

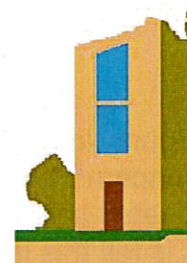
# Ponteland Town Council

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Clerk to the Council: Kathleen Mavin

1<sup>st</sup> December 2021

FAO Mrs S Aviston  
Head of School Organisation and Resources.  
Northumberland County Council  
County Hall  
Morpeth  
NE61 2EF

Dear Mrs Aviston

## **Response from Ponteland Town Council to the consultation for the relocation of Atkinson House to the former Richard Coates school in Ponteland**

The Town Council wishes to submit the following response to the consultation document that was received by email on 13th October 2021.

Further to my email sent to NCC on Friday 26th November and the subsequent reply received from NCC on 29<sup>th</sup> November, the Town Council are disappointed that an extension will not be granted but thank NCC for the information relating to a possible formal consultation at a later date. The Council is concerned that nearby residents and businesses who could be directly impacted by the proposals are unaware of what is being suggested as part of the consultation despite advertising in local papers, the NCC website and in the library.

The Town Council are keen to stress that they appreciate and understand the importance of and the need for improved provision for SEMH pupils of all ages in the county as well as the development of secondary provision for girls. However, they feel the decision to opt for the Ponteland site is a rushed one with inadequate thought given to the location and facilities you could offer pupils.

They are grateful for the opportunity given to them to hold remote meetings with NCC and the head teacher of Atkinson House.

To gain a better understanding of the situation, Councillors have listened to the general public, held a Zoom meeting with the Pele Trust and made an 8.30am site visit to both Richard Coates old and new schools accompanied by a member of the Pele Trust. More information on that visit and the Zoom meeting is covered below.

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Councillors have considered all the proposals in detail and they do have several concerns with the proposed relocation of Atkinson House to the former Richard Coates school.

It is felt this is not a suitable location due to the close proximity to a Primary school, nursery, elderly residents in the cottages opposite and the close proximity of the shopping centre.

The Council would not be averse to the relocation of Atkinson House if a more suitable area could be found in or around Ponteland.

Councillors have several concerns regarding how the schools will be able to operate safely on a shared site.

(i) On the site visit held on 25th November, councillors witnessed that Richard Coates pupils arrived by various means. Concerns were raised regarding the number of children walking to school coming from all directions, when taxis are making drop offs at the school. The safeguarding of these young children is a priority.

The school start time is traditional, and it is felt this should not be changed for the sake of pupils, staff and parents, many of whom work and have jobs to get to.

Members of the Pele Trust visiting Atkinson House in Seghill reported seeing pupils smoking and some unruly behaviour including bad language outside the school. This is another reason councillors feel that this is not the right location for this school.

At the Zoom meeting held on 16<sup>th</sup> November with NCC and the Head Teacher. Councillors were assured pupils will be taxied in and walked into the school; this does not appear to be what happens currently at Atkinson House. Is this because if they were escorted into school the pupils would feel they had lost some of their liberty?

The Town Council fully understands that pupils have a variety of different needs which are provided for in the current Atkinson House School.

- a. Pupils have a garage facility now to give them hands on education; this would not be possible at the old Richard Coates School site. It is felt by councillors that this is an important part of the present curriculum.
- a. Designated smoking areas outside the school at Atkinson House, is needed by the pupils. Councillors feel this is very inappropriate due to the location of nursery and primary school children, but query what effect it will have on Atkinson House pupils should this facility be withdrawn.
- b. It is felt the location of the shops will be an attraction to pupils attending the school.
- c. The Town Council understand that it will be difficult to divide the fields between the two schools, for reasons given below.

(ii) The Town Council are concerned about the shared use of playing fields and the multi-use playground which is immediately behind the former Richard Coates school site. The Primary school use the fields extensively for around 80% of the day, not

just for lunchtimes but for PE, outdoor lessons and daily walks for the pupils. Access to the fields provides open entry to both schools which the Council feels is not practical and workable due to the issues around safeguarding for both schools. Councillors are concerned that this has the potential for a lack of dignity and respect for pupils of both schools.

The Atkinson House pupils will be older and even forgetting any challenging behaviour and anxiety issues, their language and activities should not be witnessed by very young children.

(iii) The Town Council are aware that communications have been received by the Pele Trust indicating that if the proposal goes ahead, some parents will consider removing their children from the school and nursery. We have also received such a letter from a concerned parent.

We understand that there is spare capacity in all of the Primary schools in Ponteland as children from outside the area are no longer accepted. If this school becomes unpopular with parents, there are concerns about its future. Richard Coates school has historic significance for Ponteland, the founder, Richard Coates set aside funds to educate the underprivileged children of the time and the Council and residents would not wish to see it closed.

(iv) The Town Council has some concerns about the condition of the former Richard Coates site and its fitness for this purpose. See related comment (v) below.

(v) The Town Council believe that before a decision is made, other options should be explored. We are aware of other empty NCC buildings such as schools in Hexham which are in a more suitable location, Hexham Middle school is an example. There is also space at Kirkley Hall, just outside of Ponteland. The Council would like to be informed if other options have been explored and ask that the process be delayed allowing other possibilities to be examined in more detail. Also, the Town Council were under the impression that the former Richard Coates site was to be demolished and the land used for housing. Has this option been abandoned? If this was to happen, the receipts from the sale of the land could be used to build a purpose-built school in a suitable location which would be better suited to meet the needs and requirements of children with SEMH issues.

In summary, we would also ask that urgent consideration is given to the request set out in item (v) above.

Should this proposal go ahead regardless of the concerns listed above, the Council would need assurances on the following:

(i) That pupils are dropped off by taxis and escorted into school to avoid any issues whereby they are able to go into the nearby shopping area or further into Ponteland.

(ii) That some steps are taken to ensure the playing fields space is adequately and appropriately screened to ensure there is no interaction between the pupils of both schools.

(iii) Consideration is given to the situation around smoking and providing designated areas for pupils of Atkinson House to use for such purposes. The Town

Council believe this gives the wrong message and could influence much younger pupils who may witness this behaviour.

(iv) The Town Council seeks clarification regarding the increased traffic on Thornhill Road. They also believe that the start and finish times for Richard Coates which are well established should be not be changed.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Mavin', written in a cursive style.

K Mavin  
*Clerk to the Council*