

Lydiard Park Heritage Trust

Lydiard Park Heritage Trust Press Statement 16th February 2018

After a 2.5 year outsourcing process Swindon Borough Council have unilaterally decided to abandon plans to transfer operational and management control of Lydiard Park to the Lydiard Park Heritage Trust and bring the process to an end. Their decision leaves Lydiard without an effective management team and at grave risk. Despite publically acknowledging they do not have the skills and experience to run such an important heritage asset, the Council has rejected the sustainable future offered by the charitable Trust. The legal advice the Council used to justify their decision to the Trust, results from their own inaccurate disclosures made to all bidders in 2015/6, and suggests that the process was fatally flawed from the outset.

The shock decision came on 8 February 2017 when Trustees of the Lydiard Park Heritage Trust (LPHT) met with Swindon Council to discuss the outstanding due diligence issues jointly identified. Their public announcement of 16th February is in direct contraction to agreements made between the parties.

Mike Bowden, Chair of the Lydiard Park Heritage Trust said:

“We are deeply concerned about the future of Lydiard Park. I have seen the comments from Cllr Perkins made to the BBC earlier today and I think it is clear that he is concentrating more on the upcoming local elections in May than on the future wellbeing of Lydiard House and Park. We have always stressed that the Trust is not party political and our sole interest is finding a sustainable future for Lydiard. However, without the local elections in mind people might like to hear what has actually happened during the 2.5 year process and why the Council’s decision to continue to manage Lydiard puts its future in real jeopardy. The parlous state of the mechanics Institute and well publicised concerns around the Health Hydro show all too clearly what can happen if well-loved heritage and leisure assets are run by organisations that don’t have the necessary skills or interest to care for them. We were warned by many parties that attempting to work in partnership with Swindon Council would prove impossible but we genuinely felt that Lydiard was too important to neglect and that a fresh opportunity existed to work with the council to create a secure future for Lydiard”.

As a not for profit community orientated charity, run entirely through the voluntary efforts of Trustees, LPHT was awarded preferred bidder status in March 2017. In accordance with the Councils stated process the Trust initiated due diligence work to ensure that information provided by the Council was complete and accurate and that any updated information did not have a material impact on the Trusts business plan.

During this period LPHT discovered that key information provided by SBC to all bidders during 2016 was materially inaccurate.

There were three key areas of inaccuracy:

1. The backlog of maintenance works that the council had allowed to have built up over the last decade for which the Council had set aside £850,000.
2. The financial and business performance of the operator of Lydiard Park Conference Centre Chartridge Ltd , who have run the centre under a lease with the council for many years
3. An important technical point relating to the conference centre operators obligation to repair and maintain the centre.

Lydiard Park Heritage Trust engaged leading Conservation Architects Caroe and Partners to undertake a condition survey of Lydiard House and other estate buildings. The findings of that survey differed from the council’s own condition survey and revealed extensive works are required to address the neglect of maintenance on the Grade 1 building over a 10 year period. The council were presented with these findings in 22nd Aug 2017 but despite repeated requests it was not until Nov 3rd that the council agreed to meet the Trust. In that meeting the Council agreed to a)

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convene a meeting of surveyors from both sides to agree the extent of work required on the buildings and b) that the council would seriously consider undertaking the work themselves on the basis that a local authority would be able to procure works more cheaply than an independent charitable trust. In this way, there would be no transfer of cash, and the Council could get the best possible value for their money in repairing, what would remain their asset, over a period of years that worked for both the Council's finances and the Trust's business plan.

It is therefore disingenuous for Cllr Perkins to claim that the Trust had asked to be paid some £4 million pounds.

The surveyors met on the 27 November 2017 and agreement was reached on the need to undertake over 80 % of the backlog maintenance contained within the Trust's report. A few items required further discussion and the remainder of backlog works were deemed to be dilapidations, which had the council arranged matters with Chartridge on a professional basis would have been put right before Chartridge leaving the premise. In essence there was no material difference over the extent of the backlog maintenance required on the property.

The announcement that the Chartridge Lydiard Park Conference Centre will close in April with the experienced staff made redundant was an entirely avoidable event had the Council worked constructively with LPHT. The conference centre should be providing a critical income stream to support the effective running of the house and park.

In the upcoming local elections, and more generally, the Council needs to convince all parties that they have a credible strategy, which they are capable of implementing, that preserves and improves the unique Heritage and much loved Lydiard Country Park.

LPHT notes that the Council have reconfirmed they will abide by undertakings put to them by The Friends of Lydiard Park in 2015. Each of the 11 undertakings is set out below. LPHT will not be alone in holding them to account if the deterioration of Lydiard is allowed to continue.

It is imperative that the Council publicly commit to undertake the backlog maintenance and repairs that they have allowed to build up over the last decade, and that they come up with a credible and sustainable plan to improve revenue streams from assets such as the Conference Centre, catering and events capabilities, as set out in our business plan.

The uncertain state of The Mechanics' Institute, and more recent concerns about the Health Hydro, serves as a stark reminder as to what harm negligent and/or intransigent owners can do to the town's cultural and heritage assets (both current and future).

Comments on Process

It has become apparent that the Council did not have officers with sufficient knowledge of relevant public sector procurement, asset transfer and leasing rules to operate such a complex process/processes. At best they failed to obtain appropriate professional advice or to undertake their own due diligence to ensure all relevant information was provided to bidders at the outset and would not create the issues they have now identified. Actions undertaken by officers during the process have also seriously prejudiced the due diligence process. The Trust has trustees with specific expertise in these areas and tried to gain clarity over the rules the Council were following several times during the process. The grounds given for abandonment contradict previous correspondence and again raise serious concerns about the Council's management of their process.