

Chamberlain's estate is under threat by "Scheming" Council

Highbury, the home of Joseph Chamberlain, one of Birmingham's greatest municipal leaders, and childhood home of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain is under threat. Highbury is an important part of Birmingham's and the nation's heritage not only because of Joseph Chamberlain's legacy to the city but also for its historic landscape.

The Chamberlain family mansion was built in 1879, designed by J. H. Chamberlain and the grounds were landscaped by Edward Milner, one of the most celebrated Victorian garden designers. Highbury is listed Grade 2* while the grounds, the associated dwellings and Lodge and Highbury Park are on the Register of Parks and Gardens of special historic interest in England. The Highbury estate can be found 7 km to the south of Birmingham City Centre, between the neighbourhoods of Moseley and Kings Heath.

In 1932 the estate was bequeathed to Birmingham City Council to be used 'for the benefit of the people of Birmingham'. At the same time a charity called Highbury Trust (charity no. 1039194) was formed to oversee the estate and the City Council became the sole trustee. Recently the Charity Commission has forced the sole Trustee to re-consider its management of the Trust and as a result the City has sought permission to break-up the estate.

For many years Birmingham City Council has used the land and buildings of the Trust to house Council departments or to generate income for itself; it has been the Landlord and tenant. About ten years ago, the Charity Commission told the City Council that it could not continue to behave like this but that Highbury Trust should operate as an independent charity and use the Highbury estate for more charitable activities.

The City is now proposing to sell off part of the historic landscape in order to generate funds to repair the mansion. But in 2003 a report prepared by KPMG as consultants revealed that this plan was flawed and wouldn't work because it would not raise enough money. Highbury Trust would remain financially unsustainable and reliant on the City Council for subsidy. Continuing to pursue this proposal brings in to question the governance of Highbury Trust by the City Council.

The City Council needs the Charity Commission to grant it a 'Scheme' or constitution for the Trust with the power to sell the land. The City Council is required by law to publicise their proposals and consult with local people. To date, there has been no consultation by the city but the Charity Commission has details on its own website. The deadline for comments there is 21st February 2009.

A coalition of local community groups has for the last three years been trying to open up a dialogue with the City Council about the future of Highbury Trust and its estate. Unfortunately, the Officers and Councillors responsible for Highbury have ignored the coalition's alternative proposals for developing Highbury. These proposals would

- help Highbury operate as an independent charity,
- increase charitable activity,
- keep the estate intact
- increase involvement from other charities and community organisations.

The Chamberlain legacy is under threat but there is an alternative way forward for Highbury Trust.

We ask that the City Council undertakes a full and comprehensive public consultation over its plans for Highbury and that all interested parties write to the Charity Commission in opposition to the current proposals.

There's more background information at the Moseley Community Development Trust website, and the Charity Commission website. In addition, there will be a display at Kings Heath Library. Below are some useful web links:

- www.moseleycdt.com
- <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/supportingcharities/schemes/sch000003.asp?PDFName=90550>
- <http://highburyparkfriends.org.uk/>

Contact details for the Highbury coalition

Tony Thapar
Moseley Community Development Trust
Tony.Thapar@MoseleyCDT.com
Tel 0121 449 6060

Other members of the coalition include
Highbury Park Friends and the Moseley Society.