

# 'Disappointing' council response over Moody Hall

By Kelly Mattison

Protestors staged a peaceful demonstration ahead of a Cheshire East Council meeting to highlight fears a historic building is at "tipping point" and will fall into ruin.

And the action group's leader was "disappointed" with the council response to the question she asked at the start of the meeting.

Campaigners have called for Cheshire East to place a compulsory purchase order on Moody Hall, a grade two

listed building on Moody Street in Congleton.

The former care home was once the site of Congleton's first school for girls founded by suffragist Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy.

Elizabeth's Group, which campaigned successfully for a statue in her honour, unveiled on Bridge Street last year, would like Moody Hall to be used as a museum.

The boarded-up building has been the scene of several fires in recent years, the latest during the summer.

Moody Hall is owned by Birmingham-based Bhavinder Tamber who has been given

planning permission to turn it into 14 assisted living apartments. Work is yet to start and campaigners fear the building will become derelict beyond repair.

Speaking to the "Chronicle" outside Macclesfield Town Hall on Wednesday ahead of the meeting, Susan Munro, chair of Elizabeth's Group, who was joined by other campaigners, said: "I just want to ask Cheshire East, what the heck are you doing with Moody Hall?"

"I feel the owner of the building wants it to fall. It's a prime piece of land.

"It's just hearsay. I'm going off what's happened with other buildings in the town.

"I don't mind if this man turns it into a sheltered accommodation, as long as Elizabeth's building is saved."

Walking into the town hall, past the peaceful demonstration, was Congleton town councillor Coun Robert Douglas who stopped to join the protest.

He said: "We cannot afford for our historic buildings to fall into disrepair because it means future generations will not have the benefit of these lovely buildings."

He said he wanted Cheshire East to work with Mr Tamber so that an agreement could be reached on ensuring that the building and its history was protected.

Coun Douglas described Ms Elmy as a "very important" citizen of Congleton.

"We have the new link road named after her so Cheshire East understands the importance of this lady," he added.

Also in attendance was Congleton town councillor Kay Wesley, who represents the Women's Equality Party. She said that Moody Hall was a "major source of equality and emancipation in the UK".

She said she wanted the authority to "throw its full weight behind" restoring the building "to make sure work is done quickly before the building is lost forever". Coun Wesley explained: "Elizabeth was the mother of the suffragette movement, and she lived in Congleton!"

"Her brother went off to Cambridge and got a wonderful education. She was brighter than him and had to stay at home and follow female pursuits, so she was very angry.

"She campaigned all her life for women to get an education and thought 'well, if the general school system isn't going to provide it, I will'."

She added: "Moody Hall was one of the first girls' schools in the country. What an important building!"

Following the protest, Mrs Munro put her question to councillors at the start of the meeting.

"Are you going to let the owner win and allow it to fall. What is Cheshire East going to



Protesters outside Macclesfield Town Hall. From left, Mr Wesley, Coun Douglas, Mrs Munro, Peter Munro and Coun Wesley.

do to protect Moody Hall?" she asked.

In its response, the council said: "It is sad to see this historic building in such a poor state of repair.

"The property is not owned by Cheshire East Council, and we are limited in our power to protect it.

"The council has previously taken steps to secure the ground floor of the property, including access from the adjoining car park.

"Following the recent fire, the council served an urgent works notice seeking to make access from Moody Street more secure."

Ms Munro said she was "very disappointed" with the reply.

She said afterwards that if the building was left to deteriorate further it would be "a great loss, not least for Congleton but for the women's movement, both nationally and internationally."

"I don't give out much hope. I think we will lose the building. It's very sad," she added.

She vowed to "keep sloggling" on with her campaign to save Moody Hall, writing letters and "kicking up a stink".

Meanwhile, Moody Hall

was discussed behind closed doors at an emergency meeting of Congleton Town Council on Thursday, during part two, the section from which the Press and public are excluded.

Chief officer David McGifford said afterwards: "There is nothing I can tell you at this stage apart from the council, through myself, is having discussions with the owner and relevant officers at Cheshire East Council to try and progress the development of Moody Hall."



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Coun Douglas and Mr Wesley.



"Moody Hall was one of the first girls' schools in the country," said Coun Wesley.

## New hubs, Afghan support and new free schools all successes

Cheshire East Council discussed "encouraging" progress against its priorities in the first quarter of the year, despite a range of challenges affecting councils across the country.

At a meeting on 5th October, members of the council's Corporate Policy Committee considered the work towards the council's "open, fair and green vision".

Some of the key headlines included:

- The launch of first two family hubs in the borough at Oak Tree in Crewe and Oakenclough, Wilmslow;

- The council and its partners continuing to support children and families through the Government's Afghan resettlement and Homes for Ukraine schemes, as well as looking after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children;

- Eight children being successfully adopted, providing them with a "stable, loving and nurturing family";

- The council securing Government backing for two new free schools for children and young people with

special educational needs and disabilities; and

- The council continuing to make improvements with its work to deliver education health and care plans, with completion rates now exceeding the national average.

There also continues to be "positive progress" towards the council's net zero target.

At the end of 2022/23 there was 46% progress towards carbon neutrality by 2025 and, at the end of quarter one, this has increased to 56%, mainly due to the installation of nine air-source heat pumps in council buildings; Furthermore, 126 affordable homes were delivered in quarter one, with projections indicating that the annual target of 355 affordable homes will be exceeded.

### Backlog

A backlog of planning applications continued to reduce, with a new system of a named contact officer for each application, the committee was told. Half of all applications are now determined within 10 weeks.

The Treacle Town Art Trail, which includes a range of public art throughout Macclesfield, has also been completed and work to regenerate Crewe continues, including the completion of the Ly2 project, transforming Lyceum Square into a new outdoor entertainment venue.

Coun Sam Corcoran, leader of Cheshire East Council and chair of Cheshire East Council's Corporate Policy Committee, said: "Despite operating in a tough financial environment, this report shows that the council has continued to make progress towards delivering our open, fairer and greener vision for Cheshire East.

"We have something to be proud of here. To be able to say we have managed to achieve these things despite substantial challenges, such as continuing high inflation, increasing complexity and scale of demand for key services and a highly-competitive labour market, is a testament to the commitment of council officers and councillors to deliver for Cheshire East.

"I am particularly happy to see the progress towards our carbon neutral targets, including the continuing work to develop the action plan which will support the wider borough target of net zero by 2045. I also welcome the increased awareness of the issues across children and family services, alongside the developing actions to improve performance in this area."

He added: "Recruitment and retention of staff remains a challenge, locally and nationally. We have recently reported an unmitigated funding gap of £12.8m in the current financial year, resulting from increased costs and demand.

"The council is having to make tough decisions to adapt to meet these demands but it is right we take a moment to consider what we have achieved between April and June of this year.

"We will shortly be launching a public consultation on our plan and vision for Cheshire East and future financial priorities. I'd encourage everyone to take part and have their say."

## Legion appeals for new members to march in

Biddulph's branch of the Royal British Legion is on a recruitment drive ahead of this year's Poppy Appeal.

The search for more volunteers coincided with a celebration on Saturday to mark 30 years since the branch reformed.

To mark the occasion, Legion representatives had a get-together in the Victoria Centre at Biddulph Methodist Church on Station Road and they are appealing for more people who want to support the branch to get in touch.

The branch was re-formed three decades ago by Cynthia Ellis and Les Andrews. It had previously folded due to lack of members.

Mr Andrews was in the RAF Bomber Command during the WWII and eventually became branch president until he died several years ago.

Among the new members then were Elaine Rice, her late husband Peter, and John Leason and his late wife Margaret. Mrs Rice and Mr Leason are still members today, Mrs Rice being branch chair and standard bearer.

Secretary Sandra Bowler praised Biddulph residents for their response each year during the period of Remembrance but said that more volunteers were needed and that Saturday's branch celebration was a good opportunity to appeal for new recruits.

"We have a few people on the committee but we don't have a lot of members who come to the meetings," she explained.

"We need more members and volunteers for collections during the annual Poppy Appeal.

She said that although there had never been a lot of members "we do quite well during the Poppy Appeal for such a small town".

Mrs Bowler's husband Paul is the branch's vice-chair and joined around 14 years ago having served across the world in the Royal Navy.

Mrs Bowler, who herself joined 11 years ago, said: "It's very, very important that we recruit new members not only for what the Royal British Legion does in making sure the nation continues to honour all those who died in World Wars One and Two and conflicts since but all the support it gives to veterans as well."

She pointed out that last year's Poppy Appeal in Biddulph raised £18,000. "Leek raised £45,000 but is a much larger town," said Mrs Bowler.

"We have such a good turnout in Biddulph on Remembrance Sunday each year. I'm originally from Stone and Biddulph's turnout is up there with Stone's. The amount of people who watch the Remembrance parade in Biddulph is really good, too."

To volunteer for the Biddulph branch, call Mrs Rice on 01782 512870.