



Saxmundham Town Council

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Jamie Burles
Managing Director
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3 July 2019

Dear Mr Burles,

I am writing to you in my capacity of Chairman of Saxmundham Town Council, in East Suffolk. Our town is on the East Suffolk line, between Ipswich and Lowestoft. Saxmundham Station has, I believe, more users than any other station on the line.

Until 12th February 2018, Saxmundham Station possessed a fine mid-nineteenth century station building, which till then formed an iconic part of our heritage townscape, but had alas been kept vacant and neglected for several years. This fine building was severely damaged in a major fire on that date. I happened to be in the building opposite as the fire took hold, and have my own photos of the catastrophe as it unfolded. The building was, shortly after, taken down to a one-storey level, and it has remained in its present terrible condition to this day.

I am not clear on the respective rights and obligations in relation to repair and upkeep, and now renovation, as between Network Rail and Abellio Greater Anglia, and am therefore also writing to Andrew Haines, CEO of Network Rail, in like terms.

Saxmundham Station is in the very heart of Saxmundham. It is used not only by local residents and businesses, but forms a recognized 'Gateway' for tens of thousands of visitors to the beautiful East Suffolk coast, as well as to nearby attractions such as Snape Maltings (which hosts the Aldeburgh Festival).

For the last 17 months, the station has remained in a truly appalling condition, which is the subject of universal dismay and growing anger that – to date – there has been no progress shown in restoring the building, if not to its former glory, then at least to a good functional and attractive

state. It is frankly damaging to the image and character of our town, and we feel brings discredit to those who hold the responsibility and obligations of ownership of what should be a public-serving asset.

Back on 2nd November 2018, a meeting was organised by officers of Greater Anglia to discuss the future of the station building. It was held in our Town Council office across the road from the station, and then councillors attended, as did our local MP, Ms Therese Coffey. I am not clear if Network Rail were represented. It was reported back to the then Town Council that:

“The intention is to restore the buildings as they currently stand, so a single storey building. There will be a Waiting Room and the canopy and supports will be refurbished. The fencing will be improved and the car park redesigned and resurfaced with the lower area becoming a wild meadow feature.

Building work is expected to start before the end of March. The plans for the buildings and car park were well received although some suggestions to improve the car park plan were made. Greater Anglia stated that they wished to turn a negative event into a positive outcome for the Town.”

While this was felt to be a rather minimalist vision for the building and surrounds, the Town Council was at least reassured that urgent action was in the pipeline. But March came and went, and we are now in July, without any sign of action or information on the plans for restoration. (If there has been any further communication with us which I have missed out on, please do let me know.)

In the meantime, we have been working on plans for the improvement of our town centre, and our consultation includes a household questionnaire. We are still compiling the results, but it is already clear that (a) the state of the station is a matter of very wide concern, and (b) there is support for the concept of a more comprehensive redevelopment plan for the whole station area, which includes our own town council office site.

In order therefore to go forward in a positive way, and to put this extremely sad situation behind us, we would be willing to co-operate with Greater Anglia and Network Rail (according to the respective responsibilities) and with other relevant landowners, with a view to scoping the potential for such broader plan for the station area.

I should add that the final draft of the local plan of the District Council (now East Suffolk council, following a merger) identifies the railway and station as key elements in its strategy for Saxmundham. The Ipswich Borough & Suffolk Coastal District Retail and Commercial Leisure Town Centre Study (October 2017) also identifies “redevelopment/regeneration of the area around the railway station” as an opportunity.

Our Town Council meets next Monday, 8th July, and we will hold a first discussion on the present state of the station and its surrounds, which we will follow up at our September meeting. It would therefore be most helpful if you or your officers are able to provide us urgently with information on the current plans for the building and surrounds, and for any explanation on the apparent slippage in the programme.

We would also welcome any reaction to our offer to co-operate with you on a strategy for regeneration of the wider area including the station and its immediate surrounds, which we would hope may lead to wider social, environmental and economic benefits for all concerned.

Yours sincerely

Jeremy Smith
Chairman, Saxmundham Town Council
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