



## **WISBECH TOWN COUNCIL**

**5 September 2016 – 7.30 pm**

### **MINUTES OF MEETING**

**Present:** Councillor Tibbs, Chairman (and Town Mayor); Councillors Balsevics, Bucknor, Mrs Bucknor, Mrs Cox, Miss Hoy, Human, Lay, Mrs MacRae, Oliver, Miss Oliver, Schooling and Tierney.

**Apologies:** Councillors Brunton, Hill, Hodgson and Mrs Lay.

#### **59/16 Mayor's introduction**

The Mayor opened the meeting by reminding all present of the purpose of the meeting and his opinions in relation to the matter to be discussed. He expressed the opinion that Wisbech Castle is valuable asset to the town – it belongs to the people of Wisbech - and that Wisbech Town Council should play its part in seeking to secure the building's future as a community asset.

He proposed that, if the need arose, he would suspend Standing Orders to enable the public participation element of the meeting to be extended beyond fifteen minutes to ensure that all of those members of the public present at the meeting who wish to speak would have the opportunity to do so. The Mayor's proposal was supported unanimously.

#### **60/16 Public participation – Wisbech Castle**

Mr K Smith, Director of the Ferry Project, informed the council that he had met last Wednesday with the County Council's Strategic Asset Manager, Mr S Conrad, in response to the letter which this officer had sent to various community organisations with regard to the County Council's proposal to dispose of Wisbech Castle.

Mr Smith commented that the Ferry Project is not in the position of being able to take on an additional building. He mentioned his understanding, following a meeting with one of Conservation Officers at Fenland District Council, that a considerable amount of expenditure would be required to fund necessary repair works to this historic building; he considers that Historic England may be one source of such funding.

Mr Smith expressed the opinion that Wisbech Castle should be in community ownership/use and, to this end, he would encourage all of the interested agencies and groups to work collaboratively in formulating an expression of interest to Cambridgeshire County Council in acquiring Wisbech Castle; he suggests that a request for extension of the current deadline for the submission of expressions of interest, i.e. the end of September 2016, be extended to enable the development of a community bid. He is also of the view that the Castle should remain open for business until such time as disposal of the building takes place.

Mr Smith stated his hope that Wisbech Town Council would play the leading role in the development of an expression of interest.

Mr D Crouch, a member of the Wisbech Society, informed the council that Wisbech Society is supportive of the comments made by the Mayor and the society had informed Cambridgeshire County Council that it opposes the proposed disposal of this building. Wisbech Society would be happy to participate in any campaign or project to "save" the Castle for the people of Wisbech.

Mr R Wicks, who spoke on behalf of the Wisbech and District Tourism Development Group, informed the council of the history of the site of Wisbech Castle and explained work which had been undertaken by both the Chamber of Commerce and the Wisbech and District Tourism Development



Group to support the community use of this building. He mentioned that the current building was constructed in 1816 and was gifted to Cambridgeshire County Council (by Mrs Fendick (the widow of Gordon Fendick, who had been a Chief Education Officer at the County Council), subject a covenant requiring the building to be used for a specific purpose.

Mr Wicks detailed the work which had been undertaken in the 1990s - much of which had been led by the late Councillor Roger Green – to enable access to the building by members of the public; 11 September 1993 (for an organised social event) was the date of the first time that members of the public were able to access Wisbech Castle. In 1994 a Wisbech Castle Advisory Group (including representatives of Cambridgeshire County Council, Fenland District Council and other groups/organisations) was formed (it operated on the basis of no single organisation or group having a voting majority). He mentioned items of equipment (such as tables and chairs) that had been purchased for the Castle as a result of fundraising by the community.

Mr Wicks expressed the opinion that the community should “step up” and not allow the County Council to deprive members of the public of this community asset.

Mrs P Stocks, a member of a number of community groups in Wisbech, mentioned that she is aware of the existence of a restrictive covenant in relation to the use of Wisbech Castle but is unaware of the precise wording; she questioned whether Cambridgeshire County Council is able to dispose of this building.

Mrs S Farmer, a member of a number of community groups in Wisbech, expressed the opinion that Wisbech Castle has significant potential and that efforts should be made to capitalise on that potential.

Mr L Hodgson, one of the Directors of Wisbech Projects CIC, informed the council that, according to information held by Land Registry, the covenant prohibits business use of Wisbech Castle. She expressed the opinion that the County Council is following a reasonable and appropriate approach to this matter; it had made it known to the community that it no longer has a use for this building and is, consequently, inviting expressions of interest in acquiring the building.

Members decided that the comments of the representatives of local groups be noted and be taken into account in their deliberations regarding this matter (at minute 61/16).

### **61/16 Wisbech Castle**

Members considered the opportunity for Wisbech Town Council to play a role in “acquiring”, on behalf of the community, Wisbech Castle.

The Clerk had circulated to members, in advance of the meeting, a copy of a letter from Cambridgeshire County Council regarding that council’s proposal to cease ownership of Wisbech Castle.

The Mayor pointed out that if Wisbech Town Council were to decide in principle, at this meeting, to pursue such a course of action, further work would be required in developing a detailed proposal and expression of interest, for consideration by a subsequent meeting of Wisbech Town Council.

Councillor Miss Hoy informed members that in July of this year there had been discussion at a meeting of the County Council’s Assets and Investment Committee regarding the future of Wisbech Castle. It had been a confidential agenda item and, so whilst Councillor Miss Hoy was not able to divulge the County Council’s proposals at the time, she was able to say that the council proposed to make a decision as to its future and it was not one that she supported. Councillor Miss Hoy informed members that she was the only local County Councillor to have commented on the proposal and had said that she felt that the County Council should not make any rash moves and defer any



decisions until there had been dialogue with community groups and organisations in the town, as it is important that the Castle remains as a community asset. She commented that the County Council is now engaging with local community groups.

Councillor Miss Hoy made the point that there is no doubt that Cambridgeshire County Council needs to save the operating costs of Wisbech Castle but is not sure that it is necessarily seeking to also generate a capital receipt.

Councillor Miss Hoy commented that although the letter from the County Council states that the authority had set a deadline of the end of September for expressions of interest in acquiring the Castle, she had spoken with the County Council's Chief Finance Officer, who had stated that the County Council would give interested parties full opportunity to prepare robust proposals and so whilst it would be an agenda item for the meeting of the Assets and Investments Committee in October 2016, that officer could potentially brief the committee of any interests and ask for deferral of a decision.

Councillor Miss Hoy stated that she would like Wisbech Town Council to take a lead on this issue but she understands that the council is not able to reach a decision tonight on the Castle's future because it does not know at this time exactly what it would do with it, what it would cost, whether purchase or leasing would be the most appropriate means of acquisition, the running costs; all this and more needs exploring. However, Councillor Miss Hoy feels that, whilst Wisbech Town Council may be able to ask for time to undertake this work, it must show an interest as this council must not take the risk that the County Council could say that there were no interested parties and, consequently, allow the building to be sold on the open market. If Wisbech Town Council were to express an interest, it does not tie the council to anything but it demonstrates to the County Council that there is community interest in the building and it allows Wisbech Town Council to undertake the necessary investigations into developing a business case for acquisition of Wisbech Castle, including meeting with other relevant community groups.

Councillor Miss Hoy proposed that Wisbech Town Council writes to Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC), informing CCC that the Town Council is interested in acquiring Wisbech Castle and would like more time to look at the business case and to speak with partners as to a way forward.

In response to a question from Councillor Bucknor, Councillor Miss Hoy commented that she had not been in attendance at the meeting of the Assets and Investment Committee at which this matter had been discussed but had submitted a letter for reporting to that meeting.

Councillor Tierney expressed the opinion that Wisbech Castle should remain as an asset for the whole of the town. He is pleased that the County Council's proposal to dispose of this building had generated public interest, as if Wisbech Town Council were to proceed with acquiring Wisbech Castle for the community, a considerable amount of work in that regard would be required and this would need to be shared. Councillor Tierney stated that he supports Councillor Miss Hoy's proposal as to how to proceed in this matter and expressed the hope that Wisbech Town Council is able to be successful in retaining this building as an asset for the people of Wisbech.

Councillor Mrs Cox made reference to the "loss" of part of Wisbech Park in the past and commented that she would not like to see the people of Wisbech lose any other community assets.

Councillor Mrs Bucknor mentioned the comments which had been made to her by a local consultant regarding the historic significance of Wisbech Castle. She stated her support for the suggestions and proposals of Mr K Smith (during the public participation section of this meeting) and Councillor Miss Hoy.



Councillor Mrs Bucknor mentioned the excellent work which had been undertaken by the firm of consultants which had played a key role in the success of the application for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for restoration of dilapidated buildings on High Street and she expressed the opinion that this demonstrated to her the importance of utilising persons or groups with specialist expertise to assist particular projects; she suggested that Wisbech Town Council should consider such a course of action in the preparation of a business case etc for the council's acquisition of Wisbech Castle; it would need to identify funding for such consultancy work.

Members decided, unanimously

- (1) on a proposal by Councillor Miss Hoy, seconded by Councillor Oliver, that Cambridgeshire County Council be informed that Wisbech Town Council is interested in "acquiring" Wisbech Castle and requests that it be given an appropriate period of time to develop a business case and to engage/liaise with partners as to a way forward. The Town Council does not consider that a deadline of the end of September 2016 to submit a detailed acquisition proposal to the County Council is realistic;
- (2) on a proposal by Councillor Mrs Bucknor, seconded by Councillor Bucknor, that the County Council be requested to continue with "business as usual" at Wisbech Castle until such time as disposal takes place; Wisbech Town Council feels that ceasing activity at Wisbech Castle pending its disposal by the County Council would be inappropriate.

**Meeting finished at 8.10 pm.**

Signed .....

Date .....