

7th April 2021 – Open Letter

Dear Cllrs Haval, Rouane, Giesberg and Davies,

Thank you for your letter dated the 2nd April 2021.

I need to emphasise the point that I am replying to this letter since you have written to me in your official capacity as Councillors. Whilst purdah is in force, such sensitive matters which involve the Council are prohibited during an election period.

Many would argue that the timing of your letter has been planned to fit into the campaigning for the upcoming elections and is being used for electioneering – why was this letter not sent earlier? I am assuming that none of the signatories are standing in any of the elections on May 6th 2021. Please can you confirm as this could make this situation more complicated.

Despite holding an Extraordinary Council Meeting on the 8th December 2020, responding to all emails from residents concerning Willowbrook, making a statement on social media, providing an update on the Leader's report for the Town Council Annual Report and having Willowbrook discussed and debated at Finance and General Purposes Committee (F&GP), I am surprised to hear that you believe that the Council has not been clear or updated everyone on the status of Willowbrook. It is especially surprising as Cllrs Haval and Davies are voting members of the F&GP. At F&GP the financial position of Willowbrook, the loss of income, the state of the building, the schedule of refurbishments and the public consultation have been discussed, debated, and agreed. Therefore, to claim that you or any of the Ladygrove Councillors have not been involved is at best disingenuous.

To provide further clarity please find below actions, context, and timings regarding Willowbrook:

Context:

Willowbrook is important to the community but the safety of residents and focusing on keeping council services open, allowing and continuing with the vaccinations is the key priority.

- UK in lockdown and Didcot Town Council (DTC) operated with a skeleton staff in the office. DTC concentrated on burials; meetings; outside services team and opening the Civic Hall to the NHS.
- Rota of ten people put in place – office staff; outside staff and two Councillors. All day vaccinations require DTC to have someone on site from 7.30am to around 6.30 – 7pm in the evening – almost twelve hours a day and lots of weekends. Staff were encouraged to take TOIL for this over time which left staff further depleted for other work.
- Attendance at the Civic Hall in between vaccination sessions was needed to take NHS deliveries – further reducing the amount of time to go over to Willowbrook.
- It would have been against Government advice to get the whole of the DTC staff in the office during lockdown. DTC have a duty of care towards staff.

- Recruitment of a new Property and Facilities Manager to enable management of DTC properties. Starting on 4th May 2021.
- DTC were also hosting Covid testing in the Civic Hall car park and blood transfusion sessions.

Timeline:

- Keys handed over on 18th December – changed the locks on handover.
- Willowbrook site was in a poor state and not the standard that we were expecting. Cllr John Moody attended the handover.
- F&GP – 23rd December – way forward and consultation discussed. Still dealing with the Company Voluntary Arrangement at that point. Paperwork completed to secure DTC claim on the CVA. Completed fire risk action plan. Action plan presented.
- F&GP 25th January – Public consultation draft presented and agreed to review in February to give time for input from F&GP committee members.
- F&GP 22nd Feb – consultation amended and was to go to Full Council in March for ratification. Agreed to launch consultation at the time of the Annual Town Meeting in March. The public consultation went live in advance of the Annual Town Meeting.
- Annual Town Meeting held on 22nd March. An opportunity for residents to speak and question the Council and Leader about any aspect of council work. It is noted not one question was asked by councillors or residents about Willowbrook.
- F&GP 29th March - questions answered from Cllr Phil Davies.
- Public consultation on Willowbrook finishes on 9th April with a report of the findings to be discussed at F&GP on 26th April 2021.
 - It is crucial that we get the feedback from residents about what is needed and should be provided.
- May 2021 onwards: Tender process planned and those that have provided expressions of interest will be contacted to present their proposal on how they would operate and run Willowbrook.
- Summer 2021: Due diligence carried out on shortlisted companies and groups to operate Willowbrook. Final appointment made and Willowbrook open.

Work completed at Willowbrook:

- December 2020 – DTC renewed the alarm line and insured the building to protect the building.

- January –Handover with Soll and photographs taken of public rooms to go on the website.
- Call for expressions of interest put on DTC website along with the photographs – approved at January F&GP.
- Around thirty expressions of interest received. Meetings with interested parties carried out; some on Zoom and others on site. The interested parties range from individuals, groups, charitable groups, specific sports and regional and national companies.
- February - Quotes gathered for decoration and flooring. Repairs to roof approved by F&GP in autumn – order placed and will be carried out in April.
- Property & Facilities Manager appointed and will start on 4th May.

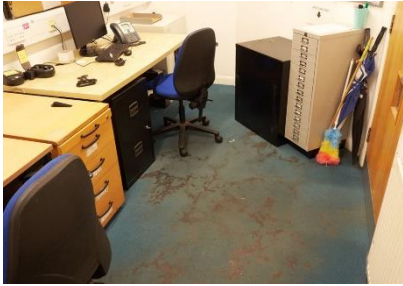
Things that need to be done before Willowbrook can safely open to the public for polling day.

- Clearing all the debris and rubbish left by previous occupiers.
- Sort and dispose of broken fitness equipment.
- Sort the equipment belonging to other people / groups – many claims received about who owns the equipment.
- Inform DTC insurance company on what equipment is in the building and future use of building.
- Get property cleaned, checked and sanitised.
 - Legionella testing
 - Annual service for gas boilers
 - Electrical testing
 - Fire alarm testing
 - Risk assessment

Impact of hastily opening up Willowbrook:

- If it opens as a leisure centre and gym – DTC could end up with having to employ former staff with a combined salary of up to £90,000. Adding the £300,000 financial loss due to the pandemic, DTC cannot afford this additional cost and DTC residents do not deserve further increase in Council Tax.
- If DTC employ current Soll members of staff – DTC may have to look at redundancy depending on the future use of the building or another organisation taking it over – this will be additional expense to employ a consultant to do this.

- Willowbrook can open as a polling station for the May elections because there is no risk of TUPE.
- Due to the condition of Willowbrook and the lack of equipment or DTC staff to manage the property, any other use now is not viable.
 - Where would the funds come from to buy all the new equipment that is up to standard?
A significant budget would be needed.



Next Steps:

- Plan of action is currently being worked on to coincide with the end of the consultation.
- Plan will be brought to April F&GP and will include some costs for professional help and an option for possible temporary opening as a short-term arrangement whilst the longer-term option is considered, and procurement carried out.
- Full timings see 'Timeline' above.

As it is clear from the above, even during the restrictions, pressures on DTC Staff and focusing on vaccinations, a lot of actions have happened regards Willowbrook. As you are aware the financial position and impact of the pandemic has severely impacted DTC and we must find sensible and realistic solutions that are not just driven by what will look good publicly in advance of an election but what is the best long term for DTC and the community.

If you and your fellow Ladygrove Councillors have better suggestions, then please share; if you disagree with my view that the priority is focusing on vaccinations and protecting residents then please let me know. If you have a proposal to operate Willowbrook then please email me your expressions of interest and I shall look forward to your proposal.

I hope that this answers your questions especially as many had already been agreed by the F&GP of which Cllr Haval and Cllr Davies are voting members.

Your sincerely,

Mocky Khan
Leader of Didcot Town Council