

OLNEY TOWN COUNCIL



10 June 2021

Dear Friends and Neighbours,

The Council are concerned about public and press being excluded from any part of meetings. This was evidenced at the Council meeting of 7th June when there was lively discussion over whether two items on the monthly agenda should be held in public or private.

A general conclusion regarding hearing matters in private was that:

Firstly, the Clerk must publish for Councillors and the public a full explanation as to why she considers such a course of action is required. This would be circulated with the agenda in order to allow the Council to make an informed decision. The default will be that the matter will be heard in public unless there is a compelling legal or financial reason why it should not.

Secondly, we resolved that the minutes relating to such items must be as full as possible whilst maintaining any confidential aspects of the discussion.

We decided to apply the second principle to the two items before the Council on the 7th and furthermore, on this occasion, to write to the town at the earliest opportunity, hence this letter.

The first item concerned the Football Club building on East Street.

On previous occasions this has always been discussed in a “behind closed doors” setting. As a Council we were unhappy with this. The Clerk reasoned that in order to provide appropriate background information she would be discussing confidential and financially sensitive aspects of a number of businesses and that to go ahead would, in her opinion, be unlawful. The Council expressed our disappointment that sufficient papers had not been circulated to allow a reasoned decision to be made and to enable us to go ahead in public, and asked for such background papers to be circulated for us to make an informed decision and therefore hopefully be able to discuss in public at the next meeting.

The second item was even more difficult given the scope and possible financial implications. The discussion was on the proposed community building at the new Aspreys development.

Normally this would have been an open discussion. However as the professional quantity surveyor (arranged under the previous Council) supplied his report as a confidential document we would have been in breach of contract had we discussed elements from his report openly. Given that the report was scheduled to form the basis of discussion we were, in effect, left with little choice.

However, following the discussion in private it was felt that 95% could easily have remained in the public domain. We therefore decided to report the substance of our debate as quickly and as thoroughly as possible to residents and the media.

The subject revolves around a proposed Community Centre which was part of site allocation ONP4 in the Olney Neighbourhood Plan and for which the town voted, and consequently, formed an integral part the planning approval and s.106 legal agreement for the new homes on the Yardley Manor development.

There were two main options:

- A) Build, as originally proposed, a community centre, the cost of which would be borne in the main by the developers.
- B) Build a larger community centre with an enhanced specification at an additional cost for the town in excess of £1million.

The cost difference between the two options, was a focus for some discussion.

We quickly concluded that the town simply could not afford option B) nor was it appropriate to try to do so given all of the other needs around the town.

There was also a discussion around actually not building anything at all at Aspreys but trying to access the S106 money to improve existing facilities.

This was the preferred initial view of many. However it was pointed out that to do so would mean we would have to go against the Town's own Neighbourhood Plan and the planning permission that had been granted. We would also be denying new residents something they had been promised, and finally we would have to renegotiate the planning permission and Section 106 agreement. It was advised that this would be both difficult and hazardous in terms of jeopardising what money we might receive.

There was then some debate over how such a centre might be best utilised. It was concluded that we would wish to involve the town as widely as possible in such a decision and we will be seeking to do so before plans are finalised. Further discussion on this matter has been held over to the July meeting in order that it can be in open forum and we would like as many of the town as possible to attend.

Please be assured that we are all in agreement that it should be a last resort for a matter to be discussed in private. That fact that it is a "difficult" topic will not be a reason to do so. There is nothing wrong with members disagreeing over something about which they feel passionate. There was, indeed a great deal of passion expressed. In my opinion this shows that we care and I am by no means ashamed that the town should be able to witness this.

Philip Geach
Mayor