



Development of Garvagh High School Site

Outline Proposal:

Next Steps & Business Development Considerations.

Introduction, DTNI & Policy Context:

The NI Executive approved the policy on Community Asset Transfer (CAT) in May 2014 *'Enabling and Supporting Community Ownership and Management of Public Assets.'*

DTNI has been working with the Department for Social Development (DSD) to test the NI Executive's policy framework on creating the conditions to transfer surplus public assets (land and or buildings) to the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector (including faith based bodies).

Development Trusts Northern Ireland (DTNI) is the leading network of community and social enterprise practitioners in Northern Ireland (NI) dedicated to the development needs of its members. Development Trusts are organisations which work to meet the needs of local communities through the development and utilisation of their assets, leading on area based social and economic regeneration and by delivering services with a commitment to community development and promotion of social enterprise.

It is recognised and acknowledged in policy and practice across the United Kingdom (UK) that community ownership of physical assets can be an enabler for sustainable development and a driver for regeneration within communities.

DTNI is currently working with 8 projects across NI which looks to apply the policy in various practice based settings. The policy is aimed at better understanding and

enabling the transfer of surplus public assets into community ownership, where it is accessed as viable, is underpinned by a tested sustainable business proposition and where there is interest and capacity from a community anchor organisation to assume management of the asset.

Central Advisory Unit guidelines: 'Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property In Northern Ireland'¹, make reference to how VCSE interests should be factored into the disposal process. The policy on Community Asset Transfer (CAT) has not yet altered the means by which means VCSE organisations can express an interest formally to acquire assets and to date remain dependant upon a recognised public body to nominate an interest on its behalf. The key development partners (including central and local government) leading on and supporting the policy are operating on a goodwill basis and without agreed criteria to determine whether an asset might have some utility for a third sector organisation.

- The policy framework on asset transfer has still not arrived at a definitive position on how assets (what type, size, location etc) will be made available to the community & voluntary sector.
- The success of the policy framework (and its relevance to wider policy thinking on urban regeneration, community development and social enterprise) is aligned to work underway by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) as it seeks to establish a central repository for managing the sale of surplus estate.
- DTNI is working closely with the Strategic Investment Board's Asset Management Unit to determine the most appropriate means by which assets can be isolated for inclusion in the CAT programme.
- Currently interest is determined by knowledge of the policy, awareness of asset development opportunities within any given constituency and thereafter engagement with DTNI as the means by which interest can be formalised.

DTNI is fast becoming the central hub of expertise on asset transfer for the VCSE sector in the region and as such, has been approached by various organisations interested in acquiring a public asset, which has been declared surplus, for community benefit. Garvagh High School is one such asset and a number of community interests have come together to explore the potential for this extensive site and building to be transferred into community ownership. It should be noted that a substantial body of work

¹ http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/lps/cau_disposal_guidelines_cover_and_form_2014_2.0.pdf (Pp49-50)

has been concluded which looked at potential uses of the site and local stakeholders have proposed a series of options and identified their preferred development choice.

However a substantial body of work still needs to be done to explore the development potential for this asset. In reality we are still in the early stages of development and need to proceed to a more detailed options appraisal, development of a business case and plan for the various elements of the associated business plan. That work will in turn be subject to a full Green Book economic appraisal and accompanied by a social impact analysis that will determine the social return to the immediate community and wider stakeholders.

Under normal disposal guidelines the body nominating an interest in acquiring a surplus asset would have a six month window in which to develop and present a business case. There is no obligation on the nominating body to acquire the asset at the conclusion of this timeframe nor is there any obligation on the disposing body to accept any future business case submitted to acquire and develop the asset. DTNI has been asked to lay out 'next steps' and to outline what will be required in order to bring the site to the point whereby a decision can be made on its future use.

Request Summary:

DTNI is requesting that Causeway Coast and Glens District Council (CC&GDC) express an interest in acquiring the asset on behalf of the Garvagh stakeholder group (Garvagh High School Development Trust). This request will defer the disposal of the site on the open market. This request places no expectation or commitment on CC&GDC to acquire the site at present market value. Subsequent and pursuant to the agreement request;

1. DTNI will look to work the Garvagh stakeholder group during the financial year 2015/16 and seek to identify resources to meet the development challenges in respect of the site outlined above.
2. DTNI will engage with other public bodies that may also have expressed an interest in acquiring the site to consider a joint development proposal.
3. DTNI will engage with CCGC to consider opportunities to make available a small

capital investment to meet associated costs in engaging relevant technical assistance / professional expertise.

4. DTNI will propose to DSD and the North Eastern Education & Library Board that the Garvagh stakeholder group is given a 12 month window to progress its business case.
5. DTNI will propose to LPS, the Strategic Investment Board and the Department of Education that NEELB be supported to withdraw Garvagh High School from its capital receipt targets for 2015/16
6. DTNI will work to support the project become 'Investment Ready'
7. DTNI will work to develop and present a credible business case to support the acquisition and development of the Garvagh High School site.
8. DTNI will (in line with CAT policy objectives) seek to have the asset transferred at nil and or nominal value to a newly formed Garvagh High School Development Trust.
9. DTNI will work to identify sources of finance to capitalise the project development.

Purpose:

DTNI is compiling this document to support Causeway Coast & Glens District Council to reach formal agreement on becoming the public sector agency which sponsors the interest of the community in the Garvagh High School Site. In doing so, it is hoped that any potential open market sale of the site can be deferred to allow those community interests to explore a business case, whilst testing all of the potential options proposed for development of the site. Given the scale of the asset and the number of potential development options, DTNI is suggesting that there is a need to request a 12 month timescale to NEELB, the disposing agent, and LPS and the Strategic Investment Board, to allow for the development plans to be worked up by the local Garvagh community stakeholder interest group. It is important to point out that in taking this step Causeway Coast & Glens District Council bears no liability for future developments on the site.

Many of the proposed development options are in line with ***Coleraine Borough Community Support Plan*** which seeks to

‘stimulate and enable community & voluntary groups to express local need, develop collective action and provide community leadership to improve the quality of life for local people’

Under the councils ‘Enhancing Community Development’ theme the council commits to:

- *Engaging in a range of community partnerships / networking / training and development initiatives to promote community capacity and engagement*
- *Ensuring effective and efficient support structures moving towards a larger Council*
- *Supporting access to local community facilities*

All of these objectives will be addressed in the associated development proposal if the community interests in the Garvagh school site are facilitated in the development of this project. The council may wish to consider contributing towards technical assistance costs and the compiling of a comprehensive business plan which would equip both NEELB and subsequent potential finance providers with the information that they need to make a decision to support the communities plans to develop the site. This request can be taken forward separately to this document if it is indicated that there is merit in doing so.

Context:

Louise Browne Associates, in association with Lindsay Advisory, was retained by the Causeway Rural Urban Network (CRUN) and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) to prepare an outline feasibility study for the future use of the former Garvagh High School site. This site became an opportunity site in August 2013 following the formal closure of the school by the North Eastern Education and Library Board. The purpose of the report commissioned was to provide a clear rationale to all stakeholders, including the community and local government, for working collaboratively to ensure timely re-use of the site in a manner which would optimise the benefits to the local community to be derived from the former Garvagh High School site. The site is expansive occupying a large pocket of prime land in Garvagh town centre and includes;

- A driveway leading to mature grounds and planted lawns bordering Garvagh Forest (400 acres),
- Two historic buildings and the school building itself, parts of which have recently become listed (February 2014).
- Garvagh Museum (NEELB is negotiating with Garvagh Museum to ensure that the portion of the site that they require to consolidate their operations is ring fenced).

The NEELB has recently formally declared the site surplus and potential interests cited on the D1 form are the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Coleraine Borough Council plus a community group not specifically named. This group comprises a number of individuals from the Garvagh community and representatives of Garvagh Development Association along with elected representatives for the area and has been meeting for approximately 8 months facilitated by CFNI and supported by CRUN. The group has no formal or legal status as of yet.

Review of Feasibility Scenarios:

An extensive process of engagement was undertaken as part of the feasibility study centering on both awareness raising during which local residents were consulted on their views, invited to become involved and were kept abreast of developments. Information flyers were produced and direct engagement was brokered with public representatives from many agencies including Coleraine Borough Council, the Forestry Service, the PSNI, the local churches, local schools, youth and community organisations, local private sector and business people and local elected representatives. A long list of potential options for the site was generated from these discussions however these were distilled down to 4 key options in the final report:

Table 1: Scenario Community Uses/Business Development Options

Scenario / Usage One:

Community Campus / Community Hub

Providing practical training for real jobs; a technology lab; excellence in engineering innovation; business units; craft workshops; a crèche, youth club; meeting place; multipurpose venue; a great hall; a productive space

Scenario / Usage Two: Expanded Museum / Heritage Provision

An enhanced museum; exhibition space; a gallery; an orientation point to the history and heritage of Garvagh and the wider area

Scenario / Usage Three: Activity Provision

Play park close to car park; walking and cycling routes; outdoor fitness equipment; focal point at the pedestrian entrance; mountain biking trails support facilities

Scenario / Usage Four: Tourism Provision

Camping; Aire de Service; visitor information; visitor orientation

In the refining of the scenarios at preliminary market testing stage Option 1 was discounted on the basis of potential displacement issues. Options around the expansion of the museum, outdoor pursuits and tourism remain as significant possibilities given the proximity of the forest as a natural resource. The development of the site as a base for a regional mountain biking centre is considered to hold significant weight given the network of well maintained forest roads already in existence. The possibility of bringing the bike Trail Head to the site could consolidate the status of the site in this regard.

Additional Potential Options

The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education has also expressed an early day interest in the school site but no discussions have been had with the organisation as yet as to what their interest is. These are discussions that should be initiated with NICIE so that it can be ascertained whether or not a partnership approach to site development along with the community can be considered. Development Trust NI have been working on a partnership model with a regional Housing Association and Broughshane & District Community Association to bring the PSNI station in Broughshane into community ownership. It is actively pursuing partnership working on other sites also.

If re-use of the site as an integrated school is not possible due to lack of student numbers, the potential for occupying part of the building for integrated educational programmes based around the environment could be developed and tested as a possibility. The community have also suggested that a shared education space for local schools for joint IT development or that which links directly to digital developments in industry with the potential to link young people to the merging job market. Also within the theme of shared space for schools, community interests felt that shared space for local schools to avail of sports facilities separate to that offered by the Jim Watt Centre was worthy of examination.

DTNI proposes that discussion is facilitated between NICIE and the community as soon as is possible to see if a partnership can be brokered for joint acquisition and development of the site.

Given the scale of the site it would be possible to consider a number of the options proposed in tandem:

- A national cycle centre where the building itself could house changing rooms and shower facilities for cyclists, bicycle repair and bicycle cleaning services
- An Outward Bound Centre utilising forest and other facilities around the coast and rural hinterland linked to caravanning and self catering accommodation
- An environmental tourism initiative exploiting the tourism benefits of the forest

estate or encompassing a forest school².

Separately to this the business case for enterprise incubation units remains to be explored-an idea put forward by the community centred on starter units for craftspeople and SME enterprises. It is clear that any such proposal would need to take account of displacement issues and fully engage with the town's local business people.

A definitive position is required on the demand for social housing in the Garvagh area and if no immediate demand is identified the business case for either specialised accommodation such as that for the elderly or vulnerable or the potential for co-ownership schemes could be market tested. DTNI has engaged the active support of NIHE in its delivery of the CAT demonstration programme and is working with housing policy in DSD to explore alternative housing models (e.g. co-operative) and mixed tenure occupancy that local communities can take forward. Housing policy excludes non-designated housing association from design and build of social housing. Housing development is actively pursued across the development trust family within the UK given the security of potential revenue it generates. If the Garvagh site lends itself to a small element of housing development it should be considered within the context of the overall site development.

The community interests felt that although the potential for the building requires further exploration there are realistic proposals to expand the museum gallery space, which would still allow sufficient space for offices and classroom space for visiting schools.

Two other ideas contributed by community interests were a common room area and storage for allotment holders and a Men's Shed project. The full feasibility of much of potential uses remains to be tested.

Key Stakeholders - Engagement & Actions

Many stakeholders have already been engaged around the development of the site and

² DTNI is engaged in conversation with The Plunkett Foundation about a possible UK wide initiative looking forests and woodlands. DTNI has proposed Garvagh as one of a number of NI case studies for that programme should it receive funding approval from Big Lottery UK.

are aware of the community's interest. At this stage it is important to define further the key stakeholders as those who will potentially become closely involved in the development options under examination. These will include: the new super council Causeway Coast & Glens District Council, NEELB, Forestry Service, Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Heritage Lottery Fund, Integrated Education Fund and the Northern Ireland Council for integrated Education.

Next Steps - Business Plan stages

The business plan stages that require to be undertaken are outlined below:

1. **An Options Analysis & Costing:** Determine options for sustainable management and use of the building. Determine preferred use of the asset both immediate, short and longer term uses.
2. **Needs & Market Analysis:** An assessment of need for the key elements of the overall business plan. Market demand for each service/option proposed.
3. **Risks & Benefits Analysis:** Help group to determine areas of risk and advantage and strategy to mitigate risk. Make preliminary assessment of pre/post transfer modifications needed along with the projected capital development costs.
4. **Policy Critique:** Support to identify and outline the underlying policy environment.
5. **Project Finance:** Information overview on opportunities for financial investment, capital and revenue development.
6. **Community Demography/Social Return:** Determine the anticipated degree of community involvement in running the project along with the projected community benefits³ including social impact and social return to Garvagh & its environs.
7. **Outline Business Proposal with Economic Appraisal:** presentation of fully appraised business case

³ Including where possible, employment creation, income generation, training, environment, quality life, community safety etc.

Making the Case:

An economic appraisal will be required to provide an economic analysis of the preferred option arising from the business plan. This too will seek to assess other options and means of achieving a similar outcome and will also focus heavily on sustainability and the means by which the initiative will generate income to sustain itself. It is crucial that the community are fully appraised of the scale of the responsibility that they are undertaking and that all aspects of the capacity of the group including issues around governance are examined in detail. This is to mitigate the possibility of the asset becoming a liability for the community or a burden which they ultimately cannot manage. It is also important that the governing structure chosen by the community is not only appropriate to their skills and capacity but that protects the organisation from liability. Both the asset and the organisation must, in tandem, be developed to a stage of 'investment readiness' for any potential benefits to the community to be realised. DTNI can support this process and can assist with capacity building for asset transfer and with building the skills of organisations for asset transfer whilst facilitating the investment readiness process for the project as a whole.

Public authorities are compelled to achieve 'Best Value' when disposing of an asset and this includes an assessment of the social outputs and outcomes achieved by disposing of the asset to a community interest as opposed to on the open market where the market value can potentially be more quickly realised. Social impact can be projected across a number of years and quantified in various ways using various tools such as Social Impact Forecasting . A Social Return On Investment study will need to be commissioned and this is will also be submitted to the disposal agent to support decision making and to determine the viability of the asset transfer.

Costs:

To be discussed. ***Please note this is not a direct request for funding.*** This proposal, in the first instance, seeks the backing of CC&GDC to nominate an interest in acquiring Garvagh High School on behalf of the existing Garvagh stakeholder interest group. The wider work (which does have cost implications) is to support setting up Garvagh High School Development Trust, to schedule a programme of work to assist the group in formulating their options and building a sustainable business model in support of these.