

COUNCIL MEETING - 17 OCTOBER 2017

(A) PETITIONS

1. Lead Petitioner - Marcus Thomas:

Do Not Sell The Central Club (A Community Asset) to Commercial Developers

We the undersigned, petition Reading Borough Council (RBC) to think again and give proper consideration to the Aspire (Reading) CIC compelling, compliant, fully funded £10 Million Bid to acquire the spiritual home of the Black diaspora of Reading, the Central Club site and buildings.

We feel the black community of Reading should not be scapegoated and made to suffer disproportionately for RBC's financial budgeting failure. We believe Aspire's bid provides strategic services to the diaspora that RBC are retreating from which makes Aspire a long term partner to the solution as their bid is 100% consistent with RBC's strategic priorities.

RESPONSE by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

Thank you for the petition regarding the future of Central Club.

This Council has a long track record of supporting and working with all the diverse communities in the town, including the black community. We are all proud to live in a multi-cultural town and to celebrate and mark the distinct heritage of people from diverse backgrounds.

Back in 2009 Reading Borough Council backed a bid by the African and Caribbean Community Group to bring the former Central Club building back into community use. Despite a tremendous effort on their part - and a time extension granted by the Council - they were unfortunately unable to raise the necessary funds. The building has been empty and unused since 2006, which I think we all agree needs to be addressed. The next bidding process is about identifying options to bring it back into use.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind everyone again of the process we have gone through in relation to the former Central Club building, and the process to come.

In July 2016 the Council offered voluntary and community organisations a five-month window to bid for the building. Commercial developers or 'for profit' organisations were not permitted to bid at this stage, and the Council also insisted the iconic mural was retained as part of any proposal.

In July, the Council took the decision not to proceed with any of the third sector bids received and instead invite bids from both third sector and private bidders. The Council feels strongly that we owe it to all council tax payers to understand the full value of the property, what people are willing to pay for it and to then evaluate all bids against a set of criteria that balance and take into account both financial return and potential community benefit. We will also ensure that all bidder receive clear and transparent information on the evaluation framework to be adopted in order that the Council can demonstrate how it is meeting its duties with regard to securing the best value.

In relation to Aspire's original bid, ASPIRE maintain the bid remains confidential and has said it will report the Council to the Information Commissioner if we make full details public. I want to reiterate however, no cash sum was offered by Aspire to buy the property as part of its original bid. Whilst I am prevented from providing detail because of Aspire's insistence on confidentiality, I can say that in addition to a lack of any cash offer there were a number of additional concerns and risks associated with the bid in respect of conditionality clauses and a

lack of certainty with regard to their proposals for the building and associated funding. As I explain below, Aspire have an opportunity to address these shortcomings in the next bidding process should they choose to do so.

In terms of the bidding process to come, the Council is completely clear that all bidders - including Aspire or indeed any other community group - can either carry forward existing bids, or submit a fresh offer for the building. No organisation is precluded from bidding. For the avoidance of doubt, unless ASPIRE indicates that it wants its existing bid to be reconsidered as part of that process, the ASPIRE bid will not be reconsidered. All offers will be fully evaluated and this process will take account of any community value, as well as the financial offer itself.

The Council is also completely clear that it expects any offers received in the next round to include proposals to secure the future of the mural. The mural which borders the building remains a key landmark for Reading and a strong symbol of the black community, its history and its contribution to our town.

The Council's commissioning of work (currently being undertaken) to professionally clean and survey the mural at a cost approaching five-thousand pounds is a very practical indication of the Council's commitment in this regard. This professional cleaning will allow for a detailed survey of the mural to take place and a detailed assessment of the condition of the structure and the mural itself. The survey work will mean the Council will be in a much better position to identify the best way of securing the mural for future generations, including any conditions when the building is sold. The current work being undertaken will also enable bidders to have more information about the integrity of the mural and its structural stability and how it might best be protected in the event that building work is undertaken within the building.

When bids are sought bidders will specifically be asked how they intend to preserve the mural and this will form an important part of the evaluation process.

With regards to the second part of your statement, for a number of years now Government funding for public services has failed to keep pace with demand for Council services. It means every local authority has had to make difficult decisions to close the funding gap. In Reading funding will have been cut by £57.5 million between 2010 and 2020. It is in that context this Council has had to make a number of difficult decisions over a number of years which are affecting all areas of service delivery. We completely reject any assertion that a specific community is being scapegoated.

By opening up the bidding process to all parties, the Council aims to attract new bids which will provide us with a full range of options upon which to make an informed decision based on best value including community benefit. Details of the bidding process and timetable will be announced once we have the results of the survey.