

WALLINGFORD TOWN COUNCIL

MINUTES

of the

Extraordinary meeting of full council held in the Town Hall, Wallingford on
Monday 19th November 2018

PRESENT

The Mayor, Councillor Lee Upcraft

Councillors Cripps, Dolton, Hughes, Kidley, Lester, Lloyd, McGregor, Norton, Titchener,
Whelan and Wilder

The Town Clerk, Mrs Paula Lopez
Officer in Attendance: Tracey Collins (Minute Taker)

354. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Baroni and Beatty.

355. ADMISSION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no admissions of the public.

356. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

A Councillor with voting rights who has a disclosable pecuniary interest or another interest as set out in our Council's Standing Orders Code of Conduct (Item 13) in a matter being considered at a meeting is subject to statutory limitations or restrictions under code of conduct and his right to participate and vote on the matter (guidelines are available at the meeting and all Councillors have received a copy prior to the meeting) Information for each Member was available at the meeting.

COUNCILLOR Jane Titchener declared an interest in agenda item number 7 and would like to speak in public participation.

357. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – NOTIFIED AND IMPROMPTU (Total 15 Minutes)

(i) **Asheley Catt, Chairperson Rainbow Preschool** – Rainbow has been providing outstanding childcare in Wallingford for many years for thousands of children, we employ 14 staff including an early years teacher. We take government and 30 hours funding children and are registered for 45 children per session providing a service to 50 families. Rainbow work

with a number of outside bodies including social workers and health visitors this can mean short notice childcare is required for vulnerable/disadvantaged children. Rainbow also provide work experience for older local children support to young adults leaving school and those who may have started college.

Rainbow often visit local establishments e.g senior citizens homes, churches and have a very successful forest school programme, we have good links with the local primary schools and work hard to ensure a smooth transition from preschool to school.

After nearly 30 years we feel we have been badly let down by Wallingford Town Council. We feel that following the structural engineers report a full survey is needed and that Wallingford Town Council as landlords should be looking at providing alternative accommodation for its tenants. Asheley asked "are you declaring the building unsafe?" We should be given the appropriate time and due diligence. Our community depends on Rainbow, our parents rely on this because they are working. I would like to ask why we can't relocate to the Wigod Centre temporarily until the Recreation Rooms are rebuilt once the Town Green status has been resolved. We have over 900 signatures on the on-line petition which shows the support that Rainbow has.

Paul Flavell, Parent Rainbow Preschool – We have sought legal advice and an e-mail has been sent to the office to obtain clarification of the legalities, I would appreciate a response to the e-mail. This situation has caused a great deal of distress for local hardworking staff, we need a response to move forward so that we know if to terminate and on what grounds.

Neville Burt, Chairman, Wallingford Emergency Food Bank - Neville read a statement which stated they agreed that the building was beyond economic repair but concerned that it would close July 2019 and not at the end of the lease March 2020, which would give everyone more time to find a suitable alternative. Mr Burt suggested sharing the Bullcroft Lodge with the CAB for a modest rent but if these options were not available then could the Town Council support the food bank in finding alternative accommodation.

Gaye Cooper, Wallingford Bell Ringers – Gaye reported that although they did not support vulnerable people or children like the other tenants they were actually supporting people to keep an active mind and body. The Wallingford Bell Ringers have been lucky enough to take the name Wallingford all around the world whilst bell ringing. Gaye wanted to see everyone working together to keep the building open until 2020, especially as the department of education have not yet agreed the repayment fee.

Jill Willison, Advice Session Supervisor, CAB – We are disappointed with the decisions being made but we understand the position that you are in, we would like you to consider extending to March 2020 and giving assistance and support to the services provided.

Councillor Jane Titchener left the table to speak in public participation - I have a family relationship with a Trustee of Rainbow so have declared a personal interest. Rainbow and the other tenants provide a valuable service to the community, myself and I'm sure other Councillors have used Rainbow as a childcare provider in the past. The Councillors do not make decisions lightly so deciding to close the building in July 2019 as opposed to waiting to

March 2020 is something that should be fully investigated before making a final decision. The building will close in March 2020 regardless, if all options have been explored and no options available then it will close in July 2019. The safety of the children and staff has to override any decision.

The Mayor Lee Upcraft, read a statement from Mark Savery, Treasurer, Rainbow Pre School, which had been e-mailed to the office as he could not attend the meeting. (Attached)

The office received four e-mails in support of the tenants from members of the public with regard to the closure of the Recreation Rooms and a member of the public made contact with local MP Ed Vaizey, Mr Vaizey's office contacted the Mayor who gave a full view of the situation. MP Ed Vaizey is happy to support the Mayor and Wallingford Town Council in its decisions.

358. MAYORS COMMUNICATIONS

- There were no Mayor's Communications read.

359. MINUTES

- (i) To sign as a correct record the Minutes of the Meeting of Council held on the 29th August 2018 as set out on pages 128-135 of the Minute Book.

Proposed by Councillor Lloyd, Seconded by Councillor Norton and RESOLVED: THAT the Minutes of the meeting of Council held on the 29th October 2018 as set out on pages 128 - 135 of the Minute Book be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

360. THE FUTURE OF THE BULLCROFT REC ROOMS

Mayor Lee Upcraft

I know first-hand the value which Rainbow provides to the families of Wallingford. I understand very well the angst and uncertainty being caused to many people by the news that the Rec Rooms may close next Summer.

Eight years ago I was given 4 weeks' notice that the Railway Children in Cholsey would close and that my daughter would have to find a new nursery. I do not want to put families in the same position I was in eight years ago. I also remember the disappointment and upset amongst the staff of the Railway Children, and I nor do I want to be responsible for putting 14 very dedicated and caring people out of work today.

I have nothing but praise for the way Rainbow were able to help at short notice and I have nothing but praise for the outstanding levels of care they have given both my daughters over the past years. Both my children have benefited greatly from Rainbow and I genuinely do not want to deprive other families of the same opportunities – and sometime essential help.

Having declared my personal interest in this issue, I want to state that I am unhappy by accusations from some individuals, that some councillors have a conflict of interest in the issue before us. I'm not aware that any councillor stands to benefit from closing the Rec Rooms.

The petition seeking to keep Rainbow open is a testament to the regard in which Rainbow is held by the community. I hope that the staff and trustees are proud of the response.

Unfortunately the petition does not reflect the full situation and its text fails to mention the reason for having to make this decision. It rightly mentions the impact of closing the building, but it completely fails to mention the seriousness of the situation and the possible implications of keeping the building open.

The issues with the Rec Rooms are serious and they are extensive. To fix the immediate issues will require somewhere between £30,000 and £50,000. The Structural Engineers report which recommends that we carry out this work make two further caveats;

- 1) That this is based on a partial survey, and to properly understand the full scope of work needed a further, much more intrusive survey is required. It cannot be ruled out that the final cost of repairs will far exceed £50,000. If we start this work, the bill might well escalate.*
- 2) That this work is the minimum needed to gain *up to 5 years* of life. i.e. if we spend this money, we *may* get up to five years of further use. We might not get another 5 years.*

I appreciate that there are some here today who feel "it is all about the money". As a taxpayer funded body, we cannot avoid that consideration. If we could guarantee that spending £50,000 today might fix the building for five years, perhaps that is a decision we could take.

Tomorrow morning, in the cold light of day, try to put aside your attachment to the services provided from it and look at it with impartial eyes. It's a timber building built during the hardest and darkest times of World War II. It is wooden shed, much loved I know – but a wooden shed which is 77 years old. Can anybody here guarantee that whatever we spend today, it will not need even more spending in 3 or 6 months time? At what point does the monetary cost outweigh the community benefits? Comments from the public that Council is ignorant of the impacts, and not taking our moral responsibilities seriously are deeply hurtful, if understandable to some degree. Nonetheless, they ignore the fact we have to consider the financial future of the Council.

There are suggestions circulating that we can somehow keep the building open while either not doing the work, or doing the bare minimum.

I'm not going to mince my words. If we ignore the advice of the Structural Engineer and attempt to minimise or avoid repairs we put our tenants at risk of injury or worse. Our

*insurance requires that we take all reasonable steps to protect ourselves, the public, and our tenants from accidents and injury. It is *not* reasonable for us ignore the advice of the structural engineer and keep the building open and not do the full scope of repairs.*

I know that some people feel we are rushing in to a decision tonight. I would argue quite the opposite. For more than a year we have known that there are problems with the floor. For two months we have been agonising over what to do with these more extensive repairs. In all this time, what we have actually done is nothing. We have continued to let the public, including our youngest children, use this building knowing there are serious problems. The public petition now encourages us spend further time deliberating what to do, while in practice we continue to do nothing but defer the inevitable while increasing the likelihood that something very serious occurs.

One of the Rainbow trustees recently asked me if could sleep at night knowing I would be responsible for putting 14 people out of work. I tell you what will keep me awake – knowing that we continue to avoid difficult decisions whilst exposing 50 young children to risk. I would certainly get little sleep if we were to find ourselves with a Corporate Manslaughter charge when it would be very obvious that we most certainly had not taken “all reasonable steps”.

By taking the difficult decision to give our tenants six months’ notice, this Council will be acting responsibly. This is six months (in fact more than 7 from today) where we can work with stakeholders across the community, with District and County Councils, to find solutions. None of them are likely to be optimal in the short term and I don’t want to minimise the difficulties or the implications, but I’d like to touch on my own experiences again – I had four weeks notice to find a new nursery for Cecilia. The Railway Children staff had 4 weeks notice to find new jobs. I hope that this council will treat people with more respect and dignity than I received 8 years ago, and despite the shock, I believe that in giving you 6 months notice, we are doing just that. If we keep the building open, if we procrastinate further, all we do is increase the chance that something catastrophic happens, possibly with horrific consequences, and that you’re left with not months or weeks of notice, but hours.

This is six months whereby maybe some institution, maybe even the current tenants, decide that they wish to take on the liability for maintaining the building. But it is six months which gives everybody some certainty, and the incentive to act with some urgency to address the needs of the community in a responsible manner, whilst balancing the costs and risks.

I do recognise that we have upset the tenants by bringing this decision forward by 2 weeks from the next Full Council meeting and for this I’d like to apologise. I have done this because I genuinely do not see how the facts of the matter will improve to the benefit of our tenants in two weeks. What this does do, is help us as Council demonstrate that we are taking reasonable steps in the interests of the safety of our tenants. The proposed end date for the

lease remains July 2019 and so it also gives everybody involved a further 2 weeks to work to find solutions.

Before I hand over the discussion to my fellow councillors, I want to reiterate to the public that we do take your concerns seriously – as we take our obligations seriously. Without wanting to prejudice the forthcoming decision, I realise that it might not be the one you want, but this Council will work with you all however we can.

Councillor Lloyd commended The Mayor on an excellent speech. As the Councillor who has had the most involvement with the Bullcroft Recreation Rooms in the last 3.5 years I can confirm that the building has come to the end of its life. We would need to spend £36,000 as a minimum to keep the building going beyond next Summer, we would need to spend more to ensure it would keep going for another 5 years.

We could close the east wing (Room 3, CAB/food bank/toilet block). Rainbow to only use Rooms 1 and 2. We can also see what support/options OCC and SODC come up with.

As I said the building has come to the end of its life and we don't have the money to spend on it. We have to be very careful about spending any more of tax payer's money.

I am unsure if it will be possible to keep half the building open without further investigation, we have Jane Murphy, SODC Leader here in the audience tonight and I have been talking with Ian Hudspeth OCC Leader so I propose we defer the decision for 2 weeks until the meeting 3rd December.

Town Clerk explained that the structural engineers report stated that more investigation was required on the west side as some areas were not visible but could be in similar decay to the east side.

Councillor Maureen Norton asked how much further investigation would cost.

Town Clerk explained that there were seven further areas that needed opening up, the carpenter fees would be £300 but unsure of engineer fees as we have not yet received the invoice.

Councillor Maureen Norton asked if the new building in the Bullcroft would be suitable for the tenants but Councillor Upcraft explained that there were a number of problems to be resolved with the Bullcroft Deeds of Trust and Charity Commission so I think they may frown upon opening up a community building. Wallingford Town Council can't afford two new buildings, the Regal/Rec Rooms, the Regal rebuild is at least 2 years away from now so there is no quick solution.

Councillor Nigel Hughes pointed out that by closing half the building you are still expecting some tenants to vacate.

Councillor Colin Dolton explained that he used to use the building whilst working with the Red Cross, money was spent on the building back then and is still being spent now but the building is beyond repair, unfortunately we have to close the building. There are some very hurtful things being said about the Town Council, staff and councillors, everyone has been working hard to keep the building up and running, if we defer the decision for another two weeks, we have to say that is it, we can't keep putting off the decision making.

Town Clerk said if the building were to be kept open without the repairs being carried out then our insurance should be checked to ensure it remains valid.

Councillor Lloyd explained that the west side of the building is kept open, the east side is closed from July 2019 but that the building would close definitely from March 2020.

Councillor McGregor thanked Mark Savery for his efforts, felt that a decision should be made in two weeks once the engineers report has been received and to see what OCC and SODC say. Does Rainbow have any reserves that could be used for situations like this, if not then the decision is made isn't it.

Councillor Norton, You stated that you also support families not just from Wallingford, could we ask other parishes to support us if we are supporting their families.

Mayor Lee Upcraft – I don't feel we should over complicate things when we only have 2 weeks.

Councillor Lester, made a statement saying "what are the legal implications with regard to the safety of the building?"

Town Clerk, in answer to Pauls Flavell's question the lease has an option for either party to break the lease upon giving 6 months notice in the prescribed form of a Section 25 Notice . In addition at the end of the lease we would use one of the statutory grounds for possession set out in Section 30 of the Act, for example the requirement to demolish or reconstruct the building which couldn't reasonably be done without obtaining possession.

Councillor Lester, I agree with Councillor Dolton, it won't hurt to wait but we must make a decision in 2 weeks and not defer again.

Councillor Norton, I would like to see a copy of the last report before the next meeting so that I can make an informed choice, this is a very emotional subject but at the moment I would not want my grandchildren in that building. The Town Clerk agreed to send the report to all the Councillors.

Councillor Hughes, we must not over complicate things, we had a survey done in August 2018, we should see what the next inspection shows and also wait to hear from OCC/SODC.

Councillor Lloyd, If in 2 weeks time we have not heard from OCC/SODC or had the structural engineers report I propose we close the building in July 2019.

Councillor Lloyd,

PROPOSED AND COUNCILLOR DOLTON SECONDED delaying the decision to close the Recreation Rooms until 3rd December 2018 whilst the west wing is investigated and ascertain what support OCC and SODC can give. Councillor Lloyd is not proposing spending any more funds on the building. All Councillors were in favour.

361. REGAL CENTRE

Councillor Lloyd recommended deferring this item, there is a lot more work to be done on the contract and this is currently with Oxfordshire County Council Legal team are looking over the document.

Meeting closed at 8.08pm

2018-11-19 Council tc

Chairman