Doncaster Gate: market should not decide

THERE can be no greater contrast than that shown by two articles that appeared in your October 25 edition.

On the one hand there is Chris Hamby with no formal building training, and limited financial resources, but with boundless guts, determination and vision, rescuing the Three Cranes and surrounding properties. On the other is Rotherham Borough Council with professionally trained town planners, architects, surveyors and accountants, demonstrating a complete and utter lack of vision in respect of the Doncaster Gate Hospital site.

Much of the council's justification to do with the condition of the building and the annual running costs doesn't ring true and could be debated if there was time. The real issue, however, is the indecent haste to demolish the building. There are examples of council buildings being left empty and boarded up for years. Broom Hayes/Rothwell Grange on Broom Valley is but one example.

Mr Battersby's reference to community groups not bringing forward any options is offensive given that the voluntary groups, including the Civic Society, had previously been reassured that the frontage of the building would be retained as part of any redevelopment of the site. The Town Centre Interim Planning Statement — Consultation Draft was explicit on this point. Also, as recently as March 2012, Matthew Peck, the council's conservation officer, reputedly informed the Rotherham Heritage Association that he would do everything in his power to ensure the frontage is retained.

It is also disingenuous to use as a justification for demolition the fact that English Heritage did not list the building in 2009. The current draft Local Plan clearly outlines a variety of circumstances in which the council can locally list buildings and ensure retention of features of local architectural interest. The society is in no doubt that had this former hospital been in private ownership the council would have listed it and insisted upon the retention of the building's frontage.

The council is proposing demolition of the building without demonstrating any clear idea of what will replace it, in what its officers accept is a street worthy of conservation area designation. Previous planning documents have suggested that up to 50 residential units could be built on the site. All well and good but there are already three housing sites in the town centre where development has stalled — Turnpike Wharf, the former Kirkby Central site, and the Moorgate House site. Depending upon the development proposed, the environment of Doncaster Gate could be further damaged by the removal of the stone boundary wall and the mature trees, and excavation of part of the grass bank to enable a new or widened access road to be built into the site.

The worst of all worlds would be to demolish the building, sell off the stone for new buildings outside Rotherham (as happened with Moorgate Hospital) and leave a cleared site. Running a close second would be to allow one of the volume house builders to cram as many houses as possible on the site.

Not too long ago there was some controversy when the Market Street sites were sold to Ilaid of Liverpool for much less than their market value because of the financial viability of the redevelopment. If it is good enough for a Liverpool company why not for a good quality local property developer? The council has also shown, as in the case of both Chris Hamby and Rotherham United, that it has the legal powers to loan money in order to get the right development.

The new National Planning Policy Framework indicates that if important heritage assets are proposed to be demolished this should only be allowed when detailed plans for the site's redevelopment have been approved to ensure that the scheme will conserve and enhance the character of the area. In the society's view this principle should apply in this case notwithstanding the fact that the council probably delayed scheduling Doncaster Gate as a conservation area specifically to avoid such problems.

The decision to demolish the building in its entirety, without any thought being given to retaining the facade was apparently taken by the council's cabinet. There are therefore a series of questions which could be put to the other 56 or so councillors who are being paid by the people of Rotherham to represent their interests.

What is the point of employing consultants and officers at great expense to prepare cultural, environmental, sustainability and other strategies if each time a key issue is faced the adopted policies are conveniently ignored?

If the only principle being applied by the council is 'the market will decide', what is the point of public consultation on such plans and strategies?

The council talk about the need for democratic renewal and public participation but are they really surprised that many voluntary and friends groups are folding or losing members because of the council's lack of response to any representations they make?

Should local residents become resigned to the fact that, with a few honourable exceptions, the councillors and officers are quite happy that Rotherham only deserves second best and the safe easy option?

B King, chairman;
B Fletcher, treasurer;
P Hawkridge, secretary;
Rotherham District Civic Society.

From hospital to hotel?

RE the closure of Doncaster Gate Hospital. A couple of weeks ago there was an article about a day chain looking for a town

Hospital decision is latest lunacy

I WAS very pleased to see the Advertiser gave this latest piece of lunacy by our council regarding Doncaster Gate Hospital the notice it deserves.

It is not that although as a councillor he is able to attend the Cabinet meetings he is not able to vote. Just who are these people on the Cabinet who are so arrogant as to make these important decisions without it seems any members? It seems that we are being run by 'comers' who are only interested in what they can get out of the town and not how much they can contribute to it.

If they have the courage of their