Hexham, NEXX XXX

March X, 2018

Re. Hadrian Learning Trust, potential conversion from three- to two-tier system.

Dear Ms Renou,

I write in relation to Hadrian Learning Trust’s ongoing consultation regarding the conversion of Hexham Middle and Queen Elizabeth High schools to a single secondary school.

As a parent of a child/children currently in the West Northumberland school system/local resident/ex-pupil etc etc, I would like to outline my concerns about the likely adverse effects on the education and well-being of our children relating to this plan.

Potential points to include -please see the following for further information:

<http://www.corbridgemiddle.co.uk/hltcpersonal.html>

<http://www.qehs.net/files/docs/formal_consultation_document_mar18.pdf>

* Current system works well in W. Northumberland as evidenced by excellent academic results. These are due, at least in part, to the extra two years of specialist teaching that pupils in the three-tier system receive in years 5 and 6, compared to those in a two-tier system, who do not enter schools with advanced facilities or subject streaming until year 7. Any alteration to this has great potential to adversely affect academic attainment.
* Rural Northumberland is a unique area with special needs, and to state that it is ‘out of step with the vast majority of schools nationally’ assumes that it could be shoe-horned into a ‘one size fits all’ model. In reality, the three-tier system suits and serves rural Northumberland very well. Children from small, often isolated rural communities, many of whom will have never experienced a large peer group, are initially educated close to home in small classes. Middle schools provide an intermediate step, before pupils enter a large high school. This allows them to organically develop social and emotional maturity, and the skills for learning. In a two-tier system they will move straight from a very small primary to a very large secondary, which can cause serious emotional stress. The pastoral system in a large secondary school is also much less effective in identifying individuals who require support.
* HLT states that upon their conversion to two-tier, there would be no reason for the smaller first schools to close, they could simply convert to primary schools. This is naïve at best, disingenuous at worst. In practice, for many first schools, conversion to primary would not be practically or economically possible. Closure of some first schools would lead to issues including:
  + Loss of high-achieving, financially viable, emotionally nurturing schools.
  + Children from the age of four travelling long distances to school
  + Negative effects across communities including a loss of jobs and difficulty attracting young families to certain areas.
  + Lack of early years provision in some areas.
* The period of change would likely be turbulent across the whole of the Hexham partnership, with the potential for adverse educational, emotional, and wider social effects on children who are within the system.
* The secondary school model proposed by the HLT relies upon the closure of all local middle schools to be financially viable. In reality, there is overwhelming support among local parents for the current three-tier system, as evidenced by the thousands of people signing petitions in its support and the results of HLTs informal consultation in summer 2017. At least one middle school has indicated that they wish to stay open. It is therefore likely that any change would result in a mixed economy of schools operating in the two- and three-tier systems, and that HLT’s plans would then not be economically viable due to reduced pupil numbers up to year 9. Furthermore, more parents would likely opt to use private schools when the alternative is a 2,000+ capacity secondary school. These factors threaten the long-term viability of what is currently a very high-achieving high school.
* The proposed restructuring removes parental choice. As outlined above, the number and type of primary schools will inevitably be reduced as a knock-on effect of conversion to a two-tier system. If the HLT’s plans come to fruition, there will only be a single (huge) school in the area for children from the age of 11, compared to the current three of varying sizes for children from the age of nine. Furthermore, responses to the HLT’s informal consultation about the possibility of conversion to two-tier in the summer of 2017 were overwhelmingly negative. In continuing to this next consultation phase, HLT has disregarded local parents’ wishes for their own children’s education.
* It is unjust and inappropriate that the dictatorial actions of the HLT impose sweeping top-down change across the whole of the West Northumberland school system, by effectively enforcing the closure of first and middle schools against the wishes of parents.

As well as the likely adverse effects of changing to a two-tier educational system outlined above, additional reasons for maintaining the current three-tier system include the fact that NCC have committed to capital investment in schools in West Northumberland without it being necessary to change to a primary/ secondary model, that a potential merger between Queen Elizabeth High School and Haydon Bridge High school would generate additional pupil numbers and extra funding for QEHS removing the need for the conversion to two-tier, and that The Hadrian Learning Trust IS an academically successful entity in its current two school model. Additionally, one of the justifications for the proposed change is that middle schools are under pressure to prepare pupils for SATS in just two years. The excellent SATS results in the Hexham partnership do not support this notion.

In short, there is no good reason for the current format of the schools within the Hadrian Learning Trust to be altered, and in fact conversion to a two-tier system is likely to have far-reaching adverse effects on our children’s education. I therefore hope that you will not support these proposed changes.

Yours faithfully,