

Public Document Pack

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 12TH OCTOBER, 2021

SUPPLEMENTARY AGENDA

Please find attached supplementary papers relating to the above meeting, as follows:

Agenda No **Item**

9. **CHARWOOD HOUSE UPDATE** (Pages 3 - 6)

REPORT OF THE SENIOR ESTATES SURVEYOR

To update the Committee on the outcome of the community engagement exercise for Charnwood House.

To request the Committee's approval to seek Cabinet's authority to dispose of Charnwood House by way of a lease of maximum term of 99 years, and to seek Cabinet's authority to market the property for leasing by informal tender.

Please find enclosed a summary of findings from the Charnwood House public questionnaire.

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Charnwood Open Day Analysis Summary

Summary of Findings

The Charnwood Open Days on 3rd and 4th September 2021 were a great success, attracting over 200 visitors across the two days. Over 180 questionnaires have now since been returned, of which 34 responses were completed on behalf of organisations and the rest by individuals.

There was an overwhelming level of support for the idea of a Community Hub (<85% in favour, <15% not sure, 1%> against). The main reasons for not supporting the idea of a community hub were a desire for more information over exactly what form this would take or concern that it may not be sustainable or have enough initial investment to succeed.

There were also differing views on what the focus of the community hub should be, with some respondents advocating a more charity focussed arrangement whilst others were more keen to see a one stop shop for investors and entrepreneurs. There was also a large amount of support for educational or artistic use. A full list of the ideas and suggestions put forward can be found at the end of this summary.

Respondents were keen to remain informed of decision making around this issue as the project progressed. 80%> of respondents are happy to be contacted again regarding the plans for Charnwood House and this pool of engaged members of the community could prove to be the basis of a useful sounding board over various aspects of the plans as the project progresses.

Over 60 respondents indicated that they or the organisation they are affiliated with would be interested in helping to develop or operate a Community Hub. The nature of these expressions of interest is not contained in this summary as the information may be commercially sensitive for some of those involved or contain personal details, however a list of those expressing interest and the nature of this interest will be forwarded to the Estates team for further consideration.

The Questionnaire also asked respondents to give their views on any business ideas they had for the building. Many expressed concern at this question, referencing the fact that the building had been donated to the people of Hitchin for community use. Others were keen for it to be recognised that there was the need to make the building sustainable. There were a number of suggestions put forward for how commercial ventures could operate throughout the building (such as hot-desking for home workers) or simply alongside the community focussed organisations accommodated within a Community Hub (such as the introduction of a café on site). A list of commercial suggestions made is also included at the bottom of this summary.

Respondents were also asked what aspects of the building they felt needed to be protected in any redevelopment. Many expressed concern that the building was grade II listed and should not be modified in any way. A high number of responses referenced the need to make the building more accessible, with a lift and toilet facilities being the main alterations desired. Overall there was not a clear consensus over which parts of the building were most loved. Some organisations pointed out that they would need to have the internal areas reconfigured to create smaller spaces for things like interview rooms, but others expressed a desire to retain the larger sized rooms for other needs and uses. A strong desire to protect

the external and internal features shone through the responses in equal measure, but there were more specific details such as the protection of the original window designs, coving details and the neighbouring Physic Garden (particularly during any refurbishment works). It was however clear that the building is much loved by the community and strong interest for a variety of different reasons in protecting its overall character. The Hitchin public are clearly very passionate and invested in the future of this building.

List of Community Hub Ideas Suggested

- Citizens Advice Bureau and other such organisations as part of a one-stop shop.
- Pop up shops and organisational use
- Hot desking spaces for home workers
- Food banks and homelessness support
- Donation points for surplus food
- Support for those suffering with loneliness or from Domestic Abuse
- Recycling/repairing centre
- Workshops for life skills and education or simply community DIY use
- Workshop for artistic use (model making etc.)
- Dance classes
- Artistic centre for variety of art and craft classes / groups
- Entrepreneurial support centre providing support and advice for start-up businesses
- Mental health support and safe, quiet spaces for those with mental health needs
- A space for flexible hire of various useful spaces for community groups
- Meeting rooms for various flexible use
- Performance spaces for drama etc.
- Artistic exhibition space
- Language and learning support
- Community cinema
- Lecture spaces
- Rehearsal spaces
- Carers' support and support for those with care needs
- Expanded library
- Therapy space
- Music and choir use
- Child and adult education
- Mix of flexible and permanent space
- Community kitchen for cookery, classes and life skills
- Tech & digital assistance

List of Business Ideas Suggested (Please note some of these overlap the Community Hub list)

- Wedding venue / event use
- Residential use
- Cafe use
- Shops
- Hired meeting space
- Offices
- Hot desking
- Gym

- Market stall style events
- AGMs / Conferences
- Craft Workshop
- Cinema
- Bar / Cocktail bar
- Repair Shop
- Fitness Sessions
- Music Tuition
- Temporary housing/accommodation
- Studio (art or music)
- Restaurant

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