

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet (Capital Assets) Committee 22 January 2013

**Subject: Proposal for the Community Asset Transfer of
Trowbridge Town Hall**

**Cabinet member: Councillor Toby Sturgis - Waste, Property, Environment
and Development Control Services**

Key Decision: No

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on developing plans by the recently formed Trowbridge Town Hall Trust for the transfer of the Trowbridge Town Hall to them under the Council's Community Asset Transfer policy.

Background

2. Trowbridge Town Hall is now vacant, with the Coroner's Service having commenced operation from its new location at 26 Endless Street in Salisbury.
3. The Trowbridge Town Hall Trust expressed their interest in seeking a Community Asset Transfer of the building following a request for interest at the Trowbridge Area Board meeting in July 2011.
4. Cabinet (Capital Assets) Committee considered a report in March 2012, and resolved to approve investigation of potential funding opportunities by the group, and receive a report at a later date demonstrating progress towards the objectives set out.

Main Considerations for the Council

5. A report from the Trowbridge Town Hall Trust is included in Appendix A, which summarises the main achievements of the group to date, as well as their strategic approach to achieving their objectives
6. The group have made good use of support available from the Asset Transfer Unit (an arm of Locality and funded by DCLG), and have networked well with other groups who have successfully promoted similar schemes in other areas. Officers in Property Services have been encouraged by the organisation, commitment and vision of the group, and

are increasingly referring other parties engaging with the transfer process to this project as an example of good practice.

7. Discussions have progressed between the Council and the Town Hall Trust, regarding a period between now and the end of 2013 during which they intend to test the viability of some of their concepts, through extending the use of the building without the need for significant investment. Property Services are working with the Trust to put in place an agreement that will formalise an ongoing use of the building for events and activities in line with their stated objectives.
8. The terms of this arrangement will include provision for a service charge, which will require the Trust to generate some income. However, this service charge is designed to ensure that the Council's financial liability remains approximately in line with the cost of maintaining the building in a vacant condition for the same period of time. This has the added benefit of clarifying responsibilities for the building, providing an ongoing deterrent to vandalism and reducing the Council's facilities management responsibilities.
9. During the period of this arrangement, the Council would remain responsible for the structure and fabric of the building, but the Trust would be obliged to maintain the internal fabric of the building in no worse condition than it currently is. Some works may be carried out as deemed appropriate, but this will be by prior agreement by Property Services, and at all times subject to listed building consent requirements.
10. At the end of this initial period at the end of 2013, if a complete transfer of the property cannot be concluded, the Council would expect the group to take on a full repairing and insuring lease for the building, or declare an end to their interest to enable the Council to progress with a disposal of the property, or to cover all of its financial liabilities for the building. Work on that next possible stage of tenure, will progress in parallel with the Trust's feasibility study process, but it is proposed this be the subject of a further report to the committee nearing the end of 2013, if members wish.

Environmental and climate change considerations

11. Any development of the Town Hall will be expected to demonstrate key improvements in the energy efficiency of the building, and therefore to reduce its CO₂ emissions. This is likely to be a requirement of any funding body, but the Group have also confirmed their commitment to fully exploring opportunities through their proposals, which in themselves will reduce the revenue burden of the building in the long term.
12. An eventual transfer of the building will include the transfer of responsibility for energy and heating, and this will therefore reduce the council's own emissions responsibility under the CRC scheme.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

13. Likewise, any development subsequent to a transfer will be expected to demonstrate key improvements in the equality of access to the functions undertaken in the building. The Council will expect to see a demonstration of how these issues are addressed in any eventual scheme prior to commitment to the transfer.

Risk Assessment

13. Key risks:
 - Financial impact of maintaining the building in a vacant state – eg. heating, security.
 - Ongoing maintenance risk related to keeping the building whilst vacant – eg. deterioration of external fabric.
 - Failure of the Group to achieve their funding ambition – deferring commencement of a sale on the open market.
 - Development of alternative community facilities elsewhere in the town undermining the Town Hall objectives.

Financial Implications

14. The annual costs of maintaining the Town Hall as a vacant building are considered to be in the order of £40,000-60,000. These costs would be borne if the property were placed on the open market, whilst suitable purchasers were secured, and provision is made in the 2013/14 property revenue budget.
15. In the absence of a special purchaser, the market value of the property is considered by Strategic Property Services to be below £250,000. Early soft market testing over the past year or so has indicated a severely depressed market for this type of property. It is expected that a significant marketing period would be required, with no guarantees as to the robustness of proposals for its future use. Any sale would have to be made in accordance with English Heritage's guidance on the sale of heritage assets, which seeks to provide assurances of responsibility of purchasers.

Legal Implications

16. Legal Services are advising on the format of the legal agreement, and will continue to be engaged as further property matters are considered.

Options Considered

17. None

Conclusion

18. The Trowbridge Town Hall Trust are continuing to make good progress towards providing the building with a sustainable future. Members are asked to note the progress made to date and continue their support of the group and their scheme.

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10 January 2013

Background Papers
None

Appendices

Appendix A – Trowbridge Town Hall Group – Update Report