

EXTRACT

THE CHAIRMAN: Good afternoon and welcome to today's City Council meeting. Would you now please make your speech to Council, which should not be longer than five minutes, and could you please begin by introducing the people in your deputation.

MR I GREENBERG: Thank you. Lord Mayor, Councillors, my name is Ian Greenberg and I chair the Lingfield and Fir Trees Tenants' and Residents' Association. I am accompanied by Committee Members Lorraine Townsend and Howard White.

For many years people in the Moor Allerton area worked to establish a community centre to meet the needs of tenants and residents. We were finally granted the use of a former double-fronted shop and a committee of trustees was set up to manage the Open House Community Centre, as it was named. With professional paid staff and a team of volunteers, all ran reasonably well until just over two years ago when the Outer North East Area Management Committee reduced the annual grant and the paid staff had to be dismissed. The reduced grant had a proviso that moneys were not to be spent employing staff. All decisions were taken by trustees, who were not residents but had appointed themselves. However, at the following AGM they conceded an alteration whereby a management committee would be established allowing residents and users to make decisions involving the day-to-day business. Trustees would be involved in policy making.

Unfortunately, this committee was never allowed to function properly and those who had previously worked in a voluntary capacity quickly left. Soon after, a former trustee who had just lost her job approached the trustees for assistance. Despite the bar on paid employment using taxpayers' funds, the trustees agreed to pay her around £5,000 per annum for just twelve hours per week, with a job title of Sessional Worker, but no job description.

Attempts by the trustees to get free legal advice in order to redefine the meaning of "sessional work" came to nothing. The former trustee was appointed without advertising a vacancy or giving opportunity for others to apply. In fact, it was done in secret. Eventually this became public knowledge and the trustees received a number of complaints, not least from the Residents' Group. Without contrition, the trustees repeated their action a few months later, this time paying the husband. It was three months before residents discovered what had happened.

Recognising their inability to run the Open House Community Centre trustees had, on a number of occasions, asked the Residents' Group to take over the management but then showed reluctance when this offer was accepted. Residents therefore pressed the trustees for a meeting and one was finally arranged for March of this year.

It is at this point that appreciation must go to Councillor Peter Harrand from the trustees for his agreement to chair the meeting. The trustees refused to agree to relinquish management of the centre, or to admit residents on to their committee, preferring to make criticisms of a personal nature. In consequence, the likelihood of

the centre closing was put to Councillor Harrand. His response was immediate and forthright – “Over my dead body!” he declared. Will Councillor Harrand now keep to his promise and ensure that the centre remains open?

Soon after this meeting, an ongoing investigation into the management and finances of Open House, which was being conducted by the Commercial Asset Management Section of LCC, was inexplicably stopped.

The four trustees of Open House are self-appointing and unaccountable. They do not live in the area and lack both knowledge and experience of the Lingfield and Fir Trees community. Prior to last year’s AGM, without consultation or agreement, they formed themselves into a limited company. Although limited companies are formed to protect the directors rather than the business, this had the added advantage of legalising their possession of around £10,000-worth of property, most of which had been donated by the community and purchased for community use.

Following the meeting a letter was received from Councillor Harrand. His considered opinion was that, because the trustees were a limited company as well as a registered charity, there was nothing that he or the Council could or would do as far as management of the centre was concerned. We were advised to contact the Charity Commission if we had further complaints. There was no mention of the use or misuse of taxpayers’ money.

The current situation is that our community centre is closed more than it is open. Most of the time when the shutters are up, the former trustee and her husband can be seen using the facilities at all hours of the day and night whilst the doors remained locked and residents barred from entry. On a number of occasions the Residents’ Group has booked the centre and on one occasion for a meeting with a senior Council officer, and we were unable to gain entry. Occasionally the trustees and their friends have been observed using the centre for private use and by people from outside the area. Individuals from outside the area have been allowed to use the centre for their own personal business ventures without being charged, yet residents have, on occasion, been charged to use the centre.

The trustees have so far refused to surrender the lease and allow a community group to manage the centre properly. Neither have they made any realistic attempt to manage it properly themselves.

THE LORD MAYOR: Can I now ask you to go, please, to your final sentence, because your time is up.

MR I GREENBERG: Yes. Our Area Committee has the stated aim to improve the quality of local decision making and this is understood by residents to mean that we would have say in the management of our community centre and is surely what localisation is about so we therefore call upon the Council---

THE LORD MAYOR: Thank you. Thank you, Ian. (*Applause*) I call upon Councillor James Lewis.

COUNCILLOR J LEWIS: Thank you. I move that the matter be referred to the Executive Board for consideration.

COUNCILLOR LOBLEY: I second, my Lord Mayor.

THE LORD MAYOR: *(A vote was taken)* One against. CARRIED.

Ian, thank you for attending and for what you have said. You will be kept informed of the considerations which your comments will receive. Good afternoon, thank you.

MR I GREENBERG: Thank you.
