



# BERWICK ACADEMY

## **Response to Berwick Partnership Consultation**

**From: Berwick Academy – Headteacher, senior leadership and wider school body**

**Endorsed by Berwick Academy Board of Trustees**

3<sup>rd</sup> March 2023

We write in response to the consultation on the future of education within the Berwick Partnership as a formal response from Berwick Academy.

Staff and leaders at Berwick Academy are committed to building a sustainable educational model in North Northumberland. We believe firmly that education is the passport to the future, and in that we have a solid sense of purpose.

At Berwick Academy our ambition is to provide our students with an educational experience that helps them to develop as young people who:

- Are ready for employment and/or further education
- Have the skills, knowledge and qualifications that enable them to compete at a local, national and international level.
- Are good citizens, able to contribute positively to their local and wider communities.

Our core values of friendship, learning and respect are at the heart of our school and provide the foundation from which all else is built.

Everything that we do at Berwick Academy is shaped by this, our solid sense of purpose, and we hold all our plans up to scrutiny against this purpose.

The young people at Berwick Academy are the young people of this community and they deserve to be treated fairly and respectfully by all who make decisions for and about them. We believe that this is a moment when the adults need to step up and do what is right for the long-term prosperity of all.

For these reasons, Berwick Academy strongly supports the proposed move to a Two-Tier structure of education for the Berwick partnership.

Berwick Academy's recommendation that the partnership should now move to a primary-secondary structure is based on the strong educational case that has been made by the Headteacher, Senior Leadership Team and wider staff body, supported by evidence, advice and experience from schools in the region and nationally. The principle educational arguments for our resolution to pursue a Two-Tier future for the partnership have been shared with parents, staff and the wider community. The key reasons which support our view of a Two-Tier structure for the partnership can be summarised as follows:

### *Educational outcomes:*

- Children should be taught the National Curriculum in complete Key Stages as they are in the majority of schools across the country.
- The national picture is heavily in favour of Two-Tier education, with only 102 three-tier middle schools out of 32,163 schools.
- Teachers are trained to teach either primary or secondary education. A Two-Tier model allows for specialist secondary teachers with recent GCSE and A Level teaching experience to teach their subject from year 7, leading to improved outcomes for students.
- 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,

(DFE/OfSTED vision). It also reduces the need for testing and assessment within key stages, as teachers/schools have a more robust knowledge of the child, their achievements and their areas for development, simply because they have supported the child throughout their whole journey within a key stage. For instance, children would not have to go through unnecessary baseline assessments within Year 5, which are currently needed as a means to secure an element of 3 tier transition.

#### *Relationships:*

- Children and families benefit from developing a longer-term relationship (from year 7) with the school and familiarity with subjects, before choosing their GCSE options choices during year 9.
- Children should move between schools less often, so that children, families and schools can build positive relationships and a clear understanding of expectations over time, rather than these changing three times, sometimes in the middle of a Key Stage of the National Curriculum.

#### *Sustainability:*

- Fewer schools within the partnership will lead to a more sustainable model for the future. Fluctuations in birth rate, and therefore the funding a school receives, are inevitable in any area, but more pronounced in our rural and coastal situation. These annual fluctuations can be more easily weathered by schools which have a stronger funding base to begin with.
- Schools within the partnership are keen to maintain our sense of rural identity, and we feel that the best way to secure this for the future is to move to a stronger Two-Tier model.

### **Mandate for change**

Northumberland County Council's Vision for Change in North Northumberland is based on the following:

- Improving education outcomes at each phase to ensure every child meets their potential.
- Sustainability of Education across the whole of the Berwick Partnership for the long term.
- Improving and extending SEND offer for children and young people in the Berwick partnership so that their needs are met locally and travel times are reduced significantly.
- Engaging the Berwick Community in the review process to build an understanding of all the issues and to grow support for any proposed changes within schools in order that the community engages, supports and thrives.
- Ensure schools work together to further develop the partnership and create a sustainable model for the future.
- Underpinning best value for NCC capital investment as well as any wider investment opportunities that may arise.

Berwick Academy believes that the Vision for Change can be best achieved through implementing a Two-Tier structure across the partnership.

### **Improving education outcomes**

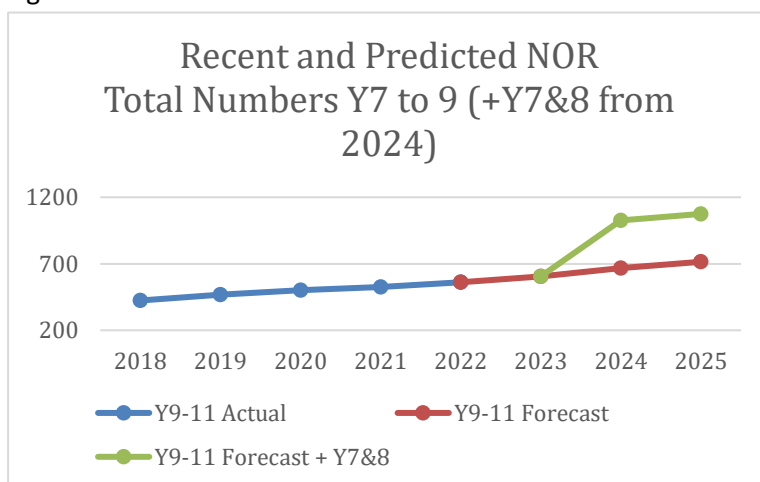
- We believe that a key element in improving educational outcomes for children is for children to move between schools less often. This, linked to the accountability framework aligning key stages with the Two-Tier structure, supports the view that Two-Tier provision will lead to children achieving their potential.
  - The misalignment of key stages with the three-tier system places significant pressure on the schools in the partnership. This, in combination with the contextual challenges faced by Berwick schools, can be seen particularly as the accountability stakes rise as students move through the key stages.
  - Students entering the school in Year 7 would mean that the starting point for all students would be their Year 6 SATs scores, not teacher assessments of three different curriculum models from three different schools.
  - A curriculum that is planned holistically to offer clear progression across KS3 and KS4 with no break between Year 8 and 9 would be experienced by all students, minimising variation in experience on entry.
- Teachers are trained to teach either secondary or primary age ranges, and there will be improved outcomes at Key Stage 4 when students in Year 7 and 8 benefit from specialist teachers with recent experience of GCSE and A level teaching.

- Students will be in the school for two years prior to considering GCSE choices, reducing the feeling of being rushed to make decisions in Y9, and enabling staff to better offer high quality advice regarding options choices.
- If children remained in a primary school from their Early Years to the end of Key Stage 2, before then moving to a secondary school for Key Stage 3, 4 and 5, children, families and schools can build positive relationships and a clear understanding of expectations over time, rather than these changing three times.
  - Currently, form tutors remain with students from Y9 to Y11. In a secondary setting this would be from Year 7 to Year 11, enabling them to develop strong relationships with students and their parents/carers. This will support the children more effectively as they move through the school.
  - The Pastoral team will remain with a year group from Year 7 to Year 11, enabling them to know their cohort very well.
- The expectations placed on Year 9 in the current system are very high, and the stakes even more so. This is the time when young people go through the most significant hormonal changes to date. They become teenagers and begin to grow into young adults. At this time of great change, we ask them to move schools, giving up what they know and feel comfortable with and move to an unfamiliar environment with new and different systems and processes, and ask them to build relationships with people neither they nor their parents/carers know well. Currently, three different middle schools feed into Year 9 at Berwick Academy, with three previous sets of expectations, systems and processes to unlearn and relearn. This takes the first term to embed, which can lead to learning being missed and the fall back that happens in the summer can be exacerbated. It is at this point that students are expected to make their choices for GCSE courses, and that staff are expected to advise on, all while attempting to give a positive Key Stage 3 experience, two-thirds of which are outside of the Academy's control and delivered in three different schools. The difficulties in this are clear, but it is the system and context that creates these difficulties, and which would be addressed through moving to a Two-Tier structure.
  - Year 7 and 8 would give the school time to really build meaningful and trusted relationships with families that mean when things become more challenging, we can work together to best support our young people.
- There are over 32,000 schools in the country, of which only 102 are three-tier middle schools. Of these 102 middle schools, only 23 exist outside of a single-accountability structure. Three of these exist within our partnership.
  - In the Berwick Partnership, for example, Berwick Academy is responsible for 100% of the outcomes at the end of the secondary phase of education but 40% of the secondary years teaching time is outside our influence and control.

## **Sustainability**

- A study commissioned by Berwick Academy and undertaken by Northumbria University stated that the challenges faced by partnership schools "in terms of rural and coastal isolation" are exacerbated by the "proximity to what are frequently regarded as better two-tier options across the border in Scotland".
  - Aligning the Berwick Partnership to a primary-secondary model would reduce the numbers of children leaving the Berwick Partnership for a Two-Tier education in Scotland.
- The rural and coastal isolation is aggravated further by increasing educational isolation. Our nearest Northumberland neighbours in Alnwick are already within a Two-Tier system, and the Amble partnership are in the process of moving to a Two-Tier structure. Across the border to the north is also Two-Tier. Continuing to maintain a three-tier provision in such isolation continues to place barriers to the sustainability of schools within the partnership, and marks Berwick as out of kilter both nationally and locally.

- Aligning the Berwick Partnership to a primary-secondary model would reduce the numbers of children leaving the Berwick Partnership to Two-Tier provision elsewhere in the county.
- Aligning the Berwick Partnership with other Two-Tier partnerships nearby within the county will lead to improved sharing of expertise between partnerships.
- Many assumptions are being made around numbers of children from the Berwick Partnership who are currently educated outside of the partnership, particularly that these students move out of the partnership to avoid coming to Berwick Academy. Our understanding is that this is much more complex.
  - Berwick Academy has welcomed students from Alnwick and Scotland into the school as families have made the choice to move their children to Berwick Academy from other communities. We have also welcomed students back from private education into the Academy.
  - Families in Wooler who initially applied to, and were rejected from, the Alnwick Partnership have subsequently made first choice applications to Berwick Academy, and our anecdotal evidence from meetings in Wooler is that they are keen to remain part of the Berwick Partnership after building positive relationships with the Academy.
  - Data provided by Northumberland County Council would suggest that a total of 184 high school age children and 98 middle school children are educated outside of the partnership. Parent choice, including 67 in private education, will play a part in this, but we do not believe that it is coincidence that the 215 being educated in either the Alnwick Partnership or in Scotland are being educated in a Two Tier system.
- The numbers of students applying to Berwick Academy as their High School provision have grown year on year for the previous three years. However, we recognise that fluctuations in the birth rate mean that smaller cohorts within the partnership are already starting to cause concern for some First Schools.
  - Although it will be several years before the birth rate decline affects the Academy, we recognise that there are insufficient children within the community to support the current number of schools. Fewer, but larger, primary schools would benefit from the ability to withstand fluctuations to funding caused by reduced student numbers in given years. Very small schools can find this difficult to manage and can lead to decisions which are not in the best educational interests of the children in order to remain viable.
  - Adding year groups to each key stage leads to robust financial security, creating a more equal access to funding and enabling significant investment in all our young people.
  - The table below demonstrates Berwick Academy's census numbers, increasing year on year recently. In addition, the forecast for the next three years is based on numbers currently in feeder schools. Our forecasts are normally accurate within two to three students. The forecast from 2024 adding two year groups of 180 (our suggested PAN) demonstrates the financial viability of the school within a Two Tier system, which, when modelled, demonstrates an immediate income surplus which will allow for significant investment in our students and the opportunities available to them.



- As a partnership, we are keen to maintain our rural identity, and to maintain educational provision for our rural communities.
  - Moving to a primary-secondary model is a way to protect this rural identity, albeit requiring some change to most effectively meet rural needs.
  - Financial stability and a coming-together of schools to share resources will protect the uniqueness of our rural location.
  
- Berwick Academy is committed to developing a Post 16 provision which ensures that young people in the Berwick area have access to a range of options for their education and training needs, currently often met by having to travel significant distances.
  - The Academy is committed to working in a complimentary, non-competitive partnership in order to ensure that the Northumberland Strategic Skills Plan can be fully implemented for young people in Berwick.
  - A MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) and joint committee are already in place with NCC and Academy Trustees to ensure this work is sustainable and both parties are accountable for its development.
  - This will develop the long-term financial sustainability of a Post 16 and Post 18 model for Berwick.
  - An evidence-based provision to address local skills demands in Key Priority Areas through:
    - Academic pathways (A Level, T Level and Higher Technical)
    - Vocational and Apprenticeship pathways
    - Professional and CPD development for the local economy
    - Pathways to support children and young people with SEND into sustainable careers.
  
- Berwick Academy has a full staff of specialist teachers, despite concerns around recruitment nationally and the effect of our location on recruitment. In addition to recruiting high quality staff, Berwick Academy has a clear rationale around growing our own high calibre staff and has systems in place to grow and nurture staff through their early careers and beyond.
  - Berwick Academy is the northern hub for the Three Rivers Trust Early Careers Teacher programme, delivering training for those in the early years of their teaching career in order to develop into excellent practitioners to benefit our students.
  - This means that Berwick Academy currently trains teachers from across schools in the Berwick Partnership.

### **SEND Provision**

We recognise the need to support an increasing number of children and families dealing with issues relating to SEMH. Berwick Academy has worked in partnership with St Mary's to deliver a proposal which relates to providing a new provision to meet the needs of SEMH and other complex needs, within our locality. We hope you would also consider this within the context of any decision on education moving forward.

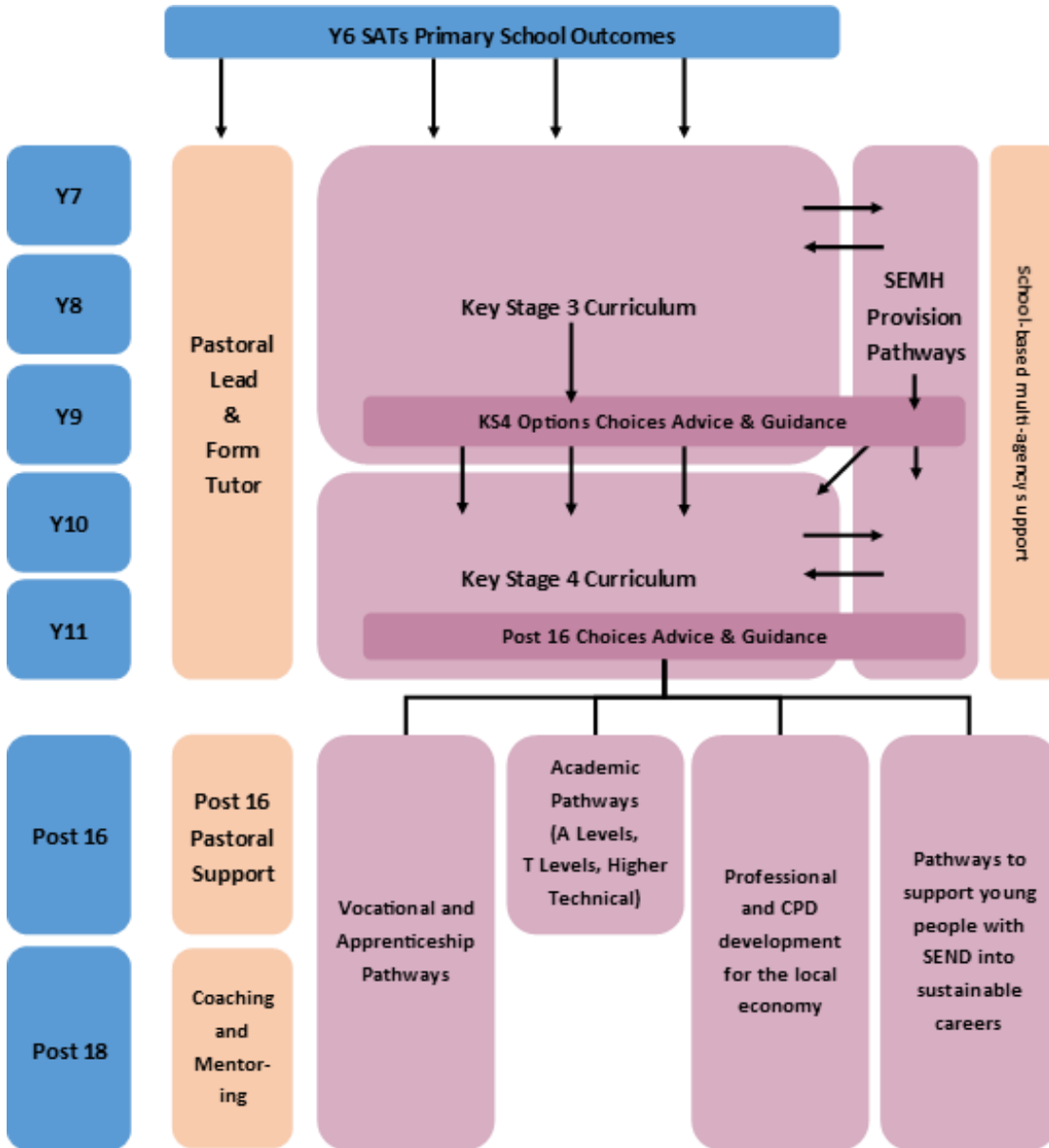
The impact of Covid on children's mental health, resilience, emotional presentation/development, early years' development is just emerging. This has also been recognised nationally. As such we believe this consultation and any proposed changes should be able to scale to provide the correct provision and resources both for now and in the long-term.

There is the potential for this to include the need to further develop, within the locality, joint work in 'a family of schools' approach as currently being suggested between St Mary's and the Academy.

The proposal suggested by Berwick Academy and St Mary's is fully aligned to the Northumberland Strategic Inclusion Strategy:

- A mainstream offer which consists of school-based multi-agency intervention, prevention and support.
- Fair access and inclusion in order to ensure places within support bases and alternative provision style learning is fair.
- A quality assurance process which ensures best practice.
- Develops specialist settings with a local solution for children within the Berwick Partnership.

**Berwick Academy as a secondary school model**



**Summary**

In conclusion, Berwick Academy fully supports the structural change to a Two-Tier primary-secondary future for the partnership. This is based on sound educational, relational and financial considerations, which we believe can only be delivered sustainably within a Two-Tier structure within the Berwick Partnership area.

Change is uncomfortable, but inevitable, and we believe that the County Council’s commitment to invest in the future in terms of the school estate needs to be matched with change that leads to, not only buildings that are fit for the next generation, but the educational structure that leads to the improvements that we all want to see for the young people of the Berwick Partnership. Berwick Academy remains committed to our clearly stated aims of ensuring that our school community is framed within a context of “friendship, learning and respect”. We will ensure that transition arrangements are handled sensitively and efficiently to secure a positive experience for all students.

There is a stark reality regarding sustainability and viability of schools due to falling birth rates across the Partnership. This is not a problem to be fixed in the future, but a problem that is being felt by First Schools currently, and which will be felt moving forwards through the school system within the partnership for the foreseeable future. It is, therefore, crucial that action is taken to put structural changes in place which allow schools to mitigate these fluctuations, and for the County Council investment of public finances in the Berwick Partnership to have the most impact on children and learning within the partnership, not on maintaining multiple sites, staffing structures and school infrastructures.

The case for change is not related to individual schools, their status as maintained, voluntary aided, faith-based or academies. As an Academy school we understand that our academy status is permanent, and even if there was a change of government, academies will remain. 80% of secondary schools are now academies. We have, however, turned our school towards its community and positioned it to be a centre of positivity for young people of Berwick.



# BERWICK

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# ACADEMY

# THE BERWICK WAY

WORK HARD WITH POSITIVITY, EMPATHY AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL



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