

DUNBLANE BURGH CHAMBERS

Dunblane Community Council asked the five candidates standing for election to the Westminster Parliament for the Stirling Constituency, to set out their vision for the future of Dunblane Burgh Chambers.

Steven Paterson, Scottish National Party

Dunblane is the largest settlement outside the city of Stirling with approaching 10,000 residents and as such I do not believe it received the attention it deserves from the current leadership within Stirling Council.

I recognise that there are many voluntary groups in Dunblane who make a real difference within the community. I was delighted to note that the recent BIDS application had the support of businesses in the town and I look forward to lending my support as your Member of Parliament to them as their work continues.

The current Charrette process gives the opportunity to express views on how you want to see the town centre develop and I hope the plans which will emerge later in the month will bring together the aspirations for the town centre. My colleague Councillor Houston has been keeping me updated on the process so far.

I am particularly pleased that some real work will be done to improve the area around the railway station and I welcome the £500,000 put toward this by Sustrans. The plans are exciting and present an opportunity to significantly improve an area which has fallen into disrepair due to lack of maintenance by the Council. You do not need me to tell you just how poorly maintained the Station Road bridge and its road surface has been.

I welcome the apparent upturn in the High Street in terms of increased footfall, due in no small measure to the existence of your very own Gold Post Box. There is a lot happening on the High Street but further improvement will still be required to bring more people to shop and do business in the town. For this reason I think the Burgh Chambers could be made better use of. My personal view is that consideration of using the empty offices as a business start-up / business incubation hub should be investigated. Dunblane has many people who run their small business from home and something like this would provide the next step for support as their business enterprises grow. It is too simplistic to remove the current services from the Burgh Chambers, relocate them in the Library and sell of the empty property. The Burgh Chambers are a valuable and historic asset and should be retained for the benefit of the town.

I hope I have set out my thoughts clearly but look forward to working closely with the Community Council in the future should I be returned as your Member of Parliament on Thursday 7th May.

Dr Elisabeth Wilson, Scottish Liberal Democrats

I read with concern the reports in the Community Council minutes and media about the proposal by Stirling Council to sell off the Dunblane Burgh Chambers.

I understand that the Chambers are currently used for weddings, Community council meetings, paying of rents and registering of births, deaths and weddings. I have been told that it is considered a suitable venue for these last activities. Not everybody does everything on line so this building in the centre of Dunblane is an important feature.

If the facilities were transferred to the Library the question arises as to whether the same degree of privacy could be afforded. Would those those registering a death have to mingle with adult and junior library users before being directed to a private room after asking at the desk?

The stated reason for Stirling council seeking to sell the Chambers is financial. However the reports I have read do not make it clear whether the council wishes primarily to gain a lump sum, or alternatively no longer have to pay the running costs, or both.

It is also the venue for Community Council meetings, and disposing of the building would not be helpful. Although Stirling Council would be obliged to provide an alternative venue, would that be convenient for members and the public? Could the Burgh Chambers be transferred to the Development Trust and have a bigger range of activities?

If sold and it became e.g. flats it would add to the private parking problems in the centre because the tenants would inevitably pay for reserved parking, leaving less for visitors and temporary parking.

If it were closed Dunblane would have lost a handsome official building, probably forever. As your MP, I would be glad to support Dunblane Community Council to retain the Chambers for public use. The exact range of activities could be determined following further public consultation, and the Community Council should take a lead role in this.

Mark Ruskell, Scottish Green Party

I believe that there is a real risk that the Dunblane Burgh Chambers are sold off by Stirling Council in order to raise revenue to meet budget shortfalls. Budget options agreed by Stirling's Labour/Tory administration included a target for income from sales of assets and although the Burgh Chambers was not specifically named it is clearly in the front line for cuts.

Stirling Council faces austerity from two directions at present and some tough budget choices. Firstly the Tory/LibDem Westminster Government have cut too far and too deep meaning Holyrood is under budget pressure. Secondly the SNP Scottish Government continue to press on with the Council Tax Freeze which means a real terms cut in funding for councils.

Despite this I think the sale of the Burgh Chambers would be incredibly short sighted and the loss of a key public asset would be a step too far. It's clear that while the Burgh Chambers is under-utilised at present, spaces could be let to small business and other users, generating income.

As my commitment to the retention of the Burgh Chambers as a public asset, if I'm elected to either Westminster or Holyrood I would wish to base my constituency office there should letting space become available.

In terms of Council services currently based at the Burgh Chambers, I see practical problems in moving these to other premises such as Dunblane Library and would prefer them to stay where they are.

In the longer term the council should be open to the potential for a community buy-out of the Burgh Chambers, assuming of course that it is not already legally part of Dunblane's Common Good assets.

Johanna Boyd, Labour

I understand that there has been a round of community consultation regarding the future use of the Burgh Chambers and that those who responded would prefer the Chambers to remain in community use.

Should I be elected as the next MP for Stirling I would be pleased to work with the whole Dunblane community to effect a successful outcome for the future use of the Burgh Chambers.

Stephen Kerr, Conservative and Unionist (late response)

The Dunblane Burgh Chambers is an important heritage site for Dunblane and its residents.

I would support any effort that was undertaken by the community of Dunblane to retain and transform the Burgh Chambers for the benefit of the people of Dunblane.

If I am elected to be your Member of Parliament on Thursday, I would look forward to an early meeting with the community council to consider all of the options.

Although these are not matters directly related to the reserved powers of the Westminster parliament, you can count on me to champion and advocate on your behalf representing this issue to other levels of government including the councillors on Stirling Council.