

Community Initiative (Bishops Stortford) Trust
Bishop's Stortford Civic Federation

17 March 2023

Mr Richard Cassidy Chief Executive, East Herts Council
Mr Benjamin Wood, Head of Communications, Strategy & Policy
Mr Steven Linnett, Head of Strategic finance and Property

East Herts Council
Wallfields
Pegs Lane
Hertford SG13 8EQ

Cc Councillor Ian Devonshire, Chairman of the Council
Cllr Mione Goldspink –Ward member, East Herts Council
Cllr David Snowdon – Ward member, East Herts Council and Bishop's Stortford Town Council
Esther Piper, Policy Officer, East Herts Council

By email

Dear Messrs Cassidy, Wood, and Linnett,

Water Lane URC Hall – Community bid for the Asset of Community Value

Further to correspondence between East Herts Council (EHC) and Bishop's Stortford Civic Federation (BSCF) in September and October 2022, the Friends of Water Lane Hall, led by Community Initiative (Bishops Stortford) and supported by BSCF are pleased to propose a community bid to lease and facilitate continued community use of Water Lane URC Hall.

Most importantly we understand this is the arrangement EHC is most likely to enter into with Cityheart, which is currently leading the Old River Lane development plans. However, rather than demolish the hall, as is currently proposed, thus triggering District Plan policies CFLR 1, 7 and 8 (appended), this arrangement would avoid triggering these policies.

In addition, we wish to point to a similar venture in Baldock, where a community group has been leasing the former town hall from North Herts District Council for 10 years now and has developed a successful and sustainable community-run performance and arts space. With Baldock Arts and Heritage Centre's Board's permission we would be very pleased to share more of their model for your consideration.

Water Lane Hall

With respect to a bid to lease Water Lane hall as summarised above, we have considered its relevant history, which can be summarised is as follows:

- The property freehold was bought by EHC from the United Reformed Church (URC) in 2019.
- The area of land west of the hall next to Water Lane is retained by the URC to provide vehicle access to dedicated car parking on the north and east sides of the hall..

- The building is in active community use, managed by the URC through a monthly renewable lease with EHC as freeholder. The URC is also responsible for operating and maintenance costs. We understand that this arrangement, which was due to end 31 March 2023, will now continue until 30 June 2023.
- EHC Communications, Strategy and Policy (CSP) registered the building as a ACV on 16 September 2022.
- On 20 September, the landowner (East Herts Council's property team), notified BSCF of their intention to make a relevant disposal of the Hall. The CSP team informed BSCF on 21 September.
- BSCF wrote to the CSP team on 30 October 2022 stating the community's intention to submit a bid by 19 March 2023, precisely 6 months after being notified of EHC's intention to dispose of the hall. This date was agreed in writing by Esther Piper, Policy Officer.

The planning context is as follows:

- The Water Lane URC Hall falls outside of the allocated ORL site defined by District Plan policy BISH8. However it has since been included, following its 2019 purchase by EHC from the URC.
- 25 October 2022 - The EHC executive adopted a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), prepared by the local planning authority for the ORL site. The area covered includes the Water Lane Hall. The SPD was subsequently adopted by the full Council 16 November 2022
- 08 December 2022 - Cityheart submitted a planning application for permission to demolish the hall (and other buildings) within the conservation area.
- 09 December 2022 – Cityheart submitted a planning application with planning parameter plans to seek permission for block layout, access, use classes and quantum of accommodation. Because of a mistake in Certificate B this subsequently had to be resubmitted. It was revalidated 02 February 2023. The planning parameter plans do not establish an arts centre or a cinema.

The development context is as follows:

- EHC as landowner, and the ORL Delivery Board, conceived the ORL regeneration as two elements:
 - 'the arts centre development' to be led by the EHC property team (to be built by Cityheart).
 - 'the main development' to be led by a development partner (Cityheart).
- The current arts centre development concept is a cinema, with provision for arts in two screening rooms, foyer, café and outside square. EHC would inject capital funds. We understand the estimate for these is £15m. It includes a Herts LEP grant, which has already been received.
- The main development, master planned by Cityheart's team, takes in the eastern part of Waitrose car park, removing about 40 spaces. These would be replaced on the site of the demolished hall.

The community bid

This bid is made by the community through Community Initiative (Bishops Stortford) Trust.

It is supported by BSCF and other community-based arts groups. Community Initiative (Bishops Stortford) Trust and BSCF are both registered charitable trust bodies linked to the Bishop's Stortford community.

The principle of the bid

The proposal allows the arts centre element to be separated from the cinema element. The benefits of this include, in no particular order:

- Retaining the hall will add to ORL's 'destination' offer, in keeping with District Plan policy BISH8, especially once it is 'turned around', so the main entrance faces Old River Lane.
- ORL's cinema proposal can go ahead without the need to incorporate one or more multi-purpose performance spaces, the proposals for which appear to be too small for the town's arts groups requirements, either because the stage is too small, or the audience space is too small. Also these venues lack adequate backstage facilities - adequate dressing rooms, wing space, or access doors to stage area. This contrasts with Water Lane hall, which they consider much more satisfactory. (We note the Supplementary Planning Document carefully uses the term 'leisure' as distinct from 'arts use' or use class F2.)
- ORL would have a theatre space, albeit smaller than originally proposed, which was for a 500-seat venue. It would be a theatre space, nevertheless.
- In the short-term at least the hall can continue to be a venue for community activities that require a large double storey open space
- Public frustration and anger would most likely be reduced



- A significant local, regional and national architectural building can be retained, especially if the more recent additions can be sympathetically modified or removed.
- The hall can be kept as an ACV.
- ORL 's carbon footprint can be reduced.
- EHC can be relieved of any maintenance responsibilities.
- Some of the capital investment funds required for the arts centre could then be directed to revitalise Water Lane Hall into the intended arts facility, as part of a developer contribution. This would meet the terms of the LEP funding already granted.

The main constraint is the desire to provide a 'parking exchange' for Waitrose. However it is believed this could be resolved by modifying Waitrose's present car park and altering the proposed development layout submitted as the non-consultative outline planning application for ORL.

Supporting evidence documents

Our proposal is supported by the following evidence and analyses. We would be pleased to provide copies of these as required:

1. Business plan for continued viable use and development as an arts facility. (March 2023)
2. A clear-sighted vision for a flexible, multi-purpose 'black box' studio space, with supporting green rooms, gallery space and café, modelled on use by existing arts organisations in Bishop's Stortford.
3. Architecture, History and Significance report by Dr Emily Cole, Architectural Historian (March 2022)
4. Building Appraisal Summary Report - Stephen Lee, Chartered Surveyor, Chantry and Co (October 2022)
5. Property Valuation Report - Ben Gilbey, Chartered Surveyor, Gerald Eve LLP (March 2023)
6. Architectural potential – advice from Martin Lindus, architect, Saunders Boston Architects (January 2023)

We have done a great deal of work to consider how the building can be used and financially managed. Our evidence base listed above is growing. As part of this we draw on the example of the Baldock Arts and Heritage Centre, as mentioned at the beginning of this proposal.

Bid proposal

We do not wish to make a commercial bid to purchase the property.

We are though, making a proposal for a different strategy for a community managed facility, which retains and reuses this valuable community asset and will benefit the Council as landowner. As stated above, it will also benefit the deliverability of the wider ORL development for the benefit the people of Bishop's Stortford and its neighbouring communities too.

We propose two ownership and operating scenarios:

Scenario 1:

- EHC retains the freehold.
- The building is leased to an incorporated community organisation for a peppercorn rent.
- Business rate relief for a charitable community facility.
- The building would continue in use 'as-is' starting with a volunteer-led service and realistic operating hours.
- An operating plan identifying income from Arts and Community usage increases year by year.
- A programme of essential maintenance work is budgeted and conducted year by year.
- Direct enabling works or Section 106 funding from the ORL developer forms part of that programme.

- Major improvement (such as re-positioning the entrance) designed and programmed for year 4, or whenever grant funding is attracted.
- Year 5 envisages a fully functioning, self-sufficient Arts Centre with some level of permanent staffing and permanent bar / coffee area, based on some major investment in earlier years.

This approach is similar to how Baldock Arts Centre started, which we have studied as a parallel example.

Scenario 2:

- EHC retains the freehold.
- The building is leased to an incorporated community organisation for a peppercorn rent.
- EHC redirects committed capital funds (from LEP grant) from the existing Arts element of the cinema endeavour, on the basis that the hall becomes the location for arts at ORL.
- We budget use of the capital funds to design and renovate WLH over a 12-month period consistent with ORL development timing.
- The building opens as a fully functioning, self-sufficient Arts facility with some level of permanent staffing and permanent bar / coffee area.

Both scenarios have been modelled in our business plans, as follows:

- The building is incorporated into the ORL development masterplan, to meet the Council's arts centre objective.
- Conditions and s106 agreement to support implementation of the arts centre facility.

Meeting to identify and resolve issues

We respectfully ask you for a meeting to negotiate a mutually beneficial strategy for the building and the wider ORL site.

We want to keep this discussion open over the coming weeks and look forward to working alongside the District Council to retain this building for thriving community use, complementing the ORL site's regeneration.

Yours sincerely

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in association with:

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