

News

ITEM 8L

Anger builds as fire-hit building left as eyesore in centre of town

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A YEAR ago, we reported how a once-pretty building in an important shopping street had been allowed to become a horrendous eyesore.

Local businesses accused Bridgend Council of failing to take action as 53 Nolton Street fell into disrepair.

Now anger is mounting as the last year has only seen the three-storey site deteriorate further.

Sarko Hassani, a barber at the Golden Cut shop opposite, feels let down by the council.

"If something like this was in Cardiff they wouldn't leave it for years", said the 20-year-old.

"I think they would fix it in five or six months maximum."

Known locally as The Ranch, the former Bridgend chip shop is derelict with a caved-in roof, boarded-up windows, large holes in the exterior and piles of debris inside.

Health and safety fencing means pedestrians have to cross to the other pavement to walk past.

The site, which dates back to 1905, was damaged by fire in April 2020, but even before, the blaze, there were frustrations as the owner Abdul Mubith ignored council pleas to improve the building's condition.

A year ago, we reported how the council had not sent Mr Mubith a notice demanding improvement since 2020.

This week, we asked the council what action it has taken in the last 12 months and whether it has considered a compulsory purchase order.

A spokesman said the situation is "not straightforward" and there is "no quick or easy solution."

"We are unable to go into explicit detail at this time, but discussions have been held with a view to seeing the premises sold to a developer, and evaluations and estimates in support of this are currently being carried out," he added.

At the same time, further legal action is being considered while a structural engineer has identified what works would be necessary to bring the building back into use in the event that suitable funding was to become available.

As with our previous coverage Mr Mubith, 43, has not responded to approaches for comment. In 2018, he was disqualified from



The derelict building, known as The Ranch, in Nolton Street, Bridgend
ROB BROWNE

being a company director for six years because of his "conduct" while running Bombay Spice, a Swansea business which has since closed down.

According to Land Registry documents, he bought The Ranch in 2011 for £110,000.

Around that time the unit was a restaurant called Mumbai King. It later became an Italian called Franco's but the site appears to have been empty since 2015.

Mr Hassani believes people avoid the street because they fear the Ranch will one day "crash down", though the council insists the building is safe.

The barber added: "The view from the shop is this place. It's really ugly and getting much worse. People are getting scared to come towards the shop. All the customers see it and they always ask me, 'Anything new?'. I have to tell them there is no update."

John Pritchard, who owns nearby antique shop Quirky, said: "It would be lovely if it was done up. It's such a shame because it could be an asset to the town and bring more people in."

It's a waste of a beautiful building. "We're at the point now where we say, 'If you can't find us, we're opposite the burned-out building.' It would be nice if we could say we're opposite a lovely old building."

The 56-year-old added that he would be happy to pull together with



The Ranch is opposite Golden Cut barbers
ROB BROWNE



The view of The Ranch from the barbers
ROB BROWNE

other business owners and discuss ideas for the site. He believes a large advertising hoarding would be preferable to the current view.

According to documents we obtained last year, the council wrote to Mr Mubith in April 2019, asking for his "co-operation" to improve the site.

Three months later the council issued a notice saying there had been "no significant improvement."

The notice told Mr Mubith to make changes including removing old wooden boards and a tarpaulin, repainting concrete and reglazing windows and doors. Mr Mubith failed to do so.

Then the fire in April 2020 made the building a safety risk. The council stepped in with emergency work to remove loose roof tiles, damaged gutters and other debris which could have fallen to the street below.

And the council had to act again in October that year, telling Mr Mubith it would remove a dangerous piece of timber overhanging nearby properties.

Two weeks later Mr Mubith, of West Cross in Swansea, admitted failing to comply with the council's original warning. He was ordered to pay £462 at Cardiff Magistrates' Court.

The council spokesman said: "While options for dealing with the matter through building control are limited as the structure has not been found to be externally dangerous, a great deal of work has been taking place behind the scenes to address the problem..."

"Bridgend County Borough Council remains committed towards finding a solution to this issue, and thanks businesses and residents for their patience and understanding in the meantime."

Speaking about the 2020 fire, a South Wales Fire Service spokeswoman said the structure of the building was "deemed unsafe to conduct a fire investigation" but it was suspected to be deliberate.

And a South Wales Police spokesman said: "It was treated as a deliberate fire and all available lines of enquiry were followed up at the time, but no suspect could be identified and no arrests were made."

"Of course, if anybody has information about the incident they can contact us via 101 and give reference 129055. Alternatively, they can call Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111."

Diesel drivers 'have every right to feel hard done by' over fuel prices

DRIVERS are being charged 20p per litre more for diesel than petrol despite there being little difference in the fuels' wholesale prices, according to new analysis.

The RAC urged retailers to cut diesel pump prices to "fairer levels" which reflect costs. It found that diesel's wholesale

price - the amount that retailers pay for fuel - was just 6p per litre more than petrol last week. But a litre of diesel is being sold at an average of around 168p, while petrol is at 148p. RAC analysis found retailers are "subsidising" cheaper petrol by taking a margin of 20p on every litre of diesel they sell.

Latest UK Government figures show 7.6 million vehicles licensed in the UK are diesel-powered, including the vast majority of vans. That represents 43% of all vehicles on the road.

RAC spokesman Simon Williams said: "Drivers of the country's diesel vehicles have every right to feel hard done by as they're paying a huge premium for the fuel which in no way reflects its lower wholesale cost. "For nearly a month, the gap between wholesale petrol and diesel prices has been less than 10p a litre and in recent days, it has reduced to just 3.5p, yet average diesel prices at the pumps remain stubbornly high,

having fallen by only 2p since the start of February. "The fact membership-only retailer Costco has been able to cut the average price of a litre of diesel by 4p last week shows what's possible, but we badly need other fuel retailers to treat drivers of diesel vehicles fairly."