

Press Release: Former MMU site, Alsager.

Residents will recall that Alsager Residents Action Group (ARAG) undertook a community-wide survey last summer regarding our proposals to develop the MMU site in a creative way that would bring benefit to the Town as a whole. Our starting point was to save the playing pitches and the best of the buildings such as the Sports Hall, Gym and Dance Studio that had been built and maintained with public money. In our view, it would be criminal to see such facilities subject to demolition as they now appear to be.

More than 3000 residents gave their positive support to the proposals we made. Encouraged by such a mandate, a project team has worked tirelessly to realise the vision that included enhanced educational opportunities for our young people and employment opportunities for the community while also preserving the playing pitches and best of the sports facilities and other buildings for the future, ensuring that this would be developed on a secure financial basis. Given the general acknowledgement even by Cheshire East Planning Officers that Alsager has suffered a significant loss of employment affecting its entire infrastructure, the attempt by our project team to bring jobs to the community seemed a very high priority.

We can now report to the community that the project team had a considerable degree of success and gained very significant support from regional, national and even global employers. Between November 2013 and February 2014 we established the basis for a Lead Sponsor Company that was fully committed to supporting a University Technical College in Alsager, working with us to help set the curriculum for skills and technologies that are relevant to UK and global employers. This company, a major international IT company, was also interested in the site to establish a Development Centre which would bring upwards of 300 IT Specialist jobs to Alsager. Consultation with independent specialists associated with the Baker Dearing Trust has confirmed that we had established the basis for a strong application to the Department for Education for a University Technical College in Alsager.

Sadly, the Project Team now has to inform the community that we have discontinued working on this development for the present unless circumstances change. Accountability for this decision lies firmly with the elected political leadership of Cheshire East Council and particularly with Michael Jones as Leader of the Council.

We have also had to contend with some recent inexplicable behaviour of our local MP, Fiona Bruce. At an earlier stage in the development Councillor Derek Hough played his own singularly undistinguished role in publicly denigrating the project without understanding it. This was, however, a peripheral distraction rather than anything significant.

Our view is that we may have to deal with the unsavoury 'politics' surrounding Cheshire East Council but it would be irresponsible to involve the employers who have supported our project – or, indeed, any

University – into probably long-drawn out negotiations with a Council Leader in whom we have no trust.

Ironically, it was Michael Jones himself who prompted our interest in bringing a UTC to Alsager during a meeting to discuss the Local Plan in January 2013 in which he indicated the Council's commitment to establishing a UTC in the region. On February 14th 2013 a second meeting was arranged at which he was asked the direct question whether the Council had any ongoing discussions with other parties regarding the development of a UTC in the region. Four of us heard him respond that the Council had no such discussions or plans currently. We learnt, through Fiona Bruce MP, in April 2013 that this was in fact untrue and that a project team had been working for some months on a proposal to develop a UTC in Crewe.

In the end this has turned out to be a crucial matter about which we were misled from the outset. A further meeting in May 2013 with one of the (then) newly-appointed Directors of Cheshire East Council, Caroline Simpson, confirmed that the Council had 'no interest' in supporting a UTC in Alsager and was committed only to Crewe. We have reason to believe that this position was on 'instruction' from the Council Leader.

Our view was that our community should not be disadvantaged through lack of commitment to it from the Local Authority and we decided to consult Alsager residents and to build powerful support from employers in order to shift the Council's neglect of positive development, especially employment, in Alsager. One of our team, Derek Fulluck, did some outstanding work to engage a range of medium size Engineering companies in the region as well as Michelin and BAE Systems in Alsager in our project. We also received invaluable advice and support from Siemens – which has extensive experience of UTC development – when we met with their key Managers in Manchester.

We continued to work on the project because we had good reason to believe that it would bring significant benefits to the Alsager community if it could be realised and also because we could not be sure about the quality and sustainability of the Crewe initiative.

Representatives of the team travelled to London to meet with Lord Baker who is one of the Founder Peers of the Baker Dearing Trust established to support UTC Applications. We received significant and helpful advice and we are happy to record our thanks to Fiona Bruce MP for arranging this meeting and for agreeing to be a 'champion' for our project. We also received subsequent independent consultation and positive support from the Trust which has been helpful to us.

As a consequence of this meeting we developed two key relationships: we established a Lead Sponsor for the UTC and we strengthened the operational educational expertise of the partnership through an agreement of support with South Cheshire College. Where the Crewe project appears to focus upon heavy engineering, we made it absolutely clear that the Alsager UTC would be focused upon the quite different field

of Digital Pathways, opening up a wide range of career opportunities through the provision of IT skills. We have received very strong, independent and consistent feedback from employers that this Specialism delivered through the UTC would have outstanding value for them in terms of employment 'needs' ; it would also be attractive to students and parents, providing a firm basis for future employment and career development. It remains our view that a UTC in Alsager with the Digital Pathways Specialism would have had a much stronger catchment potential than that which is identified with the Crewe project, based as it is upon the imponderables surrounding the uncertain development of HS2 while also duplicating existing educational provision that is already available.

Following the New Year 'break' we set up a meeting in Alsager of senior executives of the Lead Sponsor Company to which we invited Fiona Bruce MP. She did not attend the meeting but a brief response was received in the week after the meeting. Subsequent repeated attempts by a number of residents and members of the Project Team to communicate with the MP both directly and through the constituency office have elicited limited or even no acknowledgement .We are at a loss to explain such a severing by the MP of all communications with anyone associated with the project in contrast to previous regular communications and having agreed to be its 'champion'.

The Chair of ARAG emailed the Leader of the Council to inform him of the Company's interest and of the potential for attracting 300 + IT jobs to Alsager in addition to the jobs that would be generated by the UTC. This initiative could have had a fantastic impact on the entire economy of the Town. Again, there was an unprofessional, cursory and dismissive response from the Council Leader. Perhaps the point is best made by comparing the inadequate response we received by considering what kind of response such a proposal would have received for a similar project based in Macclesfield or the Wilmslow/Alderley Edge areas. It would have been reasonable to expect that a senior Council Officer would have been directed to discuss the possibilities with our project team immediately and to meet with the Lead Sponsor who sought, at a very senior Executive level, to engage both MMU and DTZ (its agent) in a dialogue about the future use of the site and confirmed its interest in appropriating it.

We have concluded, however, that it 'suits' both MMU for financial reasons and Cheshire East Council to have 350-450 houses plastered over the former campus and MMU will be seeking planning permission from the Local Authority this summer. Clearly, the Leader of the Council cannot be diverted from his Crewe UTC involving MMU no matter what could be offered in Alsager. This is why we have decided to discontinue our work on the project at this time.

It is not just that our Local Authority has not supported our project from the outset; it is that its Leadership has gone out of its way to actively undermine it even though it could have brought jobs and enhanced educational opportunities to our community. Independent advice from the Baker Dearing Trust indicated that, while we had built the basis for a very strong Application to establish a UTC in Alsager the negative response

from the Local Authority would be regarded as problematic owing to its capacity to undermine the UTC's operation, particularly in relation to student recruitment.

Finally, based on our experiences we suggest that the Local Plan (paragraph 6.4) is amended to read '*there is a need to create the conditions required for jobs led growth –except in Alsager....*'

Notes

1. This account cannot possibly include all of the detail regarding meetings and the amount of time, energy and expense injected into this project by the project team. We have, for instance, had a professional design plan for the site created to demonstrate that our vision was realisable alongside some residential housing.
2. Initially, we undertook this project as one that might be seen as creative and a positive contribution to the future of our community where a great deal of our other work has been reactively combating both Developers – and Cheshire East Council – regarding Greenfield and speculative development. Our understanding of the Localism Act was that such projects as ours should be welcomed by Local Authorities; we have now concluded that the Localism Act is not worth the paper it is written on when it comes to community empowerment. At best, the Localism Act embodies the 'big society' nonsense devised by the Conservative Party to justify off-loading accountability and responsibility for public services.
3. Quite why Councillor Hough saw it as his role or as appropriate to denigrate publicly and privately what the Project Team was seeking to do - as a group of residents seeking to generate positive outcomes for the community – we leave to residents of our community to decide. Residents will have to reach their own conclusions on the matter and judge whether they think this was in any way helpful. Councillor Hough played a leading role in the manipulation of the Town Council's position to leave any decisions about the UTC to 'the education community'. This followed his public denigration of the project in May 2013 at the Strategic Planning Board (SPB) prior to any public discussion of the project by the Town Council. As this contemptuous dismissal of the project was completely unrelated to the business of the SPB meeting, it was gratuitous and seemed designed to give the Local Authority the view that the project was not supported by the Town Council or the community. This provided at this point a convenient message for David Brown, the Deputy Leader of Cheshire East Council.
4. Some residents, parents and teachers may have been anxious about 'competition' for Alsager School and we have always regarded this as an important issue for discussion. We made it clear to all parties, including the School that it would be a key partner in the enterprise and, indeed, there was potential for the school to benefit through sharing of teachers and resources. It would be absurd to duplicate existing educational provision and the UTC, therefore, would offer different and complementary educational opportunities that would not compete with the School 'offer'. The

support of the Lead Sponsor would also bring resources and facilities that the School could not but to which it could have access. It would potentially make Alsager more 'regionally competitive' as a desirable centre for secondary education.

5. We have been regularly asked to support the ASRA proposals and so it is important to differentiate our project as providing a broader vision for the site that would benefit the community as a whole, not just those who are engaged in team sports, valuable though these are. We wanted to preserve some of the outstanding facilities for use by the community (e.g. U3A) and our plans included a 'community village' of purpose-built residential accommodation suitable for the elderly and those with disability. Our plan for a UTC would provide the infrastructure and financial basis to preserve these facilities for use by students as well as the community and there would be less dependence, therefore, upon the uncertainties surrounding future financial support for the 'sports hub', especially in relation to Cheshire East Council's 'out-sourcing' of its accountability for Leisure Centres through its 'arm's length' Trust. Clearly, we cannot rule out this as a factor in the Local Authority's 'negative' stance towards our proposals.
6. We have retained email and other correspondence as an evidence base to sustain the account provided to residents above. We anticipate all sorts of PR nonsense, obfuscations, claims of 'ignorance' etc to emerge from Cheshire East Council and for this reason we do not want the employers and others who have supported our project to be drawn into the 'politics' with which we have had to deal. The plain fact is that the Leader of the Council and the Local MP were clearly informed that we had in place an internationally respected company that wished to support a 'branded' UTC and a Development Centre in Alsager that would bring 300+ jobs. It was their decision **not** to actively support this – extraordinary though this may seem - that has led to our decision to withdraw from the initiative. We fully anticipate that the Leader of the Council will hide behind the excuse that the site is owned by MMU as a rationale for his failure to support this initiative. We also anticipate that residents of Alsager will see through this PR ruse and assess the Council Leader's actions and statements for themselves.
7. Strictly speaking, the key partners in a UTC are the Employers and a sponsoring University. When we received external specialist and independent advice that an Application would not be supported if the Local Authority was opposed to it, there seemed little point in continuing as it was clear that no matter what we achieved Cheshire East would not support a UTC in Alsager.