

**Wiltshire Council**

**Cabinet**

**17 January 2012**

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**Public Participation**

**Statement from Mr G J Skinner CBE**

**Proposed Creation of Central Devizes Customer Access Point and the Closure of Browfort, Urchfont Manor and Bradley Road Buildings**

**Statement**

Press reports suggest that the Council has taken decisions to dispose of Browfort and Urchfont Manor. I understand that in fact final decisions remain to be taken by the cabinet of the Council on 17 January. I hope that that is so and that, despite the short time available, representations such as this may be taken into careful account.

There can be little doubt that the majority of charge-payers understand why the Council must make economies and why redundant and uneconomic office properties should be disposed of. There may be disadvantages for localities and for individuals, but the imperative to make savings is a powerful and pressing one. On that basis, and given changes in working practice, a case can perhaps be made for the disposal of Browfort.

However, the proposed disposal of Urchfont Manor is more questionable.

It is, of course, the case that the current central government policy is to emphasise the provision of adult education at local level rather than at residential institutions. Urchfont Manor has a foot in both camps: while providing residential courses it also serves the local community, with many of its students coming on a daily basis from the nearer parts of the county. Indeed, it has to be recognised that, pace government policy, in rural areas like ours adult education cannot be provided in every discrete locality and that some institutions like the Manor will be needed.

We are told that the Manor does not pay. That is hardly unique in education. Indeed, what educational institution does cover its cost? Moreover, the running cost is, I understand, small. (It might even be that with better administration and marketing the Manor could be made less uneconomic.)

We are also told that the impact of disposal on local businesses would be small. That may be. But the impact on the amenities of the local community would be disproportionately large. All year round the Manor and its grounds, including the

cricket ground, the croquet lawns and Oakfrith Wood, are extensively used and valued by local people, young and old alike.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the issue of stewardship. In Urchfont Manor the charge-payers of Wiltshire, through the Council and its predecessors, have long owned and had access to a rural gem. Successive authorities have cared for it, maintaining it and giving its buildings and trees protected status. Perhaps some oligarch or city magnate would buy it, paying the Council a sum that would help a little in the present financial crisis. But once disposed of, Urchfont Manor will never be recovered: ultimately we, the residents of Wiltshire would be the losers.