



# Northumberland County Council

## Notes of Meeting

---

**Meeting Name: Northumberland County Council (NCC) and Ponteland Town Council (PTC) re: Atkinson House**      **Meeting Location: Online Teams**

---

**Date & Time: 16 November 2021 at 4:00 p.m.**      **Notes By: Jacqui Pearson**

---

**Present for NCC:**

	<b>Initials</b>
Sue Aviston	<b>SA</b>
Lorraine Fife	<b>LF</b>
Paul Sampson	<b>PS</b>
Jacqui Pearson	<b>JP</b>

**Present for PTC:**

Christine Greenwell	<b>CG</b>
Kath Mavin	<b>KM</b>
Alan Vardy	<b>AV</b>
Christine Caisley	<b>CC</b>
Nirmal Sehgal	<b>NS</b>

### **Apologies:**

None

---

SA gave the background to the meeting:

- The original meeting was a few weeks ago and we offered a follow-on meeting due to some members of Ponteland Town Council not being able to make the last meeting as it was short notice or having IT issues with being on Teams meeting.
- The last questions Ponteland Town Council members asked us, formed part of our FAQs (Frequently asked questions) on the website.
- This meeting, we are just here to answer any more questions you have.

CG provided feedback from the last meeting:

- A report was shared with Town Council members to give an update on our meeting.

### **Questions:**

- A Town Council member asked if there was an update on how the consultation was going, any progress, all comments against or are some in favour?
- SA confirmed it was inappropriate to comment on that as there are two weeks still to run on the consultation.
- The information is to be analysed and put into a committee report for Council Members.
- We have over 200 responses so far, held staff and Governor meetings with the school and the information is out there.
- We are not holding public meetings due to the rise in Covid-19 case numbers. We have assessed the risks but would be relying on the goodwill of attendees to operate a safe system and as there is no mandatory legislation for masks, we would be unable to guarantee safety of staff and public members.

- We have held / are holding meetings with groups directly affected by the proposal such as:
  1. Richard Coates Primary School (including Governors)
  2. Yourselfs, Ponteland Town Council (as a community voice)
  3. Little Tinklers Nursery

In terms of the FAQs and a lack of public meeting, we have lots of different things on the website including an animation of the FAQs.

Where specific questions from individuals are being asked, we are responding.

- CG confirmed from her Town Council presentation following the last meeting, main concerns raised included the streams of taxis up Thornhill Road.
  - Will scattered start times help streamline the arrivals? No queuing on the road.
    - SA confirmed that is the intention.
    - The Headteacher discussed the operation and how it currently works. We manage the taxi contract to state drop off and collection is within site.
    - A conversation with Mr McGrane and Mrs Cape took place on site at Atkinson House Special School between 08:15 and 09:30 so they could see the workings of the school on arrival, with particular interest in the taxis.
    - 18 taxis on site, some have one child, some have 5 children in them, depending on home postcode and needs of children.
    - Taxis arrive for 08:45 (with some arriving from 08:35 and up to 08:55)
    - On an evening when leaving they arrive between 2:45 – 3:00 p.m., gates are closed when the taxis are in and then they leave with the pupils. There are more taxis leaving here in concession than on arrival in the morning.
    - Seghill and Thornhill are similar in the respect on being in housing estates.
    - Discussion took place around the taxis arriving at the former staff car park, round the turning circle so there are no blockages.
    - Discussions will take place with the Primary School and Little Tinklers Nursery about co-ordinating start and leave times.
- A member of the Town Council asked if there was any sense in having Atkinson House Special School pupils entering from the East side and not from the shops and going down Thornhill Road.
  - The Headteacher confirmed this was a great suggestion and he will work with local community members to arrange this. He can instruct the taxi companies to do this, which will also restrict them going past the Primary School, i.e. turn left into school and right out of it. This will take away some of the pressure on the T-junction.
- A member of the Town Council asked how many students would be expected in the school.
  - The Headteacher confirmed currently 71 on roll and would expect to increase for a co-educational school.
  - By Christmas we would expect to be full at 80 students. We are not full at the start of September due to the nature of the school.
  - There is a 7% rise year on year, which would equate to an additional 20 students, so making capacity for 100 students, but this would not be on day 1.
  - The former Richard Coates Middle School was built for 500 students, but our classes are smaller.
  - Students need to have an EHCP (Education Health and Care Plan) to be able to attend the school. Assessments are ongoing throughout the year, hence how our numbers can rise during the year.
- A member of the Town Council asked if Atkinson House Special School is single Sex.

- SA confirmed yes. The consultation is also about being co-educational for those students who need the specialist provision.
- A member of the Town Council asked about the school in Blyth due to open September 2023.
  - SA confirmed the school will be built for 80 pupils and will open in a graduated way.
  - The school will not only be Northumberland pupils (50 places) as other LAs (Local Authorities) will accommodate 30 places too (Gateshead, North Tyneside, and Newcastle) in partnership to fill the commissioned places
  - The place numbers between the LAs will vary year on year.
- A member of the Town Council asked if this was the first co-educated school. If there are 70 students now, moving to 100 students so there would only be 30 additional being female, is this correct?
  - SA confirmed that there would be a smaller cohort of students and the balance of the school needs to be considered.
  - The Headteacher agreed it is about the review of needs and to enter the school, students need and EHCP, which identifies the needs for the right place.
- A member of the Town Council asked if there was nowhere for girls now. Is it home education?
  - SA confirmed some female pupils are in other special schools, but it is not a dedicated provision for their needs.
  - Currently there is a mixture – elected home education (parental choice), Special Schools, Alternative Provision, bespoke arrangements with special schools and Atkinson House Special School.
- A member of the Town Council asked how many pupils are educated out of the county
  - SA replied a lot. The numbers will need to be confirmed. In terms of funding, there is £12m per year for external placements.
  - The LA (Local Authority) wants to educate in Northumberland, that is the overall rationale of the consultation.
  - The relocation is based on no provision being available in the West of Northumberland.
  - The Headteacher confirmed there is approx. 10% of students currently on roll from the West of the county.
  - SA confirmed the location of a pupil in the west of the county and the distance required to travel but the placement is about addressing the needs of the student, not their postcode.
  - The Headteacher confirmed he is a former Headteacher of Haltwhistle Middle School and lives in central Northumberland. He is aware of the travel on the A69, and the LA are looking to limit the amount of time students spend in a taxi to commute to school. There would not be enough pupils if the school were to relocate any further west in the county. Central – west is easier.
- A member of the Town Council asked what would happen to the Seghill site in terms of bricks and mortar.
  - SA commented that this is currently being evaluated and reviewed for an alternative education use.
  - An in-depth review will be undertaken post consultation so there is no weighting added to the consultation to influence decisions.
- A member of the Town Council asked about the special /different abilities of the students and the percentage who have social problems.

- The Headteacher explained that the question can split into mental and physical challenges of which there is 0% with physical needs.
- Currently the students are all male with SEMH (Social Emotional and Mental Health) and all have an EHCP from being in mainstream school.
- The students have Autism and ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder); ADHD – controlled with medication. Deep down the students suffer anxiety and the behaviour is challenging as a symptom of their anxiety. The boys are becoming more self-manageable.
- They do not have learning needs – they have learning gaps from not being in school or having had intensive 1:1 support. Some do have a social challenge, and some are good at communicating with adults as they have been brought up with their Grandparents for example.
- Atkinson House Special school has a therapeutic profile on every student from their EHCP. This includes mentoring and counselling which provides support to the students to help self-regulate.
- There are significant issues around attachment and identity. If a student looks as though they are going to fail at something or are out of their comfort zone, then some struggle. They have nothing to hold on to from a previous experience and cannot draw on that experience to cope with the present.
- The Headteacher described his move from a mainstream Headteacher to a Special School Headteacher. When he became Headteacher at Atkinson House Special School, he introduced an academic curriculum, which is based around four fundamental areas:
  1. Nurture – the students remain in the same class, like a Primary School set up as this provides a safe environment for them. These students tend to be weaker due to learning gaps.
  2. Vocational – these students' strength is in PE, Construction for example.
  3. Mainstream
  4. Academic – last year a student left with 5 Grade 5's and 1 Grade 4 GCSEs.
- Emotions can be managed if the right environment is created, with the right curriculum.
- Punishment is seen by the students when they are taken out of their comfort zones.
- A member of the Town Council asked a question regarding the education being reduced from 11 – 18 to 11 – 16. What happens for the students who can undertake further education.
  - The Headteacher confirmed a young man has gone onto Newcastle College to do a level 3 (A-Level equivalent) in wind farms.
  - Students have an EHCP until they are 25 years old. Local Colleges adopt the EHCP and this is reviewed annually.
  - There is a careers programme for Years 7 – 11 (the same as Ponteland High School), which adds academic and social value.
  - In Year 11 they have a careers advisor, who will discuss all options:
    - Ashington College
    - Northumberland College – including Kirkley Hall
    - Newcastle College
    - Tyneside College
    - Apprenticeships – e.g. Persimmon Homes
    - Employment
    - Azure programme – support students
    - Work is undertaken for the students not to be part of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training)
- A member of the Town Council made a statement to the Headteacher that he is doing sterling work. The member of the Town Council has personal experience within

her family of Special School provision and a family member who saw restraint and has been traumatised by it. What the Headteacher is offering, sounds fabulous.

- Considering the discussions above – traffic being avoided, security and safety being addressed, the conclusion is why not Ponteland? All students are entitled to equal access. Well done.
- The Headteacher confirmed he has been a Headteacher for 11 years in 3 schools. He is a trained PE teacher, and they tend to have big voices. This school has educated himself, which education is a lifelong process.
- Reputation is as a naughty boy's school.
- The Project Manager who visited with Headteachers from Richard Coates Primary and Ponteland High Schools commented how amazed he was at the difference in individual needs of each student.
- The SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) needs are about the environment and being small classes. Students move from too many students and classes being too big. This is about anxiety and self-confidence.
  
- The Headteacher confirmed Atkinson House Special school is about young people with need, not naughty students.
- They have aggression and frustration when they are out of their comfort zones and do not know how to cope.
- Teachers model what is right. Some students are controlling – they will only do something if you give something. They are taught correct behaviour must come from themselves. It is autonomy of themselves.
- Restraints were high when the Headteacher joined. Last year there were three team-teach incidents and Ofsted commented their amazement in progress on this.
  
- Some pupils have a background of dictatorship, and some come from affluent backgrounds. The Headteacher thanked the member of the Town Council for her kind words, and he wants to work with the community.
  
- Individuals have moments of anxiety, and it is perception that they smash windows and set fires.
- The Headteacher has seen more disruptive behaviour in mainstream schools than Atkinson House Special School.
- A member of the Town Council confirmed that it is visible on the bus from High School students.
- The Headteacher confirmed every school has small pockets as school is a representation of society.
  
- A member of the Town Council agreed with the Headteacher and appreciated his efforts. Every child deserves an education and given a chance. Education makes a difference. Credit should be given to Special School students and a salute is given to the Headteacher.
- A member of the Town Council confirmed no objection to this proposal. We need to all work together to support and help – in favour of the proposal.
- The Headteacher confirmed education is the way forward.
  
- A member of the Town Council confirmed that Ponteland Town Council will submit a response to the consultation
  
- SA thanked the group for their time and the discussion was heart-warming.
- The Headteacher raised that there is no public meeting to give an opportunity for a conversation. A third of Ponteland Town Councillors were not present today and the Headteacher is happy to reconvene and have a conversation rather than not, in this forum.

- SA concluded if there are any other questions, a member of the Town Council is to get in touch. Thank you for your time.