Chair's Introduction and thoughts

These are my thoughts, / rough notes, put together based on inputs up to and including 5th November 2023 – Errors and Omissions Excepted, please!   Please bring your own thoughts along!

* A major decision to be made, **informed** by recommendations from this working group.

* Assembly Hall bounded back after Covid. Full house in the last fortnight for Abbamania and Rich Hall, stuffed at the Monster Ball, very popular (though not with me) kick boxing, busiest ever Quiz night, ActiveTrowbridge bouncy castle. Monday films and model car club, Wednesdays Tai Quando ... I estimate that approaching 2000 different people have taken part in events there, though not all of hem from within the town.

* Although the hall has a 400 capacity, the facilities are stretched. I note at Abba that the audience had to squeeze in between parked blue badge vehicles in front of the entrance, and at Rich Hall the queue for the ladies was 9 long outside the loo doors, 15 for the gents, and the bar queue stretched across the back of the hall - between 30 and 40 long.

* The building which houses the former Blue (Swimming) Pool is attached to the Assembly Hall and is now surplus to Wiltshire Council's requirements. They have offered it to the Town Council for a minimal sum as an asset transfer, though if the Town Council were to take it on there would be immediate and significant immediate unbudgeted expenses, both single expenditure and ongoing. There would also be a major implication on staff time. So the decision is not a light one.

The purpose of this meeting is to look at the needs assessments and work out what facilities we should consider providing on the site as a whole, looking at the desires that would be translated into cost effective real use of what is provided for the benefit of the residents of Melksham, visitors and businesses in the town. We need to take a view on capital cost, and ongoing cost, timescales and disruption of current business while changes take place. We also need to look at the expected life of fabric we end up with, its environmental footprint, and how adaptable it will be to changing society and council goals over many years ahead.

To inform us, we have the following official papers:

* The needs assessment from last winter's Assembly Hall consultation (at a time at which the questions were purely about the Assembly Hall)

* The structural surveyor's report which confirms (as I read it) that the structure of the Blue Pool biding is sound, and that structural customer connections could be made between the two "buildings".

* Consultation inputs from the Town Centre masterplan which include some thoughts on the future of the whole site including the Blue Pool.

* Paperwork and the offer to transfer the Blue Pool from Wiltshire Council which has been shared with councillors but which, I understand, we have been asked to keep confidential.

We lack:

* Papers from the work done by the SCOB (Shadow Campus Operations Board) which looked at the requirements for public facilities for the Melksham Area at the time the Campus (which was opened last year) was being planned. The current Town Council staff have all joined since that work was done, and have been unable to locate the reports. Although old, they are potentially significant as a considerable number of needs have not been met by the Campus which with the exception of the Library and offices of Melksham Without Parish Council provided just sport and fitness facilities.

* A current community survey of what people would want and would use on the site as a whole. We can surmise from other sources, but if we do so we are in danger of listening to he who shouts loudest and not he who has the best case

* An officially written options assessment of the alternatives, for which funding was voted by the Town Council on 26th June 2023.

* Clearly separated Assembly Hall accounts post-Covid and predictions for current and future years; a note on just how much of the £10k voted in June for the structural survey and options report was spent on the survey, and how much remains.

From community sources, including but not limited to the Friend of Melksham Asselby Hall, we have:

* An outline option assessment from July. It is in need of update to take account of the structural survey and other developments. It includes suggestions that we might use a professional framework to help us, in order to get best professional advice and quality assured contractors, and to do so without imposing an unsustainable load on our staff.

* An example of what could be done by repurposing existing buildings, again dated July and with a need to flag up that it's very much an example and needs to be updated to take into account the structural survey and other developments

* An example of the new build work being done at Tidworth and indeed an invite to view those works upon completion

* An example of an options report by Wiltshire Council on the Salisbury Playhouse which is similarly tired to our existing buildings.

* Our own physical notes and observations from visits to all areas of the Assembly Hall and Blue Pool - thank you to the Town Council and Wiltshire Council staff for arranging those tours

* Access to SCOB memories - former councillors Pam Wiltshire, Terri Welsh and Colin Goodhind represented the Town Council, and at county level Jon Hubbard and Jonathon Seed were also involved. My list may be incomplete. I personally sat on the SCOB for a while, though with a community not a council interest.

* A large number of friends, contacts, people who would love to help inform us. Some of their inputs will be excellent cases, but we must bear in mind that other requests will be difficult to make as sustainable business cases, or could put the Town Council in competition with local businesses which we probably want to take a decision to avoid.

Needs - suggestions for the Blue Pool area include:

• art gallery
• booking office for Assembly Hall events
• cafe area
• Citizens Advice office
• climbing wall
• community group meeting space
• community hub
• craft room
• creche
• exhibition area
• extension bar
• games room for adults (jigsaw puzzles, chess/draughts, whist, bridge, etc.)
• game room for youth (Xbox, Nintendo, Lego, etc.)
• hot desks
• general enquiry desk

- indoor bowls
- lecture room
- lido
- loos for Assembly Hall use
- maintenance store and depot
- mosque
- Museum for Melksham
- parking for Town Council
- photography exhibition
- polling station
- police hub
- pop up bank
- public WiFi access
- reception (single for all MTC services)
- safe space
- school art exhibition
- skittles
- smaller theatre and break out rooms
- staff offices
- support room
- Ten Pin Bowling
- TIC gift shop extension
- Wedding Venue and event facilities

Actions to be considered by this meeting:

The three options to be considered are :

a) Say "no thank you" to Wiltshire Council - in which case we then have a constrained site Assembly Hall with limited future development potential and with a possibility of disruption or even closure need depending on what happens to the old Blue Pool.

b) Take on the Blue Pool with a view to integrating it into the Assembly Hall and meeting the needs of the current and future users of both facilities with a spend (I am guestimating) of about once to twice the annual current expenditure of Melksham Town Council.

c) Take on the Blue Pool with a view to demolishing both it and the Assembly Hall and building new facilities. I am guestimating this would cost fifteen to twenty five times the annual current expenditure of Melksham Town Council.

There is no "do nothing / have no effect" option open to us; the consequences of saying "no thank you" at this point will be to set the route towards the Assembly Hall with its existing issues continuing in perhaps a managed decline.

It is likely that public loan board funding could be raised for options (b) and (c) - around £500 per property in Band D for option (b) or £5,000 per property for option (c) which would equate to a council tax rise of around £20 or £200 if directly repaid over a typical mortgage period. Note that this does not include operational costs which could increase contributions needed, or business profits which could reduce the amount needed. It is costed purely on Melksham Town, and does not take into account town growth; also bear in mind that inflation is our friend here. At the end of the loan period, the council ends up with a significant resource.

Whilst these are significant sums of money, we also note that Wiltshire Council have budgeted £600,000 for the demolition / infilling of the Blue Pool which they will be saved if we procees with a purchase, and that there is £850,000 set aside for a hall for the East of Melksham. Considered against these figures, ours are not out of line on this project.

Rather than take a risk on the public purse, the Town Council could chose to take on the Blue Pool but then work with other organisations - in one extreme to selling the Assembly Hall and

Blue Pool site to a commercial company (though it has been indicated to me that Wiltshire Council will put conditions on the asset transfer). Another option here is for the Town Council to work with a Community Interest Company or similar - as per examples in Devizes and Frome - to allow access to volunteer resources and also other funding streams without the constraints of direct local government limitations.

For this evening, I would like to propose that we recommend in principle excluding the option that is likely to result in the permanent loss of the facilities and meeting of needs served by the Assembly Hall and therefore ask council to instruct:

a) **Instructions to proceed with negotiation.** Professional negotiation team with no Wiltshire Council interests, please - to ensure that applied terms do not constrain options we might wish to apply. Things like access rights, boundaries, restrictions on title, covenants, etc.

b) **Instruct further work by a SCOB** equivalent to look in more detail from the identified needs to the business case of each of them to work out what is needed and how they fit together

c) **To instruct a framework system / project management team** to oversee the project and work with architects and contractors on emerging options.

d) **To instruct our officers** and other experts to take a look at initial costs would we take over the Blue Pool such as business rates, insurance and security and how those may be controlled while the building remains empty, and advise us on future financial prudence on these matter with a view to setting costs for the 2024/25 year in the Town Councils' budget.

e) **To set further public input and consultation on the emerging plans** in the new year with a view to obtaining general support around the plans and their tailoring to what the community wants.

f) **To engage with other councils and bodies within the Melksham Community Area** to encourage their participation within the scheme to meet the needs of that wider area.

g) **To set up and maintain a project GANTT chart and timescales** to ensure smooth running of the project.

In each and all of these areas, I am aware of both town council staff lack of time and the massive community volunteer knowledge and enthusiasm and would encourage working that is fully co-operative to make best use of that, including formalisation of structures to ensure long term integrity. The local plan and neighbourhood plan both look forward to 2038 and I believe our thoughts should be do so too.

Graham Ellis

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Purely my views to get us going – views express above should not be regarded as being either the views of Melksham Town Council, of my fellow councillors, or any members of the Friends of Melksham Assembly Hall or that group as a whole.