

Walworth Town Hall and Newington Library redevelopment options review

March 2016 Consultation Report

112 online responses received

28 Walworth Community Council comments received

Southwark Council went back out to get public opinion on the future of Walworth Town Hall after proposals to turn it into a community hub almost double the cost of refurbishment.

Whilst the council remains committed to the historic building, which was damaged by fire in 2013, it is estimated the original plans to restore it, plus the additional proposals to create a community hub with a library and registrar services will now be around £36m, £16m more than budgeted for the original restoration.

The extra costs have been caused by the recent increase in building costs, the extension of the original scope of the project to include the old library and technical complications with the building that have only come to light following extensive survey work.

The consultation asked for people's qualitative responses rather than a preferential vote and this report summarises the comments received from both the online consultation and those collected through the Community Council. Officers also gauged the positivity of the comments to understand whether options were supported or not. Many responses supported more than one option while some did not support any but used the consultation opportunity to raise queries.

General comments

A lot of responses requested greater transparency of costs and more information on why costs had increased.

People also felt that it was a Council shortcoming not to have held funds for this work and adequately budgeted the project.

General despair at the loss of so many cultural services and heritage buildings across London that Southwark need to stay committed to WTH.

There were queries regarding the insurance cover and claim process.

Option 1

To work with developers to find an alternative building at Elephant and Castle to house the services we want to deliver and identify a partner who can lease the current building from us and invest in the historic fabric of the building.

For 16 Against 64

There was considerable comment that it is important for the building to remain in public use/access as it has been a community focal point for many years and that is part of the buildings history. WTH was also noted as the ideal size and location for a civic centre and that there is a need for these civic services in the area to complete the Regeneration vision. Diversity of use and built form is important to maintain/create community and contributes to successful communities and successful regeneration.

People did not want to sell the building to developers, further privatise the area and dismiss the community agenda. There was concern about whether there are developers who have the heritage sympathy to retain the significant features and qualities of the building and what use would be put in place. There was concern that private development may result in further absentee landowners which was not seen as a good thing for local communities.

There was feeling that the council made promises to provide services and that council has a responsibility to provide and protect this historic building for now and future generations. It is important for the are to retain and respect the local historic fabric as there is very little left.

In the support of this option there was a low level of recognition that purpose built facility may be more efficient and cost effective.

Option 2

Work with English Heritage to explore whether there is an acceptable design solution that is focused on maintaining the facades of this important group of buildings, allowing for a more simple and cost effective internal layout. Such a solution would best meet the council's requirements for the provision of public services in the 21st century, however it is likely to require the removal of many historically important internal features such as staircases and chimney breasts.

For 48 Against 28

While there were many responses supporting this option often comments were caveated by noting that significant features within the building should still be retained. Ultimately there was both support for efficiencies and horror at façade retention as a practise and losing interior historic features and character.

There were many comments that heritage is also about the interior features and use rather than just the buildings exterior appearance and that a more invasive approach did not preserve the character of the building.

It was seen as a possible compromise and a way to move forward more quickly and there was acknowledgement regarding the potential efficiencies of floor plate and modern interior.

Option 3

If public opinion is that we stay committed to the original plan to rebuild within the confines of the original structure and interior then the project will have to be put on hold until we know where the extra funding is coming from. There remains a cost to keep the structure maintained in the meantime.

For 45 Against 34

Similar to option 2 there was a very split response for this option with slightly more supporting than not. There were clear statements regarding the need to keep heritage buildings in use and part of local fabric so if moth balling means the project goes ahead then that is what should happen. However, there were also comments that it is important to develop the site sooner rather than later and prevent further deterioration and noting the importance of the facility and cultural services to the community.

Within the responses there was much scepticism that funds will ever be found and works carried out. The example of Battersea power station with long delays was used and also the concern of increasing costs over time which would mean the scheme was never affordable for council.

Other

A few suggestions were made about how the project could be made affordable.

Use crowd funding to fill the funding gap

Scale back the project

Phasing the project

Next steps

Following the February consultation on the Walworth Town Hall Southwark Council is looking to establish a working group to discuss and map out a way to progress the Walworth Town Hall project. We now know that the council cannot realise the original vision for a new library, Southwark Museum with the Cuming collection, registrar's services, flexible civic and community space and a café within the single town hall building or within the original £20 million budget. The climate continues to change for councils and we consider that some services we intended to bring into the town hall can remain in their current locations to achieve best value. Therefore the vision needs to be reconsidered and the communities input to this process is very important. We also are incurring on going costs to keep the building safe and secure and are very keen to conduct this initial part of the process in a timely manner.

Southwark Council is currently seeking 5-6 community representatives for the Walworth Town Hall community forum in order to redefine the vision and agree a solution for the buildings.