

**Our Ref:** ARAG/FB/2013\_06\_03

## **ARAG, MMU and the Alsager Community**

Dear Ms. Bruce,

You will now be aware that when the Alsager Town Council was asked to support the idea of a University Technical College in Alsager, rather than providing any leadership or vision, it took an equivocal, disingenuous and weak stance that it was not appropriate for the Town Council to support any specific proposal as this would be for the educational community to determine. During the process leading up to this decision, we acquired evidence to support the view that this was a decision based upon factors other than the merits of the proposal. Since the decision became public there has been a significant backlash from residents who have contacted ARAG and the Town Council to express their anger and frustration regarding this decision.

We are also aware, however, that this bureaucratic decision provides Cheshire East Council Leaders with the rationale to distance themselves from any UTC proposal in Alsager, even though Staffordshire University is still interested. Having been drawn into this substantial piece of work by your colleagues the Leader and Deputy leader of Cheshire East, with encouragement and assurances that Cheshire East Council was not engaged in any other UTC projects in the region, you will understand ARAG's conclusion that we have been deliberately misled and distracted by our elected representatives.

The MMU campus site presents Alsager with a once in a lifetime opportunity to deliver something that will have a long lasting and positive impact on lifelong education, health and well-being for current and future Alsager generations. This presents a much wider vision than just saving sports facilities, in fact it involves a much-needed strategy to implement all of the key objectives of the Cheshire East Local Plan as well as the aspirations presented in the Alsager Town Strategy. The first time we met with Councillor Michael Jones, he stressed his commitment to investment in jobs, economic growth and entrepreneurialism. All of these were central to our proposals for the UTC in Alsager but we are now forced to conclude that the governmental rhetoric about localism, at least as far as Cheshire East is concerned, is just that – meaningless rhetoric.

In their pre-proposal exhibition in March, DTZ, the appointed MMU development consultants, proposed: demolishing buildings, destroying playing fields and erecting 500 houses. There was a strong negative reaction from the public and ARAG. The DTZ response to that will soon be seen when they make their planning proposal and we anticipate continuing strong reactions to any 'backdoor deals' of which we have become aware.

As you know, ARAG sought to enter into a constructive dialogue with MMU regarding its plans for the site and included both you and ASRA in these plans. It is unfortunate that the University rejected such discussions and maintains that its only commitment is to maximise its profit from the sale of this site. Alongside our strategy for constructive dialogue, we have also enacted a number of FoI enquiries and they have revealed some interesting information regarding the public investment that has been committed to the facilities on this site and their transfer to Crewe.

Even though the MMU argues it has to maximise the return on its Alsager assets, it would clearly be morally indefensible to demolish perfectly good buildings which were constructed and developed at great public expense. Similarly, it is unacceptable that any high quality Sports Fields should be turned over to housing. The obvious point is that any sports fields lost now will be permanently lost and unavailable for any future Sports or recreational activity. Furthermore, it has always been the case that development of the MMU site should be tightly constrained to the Brownfield element of the site and all Sports Fields should be retained for future Sports and Recreational purposes.

Although these aspirations are generally shared with the Town Council and in fact Cheshire East when we have talked with them, there is no vision, leadership or responsibility being taken by our elected representatives to deliver the whole package for the long term benefit of Alsager residents. The position is quite simply that DTZ will make a proposal and Residents will be able to comment. We are being led by a developer with a brief to maximise the return on the site.

This letter has arisen because of the significant amount of feedback we have received from residents who feel they have been let down by their elected representatives. We have been open and transparent and the people we have been dealing with have not. We do not want a situation where the commercial aspirations of the MMU override everything. We would like to be able to reassure residents that Alsager will not be overlooked this time and that we are not the housing dumping ground for Cheshire East. The MMU site and our Greenfield sites are critical to us, they are centrally significant to the identity of Alsager as a community. The outcome on MMU in particular should reflect the ambitions and vision of our community, not simply just rescue some of the sports facilities.

Now that the Town Council has demonstrated that it doesn't want to commit to or approve our constructive proposal and Cheshire East have shown that they have no interest in the UTC solution which would have delivered a mixed use high quality set of community facilities to Alsager, we need a level of vision, leadership, commitment and action which so far shows no sign of emerging.

We noted with interest your leadership and support to create a Sports Hub in Congleton. We would appreciate a similar commitment to Alsager where the publicly funded facilities already exist and the need for a community wide solution is so important.

In response to member pressure it is our intention to publish both locally and nationally the situation regarding the development of the MMU site. From the dialogue we have had so far our story seems to resonate with others and is attracting wider attention. We will in the near future adopt an active campaigning mode but before we do so we would like to give you the opportunity to respond to the contents of this letter.

Yours faithfully,

ARAG Officers

D.Bould        President

C.Howard      Chairman

R.Wakelin     Vice-Chairman

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