



TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Council – 25 January 2023

Consideration of a Petition containing more than 500 signatures

Petition: Save Altrincham Town Hall

Petitioner, Trevor Stone was in attendance to introduce the following petition which before the meeting had received 1,731 signatures in support and to present the community's case for saving Altrincham Town Hall for use by the community:

“We petition the Council to abandon its intention to dispose of Altrincham Town Hall unless it is to a community-based organisation as was done with Stretford Public Hall and the George Carnall Leisure Centre in Urmston.

Altrincham Town Hall is a beautiful building, both inside and out, and it has served the local community well for the past 120 years. It must continue to function that way and we implore the Council to ensure this happens.

Why is this so important? The Town Hall is a key component of Altrincham's heritage and it is now the only true community space left in the town centre offering affordable facilities for meetings, events and other activities. It is used by many community groups and its impressive Council Chamber is a perfect and increasingly popular location for weddings.

It must not become one of those “you only miss it once it's gone” items. Timperley has already lost its library, and the Jubilee Centre in Bowdon is scheduled to be next. Hale, Broadheath and Hale Barns have only very limited meeting facilities and the loss of Altrincham Town Hall would thus leave the area of south Trafford with virtually no available community space at all.”

The petitioner outlined some of the difficulties encountered with the process to renew the Town Hall's listing as an Asset of Community Value and the Council's decision not to proceed with their application. The petition was quick to attract the public's attention, however, it too had not been without difficulty before now being put before the Council. In summary, he felt that the process was shambolic and that the community had been made to feel unfairly treated and appealed to work with the Council and not against it to find a mutually agreeable solution. A community bid would remove the liability of running and maintaining the building which would be done via a community interest company and with a passion for the building and its heritage the Council would know that it would be done properly. Altrincham Town Hall was quite simply an irreplaceable community asset. Having met the commercial bidder to explore possibilities for joint use

of the facility it regrettably had come to nothing and the Council was politely requested to listen to and act upon the views of the community.

Councillor Patel, Executive Member for Economy and Regeneration and Councillors Whetton, Newgrosh and Welton responded to the petition on behalf of the political parties and made the following points:

Councillor Patel: Acknowledged the genuine and heartfelt community interest in the matter and set the budgetary scene. When facing difficult financial decisions the administration always sought to protect frontline services and the most vulnerable. In order to protect an important part of Borough's heritage, the Council was looking to find a sustainable financial future for Altrincham Town Hall and it was not being sold, redeveloped for flats or lost to Council ownership. As an Asset of Community Value, the Council was legally bound to follow a strict process around any potential lease of the building and the work which had been undertaken was set out for the meeting and in terms of the legal obligations concerning the disposal of an Asset of Community Value, the Council had fully complied. Considered that community groups had been given a fair and transparent chance to bring forward their proposals. Unlike George H. Carnall and Streford Public Hall, two of the three business cases received were reliant on ongoing Council funding. The petition was now asking to now dismiss the legally sound process undertaken and hold out indefinitely until a sustainable community business case emerged which would present the Council with an ongoing risk of exposure. A positive picture could be painted of Council investment into community space in Altrincham and surrounding areas and contrary to the petition, Timperley had in fact a new library not a closed one and the Council had supported community aspirations to maintain a temporary library in Hale and invested significantly in Altrincham Community Hub as part of the wider hub network – this was not a picture of disinvestment or decline. In conclusion, following due process, the Council intended to progress to the next stage of the Asset of Community Value disposal which was to present the results of bids received to the Executive and to seek a formal decision on the successful bid. For the reasons that had been set out, did not consider that the Council should delay progression of the matter beyond February 2023.

Councillor Whetton: Considered a better route to save on costs was available which was to seek to reduce the current costs to nil, perhaps on an acceptable tapered financial basis, whilst placing the responsibility for running the building into community hands. A community group would invest for the long term with pride and ambition also and a care that would be unlikely in a commercial contract and prevent dilapidation. Community groups could apply for grants meant for such purposes and retention of the premises for community use would be a good longer term prospect for the Council, whereas a commercial deal would likely need re-running several years hence without loyalty to Altrincham or the Council. Considered the parallels drawn in the petition to Streford Public Hall and George H. Carnall Leisure Centre were relevant in terms of balancing out the approach across the Borough.

Councillor Newgrosh: Altrincham Town Hall could easily play a key role in the continued success of the heritage quarter with considerable potential to add value without losing its community role. Would be wrong to lose the site's civic function and public access. Considered Altrincham Town Hall should be given as fair a chance as Streford Public Hall.

Councillor Welton: Considered marking and investment would have overcome the building's limitations as a venue and would have served to make it more viable in the long term. Understand in times of austerity but the case for the Town Hall being

unviable as a public venue remained unproven, whereas the Community Group can see the potential in the building. Given the huge petition and growing community interest, urged the administration to have patience and to nurture that interest for a community bid for the Town Hall.

Following the discussion the Leader of the Council, Councillor Ross thanked Trevor for his introduction of the petition and as someone who knew the building having been there and able to recognise the beauty of the building inside and out, he emphasised that the building and its features were not going anywhere. The Council would still own the building and was looking to safeguard its future. He had received strong assurances that the process was carried out fairly with due diligence and above board. Having heard the concerns Mr. Stone had raised, Councillor Ross was willing before the Executive came to a decision in February to ask again and stress test everything he had said to make sure that the advice the Council had been given was watertight.

Councillor Patel had set out the case for proceeding and also the financial context faced by the Council and as Leader he had a duty to do the best for the borough's residents as a whole. It was not an easy decision and given what he had said about having further reassurances about the process, it was one that would not be taken lightly, however, there was a duty to protect the Council Taxpayer and make sure every penny possible was put into frontline services.

The Leader was grateful for the petition and delighted to see such interest in the building. With regard to the reference to Stretford Public Hall, the group was rewarded as they had a robust case but unfortunately, for Altrincham, despite the best efforts of the community, it had just not worked out that time. The Council did have another bidder which it was looking to consider at the Executive where the decision would be taken. Councillor Ross thanked everyone for their contributions and the Council would pick up on the concerns raised Mr. Stone and would make sure it had assurances before any further decision was taken.