

## **An open letter to Great Baddow residents, on behalf of Chelmsford Muslim Society**

Dear Residents,

Thank you all for taking the time out this evening to come along to this gathering.

I'm sorry that I'm unable to attend but with one week's notice and month-end work commitments, I simply would not make it back in time.

We know that residents have been concerned about our purchase and plans for the future of Hamptons Sports and Leisure Centre. I've tried my best to answer questions from residents directly through email, telephone and social media, and will continue to do so.

We've also met with staff members, Great Baddow Councillors, and I've written to our MP Vicky Ford about our future plans.

While there have been concerns raised - and I hope this letter will answer these and reassure those who have raised them – we have also received considerable support for our plans and intentions from the local community, and in particular we would like to thank the local church leaders Reverend Canon Tim Ball from Meadgate, Reverend Sue Finch from St Mary's, and Reverend Phil Sheldrake from St Paul's for their warmth.

So, to summarise the current position:

We are currently in a transition phase with the existing owner of the business.

This means that the details of the contract need to remain confidential, as they are in the vast majority of commercial purchases. We are also complying with the request of the owner for confidentiality.

Our purchase of the Hamptons has been difficult, and we faced competition from developers with an asking price of £2.5million.

But one thing is for sure – our competitors for the purchase, who were property developers, were interested in the site for its future development potential, not for its value as a community facility.

Against that back drop, we believe that our purchase has secured the future of the Hamptons for community use.

The Muslim community have been in Chelmsford for over 40 years, working, praying and living here with all the community. Our aims have always been the same as everyone else to be an active community member and help the youth, elderly, homeless and our neighbours.

With that vision, the community has worked hard to raise the money needed to buy and save the centre.

Then there are the hard economic facts to consider. For the past two years, The Hamptons has not made a profit, so inevitably, changes will need to be made to ensure its survival. The Chelmsford Muslim Society is committed to making the centre a success, and we need the continued support of the wider community to do so.

We are a not-for-profit organisation and have always invested our funds back into the community and charity. The Management Committee do not take a salary and have worked hard within the Muslim and Non-Muslim communities and local projects that they are involved with.

Purchasing Hamptons was not just so the Muslim community could have a place to pray in, but also to help provide facilities for younger and older people and families with young children in the area. This is why we are committed to offering health and fitness facilities which serve the whole community, regardless of faith.

We are looking to further invest into the Tennis Club and are keen to see this grow and improve for members. Likewise, we are aware of the high standards of the squash courts and that these are used by GB players and we would like to see this grow and be an inspiration for young people.

It is important to try to answer some of the concerns which have been raised by residents, club users and employees.

Some of these have been about the potential number of people visiting the centre for functions. For daily prayers, we do not expect numbers to be beyond 15-30 people, lasting approximately 10 to 20 minutes.

Our current mosque has been handling large numbers during Eid prayers, twice a year, for a number of years. We have been managing the requirements within health and safety by staggering the prayer times. This has meant numbers are between 200-250 for each session across four prayers during this busy morning.

With Hamptons at our disposal, we expect numbers to split between the two buildings and expect to handle a similar number of 250 per session, with two prayers each lasting 30 minutes in the morning.

Although Eid prayers are only twice a year, we know this will require management to ensure there are no impacts on the local community. We are looking to engage Clarion Gate Management Group, which will be the first time Hamptons has worked with an agency, to ensure we do not inconvenience our neighbours.

We also plan to change the operation of the bars at the centre, to become more health and fitness and family focused.

But we also understand the importance of keeping bookings that have been placed prior to our purchase, and we will be honouring those bookings.

Our plan is to revamp the existing bar area as a café, with alcohol provision gradually phased out. It is our plan to offer a high quality café bar experience offering new food and drink options at a reasonable price, and in doing so, increase both usage and revenue throughout the day, making a valuable contribution to the upkeep and improvement of facilities. This will also mean new employment opportunities and potentially more hours for the existing staff.

We held our first meeting with the Hamptons staff, ahead of the sale completion, as we know the importance of having a good team around us. Having loyal, committed and trusted staff is important to Hamptons future success and we want to be part of one team going forward.

As we have previously stated, rooms will remain available to hire by anyone regardless of faith for private functions. We cannot, however, offer rooms to rent on a permanent basis as the revenue model needs to change in order to become profitable.

The main hall and first floor rooms are available to hire on an hourly basis by any faith groups. We are sorry that we will have to change the terms of use for the Buddhist room, but this is a business decision, and it can still be hired on an hourly basis.

We would like residents to understand that as a non-profit based company, our plan is to earn revenue, pay our debtors, reinvest into the centre and continue our charity work.

Another important aspect of our plans is to offer services that help the community – for example, youth services, health check-ups, mother and toddler groups and social groups for older people.

Our model is very much community based, as we always have been, and this is an important step forward in our future which will allow us to work together with everyone to make the centre a success.

We are currently planning an open day for residents, where there will be opportunities to talk to us directly.

Finally, I wish you a successful evening and look forward to our continued discussions and our future work together to make the Hamptons more successful.

Yours sincerely,

Ayman Syed

General Secretary

Chelmsford Muslim Society