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Red House to be sold off for flats?

by **Emily Retter**
District Chief Reporter

Plans to sell Great Barr's historic Red House have been confirmed this week - dashing residents' hopes for its future.

Council chiefs have recommended the property be sold and re-developed, in a document revealed exclusively to the *Observer*.

Obtained using the Freedom of Information Act, it plainly states that 'retention is not a viable option' for the 160-year-old country house - and outlines the only other option as 'disposal and redevelopment', with conversion into flats the most likely outcome.

It also suggests that using money from the sale, residents who had hoped the house could be used as a community facility would instead be provided with a base within changing rooms in the park.

"The council decided some years ago, before leasing, it had no use for this particular building," reads the document.

To retain the house, it states, would leave the council with maintenance liability and repair costs which it cannot afford.

This is despite its next admission that the property

is in good condition internally and that it is unlikely to cost more than £50,000 to repair the exterior.

However, it does state that a further £100,000 could be needed to create 'some defensible space with an appropriate boundary' around the house.

Discussing possible uses for the Victorian property, which is currently leased to the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, the report admits no council department has shown any interest in using it.

It adds that converting the house into flats and retaining it as staff accommodation would prove too costly and that conversion into a public library - as suggested by the Friends - is impossible because of the property's location, its inability to fulfil a library's needs, and lack of funding.

Responding angrily to the report, chairman of Friends of Red House Park, Sarah Carter, pleaded with Sandwell Council to keep the house.

"This house could provide a heart for our community," she said.

"We need a community base; Great Barr has no community facilities. We have the churches but that is all."

She added: "They will be selling a section of the park - if they sell a section of the park where will it end?"

"That's our park. We will wake up one day and there won't be a park, there will be a housing development."

"And what about culture and heritage? They are selling ours."

She finds the suggestion that money from the sale could be ring-fenced to provide community facilities in the park for the group, offensive.

"They'll give us a wooden hut to meet in so we can continue to raise money for them," said Ms Carter.

"That is insulting to us."

She added: "There are lots of grants out there the council could get. The money is out there to access."

"But all they want is to sell that land for flats which will bring in more money and mean they don't have to pay for upkeep."

Sandwell cabinet member for regeneration and transport, Cllr Bob Badham, said no final decision had been made.

"Any proposals will have to go to the appropriate cabinet advisory team," he said.

"Information such as this briefing is gathered as a matter of routine when reports are being compiled for a cabinet advisory team and there may well be others needed before the matter goes to members for any decision."

• Do you think the house should be sold or retained and put to community use? Next week the *Observer* will launch a campaign for public consultation, giving YOU the chance to put in writing your views on the sale of the Red House before a final decision is reached.

That's our park. We will wake up one day and there won't be a park, there will be a housing development'



The historic Red House should be sold, a council document reveals.