

26 June 2017

Dear Parents/Carers

### **Initial Consultation on Proposed Change to Age Ranges of Queen Elizabeth High School and Hexham Middle School**

We are seeking your views on a change that could help secure the future of education in this area for the next 30 years or more.

The Trust Board has set three key objectives:

- First, and foremost, to improve educational experience and outcomes.
- Secondly, to become financially sustainable, so that we can continue to deliver the education we all want for our children.
- Thirdly, to secure capital investment, so that our buildings and facilities are fit for purpose.

Over recent months, we have given much thought to how we can best achieve these objectives. We have considered many options, taking into account local circumstances and the wider educational landscape. The Trust Board, with the support of Members who safeguard our ethos, have come to the conclusion that the status quo for our schools is no longer sustainable. There needs to be a change.

The change that we are proposing is to bring together Queen Elizabeth High School and Hexham Middle School to create a single 11-18 Secondary school. Currently, we do not envisage that any significant change would take place at either school before September 2019. Clearly, this proposal would have implications for other schools in the Hexham Partnership and beyond.

We should stress that we are consulting at an early stage in developing our plans, which will be informed by the emerging views of all our stakeholders. We have already begun a dialogue with all Partnership schools and others such as the Local Authority. Now, in order to widen the debate, we want to hear the views of parents, students, staff and the whole community, before deciding how to move forward.

It is our intention to undertake a two-phase Consultation. This Initial Consultation sets out the background and rationale for our proposal and indicates what we would like your views on. We are very conscious that, at this stage, there will be many questions that must remain unanswered because much will depend on the input of other parties. Once the Trust Board has had time to consider all of the consultation responses, we will decide whether or not to put forward a much more detailed proposal, with a Formal Consultation in the Autumn Term.

If we decide to proceed, we would need to follow the statutory process for consulting on a new admissions policy. This would set out our Published Admissions Number (PAN) and over-subscription criteria. At this stage, we cannot define what our future admissions policy would be, as that depends on a number of factors. Our current intention is that QEHS' main admissions point would be into Year 7, with an admissions number set for that intake. As now, admissions would be possible in later years, subject to places being available, but there could be no guarantees. In any event, our intake would continue to be comprehensive.

The reasons behind our thinking, and why we believe a Primary-Secondary model to be the right arrangement for young people's education in this area, are summarised below and expanded upon in the accompanying document. We go on to explain how you can find out more, how the Consultation process works and how you can take part.

### **Improving Educational Experience and Outcomes**

Thanks to the hard work and dedication of staff in all schools in the Hexham Partnership, the educational experience and outcomes for our children have been among the strongest in the North East. However, this quality of provision is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

Curriculum content is increasing and tests and exams are becoming much more demanding across all of the Key Stages. We are concerned that our students will fall behind their peers in Primary-Secondary systems if we continue with the current arrangement. National achievement data from Ofsted points to weaker student performance in Middle schools in comparison to that in Primary schools.

Although the Partnership schools work well together, a significant investment of time is required to try to align provision across the tiers in a way that is coherent with end-of-Key Stage requirements. Inevitably, variation remains. Changing to a Primary-Secondary system overcomes this.

In addition, evidence shows that children's progress slows when they move schools. A Primary-Secondary system reduces the number of transition points between schools.

Increasingly, Secondary schools are moving to three-year GCSE courses to cope with the increased demands. This means students need to choose their subjects in Year 8. Clearly, this would be difficult if students were still in Middle school, without having experienced the many options on offer.

Fundamentally, our local Three-Tier system is at odds with the national one. Of more than 24,000 schools nationally, only 131 are now Middle schools and the numbers continue to fall. In its current consultation on Primary assessment, the Department for Education has acknowledged that it is unclear how Middle schools can fit within the national accountability system.

We are convinced that moving to a Primary-Secondary system would make it easier to overcome these challenges and for our children to thrive and prosper in a structure that fits with the rest of the country.

## **Becoming Financially Sustainable**

As you are probably aware, school funding is falling in real terms, while costs rise. Despite having already made extensive cuts, and benchmarking showing that we operate efficiently, we face growing deficits. If we did nothing, these deficits would rise to an estimated £1 million by the end of 2020/21. The Department for Education would not allow this to happen and would hand our schools over to an outside Multi-Academy Trust. If we made the cuts necessary to balance the budgets, our schools would be unrecognisable in terms of class sizes, the curriculum and extra-curricular activities we currently offer.

Changing to become an 11-18 Secondary school would result in an immediate improvement in our financial position – rather than the £1m deficit referred to above, we forecast that there would be a surplus of around £0.25m to invest in education. This is because the change would cut the costs of running more than one school, while increasing funding with an extra two years of students. Currently, QEHS has to support a relatively large and expensive-to-run sixth form, without the benefit of having all Key Stage Three students, who are typically taught in more efficient class sizes.

## **Securing Capital Investment**

Every year, parental surveys confirm what we all know. Our buildings and facilities are expensive to run but not fit for purpose. We are pleased to have made a successful bid to replace the Fellside roof at HMS and hope to win an appeal for a bid for new windows at QEHS. However, this kind of funding alone will not create the learning environment our students deserve.

Age range change would require substantial capital investment throughout the Hexham Partnership, as schools re-configure. We are in discussions with both the Local Authority and the Education Funding Agency to understand whether making this change could help unlock this much-needed investment.

## **How To Out Find Out More**

Copies of this letter, the full Initial Consultation Document and Response Form are available on the HMS and QEHS websites. Paper copies are also available from each school's Reception.

We will also be holding drop-in sessions on the following dates, when you can speak to Trustees and Senior Leaders:

HMS Staff Only Drop-In: Monday 3 July 15.30-17.00

HMS General Drop-In: Monday 3 July 17.30-19.00

QEHS Staff Only Drop-In: Wednesday 5 July 15.30-17.00

QEHS General Drop-In: Wednesday 5 July 17.30-19.00

The Executive Headteacher and Chair of Trust Board will also be available for short individual meetings on Tuesday 11 July and Thursday 13 July. Please contact Charlotte Gaines [cgaines@qehs.net](mailto:cgaines@qehs.net) or 01434 610301 to arrange an appointment.

## How To Take Part In The Consultation

We welcome responses from all stakeholders, including current, prospective and past parents, students, staff, and the wider community. The Consultation will run for four weeks from Monday 26 June until 4pm on Friday 21 July.

You can email your completed Response Form to [consultation@gehs.net](mailto:consultation@gehs.net) OR hand in paper copies at either HMS or QEHS Reception OR post to: Age Range Consultation, Queen Elizabeth High School, Whetstone Bridge Road, Hexham NE46 3JB.

## What Happens After The Consultation?

The Trust Board will meet to consider carefully all of the responses received. We will then decide, on behalf of HMS and QEHS, whether or not to proceed with a second Formal Consultation based on more detailed proposals. If we do decide to proceed, the Local Authority may hold its own parallel consultation on behalf of community schools. Similarly, the Governing Bodies of Church of England and Roman Catholic schools may decide to consult on their behalf.

We will keep you informed throughout this process.

We know that the prospect of any change can be unsettling until resolved, but please be assured that, whatever the future holds, we remain committed to doing our very best for all of our children.

Yours faithfully



Graeme Atkins  
Executive Head Teacher



Simon Kitchman  
Chair of Trust Board, Hadrian Learning Trust