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Berwick St Mary's CE First School Governor response to consultation on the future of Berwick Schools

Dear Members,

The governing body of St Mary's fully appreciates the challenges faced currently by the Berwick Partnership, with declining pupil numbers, issues of financial sustainability for schools, a lack of local SEND provision for some learners and poor outcomes for many children at the end of their educational journey within the current 3-tier structure. We also recognise the significant loss of children to neighbouring areas is damaging the partnership now and in the long term, and that we must act quickly to reduce this loss of children and revenue to our schools. We can only do this by improving the attractiveness of the partnership to families and high-quality teaching staff, which will in turn improve outcomes and experiences for all. We believe to achieve this aim and build a stronger and more appropriate educational experience for our children now and for future generations, we must create educational provision that is fit for the current educational system (i.e. the National Curriculum) and provides the opportunities and skills required by all our children to succeed in the ever-changing workplace. The Governing Body of St Mary's believe firmly we should be moving to a 2-tier structure as soon as possible.

As a Governing Body we have faced many challenges over the last 7 years, ranging from the journey out of Requiring Improvement, to Covid and currently a school rebuild due to Storm Arwen. We therefore understand the impact change has on staff, children and families therefore see the need to do this structural change to our educational provision in a process that prepares all, is well managed and above all quick. Especially as this consultation has been lengthy due to the need for equity and fairness and all members of the school community are now anxiously waiting to see what the final outcome will be. Once the decision is made we would hope changes would begin in September 2024, as this will enable our school partnership and wider community to begin the process of change and reduce the anxiety we all currently feel. Although we might not have new buildings in place as per any proposed final solution for Berwick, effective use of the well-publicised over-capacity within our current provision could enable all to begin developing the new Partnership model sooner rather than later.

In terms of managing change, we believe schools within our partnership have always shown a capacity to adapt and overcome, therefore we are confident the final decisions will be implemented coherently if the schools are supported proactively and allowed to manage what will no doubt be a bespoke final offer to our community. Quality educational outcomes rely on the quality of the teaching staff. As such the proposed change to 2-tier should utilise the strength of resources we currently have in personnel within the schools, but also be an opportunity for CPD and the sharing of good practice from across the region. We would respectfully suggest the negative experiences of

changes in other areas, be used to support the staff from facing similar challenges within the Berwick partnership. This will reduce the pressure on staff, whilst supporting stronger outcomes for our children.

Berwick schools have a good reputation for inclusive practice, yet we are still sending a significant number of children outside of the partnership to access appropriate support for specific needs. Within a 2-tier structure St Mary's would like to expand its offer for SEND, which in Berwick is sadly lacking in the areas of SEMH, ASD and ADHD. The school in partnership with Berwick Academy will provide a continuous and integrated provision for children, supporting some of our most vulnerable children and families. In a 2-tier structure the school would like to offer children with SEMH, ASD and ADHD a more long-term solution through the development of a Specialist Support Base, that not only offers assessment and support for families and other schools, but long-term placements which through our dual offer (that includes access to mainstream primary education), will enable children to receive a full curriculum. Our SEND provision will be part of a wider Berwick SEND offer as we will work collaboratively with the Grove Special School and Berwick Academy, enabling a flexible approach to meeting the needs of individual SEND learners now and in the future. To ensure the new provision is fit for purpose and provides best practice, we would request that additional provision is built to support these children appropriately, whilst enabling staff to do their job effectively. Investment in the Early years and primary stages will reduce the burden later on, therefore although initial capital expenditure would be required, over the long-term a reduction in children within specialist or alternative provision will save finance and resources, as more children access mainstream education and the opportunities it provides.

As a Governing Body we realise the importance of effective financial management in providing the tools to realise our vision and ambition for the school community. Despite a declining roll which is now stabilised and starting to grow again, we have always been able to deliver our ambitious curriculum, through the tough choices we have had to make to enable the staff to have the resources to do the job required for the children. Since September our head teacher has implemented this model at Norham First School, which under his executive leadership is now starting its own journey of improvement, with excellent progress already made in starting to secure its long-term financial sustainability within a teaching hub model. In the restructure of the Berwick partnership we would propose to formalise that offer with a hard federation between Norham St Ceolwulf's CE First School and also include Tweedmouth Prior Park First School. This federation between schools will improve long-term financial sustainability working in a model supported by the DFE's current promotion of 'family of schools' initiative, that supports the development of good practice and provision with shared resourcing, etc.

We would request that to support all parties through the transitional phase in to 2-tier consideration would be given for additional funding for CPD for staff, but also to meet the needs of the children who will be directly affected by any changes. Our research shows the need to support these groups is critical not only for the children's outcomes, but also to ensure the wider partnership are successful in overcoming barriers of change that can negatively impact on school performance, which when schools would

be more accountable for key stage results will be measure of progress our community will be monitoring.

Rationale for 2-Tier

Examining the proposal purely in terms of educational outcomes the Governing Body has listened to the expertise within the staff of St Mary's. We would like to highlight the following key factors that have been instrumental in our final response:

1. A 2-tier model is designed to fully support the implementation of the National Curriculum and the teaching of key stages.
2. In comparison with a 3-tier approach, a 2-tier approach reduces transitions from 2 to 1, with the transition being at the end of key stages rather than part way through. This not only has positive impacts on student well-being (i.e. fewer transitions enabling stronger relationships and support networks to develop in a 2-tier model), it also means schools have full accountability for key stages, therefore students will receive continuous provision through a defined key stage, rather than the part provision currently received, which no doubt has an impact on final outcomes at Key Stage 4 and beyond, (see point 3).
3. Outcomes in education are based on many factors but primarily it is the relationship between student/families and school that is a major determinant. We would like to highlight the following:
 - a. In a 3-tier model the time to develop purposeful and impactful relationships with students and school is as follows:
 - First school - Nursery to Year 4 = 6 years
 - Middle school - Year 5 -Year 8 = 4 years
 - High school - Year 9 Year 11 = 3 yearsIn a 2-tier model the time to develop purposeful and impactful relationships with students and school is as follows:
 - Primary school - Nursery to Year 6 = 8 years
 - Secondary school - Year 7 -Year 11 = 5 years
 - b. Within a 3-tier model, the high school, which arguably is the most important phase in terms of recognised outcomes, (i.e. nationally recognised qualifications - you don't often see reception baseline and Key Stage 2 SATs results on CV's), offers the shortest period of time with the students, which undoubtedly impacts on outcomes.
 - c. Within the first term at high school in Year 9 the students need to make life choices around the educational/vocational pathways they wish to take, and the staff in the high school, who have in real terms just started a professional relationship with the children, have to support that decision in the best way they can. This high pressure, time restricted approach can lead to errors, as staff will not know the true strengths and passions of any child so quickly, not least because these decisions are being made during a period of transition, when the true potential of a child is often hidden by a desire simply to survive in a new setting and to fit in. Furthermore, it is very important to note the age of the children at this time - they are teenagers, many of whom will be going through puberty, which in itself poses a whole new set of issues and challenges as they try to make the best choices for their future.

- d. One of the strengths of St Mary's and we suspect many schools in Berwick is the relationship between school and home. This vital relationship supports children when they are struggling, but also ensures we have a fuller picture of the child's strengths, so working together all parties can ensure the child's potential is realised. These relationships to become trusted and valued require time, therefore a 2-tier system will provide the time required for those trusted relationships to develop in Key Stages 3-4 far more effectively than at present.
4. The vast majority of staff within the Berwick partnership are trained as Primary or Secondary teachers, so there is already the expertise within the partnership to manage and deliver this change of structure well for all children. The national offer for teacher training is primary and secondary, so why are they not making the most of the training and CPD opportunities available to our current staff. There is also the capacity within the partnership to deliver effective CPD to those staff who will require additional support and high-quality training. For instance, several schools within the partnership work with teaching schools around the region, therefore a more strategic network is also available. At St Mary's and Norham all staff are primary trained and we have staff with experience of teaching Years 5-6 to outstanding levels, an experience which I am sure is available within other schools in the partnership.
5. Schools taking responsibility and accountability for whole key stages enables the delivery of a truly cohesive and progressive curriculum - the aim currently seen as the main driver in excellence within education as envisioned by DFE and OfSTED. It also reduces the need for repeated testing and assessment within key stages, as teachers/schools have a more robust continuous knowledge of the child, their achievements and their areas for development, simply because they have supported the child throughout their whole journey within any given key stage. For instance, children would not have to go through the baseline assessments during Year 5 which are currently needed as a means to secure an element of 3-tier transition. As a primary school we will know our children exceedingly well as they enter years 5 and 6, therefore we will be able to prepare them fully for the requirements of the end of Key Stage 2 SATs, without the need to teach to tests, so they maintain their love of learning.
6. In answer to the challenge that our staff are not specialists' teachers, when compared to the experience of children in a 3-tier model. We would like to highlight again that we are trained as primary teachers and practitioners, as such we have experience of years 5 and 6, having been trained to teach within the current National Curriculum.
7. Access to extended curriculum experiences are built into our curriculum offer like the 20,000 plus primary schools in England. As a teaching staff, we would like to emphasise we are not trying to break away from the national expectations for good quality teaching but align with it for the betterment of our children and community.
8. Transition within the current 3-tier model is not a strength of the partnership, with poor links in curriculum progression that means the implementation of sequential knowledge and skills within key stage 2 and 3 is not as impactful as it could be within single key stage settings. Within a 2-tier model, transitions can be more dynamic, as the children are starting a new key stage. Baseline assessments as currently practised would not be required, as this element

would be completed through the Key Stage 2 SAT's which are a nationally moderated assessment.

9. In terms of recruitment and retention of educational staff, which is an essential resource in the delivery of all our aims for the Berwick partnership, we feel it is very important that the partnership moves to a 2-tier model. As Governors we recognise the current 3-tier model limits opportunities for career progression as we staff are unable to utilise their full training as primary practitioners. This we feel is a major factor why Berwick struggles to attract a wide pool of high-quality candidates for any vacancies. Why would a new teacher join a school if we cannot offer the full range of professional experiences and so limit their career progression? This impact is also seen in the high school who have even greater challenges recruiting specialist staff.
10. We would also point out that any staffing requirements in a change to 2-tier should in the main be achieved through the support of displaced staff via targeted and bespoke CPD. Berwick has the capacity within its current staffing profile to meet the needs of the proposed changes of structure with a limited loss of jobs. All that is required is strategic management of the process and to have a commitment from all parties involved to achieve our primary aim of improving outcomes for children.
11. The 2-tier model provides the partnership with a more robust approach to the financial sustainability of the locality. It is clearly evident that pupil numbers are declining, reflecting the changing demographics of Berwick. A planned structural change is therefore required to prevent an unmanaged and long-term structural decline of Berwick educational provision. An unplanned restructure would undoubtedly result in a reduction in standards of education achieved; more schools closing than currently proposed; and a negative effect on the appeal of the Berwick area to any new families coming into the area. Such an unplanned change, will also impact on recruitment and retention, with the high possibility of good staff having to move away to further their careers in the future.
12. As a Governing Body we would like to highlight the fact that if we maintain the current 3-tier model, then we will dilute the potential impact of the investment into Berwick schools. As members of the local community with children across the partnership, we acknowledge investment is required in many areas of our provision. For instance, if we were to remain 3-tier then we would need to invest in refurbishing our middle schools and their specialist provision at the same time we are hopefully building a new high school. Surely this will mean rather than being able to invest in a state-of-the-art provision on one site that provides a level of future proofing for our children, we will have to do it on 2 or more sites, this will surely dilute the impact of the investment in our children's future, as our available investment will be limited therefore what will emerge is an improvement on what we have now, but will it really be the provision and structure we need for our children to succeed in 10-20 years' time.
13. Although not proposed in this consultation, the importance of long-term financial sustainability will also need to be addressed, with models such as those proposed for Norham and St Mary's (hub models) being a means to ensure long term success and survival. As a Governing Body we feel the benefits of bringing small schools together ensures a brighter future for our children and staff.

SEND Proposal

The Governing Body have considered the issues around SEND within our local community and the wider context. We fully support the development of additional provision for the existing and emerging SEND needs, especially the increasing needs for SEMH in Early Years and Key Stage. We also recognise the need to support an increasing number of children/ families dealing with issues related to SEMH and that any new provision should have the capacity to support families as well as the children.

As a Governing Body we fully support the proposal from St Mary's and Berwick Academy to create a new collaborative offer to meet the needs of SEMH and other complex needs within our locality, therefore would fully recommend the proposal for consideration under this consultation. We recognise the challenges this new provision will bring to the school, but we are resolute in our belief St Mary's has the staff required and ethos needed to ensure these children will succeed.

As a Governing Body we would like to highlight the impact of Covid on children's mental health, resilience, emotional presentation/development, early years development is just emerging and, as such we believe this consultation and any proposed changes should invest in the correct provision and resources for now and the long-term. This again may include the need to further develop, with the locality joint work, 'a family of schools' approach as currently being suggested between St Mary's and Berwick Academy. In addition, as part of a hard federation with Norham, we would like to support this work for our rural families when applicable and appropriate.

Early Years

As a Governing Body we have personal experience of the provision for early years in Berwick and recognise the great work done by many of the providers already in the town. However, current providers are based south of the river and as such the communities including ours north of the river are at a disadvantage in terms of access and finance. As we live through the current cost of living crisis, we would respectfully ask that consideration is given to those families and the possibility of relocating any of the current providers north of the river. A parent on low income using public transport would pay a minimum of £7:20 per day to get their child from Newfields to Surestart, which although may seem like a little expense, for some of our families it is simply not an affordable option, therefore their children go without the vital social experiences of early life to get them school ready.

Please note before Covid the school had operated a very popular 2-year-old provision which the Governing body supported, with the impact in school readiness evident in how well our children adapted into school life during their transition into nursery. This provision demonstrates the need for pre-school provision within the locality, therefore adds weight to the argument we should be looking at providing more equality of pre-school provision across the partnership.

Wooler and Belford

As a Governing Body we would like both schools to stay within the Berwick Partnership, as we believe they add strength to the partnership in terms of the current and future potential of our joint educational offer. However, the decision is for their individual communities to make, but note the positive experiences of families coming to Berwick academy last year as expressed at the Wooler public consultation event, should hopefully allow our partnership with Wooler to continue.

Summary

In considering how best to support the children of Berwick achieve the outcomes we want for them all, the Governing Body have considered all viewpoints and consider the only viable educational structure moving forward is the 2-tier option. The reasons above clearly set an evidenced based rationale for the change, but also highlight the benefits of change will bring.

With the needs and solutions identified our greatest challenge will be the transition itself, and again as a Governing Body we are resolute in our belief that this change needs to be prepared for but rapid, with a start date of September 2024 a realistic option for us all.

Submitted on behalf of the

The Governing Body of Berwick St Mary's CE First School.

