



Northumberland County Council

Cabinet

Tuesday, 11 February 2025

School Admission Arrangements and School Transport Policy

Report of Councillor(s) Guy Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member for Inspiring Young People

Responsible Officer(s): Audrey Kingham, Executive Director for Children, Young People & Education

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

These proposals are most closely linked to the Council's priority for tackling inequalities (children and young people have the best start in life and grow up well).

2. Purpose of report

This report informs Cabinet of the outcomes of the consultation on:

- School Admission Arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools for the 2026/27 Academic Year as required by the School Admissions Code 2021. Approval (determination) of these admission arrangements is also sought.
- School Transport Policy for Children of Compulsory School Age, September 2024.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 Note the outcomes of the six-week consultation undertaken in relation to the Council's proposed admission arrangements for community and voluntary controlled schools for 2026/27 and the Council's School Transport Policy for Children of Compulsory School Age that took place between 4th November 2024 and 16th December 2024.
- 3.2 Approve the proposed co-ordinated admission scheme for all maintained schools and academies, as provided in Appendix 1 of this report.
- 3.3 Approve (determine) the proposed admission arrangements, including proposed oversubscription criteria (please note the removal of greater catchment criterion)

and proposed admission numbers for First and Primary community and voluntary and controlled schools, as provided in Appendix 2 of this report.

- 3.4 Approve (determine) the proposed admission arrangements, including proposed over subscription criteria (please note the removal of greater catchment criterion) and proposed admission numbers, for Middle, High and Secondary community and voluntary controlled schools, including sixth forms, as provided in Appendix 3 of this report.
- 3.5 Approve a reduction of the Published Admission Number at The Sele First School from 84 to 60 with effect from September 2026, in view of current and future pupil numbers.
- 3.6 Approve the Council's School Transport Policy for Children of Compulsory School Age provided in Appendix 5 of this report.

4. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

21st November 2024.

5. Background

- 5.1 The School Admissions Code 2021 applies to all maintained mainstream schools, which includes voluntary controlled and community schools and schools that are their own admission authority. Academies are required to comply with the Code and the law relating to admissions as part of their funding agreements, although the Secretary of State may vary this requirement if there is a demonstrable need. The Local Authority does not have any decision-making powers when it comes to the admission criteria to academies.
- 5.2 Admission authorities must ensure that their determined admission arrangements comply with the mandatory provisions of the Code. In order to promote fair access to educational opportunities, admission arrangements are subject to scrutiny by the Schools Adjudicator who has the power to impose arrangements on those authorities that do not meet the requirements of the Code.
- 5.3 When changes are proposed, admission authorities must consult on their admission arrangements that will apply for admission applications the following year. Where no changes to admission arrangements are proposed, admission authorities need only consult once every 7 years. The admission arrangements must be formally approved each year.
- 5.4 As part of the ongoing Home to School Transport BEST review, one of the recommendations was for the School Transport Policy to be consulted upon annually, in line with the School Admission Arrangements consultation to ensure that any changes to government policy are reflected and adopted accordingly.

Admissions Arrangements Consultation Process and Outcomes

- 5.5 A six-week consultation on the Council's proposed admissions arrangements for 2026/27 took place between 4^h November 2024 and 16th December 2024.
- 5.6 As required by the School Admissions Code, the full proposed admission arrangements were published on the Council's website for the whole of the

consultation period, together with details of the person to whom comments could be sent. There were no areas specified on which comments could not be made.

- 5.7 Two potential changes were consulted upon. The reduction in the planned admissions number for The Sele First School and the removal of 'Greater Catchment' and 'Greater Catchment with Sibling' from the oversubscription criteria.
- 5.8 Groups and persons consulted with as part of the consultation process were as follows:
- Parents of children between the ages of 2 and 18, via website and communication from schools and nurseries;
 - All Governing Bodies of voluntary controlled and community schools;
 - All Governing Bodies of voluntary aided and foundation schools and academies, who are their own admissions authority;
 - Neighbouring Local Authorities (Newcastle City Council; Cumbria County Council; Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council; North Tyneside Council; Durham County Council);
 - The CE Diocese of Newcastle and Durham; the RC Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle;
- 5.9 The Sele First School shared the consultation documents with parents/carers and responses can be found in Appendix 4.

Rational on the proposal to remove 'Greater Catchment' and 'Greater Catchment with Sibling' from the oversubscription criteria.

Greater catchment:

- 5.10 'The greater catchment area for a school is the catchment area of the high or secondary school'.
- 5.11 The use of greater catchment related to a previous time when all secondary/high schools had catchment areas, and these were determined by the Council as the Admissions Authority to ensure there was a pattern across the local authority covering all addresses.
- 5.12 As of September 2024, the Council is only the Admissions Authority for 2 out of 16 secondary/high schools, The remaining 14 schools have a variety of arrangements including some secondary schools with no use of catchment areas in their policies. As such it is no longer appropriate or relevant to have 'greater catchment' within the oversubscription criterion of the Council's Admissions Policy.
- 5.13 We did not receive any feedback in relation to the removal of "greater catchment" from the Council's Admission Policy.

Consultation on Proposed reduction of Planned Admission Number at The Sele First School from 84 to 60

Context and Rationale for proposal

- 5.14 The Council's Policy on management of surplus places in Northumberland community and voluntary controlled schools is set out in the School Organisation Plan 2021-2024. School Partnerships in the West of the County, namely Hexham,

Haydon Bridge and Prudhoe are currently experiencing a sustained fall in birth rate leading to increasing surplus places in schools. The Council's policy to manage surplus places is to carry out an annual review of the continued appropriateness of the Planned Admission Numbers (PANs) of community and voluntary controlled schools (the Council having no powers to change the PANs of aided schools or academies) with a view to supporting the viability and sustainability of all schools within a partnership area.

- 5.15 While surplus places are high in Haydon Bridge Partnership, given the relatively recent reorganisation of schools in the partnership and the need for stability, proposals to reduce PANs in schools in this area have not been brought forward as part of this consultation on admissions arrangements (all first schools in Prudhoe are academies). However, in 2023/24 there were 23% surplus places in first schools in the Hexham Partnership; this was in spite of pupils attending from other Northumberland partnership areas and from out of county (e.g. in 2022/23, 172 pupils in Hexham first schools lived outside of catchment).
- 5.16 As stated above, birth rates in the Hexham Partnership are continuing to fall and therefore there are increasing surplus places available in Hexham first schools after students applying from their local communities have been allocated. In September 2022 the number of children living in the Hexham Area who were able to join Reception classes was 187; in September 2027, the number of children joining Reception classes will be 117. The number of actual places available in Hexham first schools in Reception classes currently totals 274 and therefore is far in excess of the needs of the local communities within Hexham Partnership. Without the removal of some of these excessive surplus places, pupils will be spread much more thinly across schools, with the sustainability and viability of some schools likely to be put at greater risk, leading to increased travel times to schools outside of their community for very young pupils receiving their education outside of their community. Where there is a risk of school closure, this can have a wide and long-term impact on the community served by that school.

Hexham Partnership and Surplus Places

- 5.17 In 2023/24, there were 23% surplus places in first schools in the Hexham Partnership; this was in spite of pupils attending from other Northumberland partnership areas and from out of county (e.g. in 2022/23, 172 pupils in Hexham first schools lived outside of catchment).
- 5.18 The reason for the high surplus places in Hexham first schools and their ability to offer places to children living outside of the partnership area is due to the continuing fall in the birth rate in the area. For example, in September 2022 the number of children living in the Hexham Area who were able to join Reception classes was 187; in September 2027, the number of children joining Reception classes will be 117. The number of actual places available in Hexham first schools in Reception classes currently totals 274 and is far in excess of the needs of the local communities within Hexham Partnership. Without the removal of some of these excessive surplus places, pupils will be spread much more thinly across schools, with the sustainability and viability of some schools likely to be put at greater risk.

The Sele First School

- 5.19 In light of the increasing surplus places as a result of the continuing fall in pupil numbers in the Hexham Partnership set out above, it has been identified that the viability and sustainability of all schools in the partnership would be supported by a

reduction in the number of surplus places. However, it is important that this process is managed in a phased way in order to avoid causing disruption to parental choice across the partnership. Therefore, it is proposed that for the intake year 2026/27 that this first phase of management of surplus place is limited to the reduction of the PAN of The Sele First School, as it is envisaged that the school will continue to thrive, and be viable and sustainable with an annual intake of 60 pupils.

- 5.20 The Sele First School is located in the heart of Hexham town and attracts around 70% of pupils from its own community. Based on 2022/23 data, these students make up only around 65% of the students on roll, with 35% of pupils living in other school catchments within Hexham Partnership, other Northumberland partnerships and a small number from out of county. 19% of these non-catchment pupils live in the catchments of small, rural schools and undertake significant daily car journeys to attend The Sele, passing other schools along the way. Apart from the financial impact on those small schools, this does not support the Council’s policy to reduce car journeys to schools and lessen the impact on the environment. However, Hexham First School and Shaftoe Trust Primary School in Haydon Bridge Partnership are particularly impacted by loss of catchment pupils to The Sele, with 34% of Hexham First catchment pupils on roll at The Sele (data 2022/23) and 13% of Shaftoe Trust catchment pupils on roll at The Sele. With the birth rate in The Sele catchment continuing to fall since 202/23, refreshed data is likely to show an increase in the percentage of out of catchment pupils.
- 5.21 Furthermore, with a PAN of 84, the capacity of The Sele is 420. In October 2018, the school had 404 pupils on roll; in October 2022 there were 357 pupils on roll, in October 2023 there were 338 pupils on roll and in October 2024, there were 355 pupils on roll. This indicates that the school is not immune to the falling birth rate and although it continues to attract students from other catchments, its average size year group has been falling for some time. The table below compares cohorts in 2018 to the last 3 years of cohorts at the school:

Table 1

Year group	Reception	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Census Oct 2018	81	82	74	80	87
Census Oct 2022	63	69	77	64	84
Census Oct 2023	52	66	70	84	66
Census Oct 2024	73	53	67	77	85

- 5.22 The most recent birth data for The Sele set out in the table below indicates that there is a continuing fall in the number of children being born in the school’s catchment area.

Table 2

R (2027)	R (2026)	R (2025)	R (2024)	Yr1	Yr2	Yr3	Yr4	Yr5	Yr6	Yr7						
Age 0	Age 1	Age 2	Age 3	Age 4	Age 5	Age 6	Age 7	Age 8	Age 9	Age 10	First School	PAN	CAPACITY			
01.09.22	01.09.21	01.09.20	01.09.19	01.09.18	01.09.17	01.09.16	01.09.15	01.09.14	01.09.13	01.09.12						
To	To	To	To	To	To	To	To	To	To	To						
31.08.23	31.08.22	31.08.21	31.08.20	31.08.19	31.08.18	31.08.17	31.08.16	31.08.15	31.08.14	31.08.13						
36	42	47	59	38	63	52	68	60	67	61	The Sele First	84	420			

5.23 Given the pattern of falling cohorts and the above birth data, it is proposed that a PAN of 84 is no longer appropriate to meet the needs of the community served by The Sele. Only 3 other schools in Northumberland have PANs larger than 60 and these are located in Blyth (largest town) and Ashington (3rd largest town and twice the population of Hexham). It is proposed that a PAN of 60 (2 forms of entry) should be implemented at the school for the September 2026 Reception intake onwards; this would enable the school to meet the needs of its catchment area pupils, as well as continuing to have in region of 20 places that could be offered to pupils outside of catchment. Furthermore, whole forms of entry are more common in first and primary schools and are generally preferred as they make it easier for schools to manage staff and curriculum planning. The Sele First School is rated 'Good' by Ofsted, as are the other first schools in the Hexham Partnership.

Outcomes of consultation on proposal

5.24 Consultation on admissions arrangements for community and voluntary schools began on 4th November 2024 and closed on 16th December 2024, and included the proposal to reduce the PAN at The Sele from 84 to 60. Consultation is not a referendum and members are requested to consider the arguments put forward both for and against the proposal. In particular, members should note that there are currently 355 pupils on roll at The Sele, and 53 parents responded (albeit some parents have more than 1 child at the school) and therefore the vast majority of parents did not express a view. In total, there were 103 responses to the consultation grouped as follows:

	In Support of Proposal to reduce PAN	Against Proposal to reduce PAN	Don't know	Totals
Parents of children at The Sele	1	52	0	53
Parents of children at other schools	1	1	0	2
Future parents of The Sele	0	5	0	5
Governing Body	0	1	0	1
Staff of The Sele	0	10	1	11
Other Governing Body	0	1	0	1
Other School	1	0	0	1
Members of the community/others	1	28	0	29
			Grand total	103

5.25 The reasons for and against the proposals were able to be grouped into the following themes and a commentary on these is also included.

Themes put forward in support of reduction in PAN by consultees who submitted a response

5.26 Reduction in PAN will benefit other schools, especially small, rural schools and will reduce number of out of catchment pupils in school;

5.27 Would reduce unnecessary transport into Hexham and reduce carbon emissions;

5.28 Would reduce congestion outside of school at drop-off and pick-up times and thereby would make it safer and less stressful;

- 5.29 Impact on other schools through fall in numbers has resulted in mixed-age teaching, potential staff redundancies;
- 5.30 Competition for pupils threatens viability of schools, reduction in PAN would help restore balance;
- 5.31 Encouraging parents to choose/consider local schools supports those communities.
- 5.32 **Commentary** - The above comments in general support the rationale for the consultation, namely a reduction in the PAN would re-balance pupil distribution, support local schools and communities and reduce the number of car journeys to schools and consequent impact on local residents.

Main Themes put forward against the reduction in PAN by consultees who submitted a response including the Governing Body, parents and the wider community

- 5.33 The Governing Body of The Sele submitted a number of comments to the consultation and also sent a pre-prepared template to parents for them to submit to the consultation and this contained the following repeated themes:
- 5.34 The Proposal is based solely on birth data and is too narrow a criterion within the more complex and dynamic school landscape in Tyne Valley.
- 5.35 **Commentary** - The proposal is not based solely on birth data. Census data which captures all children on roll at a school at 3 points in the school year indicates clearly that the average year group size in The Sele has been reducing over time in line with the general falling pupil numbers (see Table 1 above) – the school is not at capacity and has not been for at least 8 years. Only the excessive surplus places offered to out of catchment children have enabled the school to have cohorts larger than 60. Given the continuing fall in birth rate, the percentage of out of catchment children (currently just under 40%) is set to continue to increase and at some point in the near future, they will outnumber local children.
- 5.36 Many families move to the area with the intention of joining Sele First School and would not be seen in the birth data.
- 5.37 **Commentary** - Children moving into the area are picked up via the annual Census taken at 3 points in the school year and via annual analysis of on-roll pupils carried out by the Council, therefore the pattern of declining cohort size of the last few years can be seen over time (see Table 1). For example, it can be seen that most cohorts in 2018/19 had 80+ students, whereas in 2024/25, cohorts vary between 85 and 55 with only one cohort above 80.
- 5.38 Parental preference is hugely important - Reducing the PAN would remove The Sele First as an option for families.
- 5.39 **Commentary** - As can be seen from the declining birth rate in The Sele catchment, the proposal of a PAN of 60 would mean that there would continue to be surplus places to offer out of catchment children. Indeed, by the intake of September 2027, with a PAN of 60, the school would be able to offer 24 places (40% of intake) to out of catchment children.
- 5.40 Hexham is the largest town in the West of the county with parents commuting. The Sele is a convenient school for drop off and pick up. These reasons have no impact on car journeys. Wraparound care can be difficult to access.

- 5.41 **Commentary** - Given the continuing fall in birth rate it is envisaged that most parents who wish to send their children to The Sele will continue to be able to do so. However, wraparound care is available at other schools in the locality e.g. Shaftoe Trust Primary and Hexham First.
- 5.42 Demand for places at The Sele First is strong with current class size average at 24, allowing the school to support increasing needs of children.
- 5.43 **Commentary** - As stated above, the school would continue to be able to offer places to pupils outside of catchment. Most first and primary schools with PANs of 60 in the county provide very well for all of their pupils.
- 5.44 Housing in Hexham is expensive with many families unable to afford a home in town. This will impact on children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and attendance at The Sele should not be conditional on family income.
- 5.45 **Commentary** - 13% of pupils on roll at The Sele are eligible for Free School Meals. 5 other of the 11 schools in the Hexham Partnership have the same or higher levels of pupils eligible for FSM, with one school having 35% students on FSM and another with 23% students on FSM. Therefore, it is not envisaged that the reduction of the PAN at The Sele will have any impact on the current ability of lower income families to access the educational establishment of their choice in the west of the county.
- 5.46 It was recently announced that NCC granted planning permission for 200 new homes to be built in the centre of Hexham. How does the Council plan to accommodate families and their children?
- 5.47 **Commentary** - The extent of the number of pupils arising from new housing development is commonly misunderstood. Should all 200 houses in this development be built at once, they would generate around 6 pupils year group at best. However, it is highly unlikely that these houses would be built at the same time and more likely that construction will be planned over 5 to 10 years. Therefore, it is envisaged there would be a negligible impact on pupil numbers as a result and will not halt the general decline in pupil numbers in the catchment area.
- 5.48 A smaller PAN means The Sele First would receive less money to run their school, reducing capacity will not reduce 'running costs' as a listed building, meaning a bigger proportion of the budget will be spent on essential costs.
- 5.49 **Commentary** - It is true that with a PAN of 60, the school would receive less funding. However, as can be seen from Table 1 above, the school has already had declining numbers over time and is receiving less funding as a result. If the current pattern of declining cohort size continues, in time the school will have fewer than 60 pupils per cohort in any event. With a cap of 60 at intake, the school will be protected from having anomaly year groups of over 60 which can cause a school financial difficulty in having to staff and will be able to plan its staffing effectively.
- 5.50 Furthermore, should this proposal be approved it would not be implemented until September 2026, giving the school time to prepare its staffing and curriculum plan well in advance.
- 5.51 The proposals show a fundamental lack of understanding of the community and the wider area and are undoubtedly short-sighted. The Council should be proud of and embrace The Sele First School's success and continue to offer as many children as possible the opportunity to attend.

- 5.52 **Commentary** - The Council is proud of the success of The Sele, but it is also proud of the other schools that serve the communities in the west of the county. That is why this proposal would support the longevity of The Sele, but at the same time would support the viability and sustainability of other schools in the locality.

Other Themes put forward against the reduction in PAN

- 5.53 Other schools in the area should improve their reputation by emulating The Sele.
- 5.54 **Commentary** - All other first schools in the Hexham Partnership have been rated 'Good' by Ofsted and serve their pupils and communities well .
- 5.55 More diversity was noted as a requirement at the last Ofsted visit at The Sele; if numbers are reduced this will reduce diversity at the school.
- 5.56 **Commentary** - In fact, diversity in relation to the communities across Hexham and beyond will still be achieved at The Sele as a result of its increasing surplus places which will be offered to students outside of catchment. Furthermore, the Ofsted report appeared to reference diversity in relation to different cultures, rather than to different areas of the town or Tyne Valley.

Conclusion

- 5.57 The full anonymised comments submitted by consultees are included at Appendix 4 in this report, including comments relating to individual experience. The submissions also include some comments from individuals relating to the way in which the data and information presented as part of this consultation has been interpreted.
- 5.58 As stated previously, members are invited to note that consultations are not referendums and to consider the extent of the responses received to this consultation in relation to the number of schools, pupils and families impacted across the whole of Hexham Partnership and beyond.
- 5.59 In the light of the rationale for this proposal and taking into account all responses arising from the consultation, members are recommended to approve the reduction of the PAN at The Sele First School from 84 to 60 with effect from September 2026.
- 5.60 We did not receive any feedback in relation to the removal of 'greater catchment' criterion from the Council's Admission Policies. Therefore members are recommended to remove greater catchment from the oversubscription criteria.

School Transport Policy Consultation Process and Outcomes

- 5.61 A six-week consultation on the Council's School Transport Policy for Children of Compulsory School Age took place between 4^h November 2024 and 16th December 2024.
- 5.62 There were 2 responses received:
- 5.63 The head teacher from Swarland Primary School enquired as to whether children from her school opting to attend Dr Thomlinson Middle School would receive school transport.
- 5.64 **Commentary** - The School Transport Policy states that transport will be provided to schools within the 'transport priority area' or the nearest school to the home address; if children at Swarland live nearer to Dr Thomlinson, they will be eligible for transport.

5.65 A member of the Bellingham Middle governing body commented that the Council's School Transport Policy disadvantages children from the West of County because it doesn't recognise Bellingham's School's catchment.

5.66 **Commentary** - Bellingham Middle School is in a federation and the Governing Body is the Admissions Authority, so they are responsible for determining their admissions arrangements including any catchment area. The issue related to School Transport into Bellingham Middle was thoroughly reviewed by the School's Adjudicator in 2023. The adjudicator concluded that the Council is responsible for determining transport eligibility areas irrespective of the catchment area set by another admissions authority. In relation to Bellingham Middle School, transport will be provided where Bellingham Middle is the closest school to the home address. There is no further review planned, and the matter was concluded in 2023.

6. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

6.1 On an annual basis the local authority needs to determine its school admission arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools. As the Council's decision making body Cabinet is therefore asked to approve the arrangements for the academic year 2026/27.

6.2 There are changes proposed to the current admission policies, including oversubscription criteria, for first, primary and middle schools for 2026/27. Full copies of these are contained in the appendices to this report.

6.3 Cabinet is asked to approve (determine) all the admission arrangements for 2026/27 in accordance with the Admissions Code 2021. Determination of the arrangements must be made by 28 February 2025 prior to publication on the Council's website and to allow for the submission of any objections regarding the arrangements to the School's Adjudicator by 15 May 2025.

6.4 Cabinet is asked to approve the draft admission arrangements for sixth forms, including the criteria for entry, the admission number (relating to external students to Year 12 only) and the over subscription criteria (that will be applied if there are more applicants than places available) for 2026/27.

6.5 Cabinet is asked to approve the School Transport Policy for Children of Compulsory School Age.

7. Implications

<p>Policy</p>	<p>The Admissions Policy enables all applications for school places to be prioritised in an open and fair way, ensuring that all schools and academies adopt lawful admission arrangements.</p> <p>The School Transport Policy ensures that the Council provides school transport for children that fall into the eligibility criteria as per the statutory guidance.</p>
<p>Finance and value for money</p>	<p>There are no direct financial implications as a result of these arrangements.</p>

	There are financial implications as a result of how the School Transport Policy is applied.
Legal	The admission arrangements comply with legislation.
Procurement	No implications. Implications on how School Transport routes are procured-this is currently under review.
Human resources	No implications.
Property	No implications.
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	Yes - required and attached EIA attached at Appendix 6.
Risk assessment	The level of risk involved in the proposed amendment to the admissions numbers is perceived to be minimal.
Crime and disorder	This report has considered Section 17 (CDA) and the duty it imposes and there are no implications arising from it.
Customer considerations	Parents can express a preference for schools and give their reasons in the light of the criteria within the admissions policies. As far as possible under the policies, parents will be allocated a place for their child at the school for which they have expressed a preference. Where this is not possible, and where parents live in the Northumberland County Council area, a place will be offered at an alternative school. Parents can apply for School Transport and their application will be considered in line with the Council's policy. Ongoing work is being carried out to merge the School Admissions and School Transport application processes.
Carbon reduction	It is not envisaged that this proposal would have a significant positive or negative impact on carbon reduction.
Health and wellbeing	No implications.
Wards	(All Wards);

8. Background papers

Not applicable.

9. Links to other key reports already published

Not applicable.

10. Author and Contact Details

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