

PROPOSED REFURBISHMENT AND RE-USE OF THE FORMER ST GILES & ST GEORGES SCHOOL, NEWCASTLE TOWN CENTRE

Submitted by: Neale Clifton, Executive Director, Regeneration and Development

Principal author: Simon Smith, Regeneration Manager

Portfolio: Regeneration and Planning

Ward(s) affected: Town

Purpose of the Report

To consider the options available to the Council to bring forward the refurbishment and re-use of the former St Giles & St Georges School building in Newcastle Town Centre following the decision of the Board of Choices Housing not to take their interest any further.

Recommendations

Members' views are sought.

Reasons

There is no recommendation attached to this report.

1. Background

- 1.1 Members will be aware that this prominent town centre building, formerly the St Giles & St Georges School, situated at the rear of Queens Gardens, was acquired by the Borough Council from the LEA with a view to it being refurbished and converted into a centre for creative industries with the help of funding from the then North Staffordshire Regeneration Partnership. Following its acquisition, Cabinet decided to explore instead the possibility of relocating the Borough Museum & Art Gallery into the town centre proper so that the town could more fully benefit from the significant footfall (and inherent interest) brought by the Museum and Art Gallery. This, however, proved to be too expensive for the Council both in terms of initial capital costs and subsequent annual running costs and this was not pursued further. When NSRP funding (and that of the Borough Council) then became increasingly scarce, the Council decided to put the building back on the market to see what interest there may be in its use.
- 1.2 This led to the selection of the King Street based social landlord, Choices Housing, which planned to use the building as its new headquarters and training centre, as the preferred development partner. Discussions were also held with Newcastle Baptist Church (which had also expressed interest in the building) to pool resources and see if their space requirements could also be accommodated along with those of Choices (by extending the building to the rear). The attraction of this approach was the creation of a 280 seat auditorium in the town centre which could potentially be hired out and used for a range of other social, cultural or commercial uses, again generating further footfall and trade for the wider benefit of the town. This however could not be achieved as most of the

Church's resources, which were required to help pay for the Church's contribution towards the cost of the scheme, were tied up in two properties, neither of which had been sold (the property market was flat).

- 1.3 The Board of Choices Housing has now decided that the cost of the scheme is too great for the organisation to bear and has withdrawn its interest.

2. **Issues**

- 2.1 This leaves the Borough Council in ownership of a building it does not now have the resources to refurbish, without the availability of external regeneration funding (from organisations like the NSRP or AWM) and with no obvious demand for the building in its current condition.

This has implications for:

- The town's appearance
- The town's economy
- The use of public resources
- And, potentially, for community safety

3. **Options Considered**

- 3.1 The Council now has several options for consideration:

- (a) Market the building again but without any requirement for community use or public access. However, it is recognised that Newcastle Town Centre has plenty of available buildings that organisations and businesses could lease / buy, most of which do not have such a large upfront refurbishment cost attached to them.
- (b) Offer the site to the market with the option of it being cleared for redevelopment (as long as the Council was satisfied with the design of the replacement building) - i.e. accept the demolition of the building. While the building is not listed it does lie within the Town Centre Conservation Area. This means that (as with the former Jubilee Baths building) its demolition will not be permitted until there are detailed plans agreed for a replacement building. There would almost certainly be objections to this option for both historical and townscape reasons. As a cleared development site, however, it would almost certainly be a more marketable proposition than seeking a user which needs to spend significant monies to bring the building back into use.
- (c) Explore a simple refurbishment of the building, funded through Council borrowing (if Cabinet is prepared to countenance this) and use the building for the Council's own purposes. There may be a range of candidates for this but such a proposal would have to be seen as part of a wider review of the Council's property needs. It may be possible to off-set some of the cost of this option by selling or leasing existing Council-owned premises elsewhere in the town.

4. **Proposal**

4.1 This report does not carry a recommendation. Its purpose is to brief Members on the current position of the building and to consider a number of options available to the Council from here.

5. **Outcomes Linked to Corporate Priorities**

5.1 The original objective of the St Giles & St Georges project was:

- in part for regeneration purposes (to promote a livelier and more interesting town centre and to house new small businesses) and
- in part for environmental / conservation purposes (to bring an attractive and distinctive building back into use)

5.2 The Council may also consider it appropriate to have the additional objective:

- To minimize the financial exposure of the Borough Council

6. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

6.1 There is no statutory requirement for the Council to retain the building (but see 3 (b) above).

7. **Equality Impact Assessment**

7.1 This has not been undertaken given that no firm proposal is put forward.

8. **Financial and Resource Implications**

8.1 At this stage the options have not costed, however option c would have greater resource implications.

9. **Major Risks**

9.1 The principal risks associated with this project are:

- (i) a lack of resource to undertake the required calibre of scheme,
- (ii) ongoing ownership costs (insurance, security, maintenance) while the building remains unoccupied, and
- (iii) reputational damage through lack of action

10. **Key Decision Information**

10.1 This report has been placed on the Forward Plan. It does not at this stage commit the Council to expenditure.

11.1 **Earlier Cabinet Resolutions**

11.1 None.