

PRINCIPAL COMMENTS:

The Belper Civic Forum welcomed the report on the future of the Herbert Strutt School building and site (“the school”). The report is positive in that it has vindicated our belief that a study was justified and that a mixed commercial/community use (the “preferred option”) might be the best way forward.

Although the report has appropriate caveats about the reliability of its financial evaluation, we consider that subsequent economic events will probably have made the “residential” option even less attractive. The housing market has slumped but the need for business units to provide flexible start-up facilities in the area remains.

The financial model is a useful comparison but in reality any new user of the school would seek to optimise financial performance through seizing opportunities, phasing repair and conversion work, maximising revenue through special short term deals etc. So the figures presented should not be seen as the best possible and the preferred option probably provides more scope for such flexibility.

The preferred option passed this financial test but the report did not go on to consider indirect benefits such as the value to the local economy, community added value, environmental and sustainability issues and the avoidance of costs elsewhere. We believe that had these benefits been considered as well then the margin between the preferred and residential options would have been significantly greater.

The report did not recommend what sort of organisation would develop the school. The Belper Civic Forum favours setting up a Development Trust to take the project forward and manage the school for mixed commercial and community use. We believe that this would be the most effective route since it would:

- Eliminate profit from the equation, any profit would be re-invested or used for charitable purposes.
- Involve the community directly in the management of community assets in line with Government policy.
- Maximise the potential to obtain external funding from grant making bodies

In particular the report did not mention the sources of external funding available such as the Architectural Heritage Fund and Progressive Market Towns Fund.

A Development Trust would require the full political support of Amber Valley Borough Council and Derbyshire County Council and the Forum wish to meet the Councils as soon as possible and present its proposals before decisions are made on the future of the school.

We are aware, through our petition and public meetings, of the strong local opposition to further housing in the immediate area of the school. We also feel that using part of the site for housing may not be compatible with commercial and community use of the greater part of it and would want to avoid this if at all possible.

We fully support the “Meanwhile use” concept and would be pleased to incorporate this as part of taking forward the Development Trust route.

OTHER COMMENTS:

The report represents a good start but a full feasibility study is needed now to cover the many issues that it has missed, including a condition survey based on the new use.

It shows that a sudden sale to the private sector without proper examination of the alternatives could be a political and local disaster. The site offers an opportunity, not a problem.

The preferred option for the school provides a rare opportunity to meet local needs, both to assist what is a very vulnerable local economy based on a few large employers and provide community facilities at low cost. The report did not discuss the high cost of providing a building shell of equivalent calibre, even assuming a site were available. One could be looking at £10 million plus. The need for new community facilities could become even more critical, if as we have heard, the existing Community Hall might not have its lease renewed in three years time.

The report perhaps should have given more emphasis to the fact that other users have been displaced from the school as a result of the February closure and the difficulties that they have faced. How disruptive was moving staff from Belper to Matlock?

The report did not examine the potential for other educational interests, such as a university or private school to take over.

The legal position on the right-of-way that the report notes has existed on the east side of the school from Gibfield Lane needs to be checked.

A Development Trust would not need the security of owning the site in order to raise funds. A “reversion” clause could be inserted in a sale agreement so that the Council regains ownership should the project fail. In this way the value of the site is never lost to the Council or the community, which would be the case with other options. The asset value remains in the community

One cautious way forward for the Councils would be for them to convene a meeting with ourselves, others with a potential interest in the building, previous tenants and major new potential users and perhaps the Development Trust Association to discuss how to progress the preferred option.

We have not had sufficient time to study the report in the depth we would like but in reading it have noted three minor errors:

- On pages 11 and 115 we are referred to incorrectly as the “Belper Civic Trust”.
- On page 55 please note that we presented a petition with over 1800 signatures eventually.
- The financial evaluation (Note 1) talks about a nominal sale price of £1 whereas in the tables it is shown as £1000.