

THE FRIENDS OF
ABINGDON
CIVIC SOCIETY

Mark Stone
Chief Executive
Vale of White Horse District
Council
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Abingdon-on-Thames
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14 January 2022

Dear Mr Stone

Upper Reaches Hotel, Abingdon

I am writing on behalf of the Friends of Abingdon Civic Society to express our very serious concern over the lack of action on this site. As you know, it is at the gateway to Abingdon, in the Town Centre Conservation Area and in close proximity to residential and leisure areas and the Abbey Buildings Scheduled Monument. Part of the site is Grade 2 listed. The Vale of White Horse District Council owns it on behalf of the community and has a duty to take all reasonable steps to ensure that the community benefits from it, whether as an attraction for visitors, a space for local people to enjoy, or as a source of revenue to support the provision of other services to the town.

We have three specific concerns:

1 The current situation

As has been widely discussed, the current state of disrepair is leading to severe problems of vandalism and anti-social behaviour, making life very unpleasant for those who live nearby and creating a costly drain on police resources. The leaseholder has obligations – under the lease (presumably), under planning laws and as neighbours - to keep the property secure and in good condition and the Vale, as freeholder and as planning authority, has the power to enforce those obligations, but has failed to act. (The Vale also has obligations under Core Policy 39 of the Local Plan 2031 to "ensure that vacant historic buildings are appropriately re-used as soon as possible to prevent deterioration of condition").

We wrote to the Head of Planning in August 2021 asking whether consideration was being given to the issue of a notice under S.215 of the TCPA 1990. We pointed out the criteria for such a notice and asked whether VWHDC agreed that they had been met. We received an acknowledgement and promises of a substantive reply but none has been received.

We were invited to submit comments for discussion at a VWHDC senior management meeting in November and subsequently heard that that meeting had agreed to issue a Community Protection Notice requiring the leaseholder to take action; we were somewhat surprised by this as we thought that a S.215 notice would have been easier to justify, but pleased to hear that something was being done. However, this does not appear to have happened.

Copies of both our previous letters are attached. **Please may we now have a reply to our August letter about a S.215 notice and an update on the actions agreed in November.**

2 The future of the site

We are well aware that there are legal and financial complexities in the situation and can understand that it has been difficult to find a solution. However, 6 ½ years have gone by since the Upper Reaches closed and we cannot help but feel that the Council is being strung along by the leaseholders who have no incentive to do anything about it. As we understand it they have made no planning applications (or serious pre-application enquiries) during that time and approaches from other parties interested in acquiring the lease have been rebuffed.

The Sub-Area strategy for Abingdon in the Local Plan 2031 says “Making the town centre more attractive for cultural and recreational activities will help to ensure town centre vitality, which is a corporate objective for the Council”. It is widely recognised that if Abingdon is to thrive, it will not be by retail alone: leisure activities and tourism are absolutely essential and the riverside is our most valuable asset.

From the 1970s until about 10 years ago this site provided a popular riverside setting for both visitors and local people to enjoy. If Contemporary Hotels do not want to continue to operate in that way, the Vale must find a way to break the deadlock so they can consider other options. There are plenty of ideas circulating, especially in the emerging Abingdon Neighbourhood Plan, but we need an open discussion about the constraints – legal, financial and physical (we are aware that the former industrial uses of part of the site may have left a legacy, and it is a flood risk area) – so that decisions can be taken on an informed basis.

Please may we have an update – including timescales – on the Council’s plans to move forward on this.

3 Transparency

The lack of information on this has been a great cause for concern. As I have said, the Vale owns the site on behalf of the community and it should be accountable for its actions in managing this valuable asset. However, the standard response to questions from the community throughout the 6 ½ years has been “discussions with the leaseholder are ongoing and commercially confidential”. In 2021 a group of local residents, whose daily lives are being blighted – and their properties potentially endangered – by the situation, and whose informal requests for information had led nowhere, submitted a

Freedom of Information request. This was rejected out of hand, and the group's suggestion of a discussion about what might/might not be able to be released was ignored. This incident clearly showed a complete disregard for the genuine concerns of people who had no agenda other than to protect their own homes and the amenity of their area and daily lives.


We note that in last year's Corporate Plan, the Vale committed to "working in an open and inclusive way" and "increasing meaningful engagement and communication with everyone". Clearly there is some tension between this and issues of commercial confidentiality, but it should be possible to find a way of resolving that.

Unfortunately, the gap between the warm words of your Corporate Plan and the actual experiences of local residents who try to engage with, or communicate with, the Council over matters like the Upper Reaches is shockingly wide. As you know, the public has a variety of ways in which it can challenge a local authority (such as FOI requests, formal complaints and appeals, the Local Government Ombudsman and, in extreme cases, legal proceedings). Such moves can consume huge amounts of time and energy (on the part of residents, local authority officers and other public officials). They also create antagonism and distrust between a local council and its electorate which is not productive.

The Civic Society would prefer to work constructively with the Council on problems affecting the people of Abingdon. **We would like, therefore, to discuss with you ways in which the commitments in your Corporate Plan can be translated into reality for the people of Abingdon. I hope that you will agree to a meeting, not least as a demonstration of good faith that the sentiments expressed in your Corporate Plan are genuine ones.**

I am copying this to Adrian Duffield and Nick Downing because of the earlier correspondence and to the District Councillors for the ward and look forward to an early reply.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hester Hand". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Hester Hand
Chair, Friends of Abingdon Civic Society

Cc Adrian Duffield, Head of Planning
Nick Downing, Property Surveyor

Enc: Letters of 11 August and 18 November 2021