

## CLAIR HALL SITE

REPORT OF: Chief Officers  
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Wards Affected: All  
Key Decision: Yes  
Report to: Cabinet  
20 December 2021

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### Purpose of Report

1. This report recommends the Cabinet carefully considers the outcome of the most recent consultation and engagement on the Clair Hall site (in Appendix 1) and agrees to develop investment options for the site through further feasibility work as outlined in the report.

### Summary

2. As the Council and local economy recover from the pandemic, there is an opportunity to invest in the Clair Hall site.
3. Residents who took part in the most recent engagement and consultation exercise (Appendix 1) support investment in the Clair Hall and/or the site.
4. This report recommends that the Cabinet commissions specialist advice on options for investment in the Clair Hall site and outlines work that is needed to understand possible options. An evidence-based approach is required to explore solutions that are both viable and meet residents' expectations.

### Recommendations

5. **Cabinet is recommended to:**
  - (i) **Carefully consider the outcome of the most recent consultation and engagement activities about the Clair Hall site (in Appendix 1);**
  - (ii) **Agree to develop investment options for the site;**
  - (iii) **Request officers to commission specialists to advise on options for the site. This work to be evidenced-based and reported regularly to Cabinet;**
  - (iv) **Agree to create a £100k reserve to resource this feasibility work by transfer from General Reserve; and**
  - (v) **Authorise officers to extend the licence for the NHS to continue to use Clair Hall as a vaccination centre (see para 13-16).**

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### Background

6. The Clair Hall site is located in Haywards Heath and includes Clair Hall, the Redwood Centre and car park. The hall is a multi-purpose venue comprising a large main hall, a function suite, studio, and bar area.

7. Clair Hall was initially closed to the public on 19th March 2020, in line with the national Covid19 lockdown restrictions. On 14th September 2020 a decision was taken by Cabinet to close the hall. It reopened in December 2020 and currently it is being used by the NHS as a vaccination site.
8. In January 2021 the Council agreed a Consent Order by which it undertook to reconsider the decision of 14th September 2020 and to complete that reconsideration within six months and not later than 12 months from 13th January 2021. This report provides the re-consideration required.

### **Options**

9. When deciding the future of the Clair Hall site, the Cabinet could consider the following options:
  - (a) Invest in the site and/or assets on the Clair Hall site;
  - (b) Do nothing;
  - (c) Close Clair Hall and/or Redwood Centre
10. Following feedback from the recent engagement and consultation it is recommended that the Cabinet commissions work to investigate option (a) - Invest in the site and/ or assets on the Clair Hall site.
11. More information is required to ensure any proposals address and help manage key challenges and risks as outlined in this report. Both refurbishment and redevelopment scenarios should be investigated as suggested by the consultation and engagement.
12. The Cabinet is recommended to request officers to commission specialists to advise on options for the site. This work, described below (para 34-38), should be evidence-based. Officer and specialist advisors will report to Cabinet regularly, so that Members can oversee and direct the work carefully. At the next Cabinet meeting officers will outline key milestones to deliver this work a pace.

### **Current Use of the site**

13. As referred to above, the NHS has had use of Clair Hall since December 2020 in order to deliver the national Covid vaccination programme. This requires them to have control over the building for safety reasons
14. Officers continue to remain in touch with the NHS regarding this use. Whilst national policy on the vaccination programme continues to develop in tandem with the course of the pandemic, the NHS has confirmed that it is likely to require Clair Hall into the new financial year.
15. In accordance with the previously expressed desire of the Members, officers will continue to facilitate this use. The NHS has confirmed that the Clair Hall is a successful and accessible location for its vaccination programme and would value continued use of the site.
16. However, should this use not be needed at any point in 2022, the Council's policy for Community Management and Asset Transfer Policy will provide a framework for use of the site.

## Consultation and Engagement

17. In March 2021, the Cabinet Member for Community agreed to a new 12-week community engagement and consultation programme over the Summer and Autumn 2021 to inform the decision on the site's future.
18. An external consultancy (ECF) was commissioned by the Council to develop and implement an Engagement Strategy in relation to the future of the Clair Hall site in Haywards Heath. This included Clair Hall, the parking site, and Redwood Centre. It excluded Clair Hall Park.
19. The engagement process was underpinned by the Gunning Principles with the best practice approach to engage residents and key stakeholders on the future of this site. The Council's aspiration has been to seek feedback from every part of the community in Haywards Heath and beyond into the wider district. Residents were given the option to develop ideas and feedback.
20. The engagement and consultation process launched on Wednesday, 30th June 2021. A wider public consultation completed on 22nd September with some further engagement with community groups and stakeholders was carried out until early November.
21. The views of those contributing to the consultation will be very helpful for the Cabinet and need to be carefully considered alongside other complex factors such as planning policy, financial viability and demand and market considerations as explained in this report.
22. Approximately 30,000 leaflets have been delivered to the local community. It is hard to estimate the exact response rate as responses were anonymous and some people attended or contributed through multiple channels (or submitted more than one comment). It is estimated that 800-1000 (2.6%-3.3%) took part in this exercise.
23. In summary, there were 624 registrations on the engagement website, 95 people registered to attend workshops, 121 feedback forms were received at the drop-in sessions. 21 community groups, that had links to Clair Hall site, were invited to participate in the Community Engagement Group (CEG), 11 groups took part.
24. The demographics of those participating on the website and those that submitted a physical feedback form was slightly older than the wider population in Mid Sussex and underrepresented the 24 years and younger age range.
25. Detailed report is included at Appendix 1. The key points raised through the engagement and consultations were:
  - (a) The majority of respondents suggested the Council should take some action in regard to the Clair Hall building and/or the site. The two most popular responses were to refurbish or redevelop community facilities on site e.g. on the engagement website, this was mentioned 59 and 52 times; during the drop-in sessions, refurbishment was mentioned 96 times and development 44 times. CEG members shared a common view that the Clair Hall site must be retained for community use, but that the current site is tired and requires some work.

- (b) Different ideas were submitted on what the Clair Hall site should become. The most reoccurring theme was that the site or hall should be multifunctional. 897 (42%) of comments that mention the future use, wanted to see arts/entertainment offer and 428 (21%) comments mentioning commercial uses including café or a bar/restaurant.
- (c) Respondents valued the location of the site and its proximity to nearby train and bus links.
- (d) 62 comments suggested the site should open up towards Clair Park.
- (e) There were 70 comments on the Redwood Centre, suggesting retention of the building in its current form.
- (f) 83 comments supported the protection of car parking facilities at the site.

### **Impacts of the pandemic**

- 26. With infections rates high and possible new variants, the pandemic continues to be a significant risk and a factor in shaping residents' habits and business's decisions. Economic recovery from the pandemic remains in a point of transition, with every sign of a positive measure being equally met by a challenge. The future, therefore, is unclear and hard to predict.
- 27. The leisure sector, in particular, has not recovered yet. The Council's financial position continues to be directly and negatively impacted by this. The uncertainties around people's confidence in organised classes or indoor events continue to present a significant challenge for the leisure and art sectors. In November, the Audience Agency, which monitors sales in more than 340 English venues, reported that sales for shows haven't recovered and dropped by 34% of the 2019 levels. These are some of the factors the Council will need to consider when making decisions about investment in these types of facilities.
- 28. It is important to understand how people's habits and needs change (or are changing) as we recover from the pandemic. The challenges might be easier to identify, especially in the short to medium term. Recent changes can equally create opportunities that the Council should explore. Many people decided to work more from home or even moved out of big urban areas. This might create opportunities in Mid Sussex and our towns.
- 29. The feedback from the engagement and consultation section describes the most recent insights into some residents' views gathered in relation to the Clair Hall site. The Council welcomes the signs of optimism and finds this information very helpful. More data should be collected around 'post-pandemic' challenges/opportunities, demand/supply analysis to support evidence-based approach to developing options for investment in the community facilities on the site.

### **Financial Context**

- 30. As Members will be aware, the pandemic has had a significant adverse effect on the Council's finances, with income actuals and projections falling over the medium term, and the General Reserve being used to balance the budget each year into the future. The position as presently set out is not sustainable, although the Council's ambition to deliver services and post-pandemic growth is undiminished.

31. Members will therefore recognise that the Council's ability to support a refurbishment or redevelopment project is constrained, and will depend on the scale of refurbishment or redevelopment options, available funding of capital and revenue return. It is worth noting that these types of facilities tend to run at a deficit, rather than at a surplus which could finance any prudential borrowing.
32. As part of the planned work the Council should explore opportunities to secure external funding to improve community facilities on the Clair Hall site that can benefit the residents of Hayward Heath and the wider district.
33. The Council has a strong record of attracting inward investments, both public and private, to support the development of our communities. The Strategic Growth Programme for Burgess Hill is the most ambitious programme of change anywhere in the region and totals some £1bn from both public and private sources.
34. Central to this work has been this Council's determination to secure significant community facilities for local communities; new schools and community hubs including retail shops, substantial community open space, children's play areas, allotments, and sports facilities.

### **Feasibility work and options appraisal**

35. Further demand and supply analysis will be required to update the Council's data on the community facilities available in the area (as explained at para 42). This will help understand the impacts of the pandemic and potential challenges and opportunities.
36. More information is required to understand how people's habits have changed and to identify any gaps in the community facilities offer that could meet this demand and be the right fit for the area.
37. The Council should soft test the market for any potential redevelopment ideas to understand what could be supported by the market in the post-pandemic environment and would deliver the required community facilities on the site.
38. In order to take forward both options (refurbish or redevelopment) considerable feasibility work will be required to assess the site. For example, for the refurbish option a full structural survey will be required of the existing buildings to assess their suitability for refurbishment and the extent of asbestos used within their construction.
39. When developing the potential options this work will analyse and take into account policy context explained at para 45-49.
40. This work has not been budgeted for and it is therefore proposed that a reserve of £100k is made available by a transfer from the General Reserve.

### **Clair Hall prior to the pandemic**

41. Before the pandemic, Clair Hall had operational challenges including declining demand for its offer. The hall was mainly used for community events and meetings. As a consequence, Clair Hall has not been economically viable to operate for over 10 years. Its inclusion in the PL contract in 2014 came at a cost to the Council of approximately £35k per annum. In addition, the Council had to retain some liabilities and therefore held the full repair and maintenance responsibilities for the hall.
42. Prior to the pandemic there were over 20 community buildings (church halls, community centres, and sports pavilions) within a one-mile radius of the hall. In addition to this, there were also 9 educational facilities offering facilities.

43. In the recent consultation and engagement, a number of participants referred to other facilities in the broader area that they liked and would like to see in Haywards Heath. Both facilities, described below, use either subsidies or donations to support their operations. This support had to be increased through the pandemic.
- (a) The Capitol- Horsham: Comprises a 410-seat theatre space, two cinema screens, a small studio theatre meeting room and gallery space. The venue is run and subsidised by Horsham District Council.
  - (b) The Depot- Lewes: Comprises a 3-screen cinema, studio space, gallery, and bar/restaurant. Operated by Lewes Community Screen, a not-for-profit charitable organisation.
44. Any new proposals would need to address the old challenges as well as consider new ones and opportunities in the post-pandemic environment. The Council would need to take an evidence-based approach to develop viable, future-proved options.

### **Policy Context**

45. Planning applications are determined against the policies and guidance within the Development Plan. The following are of direct relevance to the Clair Hall site:
- (a) District Plan 2014-2031, adopted in 2018
  - (b) Haywards Heath Neighbourhood Plan, adopted in 2016
  - (c) Haywards Heath Town Centre Masterplan (Supplementary Planning Document), adopted in 2021
46. The District Plan sets the vision and strategy for the district and includes policies against which planning applications are determined. In relation to the Clair Hall site, policy DP24: Leisure and Cultural Facilities and Activities provides support for new and/or enhanced leisure and cultural activities and facilities. Proposals that involve a loss of cultural facilities will not be supported unless an assessment has been undertaken which shows the facility is surplus to requirements; or the loss would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity/quality in a suitable location; or the development is for alternative provision where the needs clearly outweigh the loss.
47. In relation to the Clair Hall site, The Haywards Heath Neighbourhood Plan's Policy L1 states: "Development resulting in the loss of Clair Hall whilst the facility remains needed and valued by the local community will be resisted unless there is re-provision of an equivalent or better facility within the Town prior to the loss of the existing facilities."
48. The Masterplan identifies Clair Hall as an 'Opportunity Site' for redevelopment. For Clair Hall, the Masterplan requires any redevelopment of the site to be subject to results of an assessment to establish the need for such a facility and whether these could be re-provided elsewhere (in accordance with DP24 above).
49. Naturally, options for the refurbishment or redevelopment of the site will need to be developed, informed by the planning context.

## **Other Options Considered**

50. The closure of Clair Hall and/or Redwood Centre option (option (c) at para 9) would deliver immediate operational savings. Closing down a community facility would need to comply with relevant District Plan policies (i.e. DP24 Leisure and Cultural Facilities and Activities) and would require the Council to ensure a sufficient level of community facilities is provided. This requires further analysis as the pandemic has affected the sector. It is therefore recommended that the Council explores viable investment options (option (a) above) to deliver the community facilities on the site.
51. Option (b), especially concerning the Clair Hall, would require further investigation of necessary work needed to enable the operation of the building after the NHS vacates it. Work undertaken as part of the option (a) feasibility work would provide this information. When this information is available, Cabinet will be able to carefully consider it and make further determinations. This includes any meanwhile use considerations which should be considered when the Cabinet have more information about the potential refurbishment or redevelopment options (their implications, requirements, timelines etc.). Cabinet should refer to its policy for Community Management and Asset Transfer Policy when making such considerations in the future.

## **Financial Implications**

52. The creation of a reserve to fund specialist work and advise to enable the Cabinet to consider options for the redevelopment or refurbishment of the site.

## **Risk Management Implications**

53. A better picture of the impacts of the pandemic on the economy, arts, and leisure sector in particular, and residents' habits and needs, are still emerging and clarifying. These increase risks and uncertainties around planning for future provision and will impact all options that may be developed as part of the feasibility work planned. An evidence-driven approach to this work will help manage these risks.
54. The financial position of the Council, as outlined at para 30-31, is under pressure and as presently set out is not sustainable. This will have to be monitored and will be a significant factor in the decision making about investment options on the site.
55. Further work to develop options around refurbishment and/or development of the site, will require access to the buildings to undertake structural surveys and facilitate more detailed planning and assessments. Currently, the NHS occupies Clair Hall, which will affect this work. Some work may not be completed until the NHS vacates the hall.

## **Equality and Customer Service Implications**

56. Options developed as part of the feasibility work and presented to the Cabinet will include an equality impact assessment.

## **Sustainability Implications**

57. Government policy requires social as well as economic and environmental objectives to be an integral part of sustainability. Strong, vibrant, and healthy communities need sufficient provision for community facilities including cultural facilities which are easily accessible. Further work will include these considerations and develop option(s) for the most suitable facility on the site.