

Wheelchair user criticises uni over provision at lecture theatre

A DISABLED man has accused the University of Gloucestershire of discrimination after being forced to sit at the back of a lecture theatre during an election debate.

Wheelchair-bound George Ridgeon said the design of the underground room meant it was

impossible for him to sit anywhere other than a few feet from the door.

The 65-year-old, from Churchdown, says university bosses have breached laws which dictate "reasonable adjustments" must be made to give disabled people access to buildings used regularly

by the public. He said: "I think it's an outrage that I'm stuck here when the debate is going on down there. This was outlawed a long time ago. I cannot believe a university building has not been adapted for people in wheelchairs."

Mr Ridgeon was backed by his

friend and prospective Parliamentary candidate for the Monster Raving Loony Party, Ken Hanks.

He said: "I think it is an embarrassment. Do we or do we not take disabled people into account when we design these buildings?"

A spokeswoman for the university said: "The lecture theatre is compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act and I am very sorry that the gentlemen was unhappy with the wheelchair spaces available.

"We try to ensure wheelchair users are comfortable."



George Ridgeon



Conservative Mark Coote



Raving Loony 'Dancing' Ken Hanks

University ignored my help – MP

BY STEPHEN HACKWELL

THE University of Gloucestershire failed to respond to an offer of help from business experts to tackle its financial troubles, according to Cheltenham's MP Martin Horwood.

The Liberal Democrat said he had offered to organise independent advice for bosses at the cash-strapped university, but was ignored by vice-chancellor Patricia Broadfoot.

Speaking at a pre-election debate organised by students at The Park campus, Mr Horwood criticised the way university bosses had tried to fill a £3 million black hole in their budget.

He said: "I do not think the situation is being at all well handled. We have ended up in the situation where this is one of the most indebted institutions in the country. It is a disastrous state to be in.

"I have already offered to find

external business advice for the university, but I have yet to hear anything back from the vice-chancellor or other members of the senior management team.

"We need some kind of a rescue plan and that is something that is quite particular to Gloucestershire."

University bosses announced last year they planned to sell the Pittville campus as they tried to slash costs. It closes in the 2011 summer holidays.

The new London campus near Canary Wharf had already been put up for a sale and 100 jobs cut across the board.

Plans to relocate Pittville to Blackfriars in Gloucester at a cost of £40 million have also been scrapped.

Courses at the media, arts, and communication faculty in Pittville will be spread across all other campuses, although some may be switched earlier.

Mr Horwood has already described the closure of Pit-



QUIZZED: Martin Horwood and James Green field questions

ville as a "tragedy". He said the historic significance of the campus, as well as state-of-the-art facilities such as its media centre, would be missed.

Paul Drake, executive director of external relations at

the university, said: "The university continues to make steady progress and we are forecasting a budget surplus for the year end 2009/10.

"It is unfortunate the MP took the opportunity to criticise university management at a student-run event where the objective was for constituents to find out about the policies of each political representative.

"The university was pleased to receive offers of business support from Mr Horwood although we have yet to receive any contact details from him."



TOP TABLE: Chairman Kevan Blackadder (centre) with Ken Hanks, Mark Coote, Martin Horwood and James Green

Election question

■ How would you help universities like the University of Gloucestershire when they are struggling?

Ken Hanks: "They have got to start to look inwards and help themselves. What is stopping a higher grade student teaching a lower grade student? That would save some money."

Mark Coote: "The system is not being audited properly. I would advocate a similar system to schools and Ofsted, where someone from outside can make changes if they are needed."

James Green: "Labour has been committed to increasing the number of people with access to higher education.

That commitment will continue."

Martin Horwood: "I would like to see a cap on the number of students at certain universities, but not at successful ones like Gloucestershire. There is no point in having lots of courses all over the country if there are no jobs for graduates."



Members of the audience at the event

Election question

■ If you were elected, what would you do first for Cheltenham?

Martin Horwood (Liberal Democrats): "When I was last elected in 2005, cuts to NHS hospitals was the main issue on the agenda. It is the same again this time. There will be cuts to public spending, but fighting for our local NHS would be my first priority."

Ken Hanks (Monster Raving Loony Party): "There are people urinating in the street every night in Cheltenham. I would repair public toilets because I think standards have fallen immensely over the last few years."

Mark Coote (Conservatives): "One of the commitments my party has made is to abolish the Regional Spatial Strategy within 10 weeks of forming a new Government. If I am elected, I will ensure this timescale is kept to."

James Green (Labour): "The really big issues in Cheltenham have not been confronted. Housing is one of those. I would make sure there is enough affordable housing for people who need it."

Election question

■ How would you tackle crime and the fear of crime?

James Green: "Crime has actually come down by about a third since 1997. I think more could be done online to get people closer to their local police. There should be more ways of interacting and getting the information they need."

Martin Horwood: "We need to cut bureaucracy. Why should an officer spend hours filling in paperwork when they could have a camera fitted on their helmet that would record statements. That would mean more bobbies out on the beat."

Mark Coote: "We need to get rid of targets from Whitehall that just take up time and distort statistics. We should trust local police officers to know what the local priorities are and let them get on with it."

Ken Hanks: "I am full of admiration for the police. I think we need better education to prevent crime."

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