

The Report on the Unity Church of England Multi Academy Trust Consultation on Options for Education Provision in Great Barford

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Section 1

The Board of the Unity Church of England Multi Academy Trust is now in a position to report on the outcome of its consultation on options for the provision of education in Great Barford

Background and Context

The three-tier system of education has served the pupils and families of Bedfordshire very well for the past 40 years, changes at local and national level mean that this system is now an exception, rather than a rule. At its height of popularity in the 1980s, there were over 1400 Middle Schools in England. There are now fewer than 150 Middle Schools remaining in 17 out of 150 Local Authorities, the largest number being found in the combined totals of Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire Local Authorities. Over 95% of children nationally are being educated in a two-tier system and teacher training colleges no longer provide courses for middle years teachers. All teachers are now trained as either Primary or Secondary specialists.

There are parts of the Borough that need to retain a three-tier system for the time being because some of the feeder Lower/Middle schools are in Central Bedfordshire, which is not proposing to change its system. This is the case for the Wootton pyramid of schools and would have been the case in Great Barford for children who enter Alban Academy from Central Bedfordshire Lower Schools, had it not been for additional changes being implemented in the Sandy pyramid of schools from September 2018.

The situation in Great Barford

In the context of implementing the two-tier education system, discussions between the governing bodies of Great Barford Lower School and Alban Academy, Bedford Borough Council and the Diocese of St Albans during 2016, determined that there was no capacity, or desire, within Great Barford for two Primary schools on the same campus. The decision was taken, therefore, to create a single, 3-13 school. This would be achieved by forming a Multi-Academy Trust – Unity MAT – which the two schools would eventually join, prior to being merged into a single entity.

It was anticipated that the single school would continue to incorporate Years 7 & 8 for as long as there was a need to accommodate pupils from Central Bedfordshire Lower Schools, and any parents from Bedford Borough Schools who still wanted a middle years (age 9-13) experience for their child(ren).

In October 2016, several schools within Central Bedfordshire consulted on establishing a two-tier system of education in part of the Sandy Upper School pyramid. These schools included John Donne and Moggerhanger Lower Schools, which have traditionally fed pupils into Alban Academy at Year 5 and also Sandy Upper School, which wishes to admit pupils into Year 7 from September 2018. The net impact of these changes, together with those being implemented in Bedford Borough, is that the expected intake into Year 5 in September 2017 will be significantly reduced.

Based on this scenario, all the stakeholders in Unity MAT recently sent out a letter to parents and carers of pupils at the two schools, making the following key points to consider when determining the future of education in Great Barford:

a) Two-tier Education: The move from three to two-tier education in Bedford Borough and Sandy is beginning to have an impact. There are already Year 7 places available in Bedford Borough secondary schools, and Sandy Upper School will introduce a Year 7 cohort in September 2018.

b) Pupils: We must ensure that pupils continue to receive a first-rate education and that the next steps for education in Great Barford minimise disruption for pupils.

c) Pupil Numbers: We respect the right of parents to choose the educational route that they believe is best for their child. At the same time, we must plan effectively for the future of the school. Government funding for education is based on pupil numbers. It is forecast that approximately a third of current Year 6 pupils (47 pupils) will leave Alban Academy at the end of this academic year to move to a secondary school from September 2017, along with some pupils from other year groups. A large

year group (currently in Year 8) is also leaving, so the reduction in pupil numbers at Alban Academy is forecast to be approximately 100 pupils.

d) Curriculum and staff: To maintain strong standards of teaching and learning we must ensure that the curriculum is fit for purpose and can be delivered to a high standard. It is important that the best teachers are well supported to deliver the best curriculum for pupils.

e) Pupil Places: Mark Rutherford Upper School have committed to both a Year 7 and a Year 9 point of entry until September 2019. It is not clear at this point what schools in Central Bedfordshire will choose to do.

Consultation

An informal consultation process was carried out between 21 March 2017 and 28 April 2017; the outcome of this is outlined elsewhere in this report. Attached is a copy of the consultation document.

Who did we inform?

We informed and invited comments from a wide range of stakeholders and the wider community through a number of approaches. The major consultees were:

- Bedford Borough Council
- Parents of every registered pupil at the school
- Parents of potential pupils in our catchment area and in Early Years provision
- Staff who work at the school
- Residents of Great Barford
- Our local communities and our current site users
- All other schools within Bedford Borough
- The Church of England and Roman Catholic Dioceses
- Anyone else who has an interest in the proposal

A public meeting was held for parents and stakeholders:

29 March 2017

A staff meeting was also held at Alban Church of England Academy with teachers, teaching assistants, office staff, site agent and domestic staff invited:

28 March 2017

An electronic version of the consultation was placed for all stakeholders and interested parties on the school website.

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May 2017

The purpose of this section is to provide detailed information about the responses to the consultation process.

The consultation document asked for views on two alternative proposals:

- **One Primary School across both sites accommodating pupils from Year R to Year 6**
- **One Primary School 'plus' across both sites accommodating pupils from Year R to Year 8**

Summary of responses

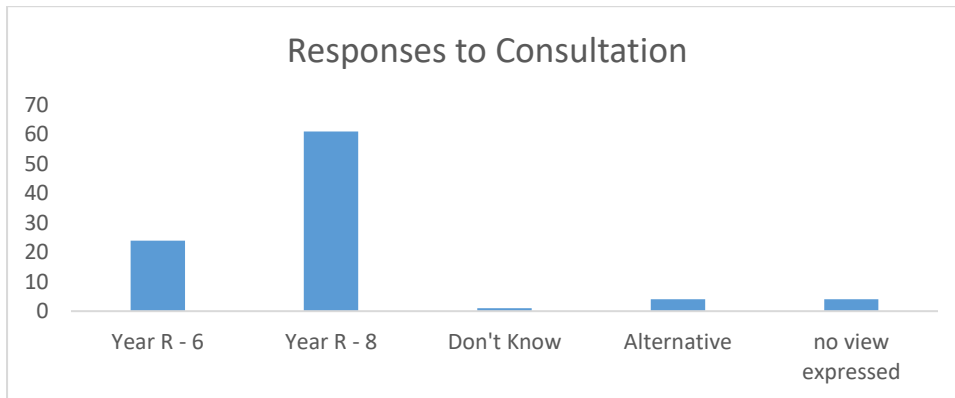
A total of 94 written responses were received in relation to the consultation plus verbal questions and responses that arose from people who attended the consultation events. In terms of this report, there will also be a commentary derived from the comments that respondents made.

Some responses were anonymous. Some responses identified the relevant stakeholder group the response was coming from, some did not. Some responses gave more than one stakeholder group. Therefore, the numbers quoted in the stakeholder groups will not equate to the number of responses received. Some people responded both by letter and email. Obvious duplicates have been deducted from the total number of responses.

Many responses indicated that people feel the schools offer a high standard of education. Staff, ethos and facilities are valued and praised.

Where comments were submitted, these were often across a range of topics and were often given as alternatives. Because of this, numbers against the different themes have not been included, with one exception, as it was not felt that this would be meaningful.

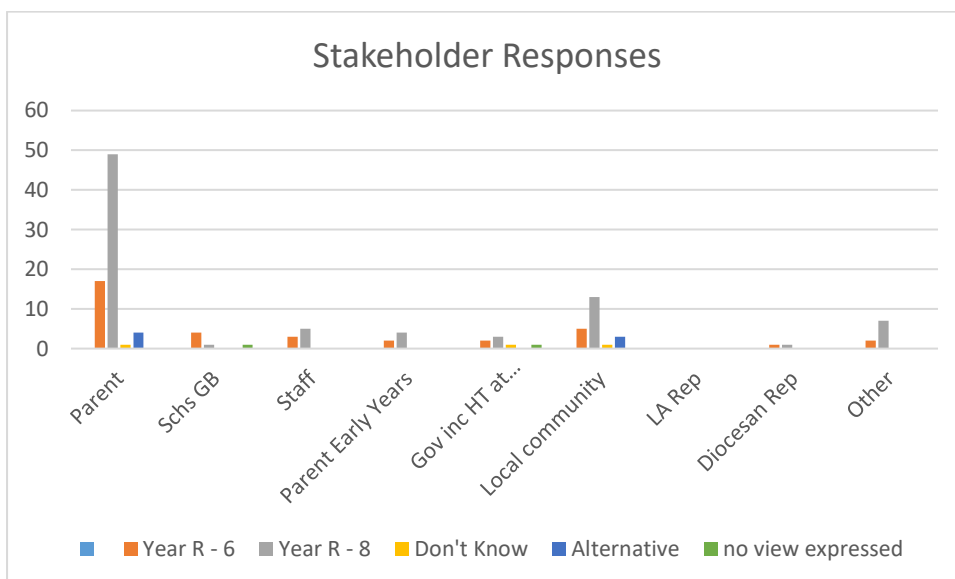
Proposals



Of the 94 responses received, who expressed a firm opinion in this way, 24 were in favour of a primary school from year R to Year 6, 61 were in favour of a primary 'plus' from Year R to Year 8, 4 made alternative suggestions, 4 did not express a definitive view and 1 did not know.

One response in favour of Year R to Year 6 was received after the consultation closed.

The stakeholder breakdown in relation to the proposals is shown below. As mentioned above, the number of identified stakeholders will not add up to the total number of responses.



Areas of Comment/ Concern

Comments and concerns expressed in the consultation responses are summarised and captured below and are grouped according to themes.

Maintain middle years provision

- Why change an outstanding school that works?
- It is better for the children to transfer at the end of Year 8 when they are more mature
- A middle school is a more nurturing environment
- Many parents prefer their children to be educated away from older children

- We initially moved to GBLS for primary 'plus'
- Will a place be guaranteed at their next school in Year 9?
- Have you looked at the possibility of other secondary schools allowing Great Barford to be a feeder into Year 9?
- The Year R to 8 model has a successful precedent at Biggleswade academy
- Year 7 and 8 need to be retained to provide a route into Sandy Upper and Samuel Whitbread in Year 9
- Transport – the routes to Great Barford are relatively free flowing (even if Silver Street itself is congested). But if Years 7 and 8 are displaced these families will add to the extremely slow moving queue along the A428 into Bedford
- A move to primary will leave my child and almost 100 others without a natural school progression into secondary. As a SEN child, this will have a hugely disruptive effect
- It is highly disruptive for the children in Years 5 and 6 that they may have to change schools again before upper school and very unfair
- Children do better in a three tier system

Two year/three year freeze

- I have a child in Year 6 I would like then to stay at the school to the end of Year 8 otherwise I have to look for a school place in a year's time which was not what I planned when I went to Alban
- The school should continue up to Year 8 for the current Year 5 students who were promised that they could stay at school in Great Braford until Year 9 transfer.
- If the school was to prevent existing pupils in Alban from continuing their education to Year 8, I believe they would be reneging on their commitment and reassurances to parents, ...if the school wishes to alter their admissions and retention policy then the timescales proposed should be set sufficiently in advance such that parents considering Alban school are aware before applying – from my understanding this would mean no change should take effect until September 2020
- As certain promises and assurances have been made by Alban about all current pupils being allowed to stay to the end of Year 8 I don't think legally they can do this until 2020
- The prospect of children being placed in any school fills us with dread
- Children in Year 6 have established friendships, travel routines, staff relationships and are learning effectively. They are happy secure and enjoying going to school. To uproot them for one year, possibly without their friends, could be very damaging
- Many parents will have made some very important decisions based around their children being in Alban until 2020
- Had I known my child's education would possibly be severely disrupted by choosing Alban I would not have done so
- Surely the School and the Council have an obligation to ensure that the children caught in the middle are not affected and disadvantaged in any way.
- It would allow for retention of your wonderful staff for a little longer to enable them to retrain or find alternative jobs if the decision is to go primary and not primary plus. This would help current kids in Years 5 or 7 before they potentially move as it would help retain specialist staff

before their transition point. It would give parents sufficient time to find other school places, the children to have the proper transition arrangements and the ability to fund new uniforms/transport etc with more than just a few weeks' notice (if decision once consultation complete on 21/6 is not agreeable). It would also give local schools time to set up new Year 7/8 arrangements (SUS especially who I hear may not be ready for ALL Year 7s currently in surrounding area) and primaries to be staffed up. MRUS have said they are happy to accept kids at either transition point... Are they ready for the in flood of potential Year 7 and 'in' Year 8 applications if doubt wins over???

- The situation (has) as NOT arisen purely down to 2 tier changes in central beds or Bedfordshire. The other major impact has been transport. Many pupils come by bus. When the meeting at the lower school happened a few months ago and the chap said that transport would only be paid to local primaries/secondaries - that affected parents' choice at Year 7 and Year 5 intake who currently get free transport. If the school had offered to source transport that could have been paid for by parents the impact may not have been so great. A transport offer for those kids who are leaving to go to MRUS early may prevent the flow out. Not for the school to cover the cost but a possibility of a coach with the cost shared by parents. Gauge interest for this. SPA did this when a bus service was withdrawn in Sandy 18mths ago. They have the proviso that they reserve the right to increase prices if low numbers or cancel if unsustainable. Any profits when numbers are high (winter) get ploughed back in for times when numbers are low (summer).
- The evolution to two tier is taking place at a slower rate in Central Beds than in Bedford. I think Great Barford should be sensitive to this and make haste more slowly

18 responses expressed the view that no changes should be made for two or three years;

Transition for Central Bedfordshire schools

- Exceptionally confusing when choosing a school outside Bedford Borough
- My child in year 4 will go to Alban in year 5 but our catchment upper school is in Central Beds and takes children from year 9; my child will have 4 tier education which is highly undesirable. I would prefer to move my child to a middle school if they cannot stay at Alban until year 8
- Surely Central Bedfordshire have to guarantee the current group of Year 7 and 8 pupils into Central Bedfordshire schools, in the future. All pupils have the right to an education and this decision will only make pupils leave sooner rather than later to guarantee a school place. Surely this decision should be in the consultation document already?

Sandy

- Staying at Alban for Year 8 for current Year 6 would not be our choice and would be very pleased for Sandy Upper to offer year 8 places in September 2018

Samuel Whitbread

- Our child in is Year 6 and we want then to go to Samuel Whitbread. They will not have a place for Year 8, where will our child go for one year.
- The timescale involved means my child would have to move for one year before attending Samuel Whitbread. This is wholly unacceptable

Church of England Education

- We chose Alban because we wanted our child to be educated in a Church of England school
- It is the only Church of England school that is available to us
- Ethos – the strong Christian Ethos in Alban, recognised by the recent SIAMS report and the silver RE Mark, and acknowledged by all who enter the school, will be experienced by the children for two more years (This was giving as a reason for no change as well)
- There are no other schools within Bedford Borough which are supported by the Diocese beyond Year 6 and which are able to offer Christian teaching and support to Years 7 and 8 students

Facilities

- We are applying for a place in year 5 at Alban as we believe this will be better with more opportunities than the joint year 3,4 and 5 class at our local lower school. Our plan is to move to secondary school at the end of Year 6
- GBLS cannot accommodate Years 5 and 6, the hall is too small for catering, whole school celebrations and teaching of the PE Curriculum. Concern that Putnoe primary has better facilities and that GBLS children will find it harder at secondary school at Mark Rutherford because of this
- The proposal up to Year 8 is required because it is very unclear whether Moggerhanger lower school will have the necessary accommodation for Years 5 and 6 built by September 2018
- I am not sure that my Central Beds lower school will give the same experiences as Alban
- My catchment school does not offer music and there is no transport to Mark Rutherford and therefore I have no options
- The school (Alban) is purpose built for 9 -13 year olds. This excellent building should not be wasted
- The Alban site has the capacity to manage growth
- The Alban site is too big to be primary
- As a primary plus Alban would keep its middle school ethos but incorporating Years R – 4. It would best utilise their excellent school and its facilities

Primary (Year R to Year 6)

- We support the change to two tier, but have a concern that our child will move after only two years at Alban
- In the current context a single primary school offers a clear educational pathway for children and families. Energies and budgets should be focussed on providing the best primary provision with quality curriculum and staffing, rather than being stretched to provide a curriculum for a limited number of Key Stage 3 pupils
- The children will be meeting with those from Putnoe who have had a smooth transition from each year group and had a broad and balanced curriculum

- The school should concentrate on providing an excellent primary education rather trying to straddle the middle/early secondary school years
- It is unfair to offer places up to Year 8 when neighbouring schools for the next stage of education will not maintain a Year 9 entry point. This will force children to travel further afield for Year 9 spaces. Provision is already fragmented and parents are stressed if they are making the right education decision. Offering up to Year 8 adds an unnecessary pressure on parents. How long will Year 8 be offered, How will staff be retained for the small number of Key Stage 3 pupils
- As part of this change, depending on when it becomes effective, children should have a guaranteed place in a three tier system, after that the two tier system would then be the only choice
- Whilst a great supporter and advocate of the three tier system and middle schools in particular, I believe that the time and circumstances have come to where schooling in Great Barford needs to fit into the emerging pattern within the Borough and neighbouring communities. Any residue of Key Stage 3 within the Great Barford School will be relatively small and rapidly decreasing. Even at its best I believe that its will not be financially viable to offer specialist teaching that will be required. Additionally, the small number of pupils left in a Key Stage 3 year group would not be sufficient to provide adequate opportunities that pupils of this age require in terms of social interaction, sport etc. For these reasons I also believe that Alban should be on a 1 year run down to closure/merger
- It would be best to eliminate any anxiety or doubt about what year children would leave school

Locality

- It is essential that our children are able to enjoy the security of a village environment for as long as possible. A walk to school is a far more reassuring experience than a bus ride to what is a city.

Merger/change

- There will be a dip in education as staff will leave because of lack of job security. Finances will be cut and parents will look for education outside the village
- Will a Year R to Year 6 school be viable over both sites
- There will be smaller numbers at GBLS as currently people apply to GBLS to get their children into Alban
- Concern over loss of staff due to uncertainty

Alternatives

- In an ideal world, the best outcome would be for Alban to become a secondary school
- The lower school becoming primary and the middle school becoming secondary is the obvious solution
- Approach Bedford Free School for a discussion on funding
- This campus was perfect for an all through setting from Years R to 16

- Is there some scope for working with the Diocese to offer an 'all through' Church of England school working with St Swithins and Henlow. This would cement the future of all three schools and create a smaller Christian based but transition free education

Timing/quality of communication

- The notification of change came out after the deadline for secondary admissions had passed
- Need clearer information on transition routes and transport
- Parents need to be fully informed of the options
- Situation has arisen due to poor governance and management

Other Schools

- I am concerned that the quality of opportunity for children in the Alban family is being compromised to save Mark Rutherford. On your PowerPoint you made reference to there being already enough secondary places in the borough. This is an odd argument from a LA that has allowed three middle schools in the town to become secondary all of which are in communities where there is no pressing need (Newnham, Goldington and Daubeney). I would assume that was an argument tabled to prevent the option of Alban becoming a small secondary school. I find this odd because the LA have clearly sanctioned both Goldington Academy and Newnham Middle school making respective transitions to Secondary phase. These are both good schools, incidentally on the same road, both of whom have been traditional feeder schools for Mark Rutherford (they are within 1/2 mile of MRUS). The impact on MRUS recruitment will be significant. Adding 2 & 2 together, can one interpret that this is why MRUS is now offering a default option for Great Barford children at both Year 9 and Year 7, and could one assume that maybe Alban is being allowed to wither on the vine to allow Mark Rutherford to remain viable
- Why was Daubeney Academy allowed to become a secondary school when Hastingsbury under recruits?