

## **Educating Northumberland; A Community Issue**

As you approach Northumberland by road from the north you are greeted by the announcement “Northumberland – England’s Border County”. Much of Northumberland’s history has been determined by its proximity to the Scottish border. .

The centuries of border movement and its associated rivalries and disturbances has determined that the indigenous population of this border county is aware of both its liberty and its fundamental needs to form communities that give both strength and a stability to daily life.

It was John Locke who brought together the two complimentary aspects of life, individual liberty and community when he said “*The only way by which anyone divests himself of his natural liberty and puts on the bonds of civil society is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community*”.

The geography of Northumberland, the scattered nature of its population, the persistence of agriculture and other rural occupations and the history of strong communities in the old coalfield has determined that England’s Border County has entered the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with both rugged “individualism” and a real “strength of community” as part of its extensive portfolio of community assets. Individualism and community are terms that must be seen in apposition not opposition. It will be the hope of a reinvigorated Education service that both strength of individualism and strength of community will go hand in hand.

The administration of NCC does have to live with the strange human geography that 70% of the population of Northumberland (200,000+) lives in 20% of the area of the county. Conversely 30% of the population (90,000 approx) are scattered over the remaining 80% of a very rural county which stretches from Berwick to Greenhead.

The delivery of an education service suitable to the very particular needs of the entire population of Northumberland will be taxing and demanding but must be one which builds on the assets of strong individualism and strong communities. The future structure of schooling in this County will not of necessity reflect the rest of England. One size does not fit all LEAs.

### **A vision (or desired outcome) for Education in Northumberland**

What sort of people do we want our children to become and what sort of society do we want to live in?

We want education to produce good human beings, able to enter into relationships with others, able to think, to communicate, to collaborate and to make decisions  
i.e. to make positive contributions to the community in which they will live.

Aristotle wrote; “*Without a fully active role in community life one cannot hope to become a healthy human being.*”

## **The case for educating children in their own communities.**

- A child spends only 20% of its time in the classroom. The rest of the learning opportunities come from the community. Learning and development is affected by experience in and out of school.
- Children need a set of community relationships in order to find an identity- or a sense of rootedness. Worthwhile education rests on good social foundations.
- A contractual view of delivery of education, common to all and uniformly prescribed, neglects to consider how children learn in the context of their social environment. If education is introduced to children as familiar concepts, using familiar experiences it more readily engages the child's interest. The curriculum is more easily understood if it is relevant to the social context. Understanding increases a child's confidence. ( Bell and Sigsworth ). There is much evidence that segregating children from the real life of their community comes at the expense of their ability to make valid connections between their school learning and real life. Surely education is about the discovery of that connectedness. ( 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Initiative )
- Local schools create a sense of belonging in all participants. This happens because of the possibility of closer relationships developing between pupils, pupils and staff, staff members, and school and parents. All play a positive role in the school. Parents become essential partners with the school, in their child's development. Children learn in situations where they feel safe and they are known as individuals.
- Relationships develop with the outside community and the community can become a resource in the delivery of the curriculum. Talents of other adults can be drawn into the school and the children contribute to community activities. The outcomes of this are that children become more competent in their social lives, less dependant on others and more conscious of their obligations to others. Also the community takes responsibility for the education of its young people. Let me quote from a lady in the far west of the county; *"What is the reason for closing Greenhead First School? It has been providing a good quality start to education for generations of children .The village has established a birth to adulthood care for its children; there is a thriving support group for mothers and babies, mothers run a pre-school and nursery for the next age group, the school children join the community activities including Church services and there is a series of youth clubs as the children develop. The result is a group of youngsters of whom we can be very proud, fully integrated into their community and giving no trouble. We are doing something worthwhile which has been lost in most of the rest of the country – don't we deserve your support? They do deserve support and this story is repeated in many small communities in our County.*

- Schools are a resource for the community, sharing the use of their buildings, grounds and facilities. For details of this see the paragraph on community schools. The idea of surplus places could be taken out of the accountant's domain and into the community sphere where it can serve the social wellbeing of all. If we change our thinking surplus space could be seen as a community investment. Such space could be developed using innovative ideas to deliver existing and new services throughout the County.
- Within communities we teach our young people human values. If we lose contact with communities they see nothing of value but their own self interest.

### **Community and the 3 tier system of education delivery.**

A 3 tier system is; -

a) Child centred.

It fits well into a child's emotional and physical development

b) Community based.

It keeps a child in its community for as long as possible, at least until the child is given the tools to move out into the wider world.

c) Responsive to the physical and human geography of Northumberland.

It dovetails well into the small scale character of many rural communities.

We all know the importance of early school years and that it is most advantageous to have small classes in first schools. Small schools at the heart of the community are an ideal introduction to school life, producing very effective learning environments. Research in Wales and Scotland show that children from small rural first schools perform significantly higher in 18+ exams ( NASS).

The criticism of small rural schools has always been;

- their inability to provide a broad curriculum
- little competition
- limited social and academic stimulus

The 3 tier system offers a solution to this issue in the form of Middle schools who offer from the age of nine;

- a broad curriculum, including specialist facilities with specialist teachers.
- competition
- extensive sporting facilities
- ever widening social and academic experiences
- A wide range of extra curricula activities

This is all offered on a human scale, where well developed relationships within the school, with parents and with the local community means that the child is known and respected as an individual. This is the best of both worlds.

The size of the school does mean that **all** children can be offered a wide range of experiences both in and out of school. I quote from a letter from a teacher at Rothbury; *“I teach at Dr. Thomlinson Middle School in Rothbury – a small rural school of fewer than 200 pupils. This week our pupils of all age groups could participate in a school orchestra, ceilidh band, choir, recorder group, football and hockey matches, netball, chess, darts, history, drama, maths and ICT clubs. Already this year pupils have gone skiing; done a Christmas production; read in church; organised fundraising events for Children in Need, the Tsunami Appeal and Red Nose Day. They have visited the ballet and the theatre. All our children take part in the democratic process of speech making and voting. They write newsletters and year 8 pupils act as librarians. This is just a taste of the experience we offer them”*.

Three tier delivery matches development needs, giving the child the time to gain experience from the community. By the age of 13 the concepts of identity, rootedness and belonging, the tools they require for confidence to explore the wider world, are usually in place.

Research from The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Initiative says that at the age of 11 these tools are not yet in place. Confidence is gained by two extra years in Middle school based in their community

Strong partnerships between school, home and community are reflected in the fact that, on the whole, Middle school children like going to school. Truancy rates are low and attendance rates are high, in fact Seahouses Middle School was congratulated in a recent Ofsted report for being in the top 10% nationally for attendance rates.

Ofsted quotes from two Northumberland Middle schools;

*“The support that the school receives from the parents and the local community makes a significant contribution to pupils learning”*. (Glendale Middle 2000)

*“The school’s position at the heart of the local community greatly enriches pupils’ personal and social development”*.(Seahouses Middle 2005)

Size **does** actually matter in the delivery of education. Transfer at age 11 to a large Secondary school is a daunting experience for any child but because of the small scale character of many rural communities it could be very difficult and traumatic for our children.

*“The government is looking for ways to tackle transition from primary to secondary as there is much evidence that it is a daunting experience and leads to a dip in academic performance”*. ( Educ. Guardian)

The 3 tier system is a viable and trustworthy answer to this. We do not need to create problems for our children.

A very large secondary school at a considerable distance from home, with an unrelated curriculum could easily result in an increase in “switch off” from learning. This is a national problem that Northumberland could avoid. Issues resulting from disaffection have a major impact on our local communities where this disaffection will be acted out.

The Economic and Social Research Council is currently funding a program to look at identity and social action. The research will look at why middle class parents choose to send their children to local secondary schools when they have a wide choice of schools. The answers coming back are that many selective or high achieving schools offer limited experience socially and academically. Local schooling is rich in social and cultural life and children are not labelled but treated as individuals. A quote from a child at Gladesmore community school, north London *“It’s a tight community and everyone accepts everyone’s differences as natural. You are more free to be yourself rather than a conformist”*. People in the rest of the country are looking again at the value of community involvement in education. In Northumberland we already have a close community/ education partnership due to our successful 3 tier system. We must not throw this advantage away but we must build on this great strength to serve our children well.

**If we concentrate on how children learn the “what” they learn will flow from that.**

## **Community Schools**

Across the county, in areas where Middle Schools serve a large rural hinterland, they are designated as Community Schools and six of these exist in Northumberland. They are at Belford, Seahouses, Glendale, Rothbury, Haltwhistle and Bellingham. These are schools open beyond school hours for the use of children, parents and others in the community. They are directly administered by the school and offer adult learning and youth provision as well as making facilities and grounds available for wider use by communities.

These schools are ideally placed to implement the Government’s new education priority –Life Long Learning.

The benefits of Community schools to the local communities are that a wide range of facilities and organised activities are easily available “on the doorstep”. Local people have easy access without having to travel. Middle schools are ideal as Community schools as they have a very wide range of specialist facilities, ICT suites, technology rooms, art rooms, music resources, domestic science rooms, adult sized gyms, large playing fields, swimming pools and youth facilities. They share the use of all these resources with the wider community.

Primary schools could not offer the community these extensive facilities.

Schools and community need each other as schools ought to be part of the community not communities in themselves.

Some Middle schools have innovative partnerships with voluntary and private organisations that benefit the whole community. For example, at Glendale the school is forming a partnership with a voluntary body and a private leisure complex ( Glendale Sports and Leisure) to provide first rate sports and leisure facilities in the town that benefits children and adults. The school is also in partnership with the Sage Arts Centre to provide tuition for Steel Pan bands. So successful is one band that they travel widely to play. (to London and Trinidad)

Closure of Middle schools would mean a considerable loss to six rural communities where distance to the nearest town would prohibit access to resources. Two of NCC’s objectives for their Adult Learning program are 1) To widen participation and 2) To offer opportunities for family learning. How does this relate to closing down the Community Middle school facilities in scattered rural communities?

The Countryside Agency in “The State of the Countryside 2004” point out that distance to learning facilities and cost of transport can be a problem particularly for those on low income, women with children, young people and those with mobility issues. The dispersed nature of the rural communities puts the people at a disadvantage and means life long learning provision is more difficult to target towards those in most need.

In Northumberland the County Council have positive objectives for their adult learning program in place and they already have well equipped, rural community Middle Schools offering adult and youth facilities. Why would they wish to close these local facilities down? The 2002 Education Act encourages the provision of “extended schools” providing resources to the wider community. The DfES requires rural LEA’s to have full service extended schools offering a prescribed core of integrated services including health and social care, childcare, study support, lifelong learning/ family learning, ICT access and sports facilities. With six fully equipped community Middle Schools in the rural settlements NCC is already a leader in this provision. Why destroy this at this point in time? It would make better economic sense to build on our already successful provision.

## **Employment**

The opportunities of employment in Middle schools are extensive and include significant numbers of ancillary and auxiliary staff. NCC should not underestimate the contribution these jobs make to the county’s economy.

In rural Community schools there is further significant employment in the Youth and Community Departments. These jobs are important as rural people are more likely to work part time or be self employed.

Availability of jobs and services in rural areas is linked to the sustainability of a rural economy. Sustainability is assumed to be part of NCC’s vision for all its rural communities. The abolition of employment opportunities might suggest that NCC has an ineffective or non existent economic development strategy for the county. If this is the case it is opposition to the Government’s vision as stated in their white paper “A Fair deal for rural England” where they wish to see;

“ A working countryside with a diverse economy giving high and stable levels of employment”.

I would like to offer two examples of important employment of non teaching staff in community Middle schools;

### **Glendale Community Middle School**

- 1 Community Officer
- 15 Adult Tutors
- 5 Youth Workers
- 1 Caretaker (house supplied)
- 6 Cleaning Staff
- 1 Cook
- 4 Kitchen Staff
- 4 Midday Supervisors
- 3 Office Staff
- 7 Classroom Assistants
- 4 External Music Tutors
- 51 Total

51 jobs make a significant contribution to the economy of a small town of approximately 2,000 adults. Those doing these jobs are not able to relocate

### **Seahouses Community Middle School**

- 1 Community Officer
- 1 Youth Supervisor
- 6 Adult Tutors
- 4 Youth Leaders
- 6 Music Tutors
- 2 Football Coaches
- 1 Karate Coach
- 1 Caretaker
- 2 Cleaners
- 1 Cook
- 3 Kitchen Staff
- 1 Office Manager
- 1 ICT Technician
- 1 Librarian
- 1 Midday Supervisor
- 3 Classroom Assistants
- 39 Total

The situation in Seahouses with 39 jobs shows a similar picture as in Glendale and as it will in all six Community Middle schools. **These jobs are vital to the sustainability of the rural economy.**

Loss of employment has wide ranging effects in a rural area. In the more remote areas such as the Coquet Valley, Ingram Valley or the North Tyne the loss of 1 or 2 jobs has a marked impact. This and the prospect of longer travelling times and greater travelling distances to school, at an earlier age, make farming jobs less attractive to young families.

Small market towns, such as Rothbury, are home to a number of commuting families. They choose to live in the rural areas because of the life style but this becomes less attractive if their children have to be bussed longer distances at an earlier age. If schools close and young families move away the decision has a direct effect on the sustainability of these communities.

Statistics from The Countryside Agency in 2004 show that in rural areas the indigenous population decreases naturally (more die than are born) but overall there is growth in the rural population due to in-migration. This has important implications as those choosing to live in rural areas require services and resources, the availability of which strengthens community vibrancy and the quality of life. Extended educational facilities are included in this.

The question to be asked is; Have NCC's proposals for educational review been rural proofed?

**In their white paper the Government stated that policy makers should systematically think of significant differential impacts in rural areas and strengthen ways to listen to the rural voice.**

Closure of job opportunities determines a downward spiral as only the retired want to move to rural areas and therefore there is a decline in pupil numbers.

An aging population structure does not make for a living, vibrant community.

Do we want a community where "The University of the Third Age" flourishes ( an excellent facility in itself) and our children are bussed out? I think not!

### **Community Development**

There is a desire across the County to regenerate communities and to this end many Development Trusts have been formed, from Lynemouth to Bellingham. Local residents work together to create and sustain a community life that works. All Development Trusts seek the economic well being of their community.

For example; in Wooler The Glendale Gateway Trust works with a vision of a town with;

- a) Thriving mix of sustainable business and services providing employment opportunities.
- b) Balanced and growing population to sustain economic, cultural and educational diversity.**
- c) Maintained, enhanced and attractive landscape.

There is a recognition that educational facilities and economic well being in a community are intertwined.

As rural economies undergo fundamental economic, social and structural change it is important that educational opportunities respond to that change. Education plays a major role in the building and sustaining of communities.

There is a widespread perception that the young leave rural areas to find challenging and well paid employment. It is important that rural economies offer a range of skilled job opportunities for them to remain in or return to the countryside. Middle Schools, in a 3 tier system of education, play an important role in this, offering specialist teaching opportunities. We cannot afford to lose such skilled jobs from our communities if we are to keep alive the Development Trust's visions of sustainable communities.

**Development Trusts need the backing of a strong economic development strategy from NCC.**

In 2002 the Northumberland Report was produced following the disaster of Foot and Mouth. This report also focused on the need for countryside development in the agrarian and tourist sector of the economy.

The deconstruction of the 3 tier system of education and the elimination of Middle Schools throughout the County would put the economic development in a number of communities, especially the rural areas, in jeopardy if not in reverse.

Economic development demands the finest of service infrastructures to attract jobs and labour.

The Northumberland Report received national acclaim for its vision of rural regeneration. It would be unfortunate if NCC acted in a manner to destroy any part of this vision.

In the White Paper, "A fair deal for rural England" the Government made the commitment:-

"We will ensure that our rural policies are joined up, recognising the inter-relationship of economic, environmental and social factors".

Their stated vision for the countryside was of:

A **living** countryside, with thriving rural communities and access for all to high quality public services.

A **working** countryside, with diverse economy giving high and stable levels of employment.

A **protected** countryside in which the environment is sustained and enhanced and which all can enjoy.

A **vibrant** countryside which can shape its own future and whose voice is heard by Government at all levels.

The people of Northumberland want this too.

Does NCC's Educational Review process embody this vision?

The people of Northumberland made their voice heard in the consultation organised by NCC and voted to retain a 3 tier system of education. Within this consultation the Youth forum voted that the issue most important to them was "the location of their school". They want schools as close to their communities for as long as possible.

Why are they and the other people of Northumberland not having their voices heard in the reshaping of the education system?

