

Remarks by Sharone Parnes of Woodstock, at WODC Council Meeting of 26th Feb 2014.

Not necessarily verbatim

Good afternoon. I'm Sharone Parnes and I'm from Woodstock, where I am also a Member of the Town Council.

I'm here today as an individual in my own right, and not formally on behalf of Woodstock Town Council. Yet I can still refer to discussion in open session where Woodstock Town Council on Feb 11th expressed concern about the freehold disposal of a non-publicly identified District Council -owned building in Woodstock. The Town Council resolved to request the identification of the publicly owned land, having regard for our Mayor's comments as District Councillor at your January 15th Cabinet meeting - where he suggested consideration of alternative means of disposal of the property by auction or tender rather than private treaty; and, his comments at your Jan 22nd Council meeting where he suggested that in future there should be a system whereby local members are advised of any proposals in their wards.

You all will know from the Finance & Management Overview & Scrutiny Committee Minutes - which are among papers accompanying your Agenda today - that the decision on an unusually exclusive private treaty disposal of the property in Woodstock was the subject of a 'Call-In' for scrutiny.

At the Feb 5th Scrutiny Committee it was said "*the decision taken had been underpinned by an independent valuation*".

Yet the response to an Fol request duly disclosed: "*The valuation was undertaken, in-house, by the Council's Estate Manager*" with the cost of the valuation "*incorporated within the employment costs paid to the Estates Manager in the performance of his employment responsibilities*". I respectfully put it to you that 'independent' valuations and 'in-house' valuations are two very different things, and that – actually – in these circumstances the public is more likely to perceive the disposal as 'a secretive mystery sale underpinned by an in-house valuation' which is not encouraging from perspectives of transparency.

It was also disclosed at the Feb 5th Scrutiny Committee that "*the decision to seek an offer from the adjoining landowner as a 'preferred bidder' reflected*

the Council's recent practice in seeking to dispose of property in Bladon and Chipping Norton."

This, too, raises concerns – and eyebrows. For WODC to “*seek an offer from the adjoining landowner*” without advertisement or public invitation, indicates an adjoining landowner was invited to be more an *exclusive* bidder than “preferred bidder”. And by giving such exclusive and secretive preference to sole bidder, WODC is preventing the prospects of higher offers or potential ideas for other uses which may better serve the local community and District.

And if “the Council’s recent practice” marks a District trend in disposing of property in this way then democracy and transparency may be in trouble, because it is not what electors would expect! And it could happen in additional jurisdictions.

Perhaps most insulting is whilst WODC stated in response to the FOI request “*The purchaser has an expectation that information about this property will be treated confidentially at present*”, Planning Application 14/015/P/FP shows that a resident adjacent to a particular WODC-owned Garage on Union Street, has already submitted a detailed planning application involving the Local Authority –owned garage and discloses the applicant “has made an offer for the land”. Is this the same land, or is WODC engaging in yet another secretive mystery sale in our Town?

The secret negotiations have not yet concluded, and I strongly urge this Council to withdraw from this transaction and invite the other party to participate in a publicly advertised and transparent process of sale or auction (of which the latter can entail a minimum reserve price to safeguard the District’s financial position).

Democracy and transparency may come at a cost. Secret sales also come at a cost - in public confidence, for example. This matter is not closed even if the Scrutiny Committee considers that it is.

Thank you for listening!