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

Dear Members,

The staff of St Mary's are resolute in their belief the option that will produce the best outcomes now and in the future for the children and community of Berwick is the proposed move to a 2-tier structure of education. As a staff who live and work within the community, we are fully aware of the current challenges and barriers our children face in fulfilling their potential. However we strongly believe a move to an educational system that is fully in-line with the National Curriculum, which fully utilises the training and potential of the Berwick teaching community, allows schools to be fully accountable for children's progress through the key stages, lowers children's anxiety by reducing the number of transitions, builds on purposeful and effective staff/pupil relationships and supports the needs of our most vulnerable students including those with SEND, will give our children the best chance to succeed.

St Mary's is a small school that itself has faced significant challenges over the last 8 years, moving from a school that was heading towards special measures, to one now that is recognised for its inclusive practice, high standards and a staff body that are driven to ensure all children succeed whatever their needs or strengths. Why is this information important? We know about the challenge change brings and the anxiety of having to step up to meet new and emerging needs within a community, therefore with this experience, we are fully confident that within Berwick (despite the concerns expressed by some), we have the capacity within our schools to successfully make this change to a 2-tier structure.

Within a 2-tier structure St Mary's would like to expand its offer for SEND, which in Berwick is sadly lacking in the support for children with SEMH, ASD and ADHD, leading too many travelling outside of the locality. Currently we offer the partnership a Primary Support Base for children struggling to cope with mainstream education. In a 2-tier structure the staff 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 offer. 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.

In relation sustainability, St Mary's has a proven record of strong financial management that has enabled the school to redevelop the site and provide extensive curriculum opportunities across all areas of learning. As a staff we have experience of supporting

other settings both in terms of providing targeted support and the sharing of good practice. 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 (currently our head teacher is executive head of Norham) and Tweedmouth Prior Park First School. This federation between schools will improve our 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.

The staff of St Mary's would like to highlight the impact of the current consultation on the children and not just those who may be directly impacted by possible changes of school, but also the younger children currently in Key Stage 1. This process has been very long and responses to the proposals have increasingly involved the children directly, which after a period of uncertainty caused by Covid has not improved the emotional well-being of our children. We have key Stage 1 children asking about our school closing and what school will I be going to? These worries should not be a concern for a child in their informative years of education. We respectfully ask that any decisions be made quickly and if changes are to occur then make them just as quick. September 2025 is a long time for a child to hear and think about changes, with the current spare capacity within Berwick schools highlighted in the NCC presentation to staff, surely we can make whatever changes are selected by September 2024, if for no other reason to reduce the anxiety of our children, which after Covid we all know has had a major impact on learning.

Rationale for 2-Tier

Examining the proposal purely in terms of educational outcomes the staff of St Mary's 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 we 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 a group of ambitious teaching professionals, the current 3-tier model limits our opportunities for career progression as we are unable to utilise our 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 drop 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 staff 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 staff we feel the benefits of bringing small schools together ensures a brighter future for our children and staff.

SEND Proposal

Staff 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 staff 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 staff 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 staff 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.

Wooler and Belford

As a staff 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.

Summary

As a staff we have put the future of our children at the forefront of our decision not our jobs, and as such see the urgency required to restructure the Berwick Partnership into something that meets the needs of the modern world and National Curriculum.

Although we recognise the difficulty of change, we do not recognise the argument that is currently being put forward that we have always had a 3 tier structure in Berwick and it works. As evidence suggests otherwise and this is not just about Key Stage 4 results, but:

- our lack of continuity between the 3 tiers for curriculum offer,
- increasing numbers leaving our partnership post first school,
- lack of inclusive provision for SEND learners,
- major issues with recruitment and retention,
- our children are ill prepared for the next stages of education, especially at high school.

To ensure Berwick makes the most of this opportunity, we need to:

- understand the needs of the children in future job markets,
- have a 2-tier system that is tightly aligned to provide a curriculum that sequentially builds opportunities for all,
- a well-trained and supported workforce,
- leaders courageous enough to make the changes required and to make them as soon as possible,
- have a community with a common goal, that of improving life chances for all our children now and in the future.

Submitted on behalf of the

Staff of Berwick St Mary's CE First School and Norham St Ceolwulf's CE First School

