

Education in Northumberland

Introduction

"Raising standards is at the heart of *Putting the Learner First*" (Members briefing document for Council meeting, 6 July 2004). Northumberland Education Action Group (NEAG) is wholeheartedly in agreement with the aim of raising standards.

NEAG acknowledges and recognises that there are several issues that need to be addressed by innovative ideas and constructive dialogue. This is why NEAG has constantly striven to deliver alternative solutions that build on the already successful 3-tier education system in Northumberland.

To do this we have worked with parents; governors; teachers; Parish, District and County Councillors; LEAs; and businesses around Britain and overseas. Alongside this we have had the help and support and encouragement of educational researchers, the DfES, and OfSTED to analyse the issues we face in Northumberland. We have not limited our research to school age education but have examined education from the perspective of community involvement in lifelong learning in the 21st Century.

This research allows us to speak with confidence about the way *Learning for Life* - a total education package can assist in the economic regeneration of Northumberland. We are confident that building on our already successful 3-tier education system to deliver innovative solutions will deliver a tangible improvement in results, is affordable, sustainable, and can be implemented across the county in a shorter timescale than a change to 2-tier education.

The present 3-tier system supports and enhances the many and varied communities in Northumberland. The social and personal development of our children is protected as they develop into responsible citizens who contribute at an early age to the communities in which they live and learn. Measurements in OfSTED school reports show the 3-tier school system assists in this process. The educational performance of our schools is above average and at the life-deciding stage of GCSE results we are in the top 25% of schools in the country.

NEAG are committed to working with local and national agencies to find innovative solutions that further develop the already successful 3-tier education system in Northumberland.

Two-tier education is not innovative. Two-tier education shows no clear educational benefit. The change to two-tier is unaffordable and retaining 3-tier is more cost effective. Two-tier is against the wishes of the majority of people in Northumberland.

The 3-tier education system works for Northumberland, our results are in the top 25% and improving year-on-year. By concentrating on our strengths and weaknesses we can deliver an excellent education system in a cost-effective manner.

Community

“when we talk about the future of our schools we’re actually talking about the future of all of our lives.”

Brian Edwards (Director for Education – Northumberland LEA) said in February’s issue of Northumberland Magazine “when we talk about the future of our schools we’re actually talking about the future of all of our lives.” There is no denying this is a profound and very truthful statement that merits our attention.

Community regeneration in Northumberland is high on the agenda with multi-agency approaches being adopted across the county. For too long our communities have been withering and dying. Lack of housing and associated services have led to migration of workers away from established communities. With heavy investment in buildings and infrastructure and the introduction of affordable housing across the county will help this regeneration process. One of the key elements identified is the need for community participation and ongoing education in the form of *Learning for Life*.

Delivering this Learning for Life programme requires innovative solutions utilising our world leading investment in technology infrastructure and on-the-ground availability of facilities. These facilities that already lie at the core of communities in Northumberland due to the 3-tier system of education already in place. With the wealth of facilities already in place, combined with the new infrastructure being implemented Northumberland is placed to become a leading exemplar of the 21st century community with a strong ethos of both people and place.

It is our diverse communities and their spirit that gives the county its uniqueness. We benefit in so many ways from the existence of schools in the heart of our community and with children involved and participating in all dimensions of their local communities. This has benefits far beyond the classroom and our above average exam results. It delivers a whole range of behavioural benefits such as reduced crime rates, low teenage pregnancy, low exclusions from school, improved health – these are not measured by exam results or tests.

These social and personal dimensions are recognised and valued, not only in our own communities, but also through OfSTED inspections. The huge social and personal benefits exhibited by the existing 3-tier education system come from the steady and well-managed transition enabled by the 3-tier system. Adults and children in their community, interacting and developing together in a way that isn’t possible in large remote schools.

According to OfSTED assessments Northumberland’s 3-tier system of education excels in the areas of behaviour and social engagement. The people of Northumberland want, and deserve to retain, and education system that produces good human beings, able to enter into relationships with others, able to think, to communicate, to collaborate and to make decisions - in short - to make a positive contributions to the community in which they live.

The government is seeking to strengthen community involvement and to improve social and behavioural aspects in schools and communities. In Northumberland, thanks to the 3-tier system of education, this is already happening and it enhances our lives. Our current 3-tier system of education already provides strong social benefits as witnessed by OfSTED and at the same time places our exam results in the top 25% nationally.

See Appendices A01-A03 for further discussion of these aspects

Educational Standards

Educational standards in Northumberland are GOOD and getting BETTER

Northumberland' does not have a failing education system. Our exam results at GCSE level put Northumberland in the top 25% of all LEAs and our results are continuing to rise.

What do we measure?

When thinking about quality we need to be careful to measure what is significant, rather than attributing significance to what is measurable.

Available measures are both outcome and process based. Tests such as SATs, GCSEs & A-levels measure outcomes for individual children, whereas the OFSTED inspection system provides an indicator of the processes. The outcome measures are focused on one measure of aptitude and fail to capture emotional, social or physical abilities. It must not assume that because these are the only measures we have, they are the only ones that matter. Quality assessment needs to be holistic and take account of indicators from a variety of sources to build up a picture of the whole. Indicators are available relating to emotional well being such as exclusion and truancy rates, crime rates, etc are equally important to our community well-being. We have seen from the previous section that OfSTED has identified that Northumberland schools excel at process based aspects due to our 3-tier structure.

In terms of the results measured by tests and exams there are some questions that need asking. In Northumberland the Key Stage 1 results are unusually high and the A-level results are poor in comparison to our GCSE results. The reasons for this need to be examined. Unfortunately the LEA has not released sufficient data for NEAG to carry out a realistic comparison of data.

However there is very clear evidence that our KS1 to Value Added results are as expected. When Northumberland's KS1 and Value Added results are plotted against other LEAs they follow a similar pattern. There is a very clear trend that if Key Stage 1 results are high then later results will be low regardless of whether the LEA is 2-tier or 3-tier. See B03.

Two tier is *NOT* superior

Northumberland LEA claims there are few three-tier systems in existence and that the results for two tier systems are superior to those of three tier systems. Mr Stephen Twigg the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills stated in the House of Commons that "We accept as a Department that both systems can be effective, and we are not aware of any clear research evidence to suggest that one is preferable to the other".

According to the DfES there are 3 LEAs that run a full 3-tier system and a further 22 that "have middle schools but also have some primary and secondary schools. Also, some LEAs have moved to a two tier system but still have one or two middle schools remaining". This gives 25 LEAs (one sixth of the total) and of these LEAs 80% are in the top half of the league tables for the past five years and 60% are in the top third.

Details of LEAs that had reorganised were requested from Northumberland County Council but Trevor Doughty replied that Northumberland had no record of LEAs that have reorganised or their results. NEAG has carried out an analysis of our statistical neighbours and LEAs that are known to have reorganised.

Northumberland vs Statistical Neighbours

At GCSE A*-C only **THREE** out of ten statistical neighbours have a higher percentage of pass rate in 2004. Northumberland made **better progress** (ie results improved at a quicker rate) than **ALL** our statistical neighbours. Northumberland (3-tier) is performing better and widening the gap with its statistical neighbours (all 2-tier).

Northumberland vs Reorganized LEAs

With help from the DfES we identified LEAs that have changed and plotted their progress. At GCSE A*-C only **TWO** out of eleven reorganised LEAs have a higher percentage of pass rate in 2004. Northumberland made **better progress** (ie results improved at a quicker rate) than **ALL but THREE** reorganised LEAs. Northumberland (3-tier) is performing better and widening the gap with reorganised LEAs. Significantly the two LEAs that performed better in terms of percentage pass rate are not improving as quickly as Northumberland so we are catching them up in terms of results.

Remarkable Achievement

To achieve this high level of performance and be in the top 25% in the country while still excelling at social and behavioural aspects is a remarkable achievement. This is even more so when you consider we have an educationally deprived area (as defined by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) within Northumberland. It is a tribute to the work of all our school teachers and the way the 3-tier system nurtures and supports both learning and emotional development

There are problems

However, this remarkable achievement doesn't mean Northumberland can rest on its laurels. There are still areas of concern that need to be addressed (See B02). When analysing the results it became clear that issues do exist. We have one very poor performing High School where standards have dropped dramatically since it was reorganised and a new building constructed. If the results of this school could be returned to the level they were in 1998 we would be in the top 10 nationally for GCSE results.

There are similar issues with other schools at all levels and addressing these issues would dramatically improve the overall performance in Northumberland. This highlights that there are educational performance issues. These are *not* county wide but localised to particular areas or individual schools. It is these issues that need to be tackled and we need to build on the excellent progress made by the majority of our 3-tier system to continually improve standards across the county. We do not need to abolish a successful 3-tier education system to address specific issues.

The continual improvement of Northumberland LEAs results is something we should be proud of and it is difficult to see how the *Putting the Learner First* strategy will achieve significant improvement in educational standards.

It is clear that there is no national research that says 2-tier education produces better results than 3-tier education. However there is clear evidence that Northumberland's 3-tier education system is performing exceptionally well given the inclusion of a deprived area, is improving quicker than those it is compared with, and that it achieves this while maintaining and improving the social and behavioural aspects measured by OfSTED. There is absolutely no case for change on the basis of educational results of impact of two changes.

NEAG extends its thanks to the DfES and OfSTED for providing data, commenting on interpretations and some of the reports in appendix B.

See Appendices B01-B10 for further discussion of these aspects

Finances

Innovative 3-tier is cheaper than a change to 2-tier.

Funding is available for Middle Schools

Officers have repeatedly misinformed the public and elected members about the funding available for Northumberland. At present **all funding streams are available to Northumberland if they retain the 3-tier system** of education. This includes Building Schools for the Future (BSF) and Academies funding. Statements made by Brian Edwards that BSF funding is not available to Middle Schools are incorrect; BSF funding is available to every child in a Middle School. Statements made by Jackie Strong that funding for Academies is only available if we change to a 2-tier system of education are also incorrect as confirmed in an email by the DfES (12 April 2004). *Do not be misled - there is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow!*

The majority of funding currently available to Northumberland requires competitive bidding against other LEAs. While it is hoped that Northumberland would be more successful there is no guarantee that a bid would be successful. Without the support of the public any bid for finance is less likely to succeed. Any new secondary school also requires that others, including parents, are allowed to be part of the process. NEAG would expect to be invited to participate at an early stage in all school projects as interested parties.

Funding not compared on an equitable basis

In November 2004 Northumberland released their financial figures comparing the costs of implementing their preferred 2-tier option with a modified 3-tier option. NEAG challenged these figures but despite several meetings and a report highlighting errors such as including costs twice Northumberland continued to say the costs were correct. Therefore NEAG undertook a comparison of costs.

To do this we contacted the DfES and asked for their advice on how a comparison of this nature should be carried out. They provided a wealth of information including building costs and how to apply them to a scheme of this type. Although NEAG does not agree with the Northumberland County Councils proposals for 2-tier or 3-tier we used these proposals and the models on which NCC based their costs for our comparison produced in accordance with the guidance provided by the DfES. These are included in appendix C01.

These figures show the cost of a modified 3-tier system would be **£70M cheaper** than the proposed 2-tier system. NCC states their costs follow DfES guidelines but so far NCC have been unable to provide any justification for the figures. In addition there are serious concerns over the figures in several partnerships, as they do not appear to show a true picture of what has been discussed. For example during the Tynedale Area Committee Meeting at Haydon Bridge a written response stated the new Secondary School would cost £17.3M but only £15.5M is allocated for all Secondary school work.

See Appendices C01 for further discussion of this aspect

Surplus Places

Surplus place projections produced by the LEA are unreliable.

The OFSTED report on Northumberland LEA highlighted the need to find innovative solutions to address the number of surplus places in Northumberland. Changing to a 2-tier system of education is not innovative. At a time when several countries are changing to 3-tier education and there is an emerging trend of 14-19 education emerging this is shortsighted.

The DfES has stated that surplus places are not an issue of concern. "Follow-up action is considered with LEAs that have 25% or more surplus in 20% or more of their schools, as this level of surplus is considered wasteful. Northumberland is not in this category." The DfES also states that "rather than close a school, the LEA can consider innovative ideas such as collaboration, clusters, federations or extended schools, which would retain the asset for the local community, especially important to those in rural areas."

The calculations

Past calculations of surplus places by Northumberland LEA have always overestimated the number of surplus places available in schools. The current calculations for surplus places include derelict buildings and schools that are already being closed (eg Byrness). Current calculations also ignore the impact of housing development for hundreds, or even thousands, of houses across the county that would arise from selling school land for development.

One of the few positive comments in the LEA OFSTED related to the availability of choice for parents. Once surplus places are reduced in the whole system, the School Organisation Plan suggests that demand will be managed by restricting the catchment of popular schools.

The OfSTED report criticised Northumberland County Council's inability to accurately forecast future surplus places. In the independent evaluators' report released on the 22 November 2004 the LEA were again criticised for failing to provide accurate and comprehensive figures. In February 2005 NEAG produced alternative figures that showed the LEA figures were inaccurate and there would not be such a large surplus places issue. The report also highlighted the localised nature of the surplus place problem. The LEA response was to say that the model produced by NEAG was flawed.

However, the model used by NEAG (shown in appendix D01) was the same as the model used by Northumberland LEA. The only difference was the NEAG projections use more recent data provided by the Office of National Statistics. In the report released to the public the LEA claim that their figures are more accurate but they have failed to provide any proof of this or to release the figures on which their assumptions are based. In addition they have still not released the figures the independent evaluator said they needed to release in terms of surplus places and movement of pupils between LEAs.

To meet guidance the surplus places model needs to be accurate to 1% either side of the required places for one year in advance. This means that for Northumberland the model could predict to within 480 places either side of those required each year. Over 10 years that could be up to 4,800 places!

Models

There are many innovative models for 3-tier education that have been ignored

The DfES has a presumption against the closure of rural schools and all other avenues should be explored before the closure of a school is considered. NEAG welcomes innovative thinking such as extending higher education into rural areas via the use high technology. This would boost rural economies and help preserve and enhance the social, educational, and economic benefits of rural communities. It would deliver enhanced services to the communities of Northumberland.

Because of this commitment to community involvement NEAG has been talking and working with schools; parents; teachers; parish, district and county councillors; together with other agencies such ONE North East, District Councils, Business Organisations, businesses, as well as the DfES to examine possible innovative models. There has been involvement of the DfES Innovations unit in some of the proposals and some of the innovative ideas for the development and enhancement of 3-tier education have been positively received. Many of these models have been submitted to NCC by a variety of routes including partnership teams, letters, emails, and reports. None of these innovative ideas, including those developed with the Innovations unit, have been mentioned in the report to members.

See Appendices E01-E06 for further discussion of these aspects

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to this document – don't ignore it.

The production of this document and its appendixes would not have been possible without the help, support and input of numerous people and organisations. We would particularly like to acknowledge the help and assistance provided by the following DfES Statistics Team, Office of National Statistics, DfES Capital Policy Team, DfES Innovations Team, OfSTED, Government Office for the North East, National Federation of Middle Schools, 21st Learning Initiative, several Local Education Authorities, NFER and other leading Educational Research groups including universities and colleges in the UK and overseas.

Having said this we acknowledge that any oversights, errors or omissions are our own and thank you for highlighting these for our attention so they can be rectified quickly. We can be contacted via the NEAG website at www.neag.info.

Summary

We agree with Brian Edwards (Director of Education, Northumberland LEA) this debate is not about buildings – it is about the lives of our children, their communities and the future generations of Northumberland.

Are Department for Education and Skills officials telling Northumberland that there will be no money for new schools unless they get rid of middle schools:

“The answer is absolutely emphatically NO. There is no suggestion that ministers or officials in the DFES have prescribed that at all. We accept both systems can be effective and there is no clear evidence that one system is preferable. ”

The Education Minister, Stephen Twigg

On 11 April 2005 Jackie Strong, Project Leader for Putting the Learner First, told the Executive of Northumberland County Council that funding was not available for Academies unless we adopted 2-tier Education. On the 12 April 2005 the DfES confirmed its position had not changed and the Academies Division confirmed they “have not said that having an academy would be conditional on re-organisation from 3-tier to 2-tier.”

Northumberland LEA has stated that “Educational Standards are at the heart of *Putting the Learner First*”. Parents in Northumberland support the objective of continuing the excellent progress the LEA has already made with the three-tier system. While making substantial progress in improving standards the three tier system is also inclusive, supports regeneration, and provides s excellent social development opportunities, which are vital factors in nurturing the development of children.

It is absolutely clear that educational standards, social inclusion, neighbourhood regeneration, and a whole host of other essential factors for 21st Century living are supported by three-tier education in Northumberland. It has been demonstrated that innovative ideas and solutions can address surplus places and, at the same time, provide additional benefits to the varied communities in Northumberland to allow them to grow and prosper. It has also been demonstrated that the financial cost to Northumberland would be lower by adopting innovative solutions to our future education.

The future of the current and future generations of children in Northumberland is a precious commodity which parent throughout Northumberland will not allow to be squandered. Everyone in the county needs to know that Northumberland County Council shares this vision and is committed to this and future generations of children.

The existing system of three-tier education in Northumberland delivers all the key elements for excellence in 21st Century Education. It is clear that by continuing to enhance and develop our three tier system of education we not only address the education of our children but deliver a step-change in community provision that benefits the whole of Northumberland!