



Report to Cabinet

Date:	13 June 2023
Title:	Future High Streets – Freehold Acquisition of the High Wycombe Social Club Building
Cabinet Member(s):	John Chilver
Contact officer:	Charles Brocklehurst
Ward(s) affected:	Abbey – Cllr Arman Alam, Cllr Lesley Clarke, Cllr Mahboob Hussain
Recommendations:	<p>1, To exercise the Council’s Option to Purchase, from the Trustees of the High Wycombe Social Club (‘HWSC’), their freehold interest in the Liberal Club building on Queen Victoria Road, High Wycombe and grant them a leaseback of the ground floor, on the financial terms set out in the Confidential Annex.</p> <p>2, To delegate to the Service Director – Property and Assets, in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources, both the procurement and completion of building contracts to repair and improve the building and (subject to planning), converting its first floor to a gallery with craft workshops, by adding a new side entrance, subject to the contract costs being within the overall revised budget, as set out in the Confidential Annex.</p> <p>3, To grant a lease of the first floor to the Wycombe Museum for the storage and display of the town’s Chair Collection.</p>

Reason for decision:

A July 2021 Cabinet report approved the then overall Future High Streets regeneration programme budget but required individual acquisitions to be approved by Cabinet. Since then, there have been changes to the Future High Streets programme and a revised overall budget requires approval.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 To exercise an Option to Purchase the freehold of the High Wycombe Social Club building, on Queen Victoria Road, High Wycombe; lease back the ground floor to the Club and convert the first floor to gallery/storage for the town's Chair Collection; refurbish and improve the building in the process, as part of the Future High Streets funded 'Southern Gateway' area improvement.
- 1.2 The underlying objectives of this project are twofold:
 - (i) To create an impressive gateway building comprising a new visitor attraction (Wycombe's answer to BBC's The Repair Shop), rejuvenating an active social club in the process.
 - (ii) To resolve a bright future for the town's Chair Collection, utilising Future High Streets grant/associated committed Council 'match funding', to reduce the financial burden of maintaining it.

2. Content of report

- 2.1 The Wycombe Future High Streets regeneration programme included plans for a perception changing 'Southern Gateway', of which the HWSC (ex-Liberal Club) property forms a prominent part. It is currently a run-down 1930's building with poor external areas and an unsightly side elevation (exposed by the access road to the adjoining Swan Theatre), on a main approach to the town centre.
- 2.2 HWSC (which now incorporates the Irish Club), has struggled to gain new members because of its dated interior (included a little used snooker hall). The Club, with 130 members, will re-invest part of the capital released by the proposed sale of their freehold interest, in a re-fit of the ground floor, including converting the snooker hall into a multi- function event space overlooking the River Wye, with a new riverside external sitting area. Their aim being to attract new members and generate event hire income and thereby put the Club on a new financial footing.
- 2.3 The first floor of the building comprises a disused former ballroom and a flat. It is proposed that the former be converted into a gallery and the latter into craft workshops. The proposed gallery to be leased to Wycombe Museum, to house the town's Chair Collection (of which Wycombe Museum custodians), which currently is

in a damp basement in Marlow. The workshops to be sublet by the Museum, to help cross-finance the upkeep of the proposed gallery.

- 2.4 The building is in urgent need of external repairs, the plan being to undertake these to enable the Chair Collection to be relocated into the first floor as soon as possible. A second phase of works will involve self-containing the first floor with a new publicly accessible side entrance (see street view visualisation attached). Both the proposed gallery use, and its subsequent public access will require planning consents.

3. Other options considered

- 3.1 The proposed acquisition/refurbishment was included in the DLUHC approved Future High Streets regeneration programme. Not proceeding would put at risk the grant received for the project.

4. Legal and financial implications

- 4.1 The capital expenditure for the freehold purchase and building works is to be funded from the Future High Streets project – a £15m programme funded by Government (£12m) and the Council (£3m of match funding). and which included in the Council's Capital programme. There is a requirement to commit Future High Streets funding by 31 March 2024. The total budget for this project is as set out in the Confidential Annex, and no changes are required to the overall Capital Budget for the Future High Streets Programme for this project
- 4.2 The proposed leaseback carries a risk of HWSC failing financially, over time (although they will be re-capitalised by the freehold sale). If this were to happen and the Club's lease were to be forfeited, the ground floor would revert to the Council for re-letting.
- 4.3 The Option and phasing of the works allows time to resolve detailed design and construction costs. The Council will only be obligated under the terms of the deal, to undertake building repairs and improvements (Phase 1 works), not requiring planning permission. This is because proposed development of the side entrance (Phase 2 works) carries some planning risk (mostly delay). It is not absolutely essential for Wycombe Museum's proposed occupation, although desirable for public access.
- 4.4 When it comes to construction cost risk, - the estimated budget cost of the proposed works, as set out in the Confidential Annex, has been drawn up with advice from external Quantity Surveyors.
- 4.5 Given the need to meet Future High Streets spend profile, the proposal is to go ahead and exercise the Council's Option to Purchase the freehold, with the risk on

construction costs being managed by a construction management approach to the works, enabling their extent to be reduced, if required.

- 4.6 Time has been incurred in agreeing the various legal agreements with HWSC including an Option Agreement, draft Transfer, Agreement for Lease and Lease as HWSC is an unincorporated body. HWSC has instructed solicitors to advise them on the sale and leaseback and the Council has agreed to pay £1,000 plus VAT towards their legal costs, which will be paid from the Future High Streets funding. The Director of Property and Assets in consultation with Members has authorised completion of the Option Agreement under an Officers Executive Decision. This decision is to authorise exercising the Option and purchasing the freehold building of HWSC and the leaseback/proposed letting.
- 4.7 This decision is also to authorise procurement of the building contracts so the Future High Streets funding can deliver a better facility for HWSC, house the town's Chair Collection and allow craft workshops to be developed and let. The Council is required to follow the Public Procurement Regulations 2015 when procuring contracts. The works proposed under the building contracts are estimated to be under the threshold of £5,336,937. The Council is required to publish procurements on Contracts Finder where the works are over the sum of £25,000. The Council will comply with the Contract and Financial Procedures Rules in its Constitution and follow the Council's procurement procedures when procuring building contracts for this matter.

5. Corporate implications

- 5.1 Securing sustainable low-cost storage accommodation for the preservation and display for the Chair Collection will avert the risk to the Council of becoming liable for these chattels, for ultimately, they belong to the Council (some having been bequeathed). The aim is to make the venture self-financing (see Confidential Annex), to ensure that the future of the Chair Collection is secure. The Council will have a 'safety net', comprising the rent from the leaseback to the Club, to ensure that in the long term, there is no new revenue cost to the Council from preserving the Collection.

6. Local councillors consultation & views

Ward Members have been consulted.

Cllr Lesley Clarke says "I have always fully supported this and despite the long lead in timetoo! But go for it! Be a good acquisition and tidy up this end of the town no end, which is now in some desperate need". So, yes, support your proposal.

Cllr Mahboob Hussain says, "I fully support the proposal-something for the betterment of the town".

Cllr Matthews “is keen to make sure that we don’t simply use it as a storage facility and feels that we should set a timescale for opening up the Chair Collection to the public, whilst retaining the workshops”

Cllr John Chilver. “I am fine with the proposal, It sounds a very worthwhile project”.

7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 7.1 The planning process for the proposed Phase 2 addition will involve some public consultation. Bucks New University are to be consulted, once the proposed purchase has been approved, as there is ‘synergy’ there, given their design-based heritage.

8. Next steps and review

- 8.1 Complete the Option to Purchase and subsequently exercise it. Agree terms with Wycombe Museum and enter into a lease with them. Apply for planning permission(s). Procure building contracts and proceed with the works to the building.

9. Background papers

- 9.1 [July 2021 Cabinet paper.](#)

10. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

- 10.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report, please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider, please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone 01494 421280/077111 69440 or email Charles.brocklehurst@buckinghamshire.gov.uk