

Responses to themes raised during the Benfield School sixth form consultation

Further to the consultation on the proposal to close the Benfield Sixth Form, we received a number of responses from a wide range of stakeholders. We identified three main themes that came out of the responses and have provided some additional information in response to the issues raised.

1. What has been done to try and increase the numbers of students attending the sixth form?

The low numbers in the sixth form has been a problem for many years and one of the key issues identified was the narrowness of the curriculum offer. To encourage more students to attend the sixth form, the school has previously entered into a sixth form partnership with Heaton Manor (now Jesmond Park Academy). When this was unsuccessful after two years, there were further discussions with other local schools who have a sixth form offer to look at the feasibility of offering a broader shared curriculum that would appeal to a wider group of students. Unfortunately, it was not possible to find a practical way for this to be delivered and resulted in the school providing quite a narrow range of sixth form options and very low numbers of students choosing to join the sixth form.

More recently the school has also looked to provide a more vocational mix of courses alongside the A level offer and has also investigated the potential for T-levels. However, the small number of students showing an interest in the proposed increased offer would have made the courses financially unviable to run.

The school has also looked at the facilities available to the sixth form students as this has been identified as an important factor in the choice of sixth form provider. As a result of higher numbers in KS3 and KS4 the school has very limited space that it can make available to the sixth form. To address this in a positive way would require a substantial capital investment, which is currently not affordable.

As no students chose to join Yr12 in the current academic year this has created even greater financial pressure on the viability of the sixth form. While there was a period of open consultation and uncertainty about the continuation of sixth form, the school has chosen to focus on providing all students with a comprehensive career support programme that will allow them to identify the most appropriate post-16 pathway for them.

2. What support will be in place to support SEND pupils transition to alternative post-16 provisions?

We already plan and support the transition from KS4 to post-16 provisions for all students attending Cherrywood Additionally Resources Provision (ARP), the physical disability ARP, and those with special education needs (SEN) support plans by:

- Sharing up to date knowledge with parents/pupils from as early as Year 10 education health care plan (EHCP) reviews regarding appropriate post-16 provisions based on pupils' strengths/weaknesses and career goals.
- Host information events at the beginning of Year 11 to share information about post-16 provision options, and discuss next steps to facilitate the transition process.
- Tour local post-16 provisions to help pupils/parents discuss course content and make informed decisions.
- Meet with post-16 provision leads to share information on pupils SEND and/or EHCP provision to ensure the provision is an appropriate placement for each pupil.
- Formally hold EHCP reviews with parents and with Local Authority involvement.
- Facilitate transition days where applicable in order to assess/remove barriers to pupils attending a placement ensuring that our pupils remain in the education system.

The school is also developing a more extensive careers support programme, which will be introduced across all year groups and we will ensure that it provides suitable options for our most vulnerable pupils and those with SEND.

3. Has consideration been given to the impact of the Covid pandemic and the further instability to pupils that arises from the closure of the sixth form?

The formal review of the sixth form had already started in 2019 prior to the pandemic, when an independent consultant reviewed the sustainability of the sixth form. The findings from that report were being considered and discussed when the pandemic started and as a direct result of the disruption and challenge from the pandemic, the trust board deferred making a decision about closing the sixth form to ensure that our students were supported during this very challenging and disruptive period. The review of the sixth form was picked up again in the autumn of 2022, which is why we have undertaken the consultation now.

Unfortunately the low numbers choosing to study in the school's sixth form, which are only 23 in the current academic year, make the costs of providing the sixth form much higher than the income that we receive from the Department for Education and this is not financially sustainable going forward.