. However, we believe that it is important that we do not become fixated upon whether the system is 3 or 2 tier – or, in some areas, a mixture of both. We must focus instead on what we are trying to achieve for the children in west Northumberland. What is ultimately behind the success of the schools in the Hexham Partnership? Inspirational teaching and learning opportunities improve outcomes regardless of the system. Together with strong pastoral care and carefully managed transitions, these are the keys to success.
11. We should aim to offer real parental choice. We believe that this is a necessity rather than a luxury, particularly in an area with the unique geographical challenges presented across west Northumberland. It inspires parental confidence and engagement, and promotes inclusion. One size does not fit all, as the experiences of many of the children in our school have shown: a steady number of our pupils come to Beaufront having failed to thrive and progress in their catchment school, and we are sure that this is also the case with other first schools. We understand that there are similar transfers for similar reasons in middle schools. In middle and high schools a reasonably proximate alternative school is crucial for children who need “a fresh start” and this can prevent exclusion.
12. We appreciate that a solution for the situation that has regrettably developed at Haydon Bridge High School must be found. It must, though, be the right solution for that whole

community and must not be one that adversely affects either the Hexham partnership schools or the other schools within the Haydon Bridge partnership. Short term subsidisation of HBHS (or any school) should not be considered “wasted” if it allows the time to find the right solution, both from educational and financial sustainability perspectives.

13. More broadly, we appreciate that finances are an important factor. It is unclear if the proposals around the majority of the school closures proposed in the consultation would lead to cost savings: as illustrated below, closure of Beaufront would reduce income by more than it reduces costs. We acknowledge that the large financial deficit at HBHS (and perhaps those predicted elsewhere, about which we know less) will need to be tackled. In doing so, we are sure that NCC will see the “bigger picture” when it comes to education. Putting money into education, either as capital or as an annual spend, is not to be considered a subsidy but an investment in the future of our children. As a visionary local education authority, we are sure that NCC will see this as a worthwhile investment. Safe, happy, healthy children who have been educated to achieve their maximum potential will become happy and fulfilled adults, able to make a positive contribution to society and significantly less likely to present a future burden to other public services or health care.
14. We identified in paragraph 10 that the keys to success are inspirational teaching and learning opportunities together with strong pastoral care and carefully managed transitions. We believe that this can best be achieved by close and dynamic collaboration between schools: essentially, an “improved and enhanced” version of the excellent working relationships that schools already enjoy, with greater scope of sharing facilities and teaching provision. Essentially, the keys to success can be delivered in an economically viable and sustainable way.
15. Accordingly, we support the “Collaboration Hub” proposed by Corbridge Middle School as a means to facilitate such collaboration openly, constructively and supportively. We believe that the proposal can be developed and refined by:
 - a) Analysis of the particular strengths of each school, so that such strengths can be shared with others;
 - b) Identification of areas that could be improved in each school, so as to benefit from the strengths or facilities of others;
 - c) Identification of common needs, that might be shared through capital funding;
 - d) Careful grouping of schools, so as to best match overall mutual benefit, with collaboration across hubs to accommodate more specific requirements and share more specific strengths;
 - e) Greater collaboration in curriculum development – both within educational tiers and between them.
16. This must be a dynamic process approached openly and within an environment of safety. We would welcome support and guidance from independent professional educationalists in steering this process. It is likely, ultimately, to result in a re-shaping of the way in which education looks in the west Northumberland over the forthcoming years, but this will have

been achieved through a process of careful collaboration to produce a demonstrably effective system.

17. The Collaboration Hub could plainly incorporate Haydon Bridge High School: there is every reason why a school that has suffered the difficulties experienced at HBHS over recent years would benefit greatly from supportive collaboration. We have already indicated in paragraph 12 above our view that the right solution for the whole community around HBHS should be found. As a small first school in the Hexham partnership, we are happy to share what we feel makes us successful but do not feel further qualified to advance a solution. However, we understand that an interesting and constructive proposal has been advanced by HBHS. If that proposal is supported by the local community and by other schools in the Haydon Bridge partnership, it is our view that it ought to be supported by NCC.
18. We accept and support the proposition that capital funding should be made available to QEHS/HLT. However, any capital contribution from NCC must be conditional on a long-term agreement with HLT to ensure that they respect the views of elected members and their communities (council tax payers), as expressed through this consultation process.

Beaufront's Position

19. Each of the three potential models proposes that Beaufront will close or merge with Acomb First School. This would not be in the best interests of either school, educationally or financially.
20. Beaufront is a popular, highly successful and sustainable school, which is of crucial importance to our local community. We plan to remain such a school for the foreseeable future whatever system ultimately prevails. We believe we have an important part to play in the future of education in west Northumberland.
21. We are a popular and viable school:
 - 21.1 Our PAN is 15, which we understand to be the number that NCC considers to form the basis of a sustainable school. We have 70 children on the roll. We have the fewest number of spare places in the Hexham Partnership and have plans to ensure those spaces are filled (see below).
 - 21.2 The consultation process highlights the fact that most of our pupils live "out of catchment": this has caused us to reflect carefully about the reasons why Beaufront is such a very popular school. In doing so, we have held meetings with staff, parents and members of our local community, and have reached the conclusion our popularity lies in our ethos of inclusivity. A school was established at Beaufront in the 1890s for the children of those who worked or lived on the Beaufront Estate, on the premise that they should all have access to an excellent education whatever their abilities. That inclusive ethos has prevailed ever since. Over the years, numbers of children in the immediate area of Beaufront have gradually decreased, yet the school has grown and grown. We are proud of the fact that parents choose to send their children to us: they do so for many reasons but, most commonly, for the nurturing environment in which we teach the children and in which they thrive.

21.3 The relatively low numbers of pupils from within the catchment area reflects the way these areas are defined and the currently low numbers of first school-age children living within our area. It is not a reflection of the lack of importance of the school to our nearby residents or, indeed, to the extended community which the ethos and values of the school creates.

22. We are a highly successful school:

22.1 We are Ofsted "Outstanding". Whilst NCC have suggested that this is of limited significance, there have been no events to trigger any further review since our last in 2011, and our results since then have clearly given no cause for any concern;

22.2 Our SIP reports are consistently good;

22.3 Our KS1 results for all subjects in the last academic year were in the top 10% for attainment nationally;

22.4 This is achieved as a result of the skills of our teaching and support staff, who know each individual child incredibly well. A steady number of children come to Beaufront having failed to thrive in their previous school or non-school based pre-school provider. We have a deserved-reputation, upon which we intend to build, for enabling children who struggle with low-level learning difficulties to fulfil their potential, whilst also ensuring that children of all abilities develop strongly, as evidenced by the high numbers of pupils achieving "greater depth".

22.5 We believe that we can share our skills in this respect with other schools, whilst retaining and building upon our success.

23. We are a sustainable school:

23.1 Budget forecasts in 2016/17 identified the potential for deficit if no action was taken, under deliberately prudent assumptions around income and expenditure levels. We would like to stress that Beaufront has never run a financial deficit and do not believe it will in the future.

23.2 We have significantly reduced the previously predicted deficits as a result of prudent financial management. We do not in fact expect to have a deficit in the future. A summary of our most recent budget predictions is attached at Appendix 2; more detailed financial analysis is available should that be required.

23.3 We have also made additional plans to increase financial robustness, whilst also enabling additional investment in education provision. These plans, pre-dating this consultation, include an extension of Beaufront's offer to include nursery and out-of-hours provision. An application for Community Powers has been made, and we refer NCC to the Business Plan submitted in support. We understand that this is considered to be a good application but that no decision can be made until the outcome of the Consultation is known.

23.4 If the application is granted, we predict a financial surplus, even on the most conservative of income forecasts, which surplus will be invested in education provision.

- 23.5 Our plans with regard to Community Powers address also the overall sustainability of the school. Whilst we have few surplus places, our aim is to have none; we are acutely conscious of the need to maintain our popularity and to meet the needs of our families. The research we carried out prior to making the application for community powers revealed that many other families would choose to send their children to Beaufront if we offered nursery and out of hours provision. We believe that this also explains why some families within our catchment choose different schools.
24. We are at the heart of the local community:
- 24.1 Beaufront provides the only community facility for the whole of Sandhoe, Beaufront Woodhead, Oakwood and the surrounding farming areas;
- 24.2 We fulfil many community functions: for example, serving as a polling station, hosting parish council meetings, and hosting (and participating in) the local horticultural show;
- 24.3 Beaufront itself is a community and supports many families in that respect. We benefit greatly from a vibrant and effective Parent Teacher Association;
- 24.4 Our children engage with the local community regularly, and enjoy what we strongly believe to be mutually beneficial engagement with senior citizens within the community.
25. We take seriously the need to remain a sustainable school, financially, educationally and in terms of ensuring our numbers remain high, whatever system prevails. For example:
- 25.1 Our plans to extend our offer to include nursery and out of hours provision were formulated for those very reasons.
- 25.2 All staff appointments are made with a view to enriching the curriculum and enhancing learning opportunities. For example, we have recently appointed a new catering manager. She is a qualified teacher with business experience. As well as ensuring that the children are provided with a delicious and nutritious meal, we expect that we will be able to:
- a) Involve children in devising menus, as part of their work on healthy eating;
 - b) Offer age-appropriate food technology lessons;
 - c) Offer a “field to fork” experience in conjunction with our school gardening projects;
 - d) Extend our offer to the local community.
- Once in place, we are keen to explore how we can share these projects and services with other schools within the partnership.
- 25.3 We are actively pursuing capital grant funding for various science-based projects.
26. We dealt in paragraphs 9 and 10 above with our position regarding 2 or 3 tier education. In all the decisions that we have made with regard to the future sustainability of Beaufront over the last year or so, the lack of certainty with regard to whether a 2 or 3 tier system that may ultimately prevail has been an important strategic consideration. As a successful

and sustainable school that delivers excellent educational outcomes and an outstanding educational experience up to year 4, Beaufront is well-placed to continue to provide such outcomes and experiences in years 5 and 6 as a primary school. We recognize that this would require careful planning. It would also require one-off capital investment to fund the necessary additional classrooms. We are very fortunate to have the space (and a supportive landlord), such that additional classrooms required as a primary school could be accommodated if required.

Merger with Acomb?

27. We do not believe that this would be in the best financial or educational interests of either Beaufront or Acomb. We attach as Appendix 3 a broad comparison of the financial position of individual v merged schools.
28. It is difficult to see why NCC would suggest this merger. In practice, the two schools are not sufficiently geographically proximate for parents to see them as natural alternatives – a problem compounded by the lack of any public transport. A merged school would have to anticipate numbers based on combined present PANs but would not meet the needs of both communities, so that there is a serious danger that it would end up undersubscribed. A merger with a PAN of only 75 would in practice not be a merger as it would imply one school with the same number of pupils currently at Beaufront.
29. We understand that Acomb shares our view that merger would not be in the best financial or educational interests of either school.