

From Lisa Ellis to Tracy Predeth – January 2025 – for full Town Council

Dear Tracy,

There is a council meeting in January when I understand, specifics about the Blue Pool will be discussed. I have too many thoughts and ideas to be given enough time in public discussion before the meeting starts to cover the items I feel are important to take into consideration by the councillors making the decisions. I have asked Graham Ellis to submit this in hopes it can be part of that evening's agenda.

There are a few things that residents have wanted to see in town -- my statement below does not mention healthcare facilities and more retail stores, which need to be addressed by others more capable, and as a separate matter.

In bringing these issues to your attention, I strongly feel the redundant Blue Pool (BP) site can offer solutions to:

- Free in-town parking
- Improved council staff offices
- Museum
- Expansion of entertainment venue including appropriate entrance, adequate bar and increased lavatory facilities
- Additional facilities, such as meeting rooms, cinema, etc.
- Better/safer access to the Assembly Hall events

PARKING

If the land surrounding the BP was included in the acquisition (and agreeing Wiltshire Council the right of access), the outer area of the BP can be enlarged by removing the outer wall that enlarges the area to create a car park with approximately 30 spaces, including parent/child and handicap. This still leaves an area of trees in front where seating and greenery -- a small park -- can be placed to add to the attractiveness of the building. The parking would be used for town residents, visitors, Assembly Hall (AH) facilities and Town Hall. (Note: parking at the campus is for intended campus use only and will be a matter of time before this is strongly enforced.)

Solar panels on top of a parking roof could add much to saving on electrical expenses for all three buildings.

Note: Parking in Melksham has historically been a major topic of controversy. To show their frustration, some will happily admit to showing protest by shopping in other towns -- never mind the cost to get there and having to pay another town's parking fees. Free parking and in-town location are the two sticking points. For years, compromises with Wiltshire Council have been attempted to purchase spots for in-town parking, but their offerings have been insulting. A free car park as described above would be a huge step in gaining back supporters of Town Council agendas.

Presently, with so many private parking companies and other parking restrictions now springing up overnight in Melksham, you are going to see increased furore about town parking. I can also relate what happened with parking at Melksham Station, but that's a long story of defeat/success/defeat. Trust me when I state that parking is a major Melksham topic.

[About 15-20 years ago I was told by a long-time resident and former councillor of Melksham that years prior a restrictive covenant had been placed on the parking area

in front of the Town Hall -- that it remain free and for use for Melksham residents. He added that the paperwork had mysteriously vanished. For now a rumour I've not been able to prove at this point.]

COUNCIL STAFF OFFICES

Anyone who has visited the Town Hall for information and advice is aware of the awkwardness of the small reception window. Visitors can peer behind and see cramped office space. Meetings have been sometimes hampered by technology limitations. The decor on the ground floor is dark and uninviting; accessible facilities are awkward.

A move to the existing BP site for staff offices enables a proper front counter at the entrance and staff rooms behind. There would be interior alterations and existing redundant pool equipment to remove, but the structure itself is sound. This move would treble the existing staff space.

I point you to the MWPC facilities afforded by the new build of the campus. MTC could have the same available with new equipment and furnishings.

The former gym area of the BP can be used for Town Council meetings. Having two separate entrances and a large storage area, it is possible to have a flexible room divider to make two meeting rooms (small/large) that can be hired out when council is not meeting. There is also an easily accessed emergency exit to the outside. One floor level; no requirement for a lift.

There would also be no confusion as to where to get information and purchase tickets for events -- it's all there and manned by AH and/or TC staff.

MUSEUM

I'd been campaigning for a proper town museum to be located in the BP gym room, but I can imagine this going into the Town Hall once staff has been relocated. The only problem I see is staffing. This would be wholly dependant on volunteers. But the building itself being historic -- and a place where a lot of history happened -- would add to the atmosphere.

EXPANSION OF ENTERTAINMENT, etc.; ADDITIONAL FACILITIES, etc.

The existing entrance, bar and lavatory facilities of the AH are inadequate. Expanding into the BP would solve this problem very quickly with minimal to moderate construction. (Internal only; as I mentioned earlier, the BP outer structure is sound.) The original plans of the AH show doorways and pass-throughs into the BP that can easily be reinstated and expanded.

Obviously, the shower rooms and bathroom facilities and can made much smaller, even a quarter of the current size, to allow adequate toilet facilities that are required for public use of a combined venue this size. This extra left-over space can be used for several things, such as an open seating area, closed-in meeting room, etc.

The 1848-built, three-storey structure between the BP and AH is awkward and I've not given too much thought into it other than storage, backstage use and for the kitchen area.

As for the kitchen, with pass-throughs already on both sides (BP side currently covered with thin board), I can envision this being turned into a tea/coffee/snack service, removing all the cooking facilities and making it more of a Bistro-type area.

The hallway on the BP side having small tables with chairs. I do not see the need to provide full catering facilities when there are very few town events that require dinner service (1, 2 a year?). These in the past have been arranged quite well with using local caterers to bring in food, and this should be encouraged, rather than competed with.

All that remains is the large indoor pool area. Personally, I would like to take advantage of the pool depth instead of just filling it with hard core and covering it over. My thought was an intimate theatre/cinema/lecture hall, seating about 150 people. The obstacles of creating an enclosed space with non-natural lighting and sound proofing would be partially solved with the depth already chiselled out. (From looking at plans, I believe there might even be an underfloor heating feed???) I've drawn up plans for a possible layout if anyone is interested in seeing it. There would be adequate space left for a large room of some sort, or even an amenity storage area with separate entrance at the back to transfer from the currently rented facilities on Bowerhill. (That last is not a popular idea by some councillors given the aesthetics, but it would be saving the rent spent on the separate Bowerhill unit.)

BETTER ACCESS

The AH is currently accessed by the public through a small entrance. As tickets are processed, a backlog of people not only block those needing access to the toilets, but also stand in the entrance with doors open to foul weather. With the main entrance moved to the BP, this smaller entrance can be used by staff. There have also been comments made by smokers that this entrance is convenient for them, and frankly, if kept for that purpose too, would eliminate "discomfort" at the main entrance.

The addition of a car park answers the parking/handicap aspect. Currently, when the only allotted parking spot by the AH entrance (which is also the only handicap spot) is taken, performers setting up cannot easily get their vehicles in when loading and unloading. Then, their vehicles block the way when the performance is about to start and patrons are trying to get in.

The addition of a car park can also incorporate easier access to the back of the property for performers, and vehicles/vans/lorries can have direct access to the back door by the stage itself; the vehicles remaining out of public sight, and kept more safe from theft possibilities.

PERSONAL THOUGHTS

I know many disagree with me about keeping the shell of the BP. There is thought that the BP building should just be torn down, the pool filled in and a new leisure facility built on top. In a perfect world where money is no object, I would have fewer disagreements with that plan. But. I have been in the BP, used its facilities in the past and have seen it in its current empty state. I agree with the recent structural survey that the building is sound, and aside from some interior changes, the BP can be quickly brought into use at a far less expense than starting over from scratch. Construction can also be done in a way where performances can continue as improvements are made to each BP and AH on alternating schedules.

Some have expressed a desire for demolition purely on the basis of aesthetics -- how the building looks on the outside. The existing AH brickwork isn't modern. Although it would be nice to have something new, shiny and modern, I look at some of the buildings in Melksham that were considered a new, modern style in the 1960s and '70s, which we all now detest. How long, for instance, will the campus design still be in vogue? A modern covered entrance and an extension/improvement of the bricking

of AH is really all that's needed. Look at the Cheese and Grain in Frome for something that's historic but fits quite well in modern society -- it's virtually timeless.

Wiltshire Council had set aside £300,000 for the expense of demolish/fill when they had plans to sell this property as vacant. They tried to find buyers, and even though it's in a prime location, it's just too small and too close to the AH to be commercially viable for a private company.

Tidworth not long ago built a civic centre that incorporated their policing facilities, and, if memory serves, their cost was around/just under £20M for all new. Just after they completed, the architects/builders approached Melksham Town Council with an interest in bidding for the BP project -- this was a few years ago. The size is comparable. It would be a good idea to visit several venues on new builds to get an idea of cost and which builders came in on time and budget. And studying blueprints will not be enough. You need a site visit. I personally found some meeting rooms and long hallways far too small to be useable for more than a few people at a time at Tidworth, for example.

As for the cost of doing the recommendations I proposed, they would be easy enough to sort. But the biggest factor is being able to get it up and running very quickly, even if certain areas were blocked off while construction continued (for instance, the pool area could be closed while the front desk, staff offices and council chambers would be open; improved entrance to the AH; museum in Town Hall are underway and functioning...).

Thank you for allowing to express my views here.
- Lisa Ellis