

Introduction and Background

- The Newcastle Diocesan Board of Education (NDEB) recognises the rapidly growing need for the provision of specialist education for those with Special Educational Needs. To that end we will always support the right provision in the most suitable location.
- Atkinson House School is Northumberland County Council's only designated secondary provision for pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental health needs (SEMH). The school has always been designated to cater for boys who travel into the school from all over Northumberland. As part of the proposed move to Ponteland this facility would also welcome girls for the first time. The NDEB recognises this is a valuable and needed provision.

Shared use of site and safeguarding concerns

- The redundant Richard Coates Building is the proposed new temporary location for Atkinson House. This is next to a Nursery Provision and still shares a school field and MUGA with the newly located Richard Coates Primary School. Access is currently readily available from both sites and used regularly by the Primary School. Please see image below:



- Access to all three buildings is openly linked and would be difficult to segregate without significant work. The NDEB is concerned that evidence of suitable measures to safeguard all children is yet to be shared by the Local Authority and would want to understand these measures and how they would work in practice before being able to support this proposal.

- The Diocesan Director of Education attended Scrutiny with NCC on this proposal and asked if clarity could be provided on how safeguarding would be managed on site to ensure there were adequate protections in place for those children who already attend provisions on, and next door to, the same site. He was assured such safeguards would be in place but was not provided with details of these measures.
- The NDEB understand that one of our Church School Headteachers and the CEO of Pele Trust visited Atkinson House in November 2021 in order to seek to alleviate any concerns around the shared use of the site. We are sadly aware that several concerns were raised after the visit had taken place including; an informal smoking area that was deemed necessary alongside the main entrance and drop off point, a significant level of inappropriate language both heard by and targeted at the visitors and three students being witnessed jumping over walls into the grounds of the provision approximately one hour after they had been dropped off by taxi. To our knowledge these concerns remain in place and in light of this we would wish to reiterate our need to understand how these potential risks to younger children using and in close proximity to the same site could be mitigated.

Conclusion

- In summary, the NDEB recognises and supports the urgent need for places and appropriate provision for the students attending Atkinson House and does not object in principle to the proposed relocation of the provision provided sufficient adaptations and investment in the site ensure adequate security and protections for neighbouring provisions. We understand that the proposal is now that this is a permanent relocation so the site must be suitably secure and significantly modified taking into account the shared use with primary aged children and proximity of a nursery provision. Unfortunately, we do not yet understand how the safeguarding concerns highlighted will be effectively managed in practice, or have any detail on the level of investment or modifications proposed to ensure these are appropriately resourced. In light of this at this time we are unable to support the proposal as it currently stands. If further detail, information and clarification on appropriate mitigations of the risks posed can be shared the NDEB will of course look to review this position.