

My ref: **Agenda Item 4: Appendix 1**
Your ref:

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Dear Mr Coulson,

Free school application by the Active Learning Trust (ALT) for a new primary school in Chatteris

In May 2016 the Council's Children and Young People's (CYP's) Committee gave detailed consideration to the question of how the Council should respond in circumstances where it has an identified basic need requirement for a new school, has not yet launched its sponsor selection competition, and an existing sponsor comes forward to establish and run a free school, via the DfE route, to meet that need. The conclusion reached was that where the Council has sufficient knowledge and confidence in the sponsor to secure and maintain high quality provision and standards of teaching and learning, the working assumption should be that there would be no grounds to run a competition.

It was further agreed that an officer and Member Panel evaluate such free school proposals on their own merits, taking into consideration the following:

- Whether or not the proposed school was part of a planned or existing education campus and, if so, which sponsors currently run or have been appointed to run existing or planned schools in that campus
- The potential sponsor's track record including the standard of teaching and learning and the educational outcomes achieved for pupils at its schools
- Whether or not the potential sponsor is able to evidence that it has the capacity to meet the Council's requirements for the new school.

In keeping with this decision, an officer/Member evaluation panel met with the Active Learning Trust's (ALT's) Director of Finance and Operations and Director of School Improvement on 23 June to discuss the Trust's free school application for a primary school to serve Chatteris and agree a recommendation for consideration by the CYP Committee at its next meeting. The panel comprised:

- the Chair of the CYP Committee
- the local member for Chatteris
- the UKIP CYP Spokesperson

- the Head of 0-19 Place Planning & Organisation
- the Head of the Schools Intervention Service; and
- the 0-19 Planning and Sufficiency Officer with the detailed knowledge of the demographic need and planned housing development in the town.

The discussion was structured and focussed around the following themes:

- the Trust's organisational capacity and staffing,
- its strategy for school improvement
- its strategy for inclusion
- its plans for delivering Early Years education
- its approach to partnership working
- the timing of delivery/school opening.

The Panel was positive about and encouraged by the Trust's openness and willingness to engage with the Council and answer questions. The following were identified as particular strengths:

- the commitment to working flexibly with the Council, in respect of pupil place planning and to ensure that the demand and supply of places was managed appropriately (the Trust has already responded to a specific request for help by agreeing to run an additional class at Kingsfield Primary in Chatteris in September 2016)
- the robust strategies that are in place supporting teaching and learning and curriculum development
- the Trust's approach and commitment to staff development
- the experience, knowledge and commitment demonstrated both in their written submission to the RSC and by the two Trust representatives
- the support for and approach to securing as smooth a transition as possible between primary and secondary school
- the focus on working in and with the schools in the Trust directly.

The Panel did, however, have the following concerns:

- that as the Trust grows its central staff team could become more remote and removed from their schools which could dilute their philosophy and partnership approach of close working relationships with those schools, which at present is a particular strength
- that the improvement of some of the schools in the Trust has not been as rapid as would be expected given the ethos and strategies that the Trust has in place and also when compared to the Council's own experience of supporting and challenging schools judged to require improvement.

In addition, the Panel had a clear preference for the school to offer places for funded 2 year olds as part of its Early Years provision. Currently, this does not appear to be included within the Trust's plans.

Taking everything into consideration, the Panel concluded that overall the positive aspects of the proposal outweighed its concerns and that the CYP Committee should be asked to endorse the recommendation that the Council should give its formal support to ALT's free school application and should not, therefore, engage in running a separate competitive tendering process for the new school in Chatteris.

At the meeting of the CYP Committee on 12th July the decision of the panel was [to be confirmed following the Committee meeting]

The Committee looks forward to hearing the outcome of your own assessment process in the near future.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Joan Whitehead
Chairwoman of the Children and Young People Committee