

Insert:
TCMG : 20th October 2026
Report by: Pam Scott
Lead Cllr: Brett Mickleburgh
Executive Councillor Economy,
Regeneration and Housing



Wards	Open / Exempt	Key Decision?
Huntingdon East	Open.	Yes

Report Title: Acquisition of the Amber Centre

Executive Summary:

Places for People are progressing a comprehensive redevelopment of Suffolk House and adjoining residential land in Huntingdon. A planning application has been submitted for 87 new affordable homes, replacing Suffolk House, Grenville House, the Mayfield Road bungalows and associated garages.

A further regeneration opportunity has arisen through the proposed disposal by Cambridgeshire County Council of the nearby Amber Centre, a former adult education and community facility at 36 Mayfield Road, Huntingdon.

The acquisition and future redevelopment of the Amber Centre would complement the existing Suffolk House proposals and create the opportunity for a second phase of regeneration. Although the emerging Local Plan identifies the site as suitable for approximately 12 homes if developed independently, earlier work indicates that its inclusion within a comprehensive regeneration scheme could potentially enable the delivery of up to approximately 40 additional homes. The final housing capacity would be subject to detailed design, viability and planning considerations.

Places for People can only acquire the property on a conditional basis, subject to securing planning permission. Cambridgeshire County Council, however, requires an unconditional sale, due to its disposal policy. It is therefore proposed that HDC acquires the property for £550,000 on an unconditional sale basis and subsequently sells it to Places for People once planning permission for the second phase has been secured. The current working assumption is that the onward sale would take place within approximately nine months.

This approach would secure the site in the short term, build on the investment already being made by Places for People through the Suffolk House regeneration and create the opportunity to deliver additional affordable housing.

The proposed acquisition would:

- Secure a strategically important site
- Build on the investment already being made through Suffolk House regeneration
- Support a comprehensive rather than fragmented approach to development
- Enable the current 87 home planning application to proceed without delay
- Create the opportunity to deliver additional affordable housing as a second phase of the wider regeneration.

The report therefore seeks approval for the use of £550,000 of capital funding to acquire the Amber Centre and delegated authority to complete the acquisition and subsequent sale to Places for People.

Recommendations	
1.1.	Approve the use of funding (capital) to acquire the Amber Centre from Cambridgeshire County Council.
1.2.	To delegate to the Deputy Chief Executive & Corporate Director (Place) and the Corporate Director of Finance and Resources (S151 Officer) in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance & Resources and the Portfolio Holder for Economy, Regeneration and Housing to: • Agree the final terms of the acquisition from Cambridgeshire County Council • Agree the terms of the subsequent sale to Places for People in a back to back agreement • Approve any interim property management, access, security or licensing arrangements – which may include demolition and clearance or works licenses. • Complete all necessary agreements, contracts and legal documentation • Take all necessary steps to complete both transactions and support the wider regeneration of Suffolk House and the surrounding area.

Key Corporate Plan Priorities	
1	The proposed acquisition supports the Council’s regeneration, place shaping and strategic housing objectives and aligns with Priority 2 of the Corporation Plan, “Creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations”, particularly the objective of improving housing.
2	The proposal would support comprehensive regeneration, help increase the potential supply of affordable housing and make more effective use of previously developed land. The Suffolk House regeneration scheme is also specifically referenced in Objective 28 of the Corporate Plan 2026/27. This will enable the Council to nominate applicants from the Council’s Housing Register and meet housing need.
Place Strategy Priorities	

1	The proposed acquisition would support the Pride in Place journey by enabling the comprehensive redevelopment of the area around Suffolk House, Huntingdon.
2	

Report Author(s)

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

(Detail the purpose & need for the report, to explain what the report is for and why it is needed. Detail the rationale for the report.

- 1.1** To seek approval for the purchase of the Amber Centre, a former adult education and community facility located at 36 Mayfield Road, Huntingdon PE29 1NL from Cambridgeshire County Council for the sum of £550,000.
- 1.2** To provide members with an overview of the Suffolk House regeneration proposals being progressed by Places for People.
- 1.3** To explain how the acquisition of the Amber Centre would support a second phase of the wider regeneration
- 1.4** To seek authority for the subsequent sale of the property to Places for People to facilitate the delivery of affordable housing.

2. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

- 2.1** Places for People are progressing the comprehensive redevelopment of Suffolk House and adjoining residential land in Huntingdon. A planning application has been submitted to Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) for 87 new affordable homes replacing the existing Suffolk House, Grenville House, Mayfield bungalows and associated garages. The existing buildings are approaching the end of their functional life and extensive upgrading is not considered to represent a financially prudent long-term solution. Suffolk House is the only building in the district that does not meet current building safety standards.
- 2.2** The proposed development would provide a mixture of one-to-four-bedroom homes as apartments and town houses for social rent and shared ownership. The proposals are also expected to include:
 - accessible and adaptable homes
 - a small number of wheelchair accessible properties
 - new landscaping
 - sustainable drainage
 - secure cycle storage
 - measures to achieve more than 10% biodiversity net gain.

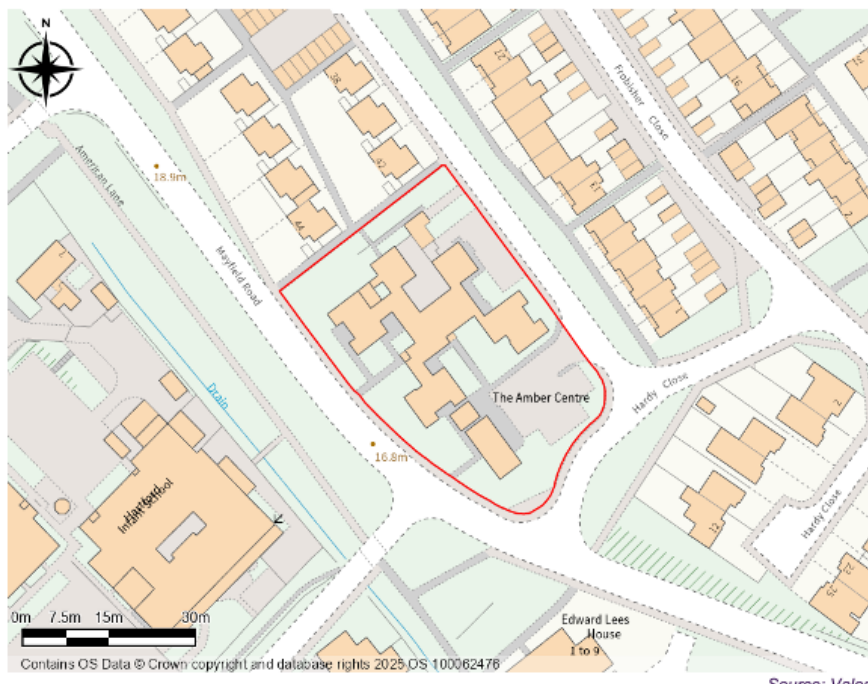
The planning application which was submitted in July 2026 is being managed through a Planning Performance Agreement.

- 2.3** Places for People began informing affected residents about the proposed redevelopment in May 2025. Several properties were already vacant and by June 2026 the remaining 22 residents had been moved to alternative suitable accommodation.
- 2.4** The Council has worked with Places for People for several years in an enabling capacity as part of its strategic housing delivery. The Council recently disposed of two small land parcels within the Suffolk House site to Places for People to facilitate

the comprehensive regeneration of the area. Please see image below, which also shows the wider site.



- 2.5** As the Suffolk House proposals have progressed a further opportunity has arisen in relation to the nearby Amber Centre (also referred to as the Music Centre). The Amber Centre is owned by Cambridgeshire County Council and was approved for disposal. As part of a County agreement the Council's in Cambridgeshire are offered a first opportunity to purchase land and buildings that they are disposing of, they therefore approached HDC to see if we would be interested in acquiring the property. Two valuations have been obtained by the County Council, one from Carter Jonas for £575,000 and one from Eddisons for £525,000, the County Council's disposal policy states that the price for the site would be the average of the two valuations, in this case £550,000, this price is based on a site with planning permission.
- 2.6** The proposed acquisition of the Amber Centre should be considered in the context of the wider Suffolk House Regeneration being proposed by Places for People and build on the investment already being made by them in the area, it would be considered as a second phase of redevelopment, so that there would be no delay in determining the current planning application that has been submitted. Acquisition of the Amber Centre site would also allow opportunities for it to be used as a site compound or facility to support the adjacent redevelopment. The core principle of this arrangement is to enable and support long-term, positive place-making and support the Council's Place Strategy as part of the Pride in Place journey. It will also enable a more comprehensive form of development by delivering a much larger regeneration of the area; this scheme would also have the benefit of delivering an increased level of affordable housing.



- 2.7** Officers explored the option of Places for People acquiring the Amber Centre directly. However, Places for People are currently only able to acquire the property on a conditional basis subject to securing satisfactory planning, whereas the County Council requires an unconditional sale, as per their disposal policy. It is therefore proposed that the HDC acquires the property on an interim basis, with the intention of selling it on to Places for People. HDC will then sell the property to Places for People once planning permission for Phase Two has been secured. The current working assumption is that the onward sale would take place within approximately nine months, although this will be dependent upon the planning process and completion of the necessary legal agreements.
- 2.8** Draft Head of Terms have been received from both the County Council and Places for People. Before the Council enters into the acquisition, officers will seek to agree suitable contractual protections setting out the proposed onward sale arrangements, the allocation of holding and transactions costs, responsibility for management and security of the property and position should planning permission be delayed or not secured. This will be subject to legal agreement between HDC, the County Council and Places For People. Final terms will be subject to legal, financial and property advice and the delegated approvals set out in the recommendations.
- 2.9** The acquisition of the Amber Centre creates the opportunity for a second phase of the wider Suffolk House regeneration. The emerging Local Plan identifies the 0.35-hectare Amber Centre site as suitable for approximately 12 homes on a standalone basis. However, earlier work considering the site as part of the wider comprehensive regeneration indicated that incorporation of the Amber Centre could potentially enable a significantly greater housing yield, with early estimates suggesting up to around 40 additional homes. Any final number would be subject to detailed design, viability and planning considerations. The Council will have nomination rights to all rented homes delivered as part of this development.

3. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED & NOT RECOMMENDED

- 3.1** The Council could decide not to purchase the Amber Centre from the County Council and let them sell the site on the open market to deliver market housing, instead HDC has decided to purchase the site to enable Places for People to develop the land solely for affordable housing.

4. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

- 4.1** N/A

5. POST-DECISION IMPLEMENTATION

- 5.1** The recommendation is to delegate to the Deputy Chief Executive & Corporate Director (Place) and the Corporate Director of Finance and Resources (S151 Officer) in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance & Resources and the Portfolio Holder for Economy, Regeneration and Housing to enable the acquisition and sale to Places for People to take place, this will be done following due diligence and legal advice from HDC's legal advisors as soon as possible following approval to proceed.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE DECISION

6.1 Council Key Priorities and Performance

- Creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations – the proposed acquisition supports the Council's regeneration, place shaping and strategic housing objectives and aligns with Priority 2 of the Corporation Plan, "Creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations", particularly the objective of improving housing.
- The proposal would support comprehensive regeneration, help increase the supply of affordable housing and make more effective use of previously developed land. The Suffolk House regeneration scheme is also specifically referenced in Objective 28 of the Corporate Plan 2026/27. This will enable the Council to nominate applicants from the Council's Housing Register and meet housing need.

6.2 Financial Implications

- 6.2.1** To approve the use of £550,000 of Capital Funding to support the acquisition of the Amber Centre, this will be within the financial year 2026/2027. Additional expenditure referenced in this report to support the acquisition of the Amber Centre will be wherever possible will be claimed back from Places for People as part of the Legal Agreement.

6.3 Policy Implications

6.3.1 N/A

6.4 Legal & Constitutional Implications

6.4.1 Sharpe Pritchard has been appointed to advise the Council on the proposed acquisition and onward disposal. Legal due diligence will include review of title, rights, restrictions, access, vacant possession and any property liabilities, together with the statutory powers and governance requirements applying to both transactions.

6.4.2 The terms of the proposed onward sale will be considered in the context of the Council's legal obligations, including valuation, best-consideration and subsidy-control requirements. Any licence, early-access, demolition or property management arrangements will be documented separately and entered into only following appropriate legal and financial advice.

6.5 Community Impact

6.5.1 The Community impact is captured in the Background and Context of this report, specifically the delivery of affordable housing.

6.6 Environment & Climate Change Implications

6.6.1 N/A

6.7 Equality & Diversity Implications

6.7.1 The Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

Good planning and effective regeneration can improve environments and opportunities for communities experiencing disadvantage. Planning which does not engage with or consider the needs of local communities is unlikely to improve their life chances and may further entrench area-based disadvantage.

The acquisition is not expected, by itself, to result in a direct adverse impact on people with protected characteristics. Any future development proposal will, however, need to consider accessibility, tenure, housing need, community safety and the implications for existing and future residents. A proportionate equality assessment will be undertaken as the detailed Phase Two proposals are developed.

6.8 Implications on Resources

6.8.1 The proposed purchase price from the County Council is £550,000 as an unconditional sale. Approval is sought to fund the acquisition from the Council's capital resources i.e. Reserves. In addition to the purchase price, the Council will incur legal costs and may incur tax,

insurance, security, maintenance, utilities and other transaction and holding costs, where possible these will be paid for by places for People.

The principal financial risk is that the Council retains the asset for longer than currently anticipated or is unable to sell it to Places for People on the expected terms. The proposed transaction documentation and alternative disposal strategy will seek to mitigate this risk.

The acquisition and interim management of the property will be led by existing officers from the housing, regeneration, legal, finance, property and facilities functions. While no additional permanent posts are proposed, the work will create an operational requirement for due diligence, contract management, property inspections, security and oversight until the property is sold.

6.9 Health & Wellbeing Implications

6.9.1 N/A

6.10 Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Implications

(Include any implications to the above presented by the recommendation. Refer to the relevant paragraph in the report if appropriate. Set out examples that show how the decision would have longer term impacts of quality of life, or deliver return on investment).

- 6.10.1** The acquisition of the Amber Centre will enable the Council to support the delivery of new affordable housing through working with Places for People, this will have long term impacts on quality of life for residents in the area. The project removes outdated, unsuitable and no longer fit for purpose accommodation with modern well ventilated and insulated homes with a small number of wheelchair accessible homes which meets the projected need of the area.

7. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 7.1** The Council would assume responsibility for the Amber Centre during the period between acquisition and onward sale. This creates property management risks, including unauthorised access, vandalism, arson, theft, deterioration and associated health and safety liabilities. Before completion officers will establish a formal agreement between HDC and Places for People to cover appropriate insurance, security, inspection and management arrangements. Options being considered include a property guardian service or, satisfactory legal terms, granting Places for People a licence to use and manage the site.

Any proposal for early access, demolition, use as welfare accommodation or use as a construction compound will be subject to the necessary legal, planning, procurement, environmental, insurance and health and safety approvals. Responsibility for the associated costs and liabilities will be documented before access is granted, this would be included in the agreement between parties.

There is a risk that planning permission for Phase Two may be delayed, refused or granted on terms that make the proposed development inviable. The site's identification for housing in the emerging Local Plan provides relevant planning

context but does not guarantee that permission will be granted. The risk will be managed through planning advice, technical due diligence, feasibility work and suitable provisions within the proposed transaction documents.

There is also a small risk that Places for People may be unable or unwilling to complete the onward purchase. Officers have been meeting regularly with Places for People over several years on this regeneration project and are working in partnership on this project, Places for People have already designed a scheme for the Amber Centre site that works alongside the scheme submitted to the Local Planning Authority. As part of the legal agreement with Places for People we will secure their commitment to purchase the site through contractual protections.

The Council may incur acquisition, legal, tax, security, insurance, utilities, rates, maintenance and other holding costs. These costs, together with the proposed funding source and the basis upon which they would be recovered through the onward sale, will be confirmed before ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~onward~~ ^{onward} sale. The Council would be acting entirely independently from the Local Planning Authority in the decision to purchase this site.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS– LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

8.1 N/A