

Initial Consultation on Proposal to Change the Age Ranges of Queen Elizabeth High School and Hexham Middle School

26 June – 21 July 2017

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1. The proposal

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 purpose of this Consultation Document is to provide information about the proposal to bring together Queen Elizabeth High School (QEHS) and Hexham Middle School (HMS) in order to create a single Secondary school. As a result, the age range of Queen Elizabeth High School would change from 13-18 years to 11-18 years. 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. If we decide to proceed, we will conduct a second formal consultation with much more detailed proposals.

2. Summary of the rationale for change

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. We have come to the conclusion that the status quo for our schools is no longer sustainable. There needs to be a change.

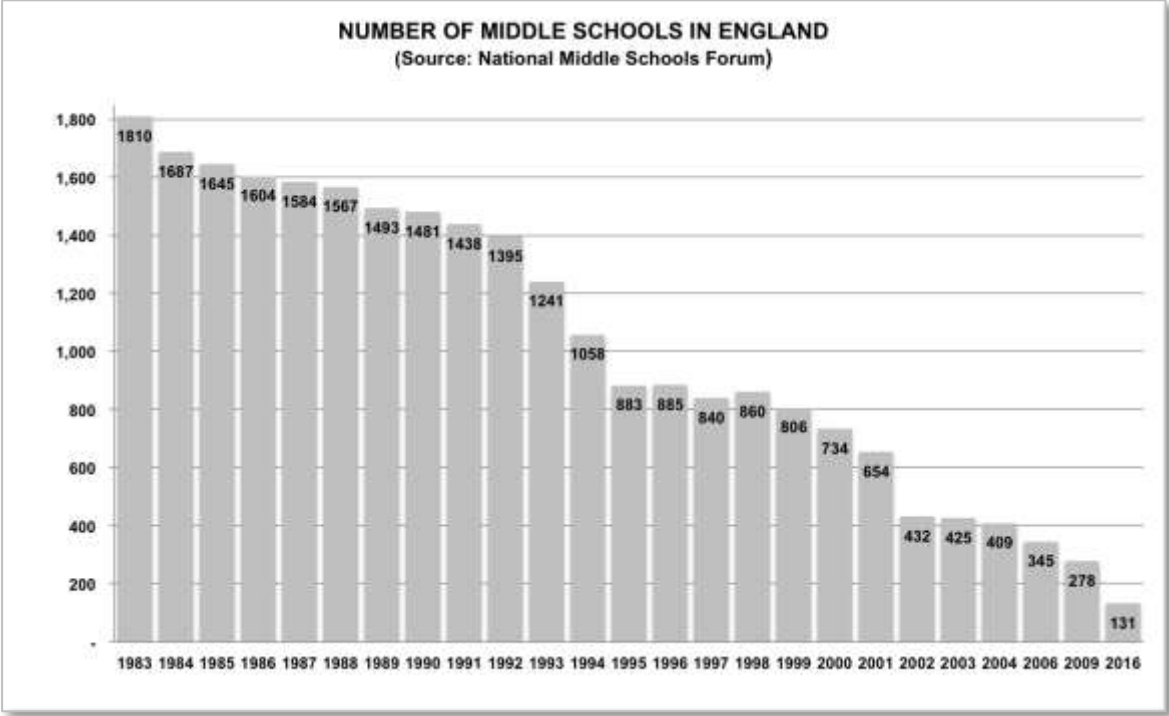
Briefly, the rationale behind our thinking is that:

- Changes in the education system are making it increasingly challenging to deliver the quality of education that we all want for our children.
- Our local Three-Tier system is out of step with the vast majority of schools nationally.
- Moving to a Primary-Secondary model would create a better fit with the national model in terms of curriculum, assessment and accountability.
- This change would make it easier to maintain and improve on our current high standards, so that our children have the best possible opportunities in the future.
- By becoming a secondary school, we would also put ourselves on a much more sustainable financial footing (which will enable us to continue to provide a broad curriculum and many extra-curricular opportunities).
- Re-organisation would also open up discussions with the Department for Education and the Local Authority about the opportunity for much-needed capital investment in our buildings and infrastructure.

The rest of this document sets out our rationale and some of the potential implications in more detail.

3. National and local context

The Three-Tier system of First, Middle and High schools has served the families of Hexham and the surrounding area well for over 40 years. However, changes at both national and local level mean that this system is now increasingly uncommon. Out of more than 24,000 schools in England, only 131 Middle schools remained in 2016. The vast majority of children, including those in rural areas, are now educated in Primary Schools from age 5 to 11 and then in Secondary schools from age 11 to 16 or 18.



The number of Middle schools is set to fall further. Schools in the local authorities of Bedford, Central Bedfordshire and Leicestershire are in the process of moving to an almost wholly Primary-Secondary system.

In Northumberland, re-organisations in school partnerships in recent years include those already implemented or planned in Alnwick, Amble, Ashington, Bedlington, Haydon Bridge and Ponteland.

4. Improving educational experience and outcomes

We start from a position of strength. This is thanks to the hard work and dedication of staff in all our schools.

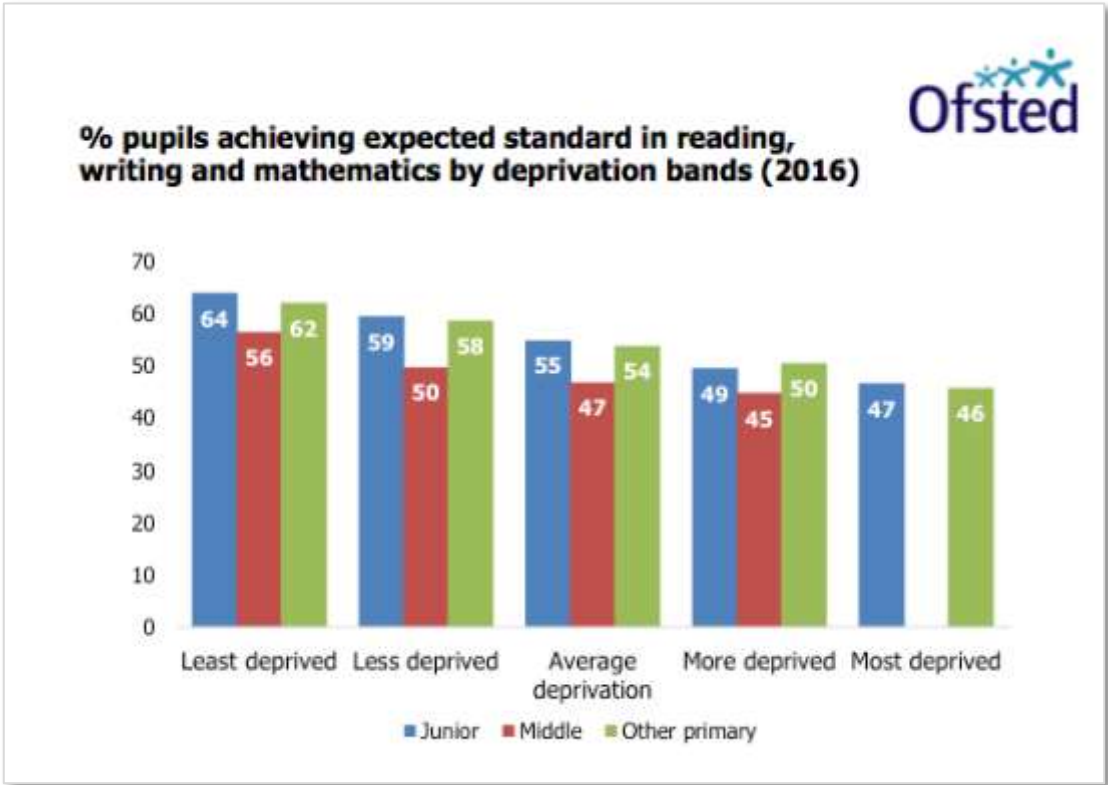
Both QEHS and HMS were judged to be Good in their Ofsted inspections in November 2015 and June 2016 respectively. The outcomes for our children by the time they leave QEHS are among the best in the North East and among the top quarter of schools nationally, as shown in the Department for Education’s [performance tables](#).

Equally importantly, our students have the chance to participate in the arts, sport and other opportunities that help shape them as individuals and citizens of the wider world. Delivering this full educational experience is a vital part of our ethos.

An obvious question arising from our strong results, is “If it isn’t broken, why fix it?” The answer is that our quality of provision is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. The main reason for this is that we are trying to run a Three-Tier model from the 1970’s in an educational world that is increasingly designed around a Primary-Secondary system. The table below shows this lack of fit, with a Three-Tier system cutting across both Key Stage Two and Key Stage Three in the National Curriculum.

| ALIGNMENT WITH KEY STAGES | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|------------|-----|---|-----|--------|---|-----------|------|---|-----|----|-----|----|----|
| SCHOOL YEAR | RECEPTION | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
| KEY STAGE | FOUNDATION | KS1 | | KS2 | | | KS3 | | | KS4 | | KS5 | | |
| TWO-TIER | PRIMARY | | | | | | SECONDARY | | | | | | | |
| THREE-TIER | FIRST | | | | MIDDLE | | | HIGH | | | | | | |

At the same time, curriculum content is increasing and tests and exams are becoming much more demanding across all 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 would overcome 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. Children could have the same form teacher and pastoral support from the age of 11 all the

way through to 16. This would especially benefit disadvantaged and SEND students. The time and resources spent on two transfers could also be better devoted to classroom learning.

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. It would also be better to make these important decisions once students have had time to settle in and discover the subjects that they are passionate about.

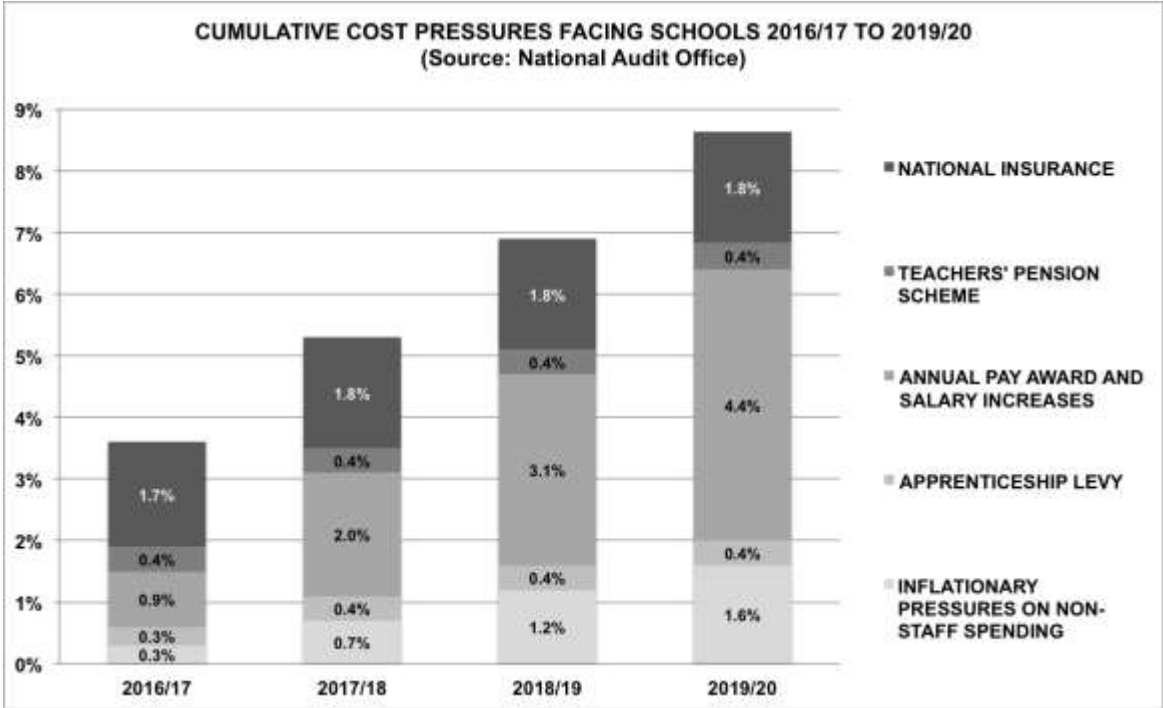
The Department for Education and Ofsted are holding schools more rigorously to account, with Secondary accountability focused on progress between the ages of 11 and 16, from Key Stage 2 SATs to GCSEs. Currently, as a High School, we are held responsible for two years over which we have no control for the majority of our students. By making this change, schools would take full ownership for either the Primary or Secondary phase.

Fundamentally, our local Three-Tier system is at odds with the national one. As mentioned earlier, 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 will fit within the national accountability system.

We are convinced that moving to a Primary-Secondary system would make it easier to overcome these challenges. Our good schools could become even better, enabling our children to thrive and prosper in a structure that fits with the rest of the country.

5. Becoming financially sustainable

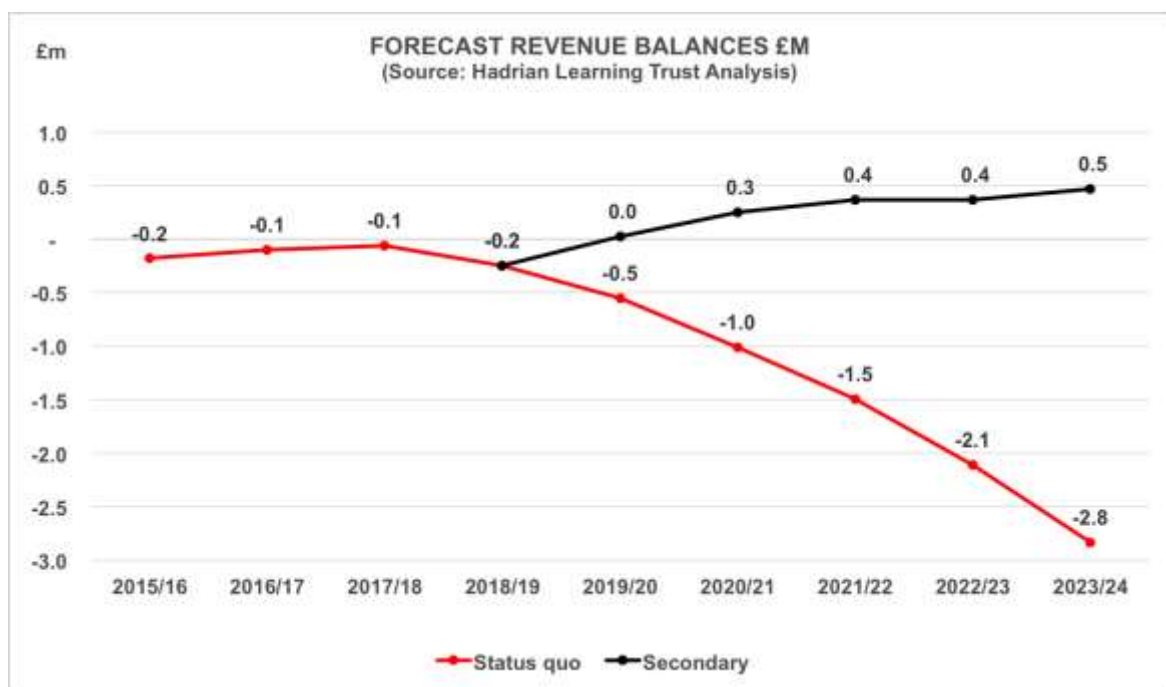
We have recently written to parents to explain the difficult financial situation currently facing our schools. A report by the National Audit Office in December 2016 showed that schools face an 8.6% real-terms reduction in funding by 2019/20 compared to 2015/16. This equates to approximately £0.68million of annual government funding across QEHS and HMS.



QEHS is particularly badly impacted as it has been historically underfunded compared to others nationally – the national median average school received 21% more grant funding per pupil in 2015/16. In recent years, our sixth form funding has also been subject to cuts in the region of £400,000 per year.

Benchmarking with similar schools shows that QEHS and HMS are typically low spenders, other than for property costs (due to the size and nature of our buildings). Despite having already made significant cuts year after year, it is still a continuing struggle to balance the books. Indeed, we are not currently investing as we should in areas such as IT, learning resources, equipment and staff development.

By making further cost savings, we are able to get through to September 2018. However, thereafter we are forecasting a worsening position – in 2019/20 we are forecasting a deficit of around £500,000 and by 2020/21 the deficit would grow to £1 million. To put this in context, our annual government funding is in the region of £8 million. As the chart below shows, the picture beyond 2020/21 is even bleaker, as funding falls in real terms but costs rise.



If we made the cuts necessary to address deficits of this magnitude, our schools would be unrecognisable in terms of class sizes, the curriculum and extra-curricular activities we currently offer. If we did nothing, The Department for Education would issue a Financial Notice to Improve and ultimately could hand our schools over to an outside Multi-Academy Trust. Inevitably, they would then make the severe cuts we are seeking to avoid.

Changing to become an 11-18 Secondary School would result in an immediate improvement in our financial position. As the chart above shows, rather than the £1 million deficit referred to, we forecast that there would be a surplus of around £250,000 to invest in our children's education. This is because the change would cut the fixed 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.

6. Securing capital investment

Every year, parental surveys tell us that our buildings and facilities are in many respects substandard. We agree, and the evidence from the Education and Skills Funding Agency's Property Data Survey supports this.

The Grade II-listed Hydro at QEHS and Fellside at HMS contribute a great deal to the sense of our own history. However, benchmarking of our expenditure shows that they are expensive to maintain and heat (money that would be better spent directly on children's education). The condition and configuration of many of our other buildings also falls well short of what is required to provide a twenty-first century learning environment. For example, the sports hall at QEHS does not meet Department for Education size guidelines and this restricts the activities we can offer.

We have been successful in gaining access to some capital funding. Northumberland County Council has recently completed pre-agreed water and sanitation improvements at HMS. The "condition needs" of the Hydro at QEHS will be met under Priority Schools Building Programme 2 (PSBP2) and we are currently in discussions with the Education Funding Agency to determine what that refurbishment will include. Following our academy conversion, we have bid successfully for substantial funds to replace the roof on the Fellside building and HMS canteen. The bid to replace the windows and cladding on the front of the QEHS Lower School missed the success threshold by just one per cent and we await the outcome of an appeal.

While all of these are very welcome maintenance projects, which we could not afford from our own budget, they do not address the fundamental flaws in our learning environment.

Moving to a Two-Tier structure could create a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape our schools so that they meet our needs for the next thirty years or more. It may be that consolidation onto a single site, for example, helps to make this possible. We are in discussions with the Local Authority and the Education Funding Agency to explore what a joined-up approach could deliver. This might include a contribution from the Local Authority's Medium Term Capital Plan, alongside PSBP2 funding. We are open-minded about the best solution, whether that is on one or both of our current sites or on a different site, refurbishment or a new build. We are also mindful that any investment would have to accommodate the changes that would be necessary in other Partnership schools to enable a shift to the Primary-Secondary system.

7. What would this mean for other schools in the Hexham Partnership?

Hadrian Learning Trust can only make decisions on behalf of HMS and QEHS. However, we strongly believe that, whatever the Key Stage, whether aged 5 or 18, these are all our children. For example, on average 95% of Year 8 students in Partnership middle schools move on to QEHS. Therefore, we are acutely aware that any change in our age range would have implications for other schools in the Hexham Partnership and beyond.

Knowing this, we have held discussions with every school, both individually and collectively, over a number of months. We are grateful for the courteous and thoughtful way in which they have listened to the reasons behind our proposal. In an ideal world, all schools would reach a consensus on the best way forward but we recognise that this may not be possible. In deciding how to respond to this consultation, the Governors for each school will need to

consider carefully not only what is in the interests of their individual school but also how that would fit within a coherent system.

The ultimate decision maker for each school varies by type. For Community Schools, the ultimate decision maker is the Local Authority; for Roman Catholic and Church of England Schools, it is the Governing Board, supported by the Dioceses; for academies, it is the Trust Board, subject to approval by the Secretary of State.

We note the decisions by Whittonstall First School and Corbridge Middle School to consult on joining the proposed Tynedale Community Learning Trust (TCLT), along with schools in the Prudhoe Partnership. If their academy conversions go ahead then, depending on timing, it could be for the TCLT Trust Board to make any decision.

Should Hadrian Learning Trust decide to proceed to a second stage consultation on its proposals, the Local Authority and other schools may decide to initiate their own consultations on any associated changes in school organisation to run in parallel.

The table below sets out the current information for each school in the Hexham Partnership: age range; published admissions number (PAN); total number of pupils on roll in January 2016 (NOR); and nominal capacity (as reported in Edubase).

| HEXHAM PARTNERSHIP 2016 (Source: NCC/Edubase) | | | | |
|--|------------------|------------|------------|-----------------|
| SCHOOL | AGE RANGE | PAN | NOR | CAPACITY |
| Queen Elizabeth High | 13-18 | 306 | 1298 | 1474 |
| Corbridge Middle | 9-13 | 90 | 311 | 360 |
| Hexham Middle | 9-13 | 150 | 440 | 635 |
| St Joseph's RC Middle | 9-13 | 84 | 333 | 360 |
| Acomb First | 5-9 | 15 | 64 | 75 |
| Beaufront First | 5-9 | 15 | 71 | 75 |
| Broomhaugh C of E First | 5-9 | 15 | 70 | 75 |
| Chollerton C of E First | 5-9 | 10 | 33 | 50 |
| Corbridge C of E First | 3-9 | 30 | 161 | 150 |
| Hexham First | 3-9 | 30 | 150 | 150 |
| Humshaugh C of E First | 3-9 | 11 | 29 | 53 |
| St Mary's RC First | 5-9 | 30 | 104 | 159 |
| Sele First | 3-9 | 84 | 447 | 420 |
| Slaley First | 3-9 | 10 | 64 | 63 |
| Whitley Chapel C of E First | 3-9 | 10 | 27 | 50 |
| Whittonstall First | 3-9 | 14 | 71 | 55 |
| Hexham Priory School | 2-19 | N/A | 75 | 80 |

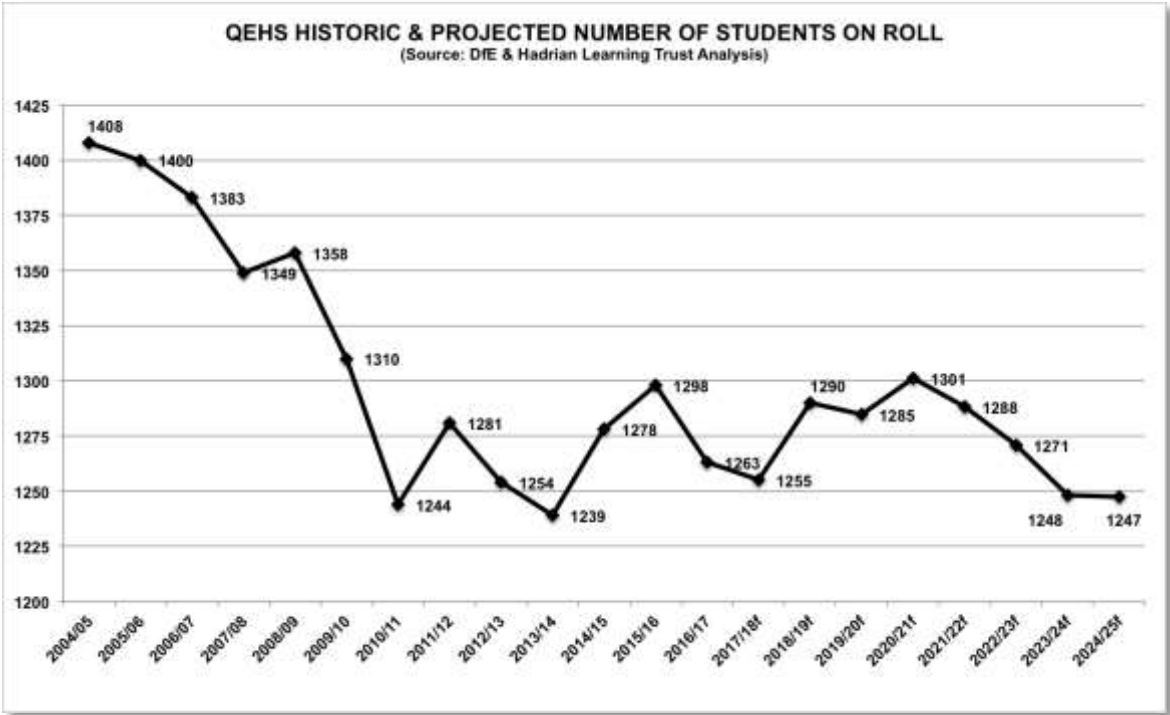
8. What would this mean for student admissions?

Hadrian Learning Trust is responsible for setting the admissions policy for HMS and QEHS. If this age range change proposal proceeds, we would need to hold a Formal Consultation on a new admissions policy. This would follow a statutory process, setting out our Published Admissions Number (PAN) and over-subscription criteria. In any event, our intake would remain comprehensive.

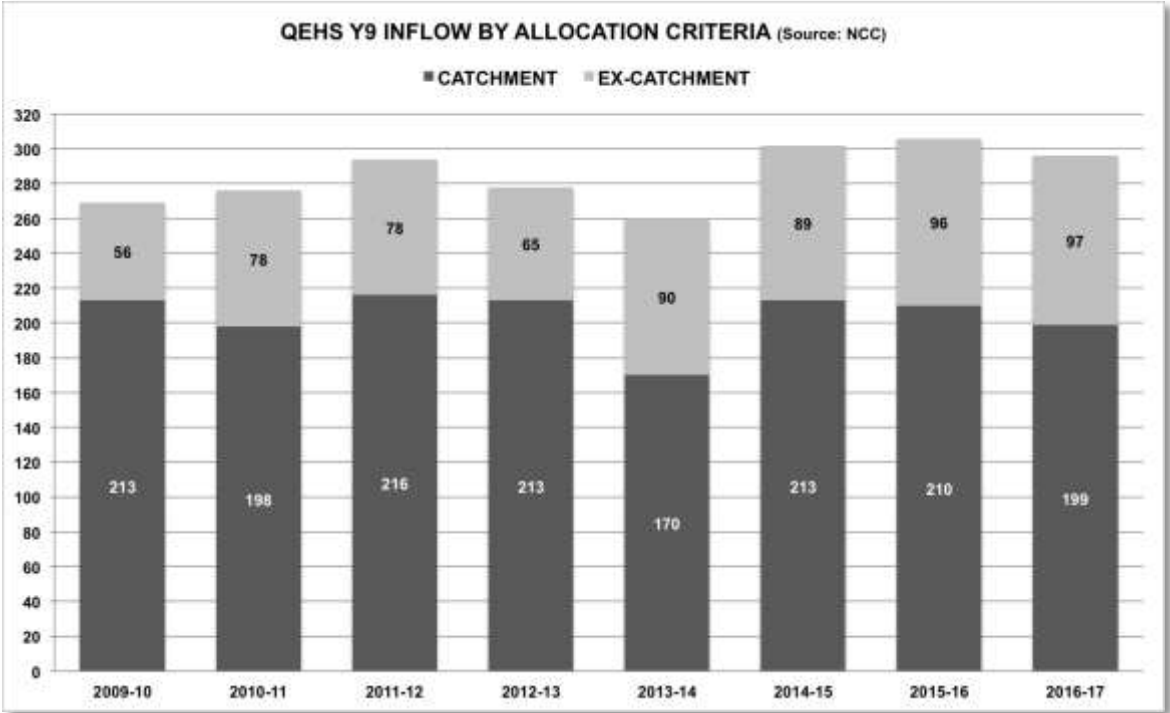
At this stage, we cannot decide what our future admissions number would be, as that depends on a number of factors. These include likely demand for places, the responses of other schools in the Hexham Partnership and the capacity of our buildings (which in turn depends on the availability of capital funding). We hope to gain greater clarity on these points during the consultation.

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.

The following is provided for information only. The current admissions number for Year 9 entry at QEHS is 306. Due to changes in local demographics, along with a shift in the pattern of post-16 choices, QEHS has undergone a long-term decline in student numbers. The total number on roll, including the sixth form, has fallen from a peak of 1408 in 2004-05 to 1263 in 2016-17. Our projections indicate that this number is unlikely to grow significantly over the coming years if we remain as a 13-18 High School, as shown in the chart below.



This long-term decline in numbers would have been even more acute were it not for increasing numbers joining the school from outside the catchment area – the proportion of ex-catchment students has risen from around 20% to 33% in recent years.



9. What would this mean for your child?

As parents ourselves, we understand that this will be the first question that many people will ask. The first thing to say is that this is only a proposal and no decisions have been made at this stage. Secondly, we do not envisage any significant change in our schools before September 2019. So, children currently in Year 6 or above would continue on the same educational journey regardless. Children currently below Year 6 could potentially move up to QEHS earlier than under existing arrangements. However, much will depend on the input of other parties and so details would only become clearer if we proceed to a Formal Consultation in the Autumn Term.

Whatever happens, we are confident that the professionalism of staff in all our schools means that your child will continue to enjoy a good educational experience. For example, we would ensure that arrangements are in place so that children starting at QEHS have time and space to adjust to a bigger school.

10. What would this mean for our staff?

If implemented, this proposal would have implications for staff in the Hadrian Learning Trust and other schools. At this stage, it is not possible to say what these might be as there have been no decisions made on what form age range change would take. In any case, we would do all that we could to minimise any negative implications. We appreciate that uncertainty can lead to anxiety but hope staff will be reassured that any changes would be for the medium-term: we do not envisage that anything significant is likely to change before September 2019. Ultimately, the same number of children will need to be taught, whatever the setting.

We would seek at an early stage to establish a staffing protocol, in conjunction with governing boards of other schools and Trades Unions, to ensure that the process of establishing a new structure would be fair and equitable and in compliance with statutory consultation requirements. The staffing protocol would outline a set of principles that all schools agree to work to, covering communication with staff and Trades Union colleagues, consultation on any new structures, recruitment, redeployment, redundancy and support to staff throughout the process.

11. What would this mean for the Multi-Academy Trust?

Hadrian Learning Trust currently comprises two schools. If HMS and QEHS were to merge, this would reduce to one. This is by no means unusual, with over two thirds of academy trusts having a single school (Source: DfE, 'Open Academies', March 2017).

As we made clear at the time of conversion, we are open to other schools joining the MAT if it is agreed that is in everyone's best interests. That door remains open for any school in the Hexham Partnership. We have decided though that it makes sense to clarify the position on potential age range first, before getting into substantive discussions on MAT expansion.

12. What are the implications for school transport?

Transport for individual pupils is the responsibility of Northumberland County Council and always arranged in accordance with their Home to School Transport Policy. Should the proposal go ahead, some pupils in Years 5 and 6 could have shorter journeys to schools as they would be educated for an additional two years in their local communities; journeys to school for some pupils in Years 7 and 8 may be a little longer.

13. What are the arrangements for the consultation process?

The consultation will run for four weeks from Monday 26 June until 4pm on Friday 21 July. Stakeholders consulted will include students, parents and staff of all Partnership schools, other local schools, Northumberland County Council, Trades Unions, Councillors and the Member of Parliament. However, as this would be such a significant change, we welcome responses from the whole community.

Copies of the letter to stakeholders, Initial Consultation Document and Response Form are available on the HMS and QEHS websites or from Reception at either school.

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 or 01434 610301 to arrange an appointment.

We are keen to hear the views of as many of you as possible, including any alternative proposals. Please complete the Response Form and email to consultation@gehs.net OR hand in paper copies at either HMS or QEHS Reception OR by post to: Age Range Consultation, Queen Elizabeth High School, Whetstone Bridge Road, Hexham NE46 3JB

14. 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 Hadrian Learning Trust, whether or not to proceed. If we do so, we will hold a second Formal Consultation based on more detailed proposals.

If we do decide to proceed, the Local Authority may hold its own consultation on behalf of community schools. Similarly, the Governing Boards 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 but please be assured that whatever the future holds we remain committed to doing our very best for all of our children.