

21 November 2024

Utilisation of the council estate [including Walsall Town Hall]

Ward(s): All

Portfolios: Economic Growth & Regeneration
Health & Wellbeing

1. Aim

1.1. The council's estate supports communities by providing public spaces and facilities that deliver community led initiatives and enhance individual well-being. They can also provide a source of income through leasing and renting, which helps contribute to the council's financial sustainability and investment in service delivery.

2. Recommendations

2.1. It is recommended that committee members note the aspiration to utilise the council's estate assets to create lasting financial security whilst also delivering social and environmental benefits.

2.2. It is recommended that committee members provide feedback on opportunities they see in respect to the utilisation of the council estate.

3. Report detail – know

3.1. Walsall Council holds a diverse portfolio of assets, including properties, land, and heritage sites. Over the years the council has invested in infrastructure and property, as well as development areas, which together foster local economic growth and support job creation. Additionally, the council is dedicated to maintaining cultural and heritage landmarks to preserve the borough's historical identity while promoting community engagement through accessible green and recreational spaces.

3.2. In total, the council owns 302 estate assets, comprising of community buildings, schools, investment properties, and ground leases, with a combined estimated value approaching £350million. Among these, 19 properties are leased to community or uniformed organisations, while 34 others are used by community groups without formal lease agreements.

3.3. A review of council owned buildings is currently underway. Although overseen by the council's corporate landlord function, buildings are managed on a day-to-day basis by several teams across the authority. The review will seek to align the management of buildings to ensure consistent standards and compliance and, present an opportunity to review building usage.

3.4. On 11 September 2024, Cabinet approved the council's Commercial Strategy which sets out a vision to be "a financially resilient, innovative, and effective organisation, delivering excellence for residents in a dynamic, business-like, and efficient manner."

3.5. The commercial strategy emphasises that generating income from council-owned buildings, land, and other assets could help address budget constraints and the cost-of-service demands. It is recognised that future building usage is likely to comprise of commercial and community uses and that there is a need to balance financial sustainability with social value.

Work is also in progress to make it easier for groups to book areas of the council venues and green spaces for leisure activities and community groups.

Walsall Town Hall

- 3.6. Walsall Town Hall, which opened in 1903, has previously been a focal point for community events. The Grade II listed building has been celebrated for its Baroque architecture and historical significance, including its pipe organ, dedicated to Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.
- 3.7. The town hall was used for a range of events up to 2017. However, in latter years the income generated failed to cover the costs of managing the hire and events, possibly due to a lack of a dedicated marketing function.
- 3.8. Since 2017, the town hall has primarily hosted council functions and has occasionally served as a space for television productions.
- 3.9. It is recognised that the town hall, could be reinstated as an events space and may be particularly attractive for larger formal or traditional events that reflect with the historic atmosphere that the building offers. Being centrally located in Walsall, the venue is accessible by public transport but lacks dedicated parking provision which may limit its appeal to event organisers.
- 3.10. If the town hall is to become a viable event space, investment will be required. Accessibility, toilet facilities and the bar and kitchen all require improvement if the potential of the venue is to be maximised.
- 3.11. The council has secured grant funding for a feasibility study considering options for the town hall's repurposing, focusing on sustainable cultural, community, and commercial uses. The project will evaluate potential uses to maximise the site's long-term viability and appeal. Key objectives include preserving the building through necessary repairs and re-development, exploring business cases for diverse uses, and establishing collaborative links with local cultural assets like the New Art Gallery and Creative Industries Centre.
- 3.12. The study will consider at least three usage options, assessing feasibility, risks, and financial viability. Community engagement is central, aiming to raise awareness and foster stronger relationships with underrepresented groups, thereby ensuring inclusive and diverse access. Usage possibilities include performance spaces, council meeting rooms, and hospitality facilities. Additional analysis will evaluate broader benefits, such as job creation and increased tourism, aligning with the town's master plan.

Events

- 3.13. Although some council teams deliver events throughout the year including the two fireworks displays, Arboretum 150 year celebration and various civic events, the council does not have a dedicated resource focusing on marketing the council estate and facilitating events.

4. Financial information

- 4.1. The council estate has an estimated value of £350m with an operational cost of c.£7m per annum, excluding school.
- 4.2. Investment properties have a net income of £500k.

5. Reducing Inequalities

- 5.1. Leasing council buildings for diverse uses can reduce inequalities by making subsidised, quality spaces accessible for community events, small businesses, and local initiatives.

These venues empower community groups to host gatherings, cultural events, and educational programs that foster inclusivity and bridge social divides.

- 5.2. Access to quality facilities allows underserved populations to enjoy arts, culture, and learning opportunities that might otherwise be unaffordable. These spaces enhance community engagement by hosting public forums and events where all residents can participate in civic life, fostering representation and inclusion.
- 5.3. Affordable recreation and entertainment options within these buildings provide accessible leisure activities, enriching the quality of life for all residents. This approach not only supports social cohesion but also empowers individuals and groups who might otherwise lack these resources.

6. Decide

- 6.1. Keeping in mind the need for the council to provide financially sustainable services, the scrutiny committee is asked to consider their priorities in respect to the utilisation of council buildings.

7. Respond

- 7.1. A review of council buildings and land is ongoing to ensure consistent management standards and compliance.
- 7.2. Business plans will be developed where opportunities for improved utilisation are identified to assess long term viability prior to investment.

8. Review

- 8.1. Management of the council's estate is reported to the portfolio holders for Economic Growth & Regeneration and Health & Wellbeing via routine briefings.
- 8.2. The development of business plans to realise the potential of the council's estate will be overseen by the commercial strategy steering group.

9. Background papers

Cabinet Report: Commercial Strategy – Item 10; 11 September 2024

<https://cmispublic.walsall.gov.uk/cmis/Meetings/tabid/70/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/397/Meeting/3933/Committee/514/Default.aspx>

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