

## **Full Written Response from Councillor Middleton**

In September 2020, officers met with Stony Stratford Town Council (the Clerk and Cllr Roy Adams) to discuss the future of the properties at Galley Hill and the need for a community facility. Officers outlined the problems with the Arts Centre, and it was agreed at the meeting that SSTC proposed to take a lease of the property, once works had been completed, for use as a community centre. Wider proposals, including the potential for a supermarket, were also discussed and received broad support. At this stage, there were no firm plans in place.

Discussions with GHRA followed and it is clear from an email received from the Chair at GHRA that the constraints and implications were understood. His email stated, "The cost to bring the Arts site up to standard from a H&S point of view will be considerable and it is not certain if funds will be available to undertake this. If it goes ahead MKC propose to lease the shell to SSTC for two years. SSTC will need to invest to bring the shell into a usable/habitable condition. After two years if GHRA have demonstrated they can manage the site they would seek to take the lease on themselves.

Since the original decision in 2021 to commit a significant amount of money (£500K) to deal with the issues at the former Arts Centre, we have worked hard to find a solution for community space at Galley Hill. This was initially with a view that the Town Council would take the space, but this subsequently fell away when the TC decided not to proceed. Latterly this was with a view that the Galley Hill Residents Association would take the space, but this has fallen away too. The space has not been in community use since 2017.

At all stages, both I and the Officers involved have sought to be open and transparent about what was possible in terms of the refurbishment of the former Arts Centre. We have had numerous conversations, have shared specifications, outlined the problems with the building, and done our best to reach agreement on a lease. The building refurbishment works completed in December 2022 and the property has been empty since then, with no meaningful progress with GHRA to see a route to taking a lease of the property. There remain water ingress issues at the property which will be addressed in the near future, the root cause is not the roof.

GHRA have consistently asked for more than we can afford or deliver. GHRA continue to ask for more work to be undertaken with no agreement for lease. For example, the roof is structurally sound but is unable to bear the weight of the solar panels that GHRA has requested. In return, we offered a 2-year lease, at a peppercorn rent. This has not been accepted.

The property has been refurbished to a point where it is now useable and has many potential uses. We have always been transparent with the Resident's Association about the scope of works that we were able to carry out within the funding available. We now have the opportunity to lease both the Small Meeting Place and the Arts

Centre to two vitally important local charities for which we will receive a rental income.

It's disappointing that we have continued to fail to agree on a way forward and we feel we now have no option but to consider other uses of the building. Given the Council's challenging medium term financial position and additional financial pressures in year, the Council now has to move forward. We can no longer commit to heavily subsidising community buildings as we chose to do in years past. We understand that GHRA are disappointed with the current proposals, but it has always been clear that there was only enough money available to bring the building up to a lettable standard, but not to refurbish it to the higher specification GHRA required.

I'd also like to address several other points.

The site sits next to the Fuller Slade Regeneration site and our proposals for a Galley Hill food store will provide around 50 jobs for local residents. The proposal is to create a new access road off Ridgeway onto Galley Hill and to stop up the access road across the front of St Mary and St Giles school. Traffic for the supermarket will not therefore need to access the estate roads. There will be an opportunity as part of a public consultation exercise to express views as part of the planning process. The proposals have been amended to remove the option of a drive-through retail unit. The removal of this unit frees-up space. We plan to undertake a feasibility study to explore the provision of additional, proportionate community space at the Watling Way Centre making use of this freed-up space.

The intention at this time is that the community space would be managed by the Watling Way Centre, which would remove the need for a local partner to take on responsibility for the potential new space. This is important as MKCC has been unable to find a local partner willing to take on responsibility for the existing community space at Galley Hill.

We have heard several concerns about the pupils from the new Special Education Needs School. The school will deliver 24 pupil places, for Year 5 – Year 11 children with profound autism and other disabilities. They present no risk to the residents or businesses at Galley Hill – I am surprised that this has been raised. I think every Cllr will agree that this is beneficial to all of our communities whose children are in significant need and families are able to make use of this facility. In addition, these children often go on to become Clients of Walnuts Care at the Watling Way Centre, so there is clear synergy and benefits between the school and Walnuts Care.

We note that anti-social behaviour at the Watling Way Centre has reached a critical point. Over the previous weekend, there was an attempted arson attack on the derelict pool site, which is an escalation of the numerous break-ins that the tenant has had to deal with over the last 12 months. Demolishing the pool and improving security is the best way to deal with the problem. Our proposals will reduce the

opportunities for ASB as there will be increased footfall and use of the area until later into the evening.

The food store proposal has been developed over a three-year period. No agreements have been signed, but we do have an offer from a supermarket operator to purchase land at Galley Hill. We have considered a number of factors when making the recommendation to dispose of the land. This will be a land disposal achieving best value as a s123 consideration.

The way in which people shop is changing, with many people choosing to do one 'big' shop each month and with 'top-up' shops throughout the month. There is plenty of industry evidence to support this view. Additionally, there is also industry evidence that demonstrates that convenience stores, such as the one at Galley Hill, see an increase in footfall when located near to a larger supermarket. This is evidenced by the Co-Op's strategy of locating near to supermarkets where possible, which is something they have been doing since before the pandemic. We have undertaken to provide a summary of industry research and findings, carried out both by supermarkets and industry analysts.

I also wanted to add that discussions with the Church in the meeting space have been ongoing for some time. We have had numerous health and safety and compliance concerns, as well as complaints about noise nuisance – going back several years, with more very recently. We have been working to rectify breaches of their lease, including the health and safety issues, while attempting to conclude a new lease. We have been negotiating a new lease with the Church since 2020 as well and it has still not concluded.

Like our work with the GHRA, nearly 3 years have passed since our first discussions with the Church. We now have other pressing property issues we need to resolve. As such, we are now not able to enter into a new lease with the Church. We have committed to them that we will:

1. Give them plenty of notice, and
2. Assist them with finding alternative premises.

New plans for the Small Meeting Place and the Arts Centre have been in development since the beginning of June 2023 (not December 2022) when it became apparent that we were unlikely to be able to agree a lease on either property.