

**PRIORY HOUSE
REPORT ON THE CONDITION SURVEY AND SITE VISIT**

It is not possible to express an opinion as to the competence of the report other than in general terms. To critically comment on the conclusions of the report would require a fresh survey which is clearly impossible. What I can say is that the breadth of the report is reasonable. The external works, the fabric, the structure, foundations, finishes and services are all covered and specialists called in where required with one exception which I refer to later. There is however a general point to be made, the structural survey has not been completed by a chartered structural engineer. If I want a consultant to advise me I want a fully qualified and experienced one.

As to what the report shows I have the following comments to make; Firstly it has to be acknowledged that the building is 50 + years old. It is towards the end of its design life. However those blanket judgements apply to so many buildings and are not of themselves sufficient reason to write it off. That argument also applies to elements within the building and I raise this because the mechanical, electrical and lift services* have been written off as life expired and require replacement at some £720,000 – almost 75% of the total cost. I would have expected to see a considered appraisal of the services in those circumstances to justify that level of expenditure.

The second point to make is that the report represents an indictment of the standard of maintenance in the Council, an indictment in terms of the failure to routinely monitor the buildings condition and thereby take timely action to prevent greater deterioration and therefore more costly repairs. This indictment continues in showing up poor workmanship and/or poor supervision of maintenance work. The report shows clear photographic evidence of long term outstanding defects and innumerable examples of defective/sloppy repairs. It is to be hoped that the Council will give careful consideration to the need for a more structured and systematic approach to maintenance in the future.

We can only be grateful that the residents appear to have received better care than the building.

Having stated that the building is coming to the end of its design life this does not mean that the building is not capable of a continued useful life as a care home. This sort of sloppiness does not give any credit to the authors of this report.

During this inspection there were clear evidence of general neglect on the outside of the premises, although the structure is clearly fit for purpose the lack of detailed maintenance does not reflect favourably on the council or officers in applying due diligence to the building and outside housekeeping where there are instances of broken furniture etc. lying in situ and not removed from site and this even related to the garden shed showing signs of rot which had electrical equipment still being stored inside.

This general neglect even extended to the cutting of grass which at the time of my inspection was clearly in need of attention and areas of pathway either covered in moss or a hazard for anyone to walk on.

As to the outside of the building itself there were a number of instances of redundant holes that have been left and not filled after the removing pipe work or pipe clips that have been either removed or not in situ in the first place, piles of broken brick work or damage to walls that have been left to create further structure problems in the future. Doors and frames not being repaired or painted and are now showing signs of rot. Painted metal poles or hand rails where the paint is peeling of and showing bare metal.

I cannot explain fully in a report the extent of neglect of the outside of the building and the surrounding grounds relating to the care home. Clearly whoever is responsible for the general upkeep of the area needs educating and this also covers areas such as the boiler/ plant rooms where obsolete parts and packaging have been left behind adding to the feeling of neglect.

The condition survey was carried out in November 2012 and was requested by the head of service in line with the work being undertaken by the working party. When asked about the last time a detailed condition survey was carried out the reply was not in working memory.

A number of photos show poor installation/ workmanship of remedial work to the building. This also indicates poor/inadequate supervision. What evidence is there that this is an isolated/ exceptional case or is this situation typical of the Council's building maintenance approach.

Moving on to the roof, it seems apparent that this is original when the care home was built in the middle sixties, in my reckoning that makes the roof in excess of 46 years old, way past it's sell by date and as my detailed report from 1998 indicates, has had its problem in relation to leaking and being patched from that date.

In contrary to other Councillors statements that the boilers are virtually at the point of total collapse, I believe this is an incorrect statement and although the boilers are past the recommended life expectancy this is only by 3 years and again problems of loss of heating can be related back to February 1999 with similar problems then as now. The general consensus is that the boilers are capable of a further life span of between 3 and 5 years.

There are further examples of general lack of maintenance to the basic fabric of the building and other external sundry items all of which should have been carried out in a routinely way and would have avoided the scale of the current problems.

Therefore in conclusion to this part of my report there are annual mechanical inspections, quarterly to the lift and 5 yearly to the electrical elements of the building. The report on the condition report of Priory House leads to more questions about the quality of maintenance of other capital assets that the council is responsible for, I believe this should be investigated further to ensure that these assets are protected in the future.

Regardless of the outcome of the Priory home issue; there are serious deficiencies in the Council's Asset Management strategy which need to be addressed. Asset management means just that: managing the property portfolio to maintain or enhance its value and ensure the safety and comfort of the users be they office workers, children in schools or elderly people in care homes. How officers can produce tables on life expectancy of components having singly failed to adhere to the requirements is beyond me especially having underspent on the priority/urgent repair budget (normally the first excuse for lack of maintenance). Maybe the way the parts of the Council are structured needs to be looked at so that building maintenance is seen as an integral and essential part of the asset management/facilities set up.

Therefore the above should be treated as a courtesy in keeping council members and various officers abreast of my findings and will form part of my final report on the future development of the building and the financial mismanagement in the past of the maintenance of Priory House Care Home.

Finally the condition survey provides only part of the information on which to make a judgement about the building and the service it provides. How is that service to be provided in the future if the building goes? What are the future cost implications of alternatives? What is the land on which the building sits to be used for? What are the cost implications for that? These issues need to be explored and finances assessed before irrevocable decisions are made.

In Conclusion

I am concerned that if the Council's budgetary based decision to pursue the planned closure of Priory House proceeds this will have a significant and detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of many residents.

It appears to me from information provided, that the Council's decision to proceed with its preferred option to close Priory House is, in part, based on the Council's inability/unwillingness to fund future maintenance works, the cost and nature of which, were 'identified' by the Council's in-house Survey. The quality of the data and figures produced by such an in-house survey must be influenced by the quality of the brief given to those undertaking the survey and by a lack of any expectation upon them to produce figures to support any particular outcome. Having produced an 81 page detailed survey document the authors have, I presume for ease of reading for the Task and Finish Panel and residents families, summarised and presented their findings as a one page attachment.

Having had the opportunity to review the detailed survey report provided it becomes increasingly difficult not to view with scepticism the nature of, and priorities attached to, certain works 'identified' at Priory House and as a consequence to question the resultant sums of money needed and their time scales. Ignoring for now the numerous items of a largely aesthetic nature and the questionable classification and priorities attached to many items, it is the 4 specific major elements i.e. Roof, Lift, Electrical Wiring and Boiler Plant which account for the bulk of the £0.8 million pound funding estimate over the next 10 years.

Whilst in a world without budgetary constraints all the major works identified could be carried out and within the time frames outlined. There could be an alternative to simply replacing/renewing all major items. Therefore it may not be unsafe or unreasonable to continue (apart from the roof) as previously been prepared to do for some time and that is to repair and make do as and when required.

I would also suggest that numerous minor items as identified e.g. wallpaper/cracks/etc. fall under routine maintenance and the works and estimated costs shown in the report could be managed by the creation of a 'work to schedule' for implementation within a reasonable time frame by the Council's existing maintenance employees and at a considerably lower cost. If this somewhat more reasonable and pragmatic approach to the on-going maintenance issues at Priory House were applied, whilst clearly not a solution to revenue funding matters. This above would at least contribute to a situation whereby existing residents could be allowed to live out their days at Priory House. (Not withstanding a revised business strategy for the future).

It would avoid a sad indictment on the Council if the words and assurances offered by those put forward to publicly represent them are subsequently shown to be hollow and disingenuous and I can only hope that the ultimate decision taken can accommodate a more caring approach toward those residents in place at the time this process began in summer of 2012.

Ron Woodley

Independent Councillor Thorpe Ward