

Subject: Petition to Reconsider the Sale of the Former Haltwhistle First School Site for Social Housing and to instead Prioritise Visitor Economic Development.

We write on behalf of concerned members of the Haltwhistle community to formally object to the proposed use of the Former Haltwhistle First School site for the development of social housing. The Housing Delivery and Supply Summary 2025 concluded that the level of housing within Northumberland has exceeded the requirement to date and the future forecasts show that there is a surplus in supply (266%) against the Local Plan requirement, both at a countywide and at the relevant smaller geographies. Haltwhistle is estimated to have a surplus of 95.

We acknowledge the need for social housing and support the efforts Northumberland County Council have already undertaken to address the region’s housing crisis, however developing social housing on this site would conflict with sustainable development policy and the potential for economic growth. We believe that the proposed sale of this land for social housing is not in the best interest of the residents of Haltwhistle and will have lasting negative impacts on the town’s economy, employment opportunities, and future growth. Instead, we urge the prioritisation of its potential as an economic asset for the town specifically in support of the **visitor economy** which has the potential to create jobs, stimulate growth, and protect the cultural heritage of this unique and historically significant area.

The area already has a high percentage of residents living below the poverty line with our community facing significant challenges in terms of local jobs and public services, including healthcare, education, public transport, and local infrastructure. The introduction of additional social housing would only increase the strain on these already under-resourced services, exacerbate existing inequalities, leading to further deterioration of the quality of life for existing residents. Rather than improving conditions, the increased concentration of disadvantaged individuals in one area could **perpetuate a cycle of poverty, hinder social mobility, and further isolate vulnerable groups**.

The Council's policies—including the **Corporate Plan** and **Economic Strategy**—clearly prioritise the visitor economy, rural prosperity, and tourism-based regeneration as key objectives. Converting a strategically located brownfield asset into social housing contradicts this principle of alignment. The Former First School site is better suited—and already strategically supported—for use as a **tourism accommodation, activity and event hub** in line with national and local policy.

The Council’s **Strategic Estates Team** manages property to ensure assets directly support its priorities—**economic growth, community place-making, and maximising returns or social value from surplus land** in ways that align with its strategic aims.

Northumberland County Council’s **Asset Management Strategy (2023–2026)** states that surplus property should be used for “**delivering key Council priorities**,” and explicitly directs the Council to dispose of land only “**to meet these needs**.” Tourism and rural economic growth are repeatedly defined as such priorities in the Council’s **Corporate Plan**,

Economic Strategy, and the **Haltwhistle Borderlands Place Plan**. The strategic aims seek to expand the visitor economy, especially through increasing off-season visitors and visitor spend, expanding overnight accommodation, and supporting rural destination.

Tourism plays a critical role in the local economy. Haltwhistle is in a unique location as a gateway town for both Hadrian's Wall and the North Pennines National Landscape, two of the most iconic destinations in the UK for history, outdoor adventure, and natural beauty. Hadrian's Wall is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most iconic landmarks in the United Kingdom. Its historical and archaeological value is irreplaceable, attracting thousands of visitors annually. Northumberland has a wealth of natural beauty, historic landmarks, and cultural offerings. The Visitor Development teams within the Northumberland National Park and the North Pennines National Landscape have invested money to expand their reach and connection to Haltwhistle including improvements to hiking and cycling trails, and signage. Haltwhistle's town infrastructure should be leveraged to capitalise on this beneficial external investment to its full potential, bring in more tourists and create a more diverse economic base.

The Former First School could serve as a key piece in a wider strategy to develop Northumberland as a regional tourism hub that celebrates its cultural heritage while generating long-term economic benefits for the community. This will create **sustainable jobs**, improve sustainable infrastructure, and boost the wider economy in areas such as hospitality, retail, and sustainable transport. Northumberland's 2024 tourism performance underlines its continued growth:

- **10.5 million visitors** in 2024, spending **£1.443 billion**—a 9% increase year-on-year,
- **Overnight stayers** (e.g. tourists) grew to **1.863 million**, with total staying visitor days reaching **7.87 million**,
- In 2023, **10.12 million visits** generated **£1.262 billion**, with overnight guests accounting for **65% of the total spend**,
- Tourism supports around **14,500 jobs** in the county.

This boost in tourism growth has implications for Haltwhistle with strong overnight visitor trends confirming sustained demand that justifies investment in additional visitor infrastructure. Given the county's emphasis on growing overnight stays and tourism spend, utilising the Former First School Site for tourism accommodation would tap into this economic momentum and align with strategic objectives. Visitors could be drawn to the region for day trips or extended stays, making Northumberland a key destination in the northeast, and local businesses would see an increase in footfall. The increased tourism would generate more spending, create jobs and enhance local amenities, helping to support local economies and services.

Driving Economic Growth is outlined in the Corporate Plan as one of Council's three core priorities – alongside 'tackling inequalities' and 'achieving value for money.' This focus includes **Destination Management, Place Plans for towns, and Rural Stewardship & Growth Investment**, all aimed at boosting the visitor economy and supporting rural economic regeneration. The **Corporate Plan 2023–2026** also reinforces the commitment to

“place-based” economic growth via the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal, in which Haltwhistle is a designated investment area. These priorities are again directly supported through the proposed reuse of the Former First School as a tourism/activity/accommodation/event hub, working in synergy with the strategically adjacent Haltwhistle Swimming and Leisure Centre.

Focusing on the visitor economy creates an opportunity to diversify Northumberland's economy and reduce reliance on traditional industries. The development of leisure-related facilities, such as accommodation for tourists, conference and event space, retail and leisure activities would directly contribute to the creation of long-term jobs for the community, from hospitality staff to event coordinators, tour guides, and retail workers. It could also attract private investment, further enhancing Northumberland's economic growth and stability.

The Economic Growth and Regeneration Team are responsible for delivering a wide range of functions that support the Corporate Plan's economic growth goals by prioritising town centre and culture led regeneration, clean growth through low-carbon infrastructure such as walking and cycling, and rural growth and innovation via grants and local enterprise support.

With an increasing number of hikers and cyclists visiting the area, the town is ideally situated to capitalise on this growing market. By preserving the site for tourism-related development, such as visitor accommodation, bike rental facilities, and activities, we can enhance the local economy while providing much-needed services to the people who visit for recreation. Hikers and cyclists are among the most sustainable types of tourists, spending money on local businesses while minimising their carbon footprint. Encouraging cycling and hiking tourism can be a win-win, benefiting both the environment and the economy in ways that contribute to the region's long-term sustainability.

The **NPPF (December 2024)** balances economic growth, housing, and environmental sustainability, with a presumption in favour of sustainable development. The planning system has three overarching objectives, (economic, social & environmental) which are interdependent and need to be pursued in mutually supportive ways. The NPPF (2024, Chapter 6, Paragraph 85) states that planning policies and decisions should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and adapt. Significant weight should be placed on the need to **support economic growth and productivity, taking into account both local business needs and wider opportunities for development**. The approach taken should allow each area to build on its strengths, counter any weaknesses and address the challenges of the future.

Chapter 6, Paragraph 88, goes on to state that planning policies and decisions should enable, the **sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas**, encouraging the conversion of existing buildings and should support **sustainable rural tourism and leisure development** which respects the character of the countryside as the Tourism Development intention for this site clearly represent.

Chapter 8, Paragraph 98 of the NPPF (2024) supports these policies and stresses that to provide the social, recreational and cultural facilities and services the community needs, planning policies should plan positively for the provision and use of shared spaces; and ensure

that established facilities and services are able to develop and modernise, as would be the case with the Haltwhistle Swimming and Leisure Centre.

Local planning authorities should also take a positive approach to applications for alternative uses of land which is currently developed but not allocated for a specific purpose in plans, where this would help to meet identified development needs. They should support proposals to use retail and employment land for homes in areas of high housing demand, (of which Haltwhistle is not included) **provided this would not undermine key economic sectors or sites**, such as the continued growth and expansion of the Haltwhistle Swimming and Leisure Centre. (NPPF, 2024, Chapter 11, Paragraph 128)

Planning policies and decisions are also directed to support development that makes efficient use of land, taking into account, **the availability and capacity of infrastructure and services**; the desirability of maintaining an area's prevailing character and setting, **or of promoting regeneration and change**. (The NPPF, 2024, Chapter 11, Paragraph 129)

The sale of the Former First School for social housing will risk overshadowing the broader environmental and heritage benefits that could be gained through responsible, sustainable tourism development. Visitor-focused infrastructure can be designed with respect to environmental sustainability and preservation of the Wall's heritage. Moreover, many areas in and around Hadrian's Wall are already under pressure from urbanisation. Careful planning can avoid the negative consequences of encroaching development and ensure that both local residents and visitors benefit from the region's history and natural beauty.

While social housing is crucial, the potential for a thriving tourism economy would provide long-term job creation and infrastructure improvements. By prioritising the visitor economy, we can build a more resilient local economy that can weather challenges like economic downturns or shifts in local demographics.

To use this brownfield site for **social housing** would contradict the Council's own strategic aims and asset management principle: land disposals must align with economic and strategic growth goals. Housing is not a named priority for surplus land in this location, whereas **tourism-led development directly delivers on multiple Council policies**. The proposal to use this site for visitor accommodation, activities and events is therefore not only consistent with the Council's stated intentions for asset use—it is the most policy-compliant option available.

We believe that Northumberland County Council should prioritise the long-term benefits of creating a sustainable visitor economy, especially considering the additional benefit of the sites' proximity to the popular Haltwhistle Swimming and Leisure Centre.

This site is key for several reasons:

- 1) It is in the ownership of NCC and therefore NCC has the power to support and facilitate the wishes of the community in using the site for the economic benefit of the town and its surrounding area.

- 2) By developing the site for tourism and leisure it will expand the existing leisure centre's reach, encourage overnight stays and extend the economic benefits of leisure activities, providing the Haltwhistle Swimming and Leisure Centre with a sustainable future.
- 3) It will provide the community with a choice of more leisure and wellbeing facilities, attracting both local residents and regional visitors who are looking for a comprehensive recreational destination, attract additional businesses and investment to the area.
- 4) The development of such a centre is part of the Haltwhistle Borderlands Place Plan and this is an ideal location.
- 5) The site is available.
- 6) Located between the railway station and the Haltwhistle Burn path to Hadrian's Wall and within a few hundred yards of the main shopping street, the site promotes sustainable tourism.
- 7) Strengthen the local economy and reduce dependency on external sources of revenue
- 8) Foster a diversified economy that benefits all members of the community, including those currently in need of social housing.
- 9) Strengthen the sustainability of the Haltwhistle Swimming and Leisure Centre by reducing dependency on annual Haltwhistle Town Council funding, and grant funding, such as the recent allocation of £200,000 in Borderlands funding for a new boiler as part of the Haltwhistle Place Plan allocation, and nearly £7000 in grant funding for specialist equipment and pool sessions provided by the Haltwhistle Community Shops Fund. This fund is set up to provide local funding and is generated by the operation of 2 community shops in Haltwhistle, which are run by the Haltwhistle Partnership and staffed by volunteers. This is a prime example of Haltwhistle looking after itself.
- 10) Expands the regions' appeal, encouraging longer stays and repeat visits, which benefits not only tourism but the wider local economy.

We respectfully request that the proposed sale of the site for social housing be **re-evaluated** in favour of a more sustainable and economically advantageous plan that prioritises the growth of the visitor economy and the long-term prosperity of the town and region. This would benefit local communities, businesses, and future generations, while maintaining the integrity of this historic area.

This petition demonstrates the strength of local feeling and the depth of concern about the proposed sale.

We Call on Northumberland County Council to:

- **Reevaluate the proposed sale of the site for social housing** and consider alternative uses that focus on the visitor economy and tourism development.
- **Explore alternative sites for social housing** that do not conflict with the region's key tourism assets and do not limit Haltwhistle's, and ultimately Northumberland's, ability to grow as a visitor destination and economic powerhouse.
- **Engage and listen to stakeholders** in the local community and tourism industry
- **Develop a strategy to maximise the site's potential** for leisure, hospitality, and tourism-related investments, ensuring a positive impact on local businesses and job creation.
- **Collaborate with tourism organisations, local businesses, and community leaders** to create a development plan that benefits both residents and visitors.
- **Support, trust and empower the community** to deliver what is right for them, acknowledging that working from the bottom up is more successful and sustainable than a top-down approach.

Haltwhistle and its surrounding area offers a unique opportunity to create a thriving and sustainable tourism destination that brings economic benefits, enhances local amenities, and preserves the heritage of Hadrian's Wall for future generations. This decision can be a critical step in fostering a balanced, forward-looking approach to development that serves both current and future needs. As residents of Northumberland, we want to see a future where the region is economically resilient, sustainable, and capable of offering a high quality of life to all of its residents. Prioritising visitor development at the Former First School will contribute to a stronger, more vibrant Northumberland and ensure that future generations have access to good jobs, a healthy economy, and a balanced community.