

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
ENVIRONMENTAL WELL BEING**

13TH OCTOBER 2009

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
ECONOMIC WELL BEING**

15TH OCTOBER 2009

CABINET

22ND OCTOBER 2009

**HUNTINGDON TOWN HALL
(Report by Director of Environmental and Community Services)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report concerns the recommendations from an independent report, commissioned by the District Council, into the most effective way to find a viable future for Huntingdon Town Hall.

2. SUPPORTING/BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 Huntingdon Town Hall is a grade 2* listed building in the freehold ownership of the District Council, which holds, it in trust, for the 'public good' of the people of Huntingdon. The ground and first floor are held on three 999 year leases from 1840 by Her Majesty's Court Service (HMCS), as successors to the County Council, from whom the service had been transferred on 1st April 2005. The second floor is occupied by the Town Council (HTC) since local government reorganisation in 1974, there is no formal lease in this respect.
- 2.2 The responsibility for all the upkeep and maintenance of the entire exterior and interior of building lies with HMCS except for interior and windows of the second floor which lies with HTC. HMCS vacated the building in 2007 on completion of the new Combined Justice Centre on Walden Road. HTC use the building sporadically.
- 2.3 Discussions between the District Council and the occupiers have been ongoing for some time to seek a practical and viable way forward to secure the fabric of this most important building and an appropriate use(s). To assist this process the District Council commissioned a report on the condition of the building in 2007. This report concluded that £855K worth of work (plus fees) would need to be undertaken over a four year period to put the building in good order and that further detailed reports were required on some aspects. This estimate however did not include any works necessary for a new use or compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act, including the installation of a lift. The District Council has also acted in its statutory capacity to chase urgent repairs under Listed Building legislation.

- 2.4 Earlier this year the District Council commissioned EW Consultancy Ltd (EWC) to undertake a review, liaise with a number of stakeholders including HTC and to recommend a way forward including appropriate project management arrangements. A copy of EWC's report is appended and has been circulated widely to Councillors and relevant stakeholders.

3. IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 Given the long leases and current responsibility for maintenance the Council could decide to take no further action other than its statutory role as regulator, under Planning and Listed Building legislation. The current condition of the building, whilst by no means perfect is not critical and in this context a watching brief would suffice. Furthermore, the extent of necessary repairs and improvements required over the next few years means that to accept the surrender of the leases without a clear plan for the future of the building would lay the Council open to a considerable liability.
- 3.2 In view of the importance of the building, the District Council has taken a more proactive approach which has resulted in the report referred to above.
- 3.3 The EWC report concluded that: As the first stage in this work, the District Council needs to give consideration to this report and in particular to decide on:
- Its approach to the project in terms of its long term involvement;
 - Project management arrangements;
 - Involvement by other organisations;
 - Immediate Governance arrangements;
 - Support for the project sustainable long term uses;
 - Any financial support in the short and medium term – capital and revenue.
- 3.4 The key recommendations of the EWC report are that the District Council:
1. Agrees to establishing a Building Preservation Trust.
 2. Agrees to the transfer of ownership of the building to the BPT when a viable long-term solution has been identified through the options appraisal.
 3. Provides project management support to the BPT until it is established and can provide its own project management arrangements.
 4. Considers possible BPT trustees.
 5. Agrees to the Steering Group arrangements in the short-term.
 6. Develops the terms of reference for the Steering Group and agrees the organisations to be invited.
 7. Provides some initial start-up funding needed for the matched funds for the option appraisal.
 8. Considers whether it will assist with the long-term revenue funding for the building.
 9. Continues discussions with the DCA (HMCS) on lease surrender.

The report also includes a proposed programmed action plan.

- 3.5 In response to recommendation 7, the current Budget and MTP provides for £10K pa over 2009/10 – 2011/12 to support this work. It is, however, premature to consider a response to recommendation 8 at this time.
- 3.6 The question of a BPT and project arrangements can go on in parallel with discussions with HMCS at the appropriate time (recommendation 9).
- 3.7 The views of HTC and the various stakeholders, concerning the report and its recommendations will be reported to Members.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 The appended report offers the most appropriate way forward to secure the long term future of this most important historical asset. The actions proposed are without prejudice to the separate negotiations which will need to take place, at the appropriate time with HMCS.

5. RECOMMENDATION(S)

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- 5.1 Forward any comments on the proposals to Cabinet

Cabinet

- 5.2 To accept the recommendations of EWC as set out in para 3.4 above and qualified in paragraphs 3.5 and 3.6; including to agree, in principle, to the transfer of ownership of the freehold of Huntingdon Town Hall to an appropriate Building Preservation Trust when a viable long term solution has been identified through a Options Appraisal and subject to appropriate arrangements for the surrender of the current leases.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- EWC Report: Huntingdon Town Hall – A Long Term Sustainable Future and Project Management Arrangements
- Buttress Fuller Alsop Williams Architects - Condition Survey Report March 2007

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