

Responses to consultation for Ashton CofE VA Middle School

Q4 - Reasons why you agree or disagree with the proposal to close Ashton CofE VA Middle School

Agree the school has falling numbers and cant make its mind up what it wants to be one minute a primary school the next an upper school the site in the town is not suited to modern education old building that require large amounts of money to keep in good order and high running costs a drain on the finances of their budget

Financial

The pupil numbers are rapidly decreasing and the level of the education children are receiving is suffering due to the changes to local schools and the desire to change to a two tier system. Ashton is stuck in the past and it's reluctance to move with the other schools in the area have affected it and meant it has been left behind.

Disagree I've recently become aware of the possible closure of Ashton School. As A middle school, I hope I understand correctly that it will go back to being a secondary school, much as Dunstable Grammar school was. Please don't close yet another of Dunstable's old buildings as our town is becoming soulless.

I strongly disagree because Ofsted quotes this school as "Middle deemed secondary". Ashton Middle school is well known for having a caring, safe and supportive environment. This school was built as a Grammar School in 1887 and although there have been many changes it has a huge amount of history and tradition which would be a great shame to lose. The intended specialist areas of Science and DT alongside Creative and Performing Arts is excellent because Ashton Middle School already has a fantastic music and drama departments who regularly produce outstanding concerts and performances. We also already have suitable and safe science labs with innovative teachers. I also question as to whether this is a done-deal and the council has already decided to close all middle schools regardless of our views. I have two children (now in there 20s) who went to Ashton Middle School, enjoyed it immensely and have gone on to university. I have no problems with mid dle schools. In addition, the letter you sent to the Yr6 parents WAS scaremongering and has heavily impacted on the numbers of pupils applying for a place at Ashton Middle School. The parents were given very little time to make their decisions and it was NOT made clear to parents that they could still transfer schools during the year.

The location is ideal because it is central, and easy to get to. The transport to the school is great. Ashton Middle School is one of the oldest schools in the area, with great standing in the community. What would happen to the building? It is the most popular school in Dunstable. It has a history of being oversubscribed. Why close it when you will only have to build new schools? There are new houses being built in the area, so where will all of those children go? Shutting a good school is not a good way to attract new people to Dunstable. Keep it open for the sake of the children and the town.

I think the council has already decided to close the three middle schools but i feel the council should re-consider shutting Ashton as it is an historic building. It cannot be knocked down. I don't really know what the leadership is like at Ashton but i am more concerned about the building.

I Disagree due to the following points:- 1. Removal of parental/child choice. 2. Ashton Middle is our Faith school which links with our local cumunity. 3. It is a central school to the community for all of Dunstable. 4. There has been an unfair/misleading/biased consultation process. 5. There is a political agenda 6. Local constituents do not want Ashton Middle school to close due to its links to local community and extensive historical links to the town. 7. The School buildings a listed and there are restrictions as to the use of this site for educational use. 8. Central Bedfordshire Council have manipulated the local Schools, Parents and Communities. CBC are clearly delivering their own plan, irrespective of our views as parents (and constituents) and they are clearly not running a fair and active consultation. 9. Cllr Mark Versallion, by his own admission, was unable to change the three tier system when he was first in his post(2011) due to t he fact that the community did not want the changes. He has said that, as he was legally unable to force Schools to change, he started to look into 'local solutions' to emerge, which saw Schools make applications to change from three tier to two tier. This plan was helped along with the change of, the then failing Northfields Upper School, becoming All Saints Academy. A domino effect then occurred, where the schools were played off one another. Schools became unsettled and were concerned for their own viability, within Cllr Versallions plans.
(continued)

(continued) They were under no illusion that they were fighting to survive. Communication among the schools broke down as, one by one they began to seek out Academy status. Some schools huddled together, fearful for their school and became linked in partnerships. Others took on the views of the parents and students and decided to fight to remain. Confident of their place in the community, their support and viability. This is possibly the point at which the local community became aware of the unrest gripping our children's Education in Dunstable. As Cllr Versallion's plans continued, it was the schools that chose to work with their communities, Ashton Middle School and Streetfield, who found themselves remaining as the only two schools who were not supporting CBC's plans. They were then joined by Brewers Hill. Who, after securing Academy Status with Barnfield, were shockingly dumped by bad business decisions out of their control. Having worked through, what must have been a disruptive time for all, they also now found themselves against CBC's plans for change. 10. All this change seems to have followed CBC's plans for expansion of Houghton Regis (North). HR schools gained Academy Status. Plans for the new M1 link road and the building plans for the new homes were announced earlier than June 2012.

(continued) On 10 December 2013 the Council's Executive agreed to invite Houghton Regis Academy to prepare and submit a business case for a proposed expansion of the school from its current capacity of 480 to 900 places, for children aged 11 to 16 years of age, plus a 6th form, for a phased implementation from September 2016. They have said that the commencement of the process will depend upon the build rate of new housing within the new development north of Houghton Regis. However, there are plans to create nearly 600 new places for the start of the academic year in 2015. When the development of HR (North) progresses, CBC have said that they plan to build brand new school(s) within the development. This is to support their 'New School places programme', where a £100 million investment, to meet the demand of "... a growing local population and with Central Bedfordshire an ever popular place and families choosing to put down roots here – we need more school places..." E2...as the council ensures that all children and young people have access to high quality schools." (Quote taken from an interview with Cllr Mark Versallion). He also stated, in the Bedford Today on 10th Dec 2013, "With a growing local population it's estimated that our school population will increase by over 6,000 over the next five years.

(continued) A key role for the council is to ensure that all our children have a place at a local school. "Our New School Places programme is a hugely important piece of work for us and we estimate that we'll spend over £100m in the next five years on implementing it. "At the heart of all our work around education is a commitment to do everything we can to help our children and young people reach their potential, both academically and in terms of their personal development." Why are they planning to close good local schools if this is true? Will it help with a need to build a new school in the new development to meet a demand they are creating? The proposal to close the school states that there is an over supply of school places and yet the council has approved the expansion of Houghton Regis Academy from 480 to 900 students, this was approved about 2 months prior to the proposal to close Ashton Middle School. Central Bedfordshire Council states that there is a 63% over supply of middle school places and yet my child did not get in to my first choice middle school? Ashton was my second choice the nearest other schools that my child could have gone to are also both under consultation to be closed! So what choice do we have?, I have been very impressed with how Ashton are educating my child whilst under the immense pressure that is being placed on them by this situation that has been manufactured by the admissions process that the council has adopted/instigated.

(continued) 11. The three Middle Schools do not complete the change process, as CBC and Cllr Versallion would like. Therefore, many people believe, misleading tactics were implemented via the admissions process for Middle schools in 2013/14, to make these schools financially unviable. 12. The new intakes from year 6 (from Primary to secondary) were due to start in Sept 2014. However, a letter, sent out to parents in the position of moving their children at that time, told parents that if they did not move their children to places in the new Secondary System from Sept 2014, their child would not have a guaranteed place. Also, parents of children who are currently in year 4, at the newly extended Primary schools, received no notification whatsoever that they could move their children up to a Middle school at the end of year 4, as has happened every year previously. The admissions department stated that this is because; as these children are now currently in a primary setting (Schools have all changed in the last year), there is no structured move in place at the end of year 4, even though the Middle schools are still accepting children at this stage. Parents were not made aware of this. They were led to believe that the two tier change was complete and there was no other option.

(continued) 13. And just as people began to question this, CBC announced their plans to close the three middle schools. Therefore, creating panic yet again among the parents as to the safety and stability of their child's Education. Concerned parents, wanting to make their child's Educational pathway as stress free as possible, whilst trying to give them the best chance with their education, did what the Council told them to do. 14. And just to make sure there would be as few as possible applying for a place at the schools, CBC took their confirmed intake numbers date cut off on the 15th Jan 2014. This was before all places had been given and did not take into account children with 2nd place choices. Since cut-off date, the numbers at these schools have increased. This is important as many people may have applied for Priory Academy. This school is vastly over subscribed and therefore many children will require their 2nd choice place. 15. Suddenly, CBC announced that too few children have chosen to join the Schools in Sept, supporting their decision to close the schools. Their reason being, that the funding follows the pupil. However, CBC have said that the funding isn't received by the school until the following year. WHY? We are told by Councillor Mark Versallion, that the money follows the student, well then it should be provided to the school that the student actually goes to when they go there not one year later, the council knows how many children there are and know how large a budget they require so there should be no issue with directing it to the actual school that the student attends.

(continued) (continued) No wonder they have schools that become financially unviable. They are deliberately sabotaging them! 16. Then began the consultation meetings, at which many of the questions, directed at the mental well being of the children at the centre of all this change, were met with none committal answers or "Things will be put in place to support the changes". 17. No consideration has been given, at this time, as to how these changes are emotionally effecting the children at these schools. 18. Staff, who, have been put under a great deal of stress and uncertainty with regards their careers, have remained professional and continued to educate and support the children and families, whilst in some cases being forced to apply for other jobs and relocate to other schools out of the area. This has put a great deal of stress on all those involved from all schools, esp. the three middle schools. Change is an important part of life, but how change is managed is also an important consideration when having an impact on the mental development of our children. 18a. I was very disappointed to learn of the apparent lack of consideration and support these changes are going to have on children with special educational needs in the area. 19. At the consultation evening, when the issue of how the council would deal with one of the larger schools, should it start failing, the response was that they would do all that they could to help, yet seem unwilling

My reasons why Ashton Middle School should not be closed by the council are :- Ashton Middle school is a school that cares to provide an all round education for the child rather than just concentrating on sats. My child is educated by specialist teachers in each subject from year 5 rather than having one general teacher for all subjects to the end of year 6 as per the lower school setup that the council wants to subject us to. Councillor Versallion states that the sats results in Dunstable are on the way up especially ks2 middle school years and yet these schools are or have been manipulated to change their age range .The school is in the centre of Dunstable and easy to access from all parts of the town. The proposal to close the school states that there is an over supply of school places and yet the council has approved the expansion of Houghton Regis Academy from 480 to 900 students, this was approved about 2 months prior to the proposal to close Ashton Middle School. Central Bedfordshire Council states that there is a 63% over supply of middle school places and yet my child did not get in to my first choice middle school? Ashton was my second choice the nearest other schools that my child could have gone to are also both under consultation to be closed! So what choice do we have?, I have been very impressed with how Ashton they are educating my child whilst under the immense pressure that is being placed on them by this situation that has been manufactured by the admissions process that the council has adopted/instigated.

(continued) Parents have been manipulated, misled and scared into sending their children to alternative schools by the Council admissions team and then the criteria for this consultation has been manipulated to suit the councils hidden agenda. It obviously suits the council to finance only 1st choice places for that year, no other organisation would work like that, we are told by Councillor Mark Versi llion , that the money follows the student, well then it should be provided to the school that the student actually goes to when they go there not one year later, the council knows how many children there are and know how large a budget they require so there should be no issue with directing it to the actual school that the student attends. At the consultation evening when the issue of how the council would deal with one of the larger schools that the council seems to want starts failing, the response was that they would do all that they could to help, yet seem unwilling to do anything to help Ashton Middle School which is not a failing school. It seem that unless you are a large school it's your problem as per the adage (if you owe the bank £1000 it's your problem, if you owe the bank £1000000 it's their problem)

(continued) There has been approval of about 6000 new homes in Houghton Regis, part of this proposal is for new schools to be built to accommodate the increase in students, will these schools be built before the new homes or will our school classes be over capacity in the foreseeable future. Why close a school that gives an excellent education to all children who attend only to open a new one one or two years down the line that is not tried and tested. When certain schools are over subscribed and there ends up with only about 5% over capacity in the school places how can the council say that parents have a choice? Priory Academy proposed numbers on roll according to their consultation documents show their numbers in year 6 September 2013 as 123 but when it becomes year 7 in September 2014 drops to 84 where are the 39 missing children going? Should the anticipated reduction in numbers not happen will pupils be forced out of this school? This situation is repeated as every year 6 moves on to year 7 for years 2015 and 2016. Again where is the choice?

It is my firm belief that the Year 5 intake figures have been conveniently managed by the Council allowing the newly formed Academy schools scaremongering parents into choosing the Year 5 places based on false information ie if the pupil remained at a middle school there would be no Year 9 place for the child in the future, a point that was negated at the public consultation held at the school. No consideration has been made in the figures for parent's 2nd choices in evaluating the financial viability of Ashton. Parents have not been allowed to make the decision as to where to send their children in Year 5 with all the necessary relevant information. The recent consultation re moving the town to a 2 tier education system was voted against by the parents in Dunstable, the Council is allowing a move to a 2 tier system through the "back door" as it is in their financial interests. Middle schools have recently improved significantly the Key Stage 2 results in English and Maths, disrupting my child's education by closing this school at the end of year 6 will put this improvement in the town's education in jeopardy. Ashton Middle school has a strong reputation in the town and local environs. On recently visiting Cedars Upper in Leighton Buzzard for my daughter's proposed move into Yr 9 the headmaster stated that he had a number of pupils from Dunstable and that those from Ashton Middle stood out from the rest (in a very positive way). Being the only faith school in Dunstable was a very important factor in choosing this for my son to attend from Year 5, no other Year 5 intake provides this locally.

Both my son who is in year 8 and my daughter who is in year 5 have thoroughly enjoyed their time at Ashton. They have received a balanced and quality education, and have been encouraged by the staff to excel. My daughter, who has potentially three more years in the school has made many friends and will be heartbroken to leave them. I recently went and attended a performance of the musical 'we'll meet again' at Ashton that was extraordinary in its scope and the teaching that brought out the talent in the kids. How can you close a school with such a flourishing artistic community? As I am sure you are aware, the reason for the lack of numbers in the school is due to incompetence of Ofsted in saying that the school was failing a few years ago and then apologising as they got the decision wrong. The local council then scared many people away, putting their year 4s into other schools just in case Ashton Middle School closes. Talking to other parents, the numbers will recover as soon as the threat of closure is lifted. The school is a faith school, which is important to us, and the traditions embodied by the school make it the ideal place for my daughter going forwards. Another point is that Dunstable has been going through hard times recently and the closure of this historic school would be severely detrimental to the overall wellbeing of the town. The incredible energy of Ms Phillips and Ms Hollis, the senior management team at the school will ensure the survival of the school give the chance.

We need a school in central Dunstable with the provision for those seeking a faith education.

Ashton Middle School is an excellent school that functions extremely well and has always been well-attended. My two children have had an excellent education at Ashton and had great care taken of them there. How can it make sense to close a good school, when if the school's performance was lacking the education system would legally oblige the LA to help it out and try and keep it running, no matter how few children were attending. A school of this calibre should not be taken out of existence simply because outside factors change the shape of the education structure. Dunstable needs good educators as much as any other town and Ashton offers this service in buckets, unlike some of the other schools in the area, especially the ones which started off the shift in tier-system in the first place. Schools that were in trouble took the option of academy status, therefore pushing a two-tier element in to a previously three-tier system. Knowing how much the LA tried, UNSUCCESSFULLY due to strong parent reaction, to make Dunstable two-tier 10 years ago, I find it unsurprising that this move was approved by the authorities.

(continued) I think many of us had realised over the last couple of years that this backdoor school by school method of change was going to eventually result in alterations to school systems which we could not avert. However the decision to close Ashton is short-sighted. Places are going to be woefully tight in the older sector of Dunstable schools - Ashton's decision to go to secondary status should be welcomed with open arms. The LA's actions have also been criminally opportunistic and rushed through. Ashton has been given no time to regroup and no help whatsoever - they have been hit when they are vulnerable and it has been the LA and its "allowance" for the other schools to change age groups which has caused that vulnerability. On that note, Ashton simply cannot be blamed for the lower intake this year - the LA admissions department have been lamentably unhelpful and on many occasions definitely detrimental in the information they have given to prospective parents.

It is part of the towns history that is seen as a well respected establishment in the town.

We will loose too many faith school places in the town especially as it was agreed that All Saints Academy is not a faith school as previously believed by the local authority. I believe there will be a shortage of school places in the future and a reduced choice of school for local parents as years 9 10 and 11 are almost to capacity. Excluding the 7000 homes in Houghton Regis there are smaller developments which with an average population of 1.8 children per household will instantly fill the local authority contingency of 10%.

It is my understanding that it is CBC's responsibility to ensure that there is enough school places for kids in Dunstable, that the schools are driving the highest possible educational standards, that there is a choice of quality schools for parents in Dunstable and to ensure that the schools on their books are both educationally and financially viable. I believe that by closing Ashton Middle School, CBC will be limiting choice for parents (especially if you want to send your child to a faith school as Manshead is already oversubscribed). I also that CBC would be failing in its obligation to improve higher standards if they closed Ashton Middle School as I don't believe that the secondary schools in Dunstable would be able to support the additional pupils. The CBC have already admitted that there is only a 5% surplus of places in years 10 and 11 , which is cutting it fine & with new houses being planned across Dunstable I believe this puts too much risk i nto the 2x most critical years in any childs education. As for the current secondary schools themselves, Manshead is oversubscribed and is already having to support teaching in ill equipped portacabins. All Saints is close to being full and in spite of fantastic new facilities, it is struggling to deliver academically. Finally there is Queensbury which must be struggling financially after its pupil numbers slumped after it went into special measures.

(continued) Even though it is now being led by a new leadership team and no doubt has capacity, it will take time to reestablish itself academically and financially. As well as a choice of faith schools, aspiring to deliver high educational standards, I also would welcome the choice of sending my child to a smaller, more individually focussed school (of circa 500 pupils) as opposed to a "super school" of circa 1000 pupils. There are no other secondary school options for my child in the area. CBC have presented admission figures for Sept 2014 that show Ashton to be financially unviable. I challenge these figures as the communication sent at the time by CBC was misleading and meant that parents were not aware of all the choices and options available to them. (As a result parents were panicked into choosing other schools, as they were desperate to secure a place) For me, if CBC is basing its recommendation to close Ashton based on these numbers, then this fundamentally undermines the validity of the whole consultation process.

The school should not be closed solely because of financial viability. The location is ideal because it is central, and easy to get to. Whilst it would appear on paper that the school would be undersubscribed in the future, I believe that the current trend for massive housing developments will counteract this. It is the only CofE school in the area and should be kept open for religious reasons.

It was agreed in 2006 to stay 3 tier. Leave our Dunstable schools alone.