

TITLE OF REPORT: THE FUTURE ARRANGEMENTS FOR HITCHIN TOWN HALL

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL SERVICES
PORTFOLIO HOLDER : COUNCILLOR TRICIA GIBBS

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to report back on the unsuccessful joint application by the Council and the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative (HTCi) to the Community Assets Fund (CAF) for the refurbishment of the Hitchin Town Hall.
- 1.2 The report proposes a further course of action to be followed to secure the longer term viability of the Town Hall.

2. FORWARD PLAN

- 2.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on 1st January 2006 and more recently on 1st November 2007.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The background to this report has been set out in previous reports to Cabinet considered at its meetings on 26th June 2007, August 15th 2007, 16th October 2007 and 29th January 2008.
- 3.2 In particular, at the meeting on 16th October Cabinet resolved:
 - (1) That it be noted that an interim alternative approach for the future of the Town Hall is being proposed on a partnership basis with the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative to make an application for capital funding from the Community Assets Fund;
 - (2) That it be noted that a further report on the alternative options for the management of the Hitchin Town Hall will be submitted to a future Cabinet meeting.
- 3.3 A joint application between the Council and the HTCi was duly prepared and submitted by the deadline date of 15th November 2007.
- 3.4 On Tuesday 15th January, the partnership was advised that the application had progressed from the initial to the detailed assessment stage.
- 3.5 The CAF assessors met with representatives of the partnership on Friday January 25th at which time they inspected the hall and examined the application in greater detail.

- 3.6 The notification that the application was unsuccessful was received on 31st March 2008. The letter explained that when assessed against the relevant criteria listed in the programme guidance notes an offer of a grant could not be made because the Big Lottery Fund's England Committee felt that the evidence provided did not demonstrate the need for the project as well as other applications it considered.
- 3.7 Subsequent to the decision letter, further discussions have been held with the CAF officers to examine more precisely the reasons why the Town Hall application was unsuccessful. A more detailed Assessment Report has now been received, which explains in some depth the CAF Grant Officer comments and perspectives. The report's main recommendation stated:
- 'This application is not recommended for funding as the need for the refurbishment has limited community benefit for specifically targeted beneficiaries'.
- 3.8 There is no right of appeal against the CAF decision. However, there is some very useful information and learning points that need to be addressed whenever a new funding application is made.

4. KEY ISSUES – NEXT STEPS FOR THE TOWN HALL

Continue Asset Transfer Arrangements

- 4.1 The Council's current aim is to secure the asset transfer of the Town Hall to a third party with no direct residual costs to the authority.
- 4.2 The Council has become a second phase pilot for the implementation of the Advancing Assets Demonstration Programme being coordinated on behalf of the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) by the Development Trusts Association (DTA). In summary, this is a national scheme to consider the viability of public assets being transferred to voluntary and community organisations.
- 4.3 The Council has been working in partnership with the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative to examine the future of the Hitchin Town Hall and a scoping meeting was held with the DTA on 19th March 2008, prior to the decision on the CAF application.
- 4.4 Notwithstanding the disappointment of the CAF bid, it is proposed that further discussions and exploration of the options on the asset transfer of the Town Hall be undertaken by the Town Hall partnership in collaboration with the DTA who are able to offer advice and guidance as to how best the long term aim of an asset transfer can be secured.
- 4.5 The DTA has now prepared a scoping document that outlines the type and level of support that can be given. While their support is free, it is time limited to March 31st 2009 and at the conclusion of their period of assistance, it is envisaged that a revised plan of action for the Town Hall will be prepared.
- 4.6 While it is evident that different approaches can be taken and it is, clearly, too early to determine a preferred option, it is the Partnership's understanding that there may be further rounds of community asset funding that will commence later in 2008/9, though

this will not be through the CAF. If such an opportunity arises then a refreshed Town Hall application could be submitted.

- 4.7 The work with the DTA does not, of course, preclude consideration of other ideas and funding sources being examined and applications being made as part of a parallel course of action.

Trust Arrangements

- 4.8 Work is proceeding on this matter, following consultation with external legal advisors. The engagement of independent consultant valuers to advise the Trust on the property and options available to the trustees will be concluded by the week ending 13th June. It is hoped that a report from the consultants will be available for consideration by the trustees by September.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no specific legal implications arising from this report as it is an update only. Before any decision on the future of the Town Hall is made, the trustees of the Workman's Hall and the Gymnasium need to decide how the trust wish to proceed with their property, paragraph 4.7 refers.

6. FINANCIAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Provision has been made to continue the revenue support for the Town Hall for the full financial year 2008/9. This was to allow continuity of community provision while the CAF bid was being considered and the lead in time for commencement of any refurbishment works would go beyond the start of the 2008/09 financial year.
- 6.2 Despite the unsuccessful application to the CAF, the revenue support should remain in place for 2008/9 to allow the examination of alternative options of asset transfer as set out above. Consideration of an extension of further revenue support beyond 31st March 2009 will be necessary as part of this year's corporate business planning process if any asset transfer option should be viable in 2009/10.
- 6.3 The longer term running of the Town Hall must be on a sustainable basis and a detailed Business Plan will need to be developed further. This will be considered in the discussions with the DTA and completed as part of any subsequent funding application.
- 6.4 There is no current provision in the capital programme for any Council contribution towards the refurbishment of the Town Hall.

7. HUMAN RESOURCE AND EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 In the event of the transfer of the Town Hall and its services, there will be 3.5 FTE posts affected. The Council's TUPE policy and practice will be implemented for individual and group consultation.

8. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 8.1 There has been consultation with the HTCi in the preparation of this report.

8.2 The Hitchin Area Committee has been advised on the proposed approach.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Cabinet is asked:

9.1 To note that the application to the Community Assets Fund has been unsuccessful.

9.2 To agree that further discussions about asset transfer and the longer term future of the Hitchin Town Hall should be explored in collaboration with the Development Trusts Association.

9.3 To note that in the event of a further round of asset transfer funding or equivalent being made available, applications will be considered in accordance with notified criteria and timescales.

9.4 To confirm that, in the event of a successful funding application, the decision on the transfer arrangements for the Hitchin Town Hall should be delegated to the Portfolio Holders for Finance and Community Engagement.

9.5 To note that other options for the longer term viability of the Town Hall will also be explored.

9.6 To note that progress on the Trust related issues pertaining to the Town Hall are being progressed and that a further report on the outcomes will be submitted to Cabinet later this year.

10. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

10.2 To achieve a qualified position on the future use of the Town Hall which meets the financial requirements of the Council and at the same time those of Hitchin Town Centre, local residents and existing users.

11. APPENDICES

11.1 None.

12. CONTACT OFFICERS

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13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

13.1 Part 1 and 2 Reports to Cabinet on the Hitchin Town Hall on 16th October 2007 and 29th January 2008.

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