

**TITLE OF REPORT: BALDOCK TOWN HALL GROUP DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN**

**REPORT OF THE HEAD OF POLICY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**1. SUMMARY**

- 1.1 Further to Cabinet's resolution at its meeting of March 2011 to grant the Baldock Town Hall Group (BTHG) one year in which to develop a business plan, this report advises Members of the receipt of a draft business plan from the group and ongoing discussions to clarify points within the draft plan prior to its formal presentation to Cabinet at the March 2012 meeting.
- 1.2 Further to discussion at the Council's Cabinet on 15<sup>th</sup> February, to seek the views of Baldock and District Area Committee members with regard to the proposals being made by the Baldock Town Hall Group, to accompany and inform the final report back for consideration by Cabinet on 20<sup>th</sup> March.

**2. FORWARD PLAN**

- 2.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key decision.

**3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 An officer report was prepared for the 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2011 meeting of Cabinet recommending that steps be taken to dispose of the Baldock Town Hall. At the same meeting, a group of local people (now called the "Baldock Town Hall Group" (BTHG)) made a presentation to Cabinet and expressed an interest in taking over the town hall under appropriate lease terms from the Council with a view to running it as a community asset.
- 3.2 Following discussion, Cabinet resolved:

**8. LAND AND PROPERTY DISPOSALS - BALDOCK TOWN HALL:-**

- 1) *That Baldock Town Hall be declared as surplus to requirements;*
- 2) *That the disposal of the building be deferred until 31 March 2012 at the earliest, to allow time for the Baldock Town Hall Group to create a business plan for the reinstatement of Baldock Town Hall as a community asset;*
- 3) *That an appropriate level of officer support to the Baldock Town Hall Group be agreed with the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs.*

**REASON FOR DECISION:** *To allow the Baldock Town Hall Group sufficient time to prepare a Business Plan for the future of the Town Hall.*

- 3.3 Since that decision was taken by Cabinet there has been a continuing dialogue between officers and members of the BTHG to develop a proposal which would establish a possible basis for the Baldock Town Hall to be brought back into use for the community. Several site visits and condition inspections have been undertaken by the group, with the assistance of NHDC officers, to ensure that any proposal made is formed on a sound basis.
- 3.4 The essence of the proposal made by the BTHG is to establish an Arts and Heritage Centre, that aspiration being very much in keeping with the previous community expressions of interest for the return of the building to public use. The proposal envisages the provision of a fully sound proofed basement for musical activities and use as a youth club, a heritage centre on the first floor including relocating the privately run museum, which could be expanded to better display and showcase the architectural heritage of Baldock.
- 3.5 The second floor would become 'The Thomas Pryor Theatre', its name commemorating the original benefactor of the land on which the building stands, and would be available for a wide range of theatrical and arts events and workshops; the theatre would also provide a venue for private hire for weddings, children's parties etc.
- 3.6 Whilst recognising that the proposals of December 2011 and the draft Business Plan originally received in late January were very much of an outline nature, the overall concept and enthusiasm displayed by group members is noted and appreciated by NHDC officers. Following the presentation by the BTHG, internal briefings by officers to appropriate Members and portfolio holders were held at which officers were able to provide positive feedback on the group's outline proposals for Baldock Town Hall. Officers did however indicate the need for some areas of the BTHG proposal to require further development / clarification.
- 3.7 It was agreed that in order to complete a business plan by the end of March 2012 significant elements of information would still be needed from the Council, and much of that information has now been provided. The Head of Service for Policy and Community Services has provided the BTHG with further information regarding condition surveys, covenants affecting the building etc and a further meeting of technical officers with the BTHG to progress the draft business plan further was scheduled in late February. Any outstanding or pertinent issues from those discussions will be informed to the Baldock Area Committee verbally at the time of presenting this report to ensure that the very latest information is available to inform their discussions.
- 3.8 Several of the financial proposals made by BTHG to the Council are still to be reviewed and their feasibility assessed, and other aspects require more detailed work by the Group, but this is work which is already underway and is intended to inform the final report to Cabinet on 20<sup>th</sup> March. This is to enable Cabinet to reach a decision on whether the final business case represents a robust and acceptable basis for the transfer of the building for community use.

#### **4. ISSUES**

- 4.1 Officers from a range of NHDC services have reviewed and considered the draft business plan attached as **Appendix A**. Whilst accepting that the proposal is still in draft form, initial consideration of the business plan indicates that further supporting evidence for a number of the proposals expressed by the BTHG will be required to enable all relevant technical officers to advise Cabinet so that Members can reach an informed decision. That work is currently underway.

4.2 The transfer of the Baldock Town Hall proposed by the group is in the spirit of the recent Localism Act, which encourages such approaches being made by community groups to take on the management of local assets.

4.3 At its meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2012, NHDC Cabinet acknowledged that the proposals for Baldock Town Hall, Hitchin Town Hall and Letchworth Town Hall were all different. Baldock Town Hall could be operated by a community group for community purposes under a long lease from the Council; Hitchin Town Hall would be managed by Hitchin Town Hall Limited, but the Council's direct involvement with the building would continue, as part of the site would be occupied by the District Museum; and Letchworth Town Hall would be offered to interested third parties, under the terms of a long lease from the Council. It was noted, therefore, that the level of officer support and resources that could be devoted to each of these proposals would vary accordingly. Cabinet resolved that the draft Business Plan as then presented should be noted and welcomed, although it should also be noted that further revision has now been undertaken and the version presented here at **Appendix A** forms a second draft.

## **5. LEGAL, FINANCIAL, RISK AND HR IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 There are, as in any transfer of an asset, a number of legal implications with regard to any covenants which may apply to the use of the Baldock Town Hall, the terms of any lease agreement or any clauses which may need to be considered/included in order to protect all parties in what must ultimately remain a 'council' asset, albeit on a long lease arrangement.

5.2 There are potentially a number of financial and risk implications which will first need additional information or clarification from the Baldock Town Hall Group in order for robust assessment and subsequent advice to Cabinet to be completed.

5.3 The potential transfer of the hall to a community group, will require less officer resource to that currently afforded to the Hitchin Town Hall project since that includes redevelopment of an operational, not closed building, but will require input from officers across the same technical areas of expertise. To progress any transfer will therefore require very careful management of potentially conflicting workloads and project priorities. At their meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> February, Cabinet requested that officers continue to provide relevant support as required toward this project.

5.4 However, investing technical officer resource into the consideration of the draft business Plan at this early stage, including seeking further clarification of points made in the plan should enable officers to provide a more robust assessment of the commitment being made by the Authority in the longer term. The report back to Cabinet in March will therefore include such analysis.

## **6. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 The Equality Act 2010 came into force on the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2010, a major piece of legislation. The Act also created a new Public Sector Equality Duty, which came into force on the 5<sup>th</sup> April 2011. There is a General duty, described in 8.2, that public bodies must meet, underpinned by more specific duties which are designed to help meet them.

- 6.2 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of its functions, give **due regard** to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 6.3 In the case of the existing town hall building, there will evidently be a need for full DDA compliance and the provision of a lift, or appropriate stairlifts, to enable potential hirers and audiences to access upper floors in the longer term. However, phasing the development into three stages, with the first accessing only the ground floor level will allow appropriate improvements to be made in due course and once funding is available. The draft business plan therefore describes a building which can be used by the wider community.

## **7. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND MEMBERS**

- 7.1 There has been much consultation with local Councillors over recent years regarding the future of Baldock Town Hall and more recently with relevant portfolio holders (those being Assets, Community and Rural Affairs and Leisure) in respect of the proposal by 'The Baldock Town Hall Group'.
- 7.2 The potential for transfer of the Baldock Town Hall has been subject to long term, and detailed discussion with local residents, including the completion and analysis of a survey which forms an appendix to the BTHG draft business plan attached here.
- 7.3 Cabinet requested officers submit the draft business plan to Baldock and District Area Committee at its meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> March in order for their discussions/comments could inform Cabinet's consideration of options for the transfer of Baldock Town Hall at its March 2012 meeting.

## **8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 8.1 That Baldock and District Area Committee note and welcome the receipt by the council of the draft business plan as presented by the Baldock Town Hall Group.
- 8.2 That Baldock and District Area Committee comment on the proposals being made within the Draft Business Plan affixed at Appendix A

## **9. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 9.1 To acknowledge that the BTHG have prepared a draft business plan for the transfer of the Baldock Town Hall to community management as originally requested by Cabinet in March 2011.
- 9.2 To enable the comments of the Baldock and District Area Committee to be made to and considered by Cabinet at their meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

## **10. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED –**

- 10.1 None applicable at this stage.

**11. APPENDICES**

11.1 Appendix A – Draft Business Plan from Baldock Town Hall Group (To Follow)

**12. Background Papers**

12.1 None

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