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Agenda Item 8

Statement of Cllr Colin Campbell – Ward Member for Otley and Yeadon 5th December 2018

Submission to Scrutiny Board (Infrastructure, Investment and Inclusive Growth) for meeting 12th December 2018.

Otley Civic Centre has been at the heart of the Community since the end of the nineteenth century. It was built as a Mechanics Institute to provide educational and social facilities for the town. It has always fulfilled this role but has never been a Town Hall in the traditional sense of the word (civic functions taking place at the Local Board Office on North Parade* or in the OUDC offices on Boroughgate).

In the 1950s it was handed to the old Otley Urban District Council who continued its social function and in 1974 (at local government reorganisation) it was passed to the City Council.

I will not catalogue all events since 1974 but the building suffered from a lack of maintenance/investment and was finally closed following the condemnation of the electrical system by the then Fire Officer.

Since then the future of the building has been “under discussion” while the fabric of the Grade 2 listed building has deteriorated.

In an ideal world the Council, as owners, would refurbish the building to replace the lost facilities (which have not been replicated following closure).

There was an agreement some nine or so years ago between the then Leader of the Council and the ward members that this would happen and be funded from the sale of the North Parade site.

There was a change of administration and this did not happen.

Since then the Council have made it clear that they are unwilling to fund the cost of refurbishment.

It would be nice to see the building brought back into public use but notwithstanding any recommendation from Scrutiny, Executive Board have made it clear this will not happen.

Given that there are two questions.

1. Is the proposed sale the best use of the building?

The Council have asked for expressions of interest on the site and of the ones they received the housing proposal, though not ideal, seems the least worse option.

Given the housing market in Otley I feel however the offer price is too low and given it only comes from one company I feel that it would be better value to open it to the wider market.

2. Is the Executive Board proposal a good deal for Otley and the wider community?

I would say no.

Given that the site, along with the former Council Offices on Boroughgate, Ashfield Works, North Parade and housing land to the east of Otley will be sold there will be a substantial financial gain to the Council running in total to several million pounds.

Residents rightfully ask “what are we getting out of this” and at the moment it is very little.

The offer such as it is seems to be an option to a third party (The Courthouse) on a piece of land on a derelict site (North Parade). They have to raise funding for a feasibility study, funding for building, pay fees and manage this project. There is no indication of what might happen if this voluntary group could not do this.

It is a little like jam tomorrow but only if you pick the fruit, boil and bottle it.

I would support the Courthouse's aspirations but feel the Council are offering them little assistance.

I think the other part of the question relates to the rest of the North Parade site* which the Council seems to be leaving in its current derelict state.

As I said the Council through land and property sales are set to receive a large capital receipt. It is not unreasonable for them to reinvest some of that within Otley and at the same time meet some of its other obligations.

The North Parade site has been one the Council has talked of developing for a number of years. If the public hall goes ahead it will limit its development for commercial uses. This is the ideal opportunity to use the main building on site (former Local Board offices, identified in the Neighbourhood Plan as a significant local heritage asset) as a home for Otley Museum* maybe offices for local groups (the Town Council has expressed an interest in this) and conversion and new build to provide affordable social housing for the significant number of local people on the housing waiting list, (this could be funded from existing section 106 affordable contributions from developers paid to offset onsite provision).

At the moment there are no other proposals for the site which if nothing happens the Council will continue to allow it to fall into disrepair .

There is an opportunity to turn a negative (sale of a community building) into a positive by removing a derelict eyesore, providing affordable housing and new community facilities. I feel the Council should take it.

- In more recent times the Parish Council had an office in the building.
- Parts of the site are used. Otley Lions store books for their charity stall in an old garage and there is a run down hobby garage business. A small section of the site is used by the Council to store market stalls. For twenty years the

Council have been discussing moving these to a site they have earmarked but because there has been no incentive it has not happened.

* The Museum was made homeless when the Civic Centre closed and is currently in temporary accommodation with most of its collection in store. The Council have already accepted they have a commitment to finding it a new home. This could have been on the former Ashfield Works, unfortunately the proposals for this site are unlikely, (despite wishful thinking by some officers) given the problems with design/site layout/traffic etc. to go ahead in its present form.

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