



OPEN LETTER TO VALE OF WHITE HORSE DISTRICT COUNCILLORS

The Friends of Abingdon Civic Society - and others - consider that we have been treated with what we feel is a contemptuous attitude by the Council over Old Abbey House, which, remember, you own **on behalf of** the community.

The only thing we have ever asked the Council for was meaningful dialogue, and we have been denied that. We have been writing to you about Old Abbey House for over a year, and have, throughout, stressed our wish to work with the Vale to find a satisfactory outcome. In response, we have been repeatedly rebuffed and strung along with promises of meetings and public consultation. None of those promises has been delivered and it now appears that the decision on the building's future will be taken in a closed Cabinet discussion next month.

In September 2019 we asked to work with you in drawing up a plan to rescue the building after the disastrous years of neglect under the previous administration. You refused to engage in those discussions and have continued to neglect our asset. Over a year has gone by since you instructed your officers to repair the roof urgently, yet nothing has been done.

We were told that you only wanted to "market test" interest in the building. It is now obvious that this was untrue: officers and the estate agents were quite clear that their brief was to sell the property, and this was implicitly confirmed in a letter from the Leader on 29 October.

The Council compounded the problem by rejecting our request to renew the building's listing as an Asset of Community Value. This scheme is designed precisely to help community groups put together finance and management arrangements for projects such as this. The Council then impeded our efforts, and added to our frustration, by blocking lawful requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act.

We have realistic and viable ideas to put to you, based on our knowledge of successful projects elsewhere. Contrary to messages put out by the Council, these do not depend on the Council investing a lot of money, nor are they only for the benefit of Abingdon residents: our proposal would benefit a much wider area. We have repeatedly asked to meet you to discuss our plans. You have repeatedly refused.

Have you considered how damaging this is for our MP Layla Moran, who has just become chair of a new All Party Parliamentary Group which is looking at ways in which historic buildings can be put into public use, with great economic and social benefits? What an embarrassment that a council in her

constituency does not seem to care about these ideas, and is instead planning to sell off valued community assets for commercial use.

We are astonished that the Council appears to have learnt nothing from the sorry story of the Old Gaol. There, a valuable asset was sold off for much less than was expected, to a developer who failed to provide most of the promised public benefits. Local people are still angry about that. There will be furious disbelief if you now show complete contempt for your electors by selling off another public asset in defiance of clear public opinion, and after refusing to engage with the community over its own plans for the building.

The Council has shamefully mismanaged Old Abbey House over many years, but all is not lost. At least two proposals have been submitted for community use of Old Abbey House so Cabinet members have the opportunity on 4 December to return to what was promised earlier, i.e treat the VSL exercise as “market testing” and use it as the background for serious discussion with the community about a viable way forward. We have sent you a proposal in this respect: the law allows you to do that, so let us see if you have the will.

Friends of Abingdon Civic Society
November 2020