



# GREENWOOD ACADEMIES TRUST

## Houghton Regis Academy Closure

### Responses to the Listening Period

This report summarises the responses received during the listening period.

#### **Background**

On 24 September 2019, we announced that Greenwood Academies Trust (GAT) were in discussions with the Department for Education (DfE) and Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) to assess the impact and practicalities of potentially closing Houghton Regis Academy.

On 27 February 2020, we informed stakeholders that the Secretary of State for Education, in mutual agreement with the GAT, had made the substantive and final decision to proceed to closure of Houghton Regis Academy. The date of closure will be 31 August 2022.

The Trust then conducted a 'listening period'. The listening period was an opportunity for stakeholders and interested parties such as pupils, parents and staff to be provided with more information about the proposed closure process. It was also an opportunity for stakeholders to submit your views on how the process can best be managed. The listening period ran for a total of four weeks from 28 February 2020 to 27 March 2020.

#### **The Proposed Closure Plan**

A plan has been developed in order to close the Academy by 31 August 2022. The plan seeks to reduce the impact of the closure on pupils, parents, staff and the community and to ensure that any pupils at the Academy up to closure have access to a good quality of education.

There are a number of key aspects to the plan.

#### **Provision of Key Stage 3**

It is proposed that from September 2020 the Academy will become a Key Stage 3 only provision (years 7, 8 and 9). This is to ensure that the Academy has the best chance of providing a good quality of education for those pupils remaining at the Academy and to ensure that those pupils in Key Stage 4, who will be working for and sitting their exams, can do so without any potential disruption to their education.

The proposal to have a smaller school during the closure process also enables us to address the current poor accommodation at the Academy by allowing years 7, 8 and 9 to be moved to the adjacent former UTC building from 1 September 2020.

#### **Provision of Key Stage 4**

Current year 11 pupils will continue to be supported with their education where they are until they have completed their exams.

## Stakeholders

A letter was sent to parents/carers of pupils at the Academy, staff at the Academy, all local schools and colleges, the Academy Advisory Council, unions, local MP and Councillors, CBC's Children's Services and the Admissions Department to inform them of the substantive decision and to launch the listening period and provided details of how they could give their views on the proposed closure transition plan.

Information was also added to the CBC's weekly newsletter to schools.

Information was added to the Trust's website, the academy's website and the CBC's website.

Letters were also given to anyone who provides services to the Academy.

A public meeting and a separate staff meeting were held on 10 March.

### Public meeting

Approximately 100 people attended, with the majority being parents, many attending with their children. Three members of Houghton Regis's Academy Advisory Council (AAC) attended and approximately five members of staff. There was also attendance from the Admissions team from the CBC.

Key questions raised were:

- If Houghton Regis Academy have the capacity to provide an education for KS3 pupils next year?
- What would happen to KS4 pupils who have already started their GCSEs?
- Why weren't they told earlier?
- Why has the school been allowed to fail their children for so long?
- Most of the questions were, however, directed to CBC wanting to know more about the process and timelines for moving schools and most importantly, about transport. Some asked if they could take their pupils out if they were in, or about to join, KS3 at Houghton Regis Academy.

A small number of feedback forms were handed in at the public meeting and the themes are listed below:

- Feel like you've failed our children.
- Feel let down by all parties concerned.
- Very disappointed in the whole process if as you say this is not a secondary school then should not have taken it on. Why wait till in so much debt before closing?

### Staff meeting

A separate staff meeting was held and the questions raised were:

- 1) Current Year 8 – will be Year 9 in year 2020-21, so what is likely to happen to those students?
- 2) Current Year 7 by year 2022 what will happen to them?
- 3) Come September 2020, if HRA are taking on Year 7 students in the new building, what will happen to those students at the end of 2022?
- 4) HRA will be a Key Stage 3 school, after 2022 will the new proposed school be a secondary or primary school?
- 5) Concern around communication and clarity around dates for example, at the start of the consultation staff were informed that students would be leaving by Easter, but the CBC website differs?

- 6) Are Year 10 still going on residential trips if they are leaving the school by Easter?
- 7) Are we going to take New Year 7 on?
- 8) Someone commented how appalling they thought, staff have been treated and the lack of communication.
- 9) What is the process to move the School to the new building?
- 10) How are the staff going to facilitate the move to the new building?
- 11) What is the rush of getting the Academy out of this site?
- 12) Will the new building have the same facilities? Will there be a difference in facilities?

All these questions were responded to and emailed to all staff for clarification.

### **Key Themes from the listening period**

In total only seven emails and one online form were received. The themes of the submissions are listed below, which were consistent with issues raised at the public meeting. A response to each issue raised is also provided by GAT:

#### Parents

**Issue: Not happy with taking children out half way through their GCSE options – wouldn't it be best to let the Year 10's at the school. Some other schools don't teach the same subjects. It's not fair to move them half way through – wouldn't it be best to leave them in the academy as it will be more stable for them?**

*Response: It is considered that pupils starting Year 10 will fare better with their Key Stage 4 results at alternative school because of the significant difficulty continuing to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum. CBC are trying to ensure that alternative schools can offer similar curriculum choices where they are requested.*

**Issue: Financial impact in relation to uniform and transport.**

*Response: It has been communicated that those pupils in Year 9 & 10 who will be transitioning to another school will receive support on transport by the CBC and uniform by the Trust.*

#### **Issues:**

**Schools are full. Will parents be able to secure a place a for their child within the school of their choice?**

**Can you guarantee that they are in GOOD schools within Central Bedfordshire?**

**Distance of the schools who have places is an issue if the children are poorly as will be unable to collect them.**

*Response: CBC are working with local schools, including Good schools, to broker additional school places for Houghton Regis pupils and are confident that places exist.*

**Issue: What guarantees are there for the children that are at Houghton Regis Academy get a place at the new school being built? What if there is slippage in the build programme?**

*Response: It will not be possible to secure a place at the new schools planned by CBC until it is built and has published its admission arrangements. However, the new school is planned to be built to deliver capacity in the Kingsland area and therefore will be specifically targeting pupils presently or planning to attend Houghton Regis Academy.*

**Issues: What will happen to Year 7 children in the academy?**

*Response: This was covered in the information provided in the listening period letter, which made it clear that present Year 7 pupils would leave in August 2022 on closure and would go to another local school from Year 10.*

**Issue: Very disappointed to hear that nothing has been put into place before the announcement of this closure, extreme pressure has been put on all parties to solve this as I do understand that the decision has been said to be final.**

*Response: GAT is following the Department for Education's closure process, which has determined that the decision taken is final.*

**Issue: The school was obviously not in the right state and has been allowed to slowly deteriorate on the understandings that this land will be sold off for development.**

*Response: When the Academy closes the land and buildings will revert back to Central Bedfordshire Council who will determine any future use for the land.*

Academy Advisory Council (AAC)

Houghton Regis's AAC provided a detailed response to the listening period, which is shown at Appendix 1. A number of comments we made in relation to the conduct of the public meeting and the process generally, which GAT does not agree with. The AAC also made a number of specific points across a number of general areas in relation to the closure plan as follows:

**Issue: Proposal to build a new school:**

- The Local Authority should announce its decision to apply for planning permission for the new school in August 2020.
- Early and regular information should be provided to parents and community regarding the building of the new school.
- The Local Authority should announce at the earliest opportunity the appointment of a new, local trust provider.

*Response: These are issues for CBC's consideration.*

**Issue: Proposed move to the UTC building from September 2020**

- There needs to be a meeting for community leaders regarding Houghton Regis Academy's use of the UTC building.
- An open day at the UTC building be held in July for parents and pupils.
- The plan should include measures to support and retain staff, perhaps with assurances of continued employment at the UTC, and attention to staff welfare.
- Parents should be fully informed about the arrangements for the move to the UTC building; reassured of its independence from the Academy of Central Bedfordshire; possibilities presented for STEM opportunities.

*Response: When detailed plans have been developed, which will include retaining the independence from the Academy of Central Bedfordshire, to facilitate the move, parents and pupils will be fully informed of the plan. The UTC is closed and therefore it is not possible to have discussions in relation to continued employment of staff.*

### **Issue: Admissions process for Year 10 and 11 pupils from September 2020:**

- The Trust to attend the Local Authority's proposed meeting with parents on 18 March and to display care and concern for the year 10 and 11 pupils, presenting a positive educational offer and a commitment to the improvement of standards for year 7, 8 and 9 pupils. [Meeting had to be cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions].
- There needs to be closer co-operation regarding the early movement of year 10 and 11 pupils to their new provisions in the coming term addressing the issues of uniform and transport.
- The retention of friendship groups needs parents and pupils to have opportunities to discuss their options together.
- Chalkhills and Manshead schools to offer open evenings and visits to help parents make a more informed choice.
- There should be weekly admissions meetings at the school during the remainder of this term and the first half of next term for year 10 and 11 pupils and their parents, a one off meeting is not enough particularly for working parents.

*Response: The admissions process is run by CBC and therefore these are issues for them to consider. However, GAT supports the issues raised here and believes the process being followed by CBC will consider these issues.*

### **Issue: Communications**

There should be half-termly meetings for community leaders, parents and other stakeholders hosted jointly with the Local Authority and the Trust to continue to gather views about the progress of the plan. These meetings to be open to the Houghton Regis primary schools and to the community to enable them to support and contribute to the developing future of education in the Town.

*Response: There will be regular communication throughout the closure period to all stakeholders, in particular with pupils, parents and staff. The fine detail of the communications plan over the closure period will be determined shortly and kept under review to ensure that all stakeholders remain fully informed about progress.*

### **Conclusion and Next steps**

The issues raised during the 'listening' period have provided a rich source of information to allow GAT to ensure that the detailed closure plan can address the key concerns identified.

This report will be provided to DFE and made available on the Academy's and Trust's websites.

**Wayne Norrie**  
**Chief Executive**  
**6 April 2020**

### Formal Response to Houghton Regis Closure 'listening' period

Formal Response to the listening period as part of the consultation on the plan to move towards the closure of Houghton Regis Academy

As the Academy Advisory Council, we are a group with no powers, merely an advisory brief. We have warned repeatedly about the impact of the decision on the community to close the school and the need to manage the process sensitively alongside positive messages about the future. We attended the meeting arranged by Greenwood Academies Trust (GAT) at the school on 10<sup>th</sup> March. This was attended by approximately 80 parents who expressed their anger, dismay and deep concern about the current situation and the poor and misleading communication they had experienced, for example from office staff and teachers who themselves had not received clear and current information.

The conduct of the meeting was inept. There was an adherence to a legal format / process rather than giving proper engagement and respect to the parents and wider community who attended, and a lack of clarity about what parents were being asked to comment on. No structures were planned to provide space for parents' views to be expressed in an orderly way and for them to experience being listened to. Importance was laid on being objective but there was an absence of empathy.

A poor framework was chosen for the gathering of views within a meeting where students, parents, community representatives had gathered, resulting in few of them actually making written responses. Views were closed down at the end of the meeting. The impression was given that the Chief Executive of the Trust totally wiped his hands of any responsibility for the status quo, that the meeting was something he had to do - he had no say in so he was going through the motions required of him, and GAT had no responsibility for the situation the school is in.

During the development of the closure plan, there have been many references to joint communications but the local authority was reliant on Advisory Group members to notify them of the meeting and give them sight of the letter GAT sent out. It appeared that Local Authority representatives would not have been present at all if we had not drawn their attention to its being a public meeting. The officers did not know prior to that afternoon that they would be attending. If they had not been present to answer parents' questions, the meeting would have been even more difficult but it could have been so much better if they had been more fully briefed and prepared.

Opportunities have been repeatedly missed to present a positive vision, and our prompts regarding this ignored. The positive message required was wholly lacking in this meeting and has significantly damaged the potential transfer of the school to the UTC. Any vision of providing a better educational offer, in improved facilities, with potentially exciting new STEM options was absent and left parents bereft of any reason why they might want their child to remain in the school in year 7, 8 and 9. Indeed anecdotal feedback from parents in a feeder school indicates confusion even about who will deliver the school in the new buildings and fears about an imagined link with the Academy of Central Bedfordshire. Above all they are left with the message that the existing school is closing and they have to move their child.

Overall, there was a lack of clarity for parents about key issues regarding future school transport and uniforms. Clearly, there is still work to be done liaising between CBC and GAT. The CEO of GAT was indicating that it would be helpful for students to transfer to different schools as soon as possible while the local authority transport arrangements will not commence till the autumn. For some parents HRA is not their first educational choice but it is the option that allows them to work and ensure their child is safe in school. There are clearly increased pastoral risks for students who are safer in school and there appears to be more work to be done here.

Behind this lies a background of much discussion and delays while we have awaited outcomes from the DFE, CBC and GAT negotiations. Whilst we welcome the strong commitments from CBC to front fund and provide a new school and from the DFE to refurbish the UTC building, there has been a fundamental failure to form a complete plan which the Trust, CBC and DFE can all publically support and have confidence in for the future. Our disappointment is shared by elected and lay community leaders. The determination of GAT to pursue their request for closure and fail to collaborate fully with a transfer process has damaged school, students, staff and community. During this time, GAT have refused access to the school by visiting DFE colleagues, denied a requested visit by the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and have been unwilling to engage responsibly with the concerns of the local M.P.

GAT's approach might leave an impartial observer with the impression that the Trust is determined to run the school down. Its management of staff during the last 18 months has had disastrous results, losing key people and failing to take action to support senior leadership capacity leading to a rapid decline in standards. Its tardy and inadequate response to the Ofsted inspection in 2019 and the recent HMI monitoring visit are damning of the Trust and there is little that can be defended within that. We have warned them about the impact of strategic decisions they have made on the viability of the school, the substantive reason for closure. Examples include the failure of the school to engage with local primary schools over many years, absence of action to halt the exodus of pupils in the last year and the damaging decision to refuse to hold an open evening for the parents of prospective year 7 pupils.

Crucially, they have failed to recognise the significance of the school's role in this community, not least its strategic pastoral role in supporting local families.

Having worked to support the efforts of all parties, we have been dismayed at their failure to engage effectively with what seems to us to be a pragmatic and relatively uncomplicated solution, to maintain secondary education in the town providing continuity for pupils and reassurance for parents and the wider community. The time it would take to close the school would correspond with the time it would take to open a new school, possibly in temporary accommodation until the new building would be ready a year later. Closure then would have been a paper exercise in a forward looking process. We expected relevant parties to work together with good will to achieve this. Houghton Regis is on the brink of change with massive expansion providing exciting opportunities for community development of which a successful, thriving secondary school should be a central part rather than the sad rump this plan now seems to leave us with following this meeting. In a humane and sensible world, all this should have been possible and the failure to do so seems to us to be a dereliction of the duty of care owed to this vulnerable community by those entrusted with the education of our children.

We believe that the closure plan is inadequate as it deals only with the managed decline of the school, not the maintenance of a strong and improving educational environment for all pupils. The narrative needs to change completely taking account of current fears, and should be strongly focused on actions to assure a positive future. We would like to see the Trust, DfE and CBC sign up publicly and immediately to a more complete joint plan covering all aspects up to the expected date of closure and transfer to a newly established school, including the engagement of a new trust provider.

This should include,

- The Trust to attend the L.A's proposed meeting with parents on 18<sup>th</sup> March and to display care and concern for the year 10 and 11 pupils, presenting a positive educational offer and a commitment to the improvement of standards for year 7, 8 and 9 pupils.

- There needs to be closer co-operation regarding the early movement of Year 10 and 11 pupils to their new provisions in the coming term addressing the issues of uniform and transport.
- Chalkhills and Manshead schools to offer open evenings and visits to help parents make a more informed choice.
- There should be weekly admissions meetings at the school during the remainder of this term and the first half of next term for year 10 and 11 pupils and their parents, a one off meeting is not enough particularly for working parents.
- The retention of friendship groups needs parents and pupils to have opportunities to discuss their options together.
- The L.A. should announce its decision to apply for planning permission for the new school in August 2020.
- Early and regular information should be provided to parents and community regarding the building of the new school.
- There needs to be a meeting for community leaders regarding HRA's use of the UTC building.
- Parents should be fully informed about the arrangements for the move to the UTC building; reassured of its independence from the Academy of Central Bedfordshire; possibilities presented for STEM opportunities.
- An open day at the UTC building be held in July for parents and pupils.
- The L.A. should announce at the earliest opportunity the appointment of a new, local trust provider.
- The plan should include measures to support and retain staff, perhaps with assurances of continued employment at the UTC, and attention to staff welfare.
- There should be half-termly meetings for community leaders, parents and other stakeholders hosted jointly with the L.A. and the Trust to continue to gather views about the progress of the plan. These meetings to be open to the Houghton Regis primary schools and to the community to enable them to support and contribute to the developing future of education in the Town.

On behalf of the community, we want to see a robust plan that shows a continuing and deepening commitment to the improvement of educational standards and opportunities for our young people and provides hope and confidence for the future.

Sincerely, Julia Babiak, David Skinner, Brenda Rogerson

16.03.20