

Public Question Time

Cabinet

3rd March 2021

Daniel Adams has asked Councillor Dale Heenan, Cabinet Member for the Town Centre, Culture, and Heritage:

The Corn Exchange report is welcome progress but please could you update me on progress with the Mechanics?

The Cabinet Member has responded:

Thank you for your question. We welcome the support on the Corn Exchange and it is important to manage expectations since the Council does not own the building. However the Owners architect is working with the Council planning team which is positive.

The Mechanics Institute is hugely important to Swindon's heritage, and there remains no contact or communication with the owner despite many attempts.

Securing progress was a personal objective when I was appointed as the Cabinet member for Heritage in October 2018.

Visible progress on restoration is the number one objective of the Heritage Action Zone which was launched in summer 2019 in partnership with organisations such as Historic England, and the Mechanics Institutes Trust.

In December 2019 a S215 Enforcement Notice was issued to the owner of the property and works were undertaken to clear the plants and bushes from around the property.

In March 2020, Cabinet noted that a business case, commissioned by MIT through our Mechanics working group, showed the Mechanics has a viable use without annual subsidy from the Council. At that meeting, Cabinet authorised Officers to undertake all the work needed to prepare a compulsory purchase order.

A hazardous material survey has been completed on the Mechanics, and last month we received the final report. We now have a really good understanding of the issues faced by anyone wanting to repair and restore the building. For example, full protective suits will be needed because of the issues found. Unfortunately, like many things during 2020, Covid has hit our ambitious timetable in ways you wouldn't normally consider. Delays have included lab space across the country rightly being prioritised for processing Covid swab samples, instead of building samples.

I am very pleased that the next stage of activity will commence shortly and involves approximately three months of work to compile a repair schedule, and final valuation of the

building. On completion, a report can be presented to Cabinet where I hope colleagues will support a recommendation on how to support restoration, such as proceed through the courts with a compulsory purchase.

A funding strategy for the estimated £25m of restoration works remains the main obstacle since covid has seen many of the traditional opportunities, like grants, close. These funds are starting to reopen so we are keeping a hopeful eye on what happens next.

Mr Lawrence Elliott has asked Councillor Dale Heenan, Cabinet Member for the Town Centre, Culture and Heritage

I welcome the Consultation on the Parks Strategy and will most definitely be responding. Swindon's 5 existing Country Parks are at the heart of our communities and their benefits go beyond just being open green spaces. They provide habitat and safe spaces for wildlife and contribute positively to air quality. Parks also enable social interaction which this pandemic has shown is vital to the mental wellbeing of the population. Communities can use the open space for exercise and other outdoor activities helping us all stay healthy. I believe that the Council has recognised the wider value of Parks as seen by its hugely successful work with the Lydiard Park Heritage Trust in the running and maintaining of Lydiard Park. Parks are not about commercial asset and I am heartened from speaking to the Cabinet Member on previous occasions, that he is passionate about the intrinsic value of Parks to people and communities across Swindon. I use Lawns Woods on a regular basis and believe that more can and should be done to improve it and make it equally as important as Lydiard and Coate Water.

Would the Cabinet Member consider creating more Country Parks throughout Swindon, including the popular Lawns Wood?

The Cabinet Member has responded:

Thank you for your thoughtful question on our Country Parks strategy. The public survey asking residents to let us know what they would like to see improved and changes in our Country Parks closes on Sunday. It has received more than 900 responses probably making it one of the most popular things this Council has ever done!

Yes, I would be very pleased to see more Country Parks created across Swindon. More than £2m is available for Swindon's first ever four year Country Park improvement strategy but I do need to manage expectation since this money is spread between the existing Country Parks of Coate Water, Lydiard Park, Stanton Park, Mouldon Hill, Shaw Forest and Barbury Castle. I can't promise any specific new site but you have made an excellent suggestion and I believe we would all welcome a debate about what the art of the possible is later this