

AGENDA ITEM 4

PETITIONS

1. Lead Petitioner - Susanne Clausen

Save Open Hand Open Space: Protect Reading's Cultural Lifeline at Brock Keep

Brock Keep, a vital heritage building and home to Open Hand Open Space (OHOS), is under threat. For over 40 years, OHOS has been a cornerstone of Reading's cultural life, providing affordable artist studios, supporting exhibitions, performances, and community engagement. Now, OHOS faces an uncertain future as the building is at risk of sale and closure.

A Historic Landmark with a Living Purpose

Brock Keep was built in 1877 as a Victorian military keep, serving as accommodation for soldiers and as an armoury for the Brock Barracks. Designed by architect Major H.C. Seddon, the Keep is a remarkable example of nineteenth-century military architecture, with its distinctive crenellated roofline and historic brickwork. A Grade II listed building, it is an integral part of Reading's rich heritage and identity.

A Vital Asset for Oxford Road

Located on Oxford Road, Brock Keep is a landmark in one of Reading's most diverse and dynamic areas. OHOS brings creativity and cultural activity to the heart of Oxford Road, enriching the community by offering:

- Affordable studios for artists to work and thrive.
- Free and accessible exhibitions, workshops, and performances that invite participation and connection.
- A welcoming space that bridges art, heritage, and the vibrant community of Oxford Road.

Brock Keep and OHOS play a vital role in supporting the cultural and social life of Oxford Road. Losing this space would not only impact artists but also deprive the area of an important community and cultural resource that inspires creativity and engagement.

Our Cultural Offer to Secure Brock Keep

We have made a **cultural offer to bid for Brock Keep**, with a vision of preserving it as a sustainable arts and cultural hub for Reading. This offer recognises the building's historical significance and outlines our commitment to maintaining Brock Keep as a vibrant centre for creativity, cultural exchange, and community activity. Our proposal ensures that artists and the public can continue to benefit from this unique space for generations to come.

Why OHOS Matters

OHOS has transformed Brock Keep into a living, breathing hub for artists and residents alike. It stands as an example of how heritage buildings can be repurposed to serve today's communities while preserving their historical significance. Without OHOS, we risk losing both a creative centre and an asset to the identity and vitality of Oxford Road.

We call on Reading Borough Council to:

- Recognise Brock Keep as a valuable historic and cultural asset.

- Protect OHOS and its role in supporting the cultural life of Oxford Road and Reading.
- Support our cultural offer to secure Brock Keep for the community.

RESPONSE by Councillor Barnett-Ward (Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture):

The Keep on the Oxford Road is a Grade 2 Listed Building which requires long term investment in the property and at this time, the Council is not able to commit to the investment needed.

The property is occupied by Open Hand Open Space (OHOS) and Reading Space on a heavily subsidised basis with the Council. Over a number of years, the Council has supported a variety of OHOS bids to obtain external funding, but these have ultimately proved unsuccessful, including a recent bid for Heritage Lottery Fund money.

As a result, the Council has invited bids for the sale of the freehold from both from private bidders and from Reading's voluntary sector, with the current occupiers remaining in situ. Whether the occupiers can remain long term or not, will ultimately be a decision for the buyer of the site. The Council is committed to introducing the current occupiers to any alternative properties that may be available in the Borough whilst the sale process progresses.

The Council recognises the value Open Hand Open Space provides to Reading and will continue to support them as an important part of the cultural sector of Reading.