



Report on the Statutory Consultation

November 2013



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Steiner Academy Bristol — Report on Statutory Consultation

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Introduction and background

Steiner Academy Bristol is a new school, opening in Bristol in September 2014. The school was approved by the Department for Education in May 2013, under the Free Schools programme. To support our application, we ran a Bristol-wide campaign during 2012 to demonstrate the support from parents for a state-funded Steiner school. At the time of submitting our application (January 2013), well over 1000 parents had signed up to say that our school would be their first choice for their children, having between them a total of 943 children of the appropriate age to enter our school in 2014 and 2015.

We are keen to ensure that our school serves the needs of Bristol families and businesses, contributes to meeting the shortfall in pupil places and becomes a part of the fabric of Bristol's educational provision. We therefore ran a public consultation following the approval of our school by the Department of Education. This consultation also meets our legal responsibility to consult the public and interested parties under Section 10 of the Academies Act. The consultation ran for 6 weeks, from October 1st 2013 until November 12th 2013

About our school

Steiner Academy Bristol will offer an education that is creative, engaging and environmentally conscious. Our vision is for a school in which children can fully experience childhood; think independently, clearly and considerately; observe the world perceptively; and act with creativity, courage and self-determination.

Steiner Academy Bristol will be an all-through school, for children aged 4-16. When the school reaches full capacity it will have 624 pupils in two classes for each year.

In 2014, we will admit three classes only – Reception, Year 2 and Year 7. In 2015 we plan to admit a further four new classes, at Reception, Year 2, Year 4 and Year 7; from then on the school will have two points of entry at Reception and Year 7 until it reaches capacity in 2022.

We are part of a growing group of Steiner Academies, state-funded schools that build on the ideas of Steiner education with a commitment to diversity and accessibility. Our school will be accessible to all, regardless of background, income, ability, faith, gender or any other consideration.

Full information about the school is available on our website, www.steineracademybristol.org.uk.

Please do contact us if you have any questions about our school or about this consultation.

Steiner Academy Bristol

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Summary

- The consultation was carried out in accordance with our statutory obligations under Section 10 of the Academies Act.
- There were 183 responses.
- The consultation was successful in reaching all sectors of the community, including parents, teachers at local schools, businesses, youth and community groups and local councillors.
- The result was overwhelmingly positive, with 92.3% of respondents supporting our proposal for a new school.

This document sets out the methodology and results of the consultation and addresses the issues raised by respondents. Although there were only a small number of respondents who did not support our proposal (11 in total) we have tried to give fair representation to their views and to address their concerns.

This report will be made available on our website. We will send a copy to all respondents for whom we have email addresses, and we will email copies to all stakeholders who were directly contacted by us in the consultation.

Methodology

Legal basis

The Academies Act clearly states that all new schools must conduct a consultation before entering into any agreement with the Secretary of State. Section 10 of the Academies Act states:

“Consultation: additional schools

(1) Before entering into Academy arrangements with the Secretary of State in relation to an additional school, a person must consult such persons as the person thinks appropriate.

(2) The consultation must be on the question of whether the arrangements should be entered into.”

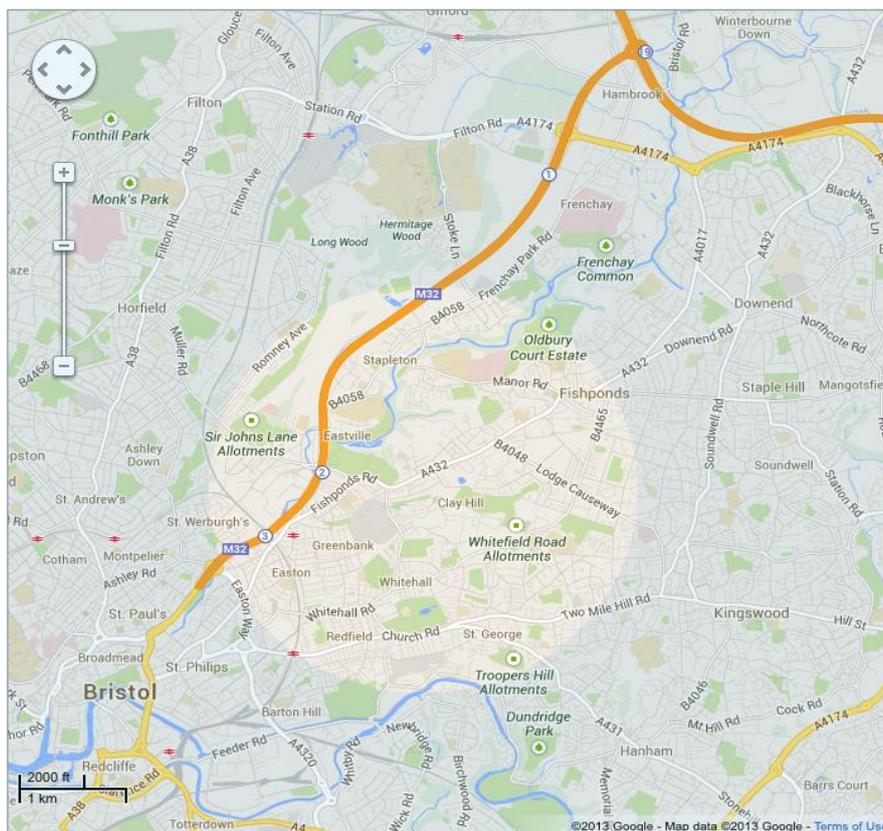
The Act does not prescribe who should be consulted, and the only question that is specifically required relates to whether ‘arrangements’ should be entered into. This is understood to mean the ‘funding agreement’ to be signed by the Secretary of State, enabling the establishment and funding of the school.

Geographic scope of consultation

At the time of consultation, Steiner Academy Bristol had not been able to acquire a site. We therefore based our consultation on the area used for our site search. The information pack sent out as part of this consultation included the following statements and map:

“At the time of consultation, we do not have a confirmed site for our school. We are currently working with the Education Funding Agency, who are responsible for acquiring and preparing a site for our school ready to open in September 2014.

The map below shows our preferred area for our school, based on the need for new school places and the vision we have for an inclusive, community-led, inner-city school. However, we are also examining options across a wider area, remaining within 3 miles of Bristol city centre but not including Hotwells, Clifton, Cotham, Redland, St Andrews or Bishopston.”



Time period

Our consultation ran for 6 weeks, from October 1st to November 12th.

Stakeholders

We wanted to reach a wide range of stakeholders, including:

- Parents whose children could be eligible for admission
- Local residents
- Elected members with wards within our search area or with responsibility for education
- Local businesses
- Staff at local schools
- Community groups and youth groups

Publicity and circulation

A paper version of the consultation form along with an information pack was sent to 161 people and organisations including head teachers of primary and secondary schools within the consultation area; all elected members either with a ward within the same area or with responsibility for education; and to youth, community and faith groups within the area.

The information pack and a link to the online consultation form were also emailed to these 161 stakeholders.

We promoted the consultation at public information events run on 21st September and 12th October at Easton Community Centre, and 9th November at the Jack Brimble Centre in St Werburghs.

A consultation form was available on our website throughout the consultation period, and it was signposted before and during the period in news stories on the website home page.

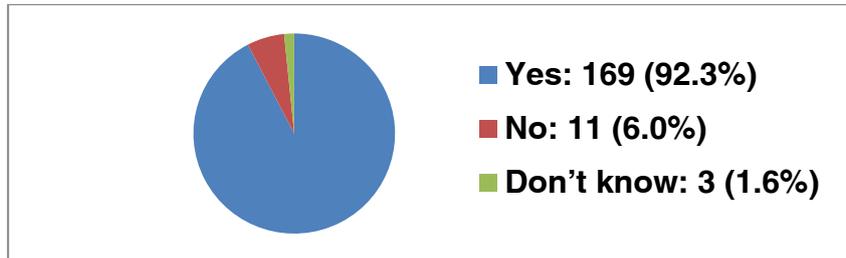
The consultation was reported in the Bristol Evening Post, both in the 'news' section and in the education supplement.

We used our email newsletter to promote the consultation, which is sent to around 1200 people but which reaches more, as many parents send it on to friends. We also regularly promoted the consultation using Facebook.

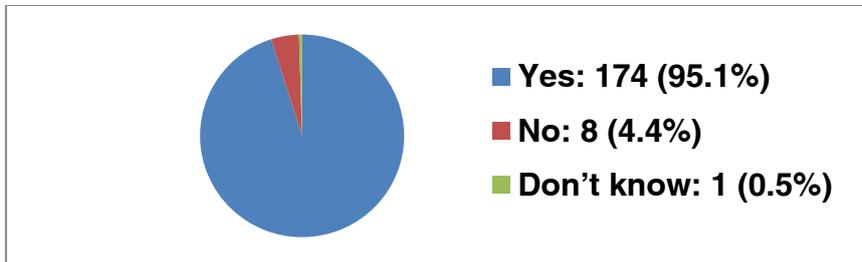
Summary of responses

Total number of responses: 183

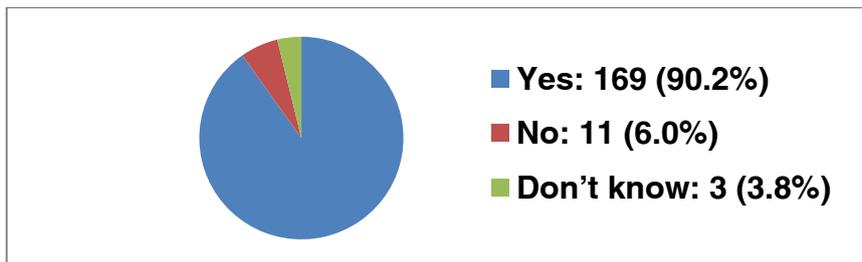
Question 1: Do you support the proposal to open a new all-through school (4-16 yrs) in Bristol to help meet the need for new school places and increase parental choice?



Question 2: Do you support the School's educational vision to develop children to their fullest potential as motivated, confident, self-reliant and responsible individuals with a life-long love of learning and a strong sense of the contribution that they can make to society?



Question 3: 3. Do you agree that Steiner Academy Bristol should enter into a Funding Agreement with the Secretary of State for Education to enable their school to be opened in 2014?



Comments

The response to the consultation was overwhelmingly positive, with 183 responses of which 172 were supportive and only 11 were negative.

Question 2 reflects the vision for our school. One respondent who did not support the project made the point that this vision could be said to be true for all schools. Whilst this is perhaps a fair criticism, the overwhelming support for our vision from respondents is compelling.

Six respondents who were otherwise very supportive answered 'Don't know' to Question 3, indicating that they might have been unclear as to the process of starting a new school and the role of the Funding Agreement within that.

Respondents

Local councillor: 1	No direct opinion given
Local employee / employer / business owner: 2	All supportive
Local resident: 29	25 for, 3 against, 1 don't know,
Member of a community or youth group: 6	All supportive
Member of staff at a local school: 13	8 for, 5 against
Parent / carer: 109	108 for, 1 against,
Other: 20	All supportive
No information given: 3	1 for, 2 against

Comments

The consultation appears to have been successful in reaching all parts of the community, with business owners, residents, community and youth group members, teachers, parents and a local councillor responding.

It is notable that the largest single group (45%) of respondents who were against the proposal were members of staff at local schools, with 5 out of 11 negative responses coming from this sector. This is in marked contrast to respondents who were parents, less than 1% of whom were against the proposal. The concerns of school staff are addressed below.

The issues raised

57 of the 183 respondents made comments. Of these, many were supportive and enthusiastic without raising any specific issues:

"I would be delighted and excited for my children to attend your school. Wonderful philosophy and approach."

"This is an amazing opportunity for Bristol children-good luck!"

"We have absolute faith in the team setting up the new school and hope very much that our children are able to attend."

"We want this school!"

Respondents also brought up a number of specific issues.

1. Choice

Many respondents were supportive of increasing parental choice in education.

"Feel very happy that more choice will be offered to the parents of Bristol children, of different approaches to education. Very exciting."

"I feel the free Steiner School is vital to offer variety and choice in educating our children. There should be many more throughout our society"

"I have long wished for real choice in education in Bristol"

"I think this is a great idea. I welcome choice of education for everyone as opposed to just those who can afford it."

However, others pointed out that choice in education can bring its own problems.

"I also have reservations about the concept of parents being given more 'choice'; I feel that this can sometimes be dangerous as it often means that the more articulate and vocal you are, the more likely it is you will be listened to and that less confident parents will not have a voice."

Our response

Steiner Academy Bristol will provide parents with more choice in education for their children, and we believe that this is a good thing. However, we feel strongly that these choices need to be accessible to all. For that reason, our Admissions Policy is entirely non-selective and based on objective criteria, so that the more confident and articulate parents do not have any advantage in admissions. The policy also gives priority to children from backgrounds of disadvantage, whether on low incomes or looked-after children; and a 'nearest first' tiebreaker is intended to deliver a community-based school.

2. The need for school places

Several respondents brought up the shortage of school places in Bristol as a reason to support the project:

"Bristol needs more school places, so this is really welcome."

“Bristol is obviously in need of more school places as every year children are not getting one of their first three school choices. Additionally, it would be great to have the option of a different style of school, so giving parents and children more choice.”

However, some respondents disputed the need for new school places:

“The comment that the proposed school will address a shortfall in places is untrue. All schools in the area have spaces. An additional school so close to ours (and others) will have a devastating impact on a) the numbers b) the school’s demographic.”

“There is a need for primary places in Bristol but not for secondary and certainly neither in the area you have identified as where you wish to site the school. Adding another secondary school in this or any area of Bristol will result no doubt in the closure of a good school somewhere else or you will be unable to fill your places.”

Our response

We were surprised by the comments disputing that shortage of school places in Bristol. Bristol City Council’s School Organisational Strategy shows a high and growing shortfall of school places in the city:

Primary School Admissions Forecast <i>(BCC Schools Organisational Strategy 2012-16)</i>				
Year	2013	2014	2015	2016
Number of reception places	5386	5396	5396	5396
Number of reception-age children	5585	5920	5994	6032
Shortfall of reception places	-199	-534	-608	-646
Number of new reception classes required in each year	9	12	4	4

With 12 new reception classes needed across Bristol in 2014, the primary places that our school will offer are clearly needed.

It is true that the immediate need is for primary places, but as the demographic peak moves up through the age range, additional secondary school places will soon be required. BCC’s Schools Organisational Strategy shows that although in 2014 there will be a surplus of 443 secondary school places across the city, by 2018 there will be a deficit of 28 places. Most local authorities aim for a surplus of 8-10% in school places to allow for parental choice and easy movement between schools. By 2016, with a surplus of 192 places against a capacity of 3957 places, the surplus will be at 4.9%, well below that target figure.

Our school will open in 2014 with just one class of 26 pupils of secondary age. By 2016 the school will have only 78 secondary age places. By slowly growing our secondary capacity, our school will build capacity to meet Bristol’s growing need for secondary places without unduly affecting existing schools.

Our school has attracted a significant proportion (around 10%) of applications for places in 2014 from parents whose children are currently attending independent schools. In 2012, 12.7% of Bristol pupils left the state sector between primary and secondary education. We hope our school will contribute to reducing this level of movement, keeping more pupils within accessible, community-based education.

In this consultation, we identified a primary search area centred on east and north-east Bristol. In this part of the city, schools are struggling to accommodate additional capacity within their sites.

“The East Central Area of the City is subject to considerable development pressure and a rapid growth in the population [...] Land is at a premium within the East Central Area with many schools being located on confined sites.” (BCC Schools Organisational Strategy 2012-16)

A new school on a new site is therefore a viable solution to meet the shortfall in school places for the area, as many existing schools are not able to expand within their current sites.

3. Demographics and accessibility

A number of respondents commented on the need for new state-funded schools to be open, accessible and diverse.

“To get funding, the school must ensure it recruits from a broad cross-section of the population.”

“Even though I understand that this school will be open to all, I have concerns that it will, nonetheless, be non-representative of the demographic of the area.”

“I think that such a school is potentially exclusive and could lead to further expansion of the gap between the middle class and our more vulnerable families in the local area. Local schools need to be sustainable and some have places. This would be a divisive threat to our diverse community. Steiner is seen as potentially elitist and alternative and against my notion of what state funded education is.”

“An additional school so close to ours (and others) will have a devastating impact on a) the numbers b) the school’s demographic. It is highly unlikely that the proposed school will reflect the exceptionally diverse community that we serve and will cream off the middle classes, resulting in a two tier system.”

Our response

These are valid concerns and we take them very seriously. Steiner education in the UK is currently dominated by independent, fee paying schools. As people with a passion for education, this is a problem for us and one of the primary motivations for this project was to offer Steiner education to a broader range of families, regardless of ability to pay. We want our school to be open to all, part of a diverse, inner-city community and genuinely accessible to all.

We have therefore concentrated our search for a site on the areas of Bristol that match that vision, rejecting potential sites in more affluent areas.

We have also used a completely non-selective Admissions Policy modelled on that used by Bristol City Council, with priority given to looked-after children and those eligible for free school meals, and with a ‘nearest first’ tie-breaker.

However, we recognise that we will need to be open, accessible and welcoming to the local community around our school site. We intend to work hard to communicate the ethos and values of our school and to be genuinely open to all.

We would welcome the opportunity to work with other schools, community groups, faith groups and local councillors to ensure that we deliver this vision.

4. Location

Comments on location fell into two groups. Several respondents were simply keen for the school to be near them:

“Please be in Greenbank!”

“Bedminster please!”

“South Bristol in particular does not have much choice for secondary school.”

There were more detailed points made around location:

“Local people need a say in where the school is sited and impact on local traffic. Also think the school buildings should be open to wider community users.”

“I do not support any kind of private education which is not available to all at no cost and believe that children are best education within their local community alongside others from the same neighbourhood.”

Our response

We do not yet know where the school will be sited. Our original search, working with the Education Funding Authority, was for a site within 3 miles of Bristol city centre but not including Hotwells, Clifton, Cotham, Redland, St Andrews or Bishopston. Wherever the school is sited, we will need to acquire planning permission from Bristol City Council. Local residents living near to the site will be consulted on any planning applications in the normal way, providing an opportunity to comment on issues such as transport and traffic.

We fully agree that school buildings should be open to wider community users. Our vision is for a school that sits at the heart of its local community, with adult education classes and community events, after-school clubs and youth activities. We welcome contact with all charity and community organisations who are interested in helping us to achieve this.

We are very sympathetic to the respondent who did not support private education. We feel strongly that all parents should have choice in education, not just those who can afford it. We would also agree that children are best served by a local school, allowing walking or cycling to school and building local friendships. For this reason, we have used a ‘nearest first’ tiebreaker in our Admissions Policy.

5. Steiner education

Our school will offer a distinctive educational philosophy. Steiner education, developed from the work of the writer and philosopher Rudolph Steiner, attracts passionate supporters but has also faced pointed criticism. This consultation reflected that.

“A Steiner School and its ethos would be a wonderful addition to any community.”

“I fully support the Steiner education philosophy having attended a Steiner school as a child. I have very happy memories of foraging in the woods and making gnomes. I would welcome the opening of any new Steiner school in the area as I feel that children deserve the wholesome and well-rounded education it offers.”

“Steiner education is invaluable, and commonly results in well rounded, respectful, considerate and compassionate adults. With the current education system being so restricted, it is vital that an alternative education is available!”

Some specific concerns about Steiner education were raised:

"I have a son who is a Steiner trained teacher so I know quite a lot about the ethos of your schools. I do have some caveats eg the belief that children aren't taught to read before their second teeth come through. If a child is interested they will learn to read before this! However, your holistic vision of education is attractive. I wish you well."

And some respondents were very clear in their opposition to a new Steiner Academy.

"I don't believe Steiner education and the school as described are appropriate recipients of public money. I do not believe a Steiner education, rooted in a highly dubious philosophy and delivered by unqualified staff can achieve the aims outlined above. I am totally opposed to the opening of this school."

"I am still concerned about the racist teachings of Mr Steiner and his connection to the occult."

"The education provided is outdated and unfit for the children of the 21st century."

Our response

Since marketing began in 2012, Steiner Academy Bristol has received a huge amount of support for the concept of providing Steiner education within a state-funded framework. Over 1000 parents signed up to say that our school would be their first choice for their children. We are committed to providing this choice for parents in a way that is accessible to all.

However, we would like to address some of the points made.

Regarding the qualifications of teachers, we will employ teachers from both mainstream and Steiner education backgrounds, and will have a strong programme of professional development and training with the aim that all teaching staff will have, or be working towards, QTS status and/or a Steiner teaching qualification.

Regarding reading age, it is correct that our school will start formal literacy teaching in Year 2 (age 7), as is normal practice within Steiner schools and indeed within mainstream education in many European countries. There is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that a later start to literacy and formal education can be beneficial for many children. In recent months the Save Childhood Movement, including 127 senior educationalists and academics, has called for a later start to formal education and we back this call for a less pressured early childhood.

Regarding the reference to racism and the occult, Rudolf Steiner's philosophical work, known as Anthroposophy, includes extensive spiritual and religious material. Within this there are a very small number of references to ideas on race that are very much of their time. We reject these racial ideas completely. We have produced a public statement on education and Anthroposophy which is available on our website (<http://www.steineracademybristol.org.uk/steiner-education/anthroposophy-and-education/>). From that statement:

"The evolving nature of Steiner education has meant that interpretations of Steiner's ideas have changed over time. In particular, some of Steiner's Anthroposophical work related to race and ethnicity. His ideas on race reflect the racism of the time and place in which he lived, and have been rejected within Steiner education. Instead, Steiner schools have focussed on his ideas of the unity of humanity and the value of the individual, above any categories of race, gender or nationality. Our school will share these values, building on Steiner's vision of a common humanity and rejecting all forms of prejudice." (Steiner Academy Bristol — Statement on Anthroposophy and Education)

Likewise, our school will not teach or promote any one religious or spiritual philosophy, whether that of Rudolf Steiner or anyone else.

“We recognise the importance that spirituality and religion have for many people; however, we believe that they are matters of private belief. We will therefore neither promote nor denigrate any particular religious or spiritual beliefs. Our school will uphold the right of all individuals to hold their own beliefs and values, remaining neutral and inclusive on all matters of religion and spirituality.” (Steiner Academy Bristol — Statement on Anthroposophy and Education)

Regarding being unfit for our times and outdated, Steiner education is not a fixed set of dogmatic practices; it is a flexible and adaptable philosophy. Because of this, it is able to respond and change to meet the needs of successive generations. For example, Steiner Academy Hereford’s recent 2013 GCSE cohort achieved exceptional results, with 80% of pupils obtaining 5 or more GCSEs and with nearly 50% of those grades being A or A*. Likewise, the independent Bristol Steiner School has seen a consistent 7-8% of pupils go on to Oxford or Cambridge, against a national average of 1.5%. We hope that the education that our school will offer will be of an equal standard.

Our commitment to communication

Within this consultation we have tried to reach all those who might have an interest in the opening of our school, and we have tried to represent the opinions and respond to the concerns of all who took part, whether supportive or critical.

We intend to continue this open communication, and we welcome contact from anyone who might have questions, concerns or issues that they would like to discuss with us.

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