

Highbury Hall and Grounds

Concept Plan

A VIBRANT FUTURE FOR A HISTORIC RESOURCE!

Produced by a consortium of local groups including Friends of Highbury Park, The Moseley Society, Moseley Community Development Trust, Britannic Park Residents' Association and Heathfield Rd Residents

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HIGHBURY

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A VIBRANT FUTURE FOR A HISTORIC RESOURCE!

We have a vision of:

- * a locally representative and independent Charitable Trust managing Highbury Hall and Grounds to benefit the citizens of Birmingham.
- * Highbury Hall and Grounds operating as a Charity furthering the aims of education, health promotion, poverty relief, community service and environmental benefits in a sustainable way
- * the Hall and Grounds preserved for future generations whilst making use of this historic resource for education, employment, health and environmental enhancement.
- * the Hall and Grounds playing a vibrant and visionary role in the surrounding communities of Moor Green, Kings Heath and Moseley, as well as providing a focus for tourism, political and historical studies and education for the City of Birmingham.
- * creating a sustainable income stream to help fund the above charitable activities
- * functional links between the Hall, the grounds and Highbury Park providing recreational facilities, and community facilities

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INTRODUCTION

Highbury Hall*¹ and Grounds lies 7 km to the south of Birmingham City Centre. It was once the estate of Joseph Chamberlain, one of the greatest municipal leaders of Birmingham (Appendix 1).

The Victorian mansion was built in 1879, designed by J. H. Chamberlain and the grounds were landscaped by Edward Milner, one of the most celebrated Victorian gardeners. In 1932 it was bequeathed to Birmingham City Council (BCC) to be used 'for the benefit of the people of Birmingham'.

The area to the east of Highbury Hall, once covered by Joseph Chamberlain's famed orchid growing greenhouses is now Chamberlain House, used by BCC Adult Services as a Day Centre and a training centre. Part of the old kitchen garden is used by the Four Seasons Project, providing gardening training to adults with special needs. The grounds immediately to the south of Highbury Hall are maintained as lawn and shrubs and are not publicly accessible. Part of the estate has been incorporated into Highbury Park and is open to the public. Between the Park and Chamberlain House is an area of former shrubberies and lawns that, apart from use as an apiary, has not been maintained.

Highbury Hall, the grounds, the associated dwellings and Lodge and Highbury Park are on the Register of Parks and Gardens of special Historic Interest in England (English Heritage).

Management of Highbury Hall and Grounds currently lies with Birmingham City Council as the sole trustee - for a number of years BCC has been using parts of the estate for core functions, which, according to the Charities Commission, is not an appropriate charitable use. This puts the Council in a difficult position..

Highbury Hall and Grounds form a major resource to the local community, the wider community and nationally. The consortium has been concerned that the potential of this site has not been realised and that without a visionary, inclusive and far-reaching approach, the status of the grounds will remain a combination of benign neglect punctuated by disposal of assets to manage repair work. For this reason the consortium has produced this discussion document to stimulate debate and ensure that Highbury Hall and its grounds have a sustainable future with its historic features and importance forming a vibrant part of the life of the City.

¹ Joseph Chamberlain called his estate 'Highbury' but in this document, Highbury Hall is used to refer to the building as distinct from the grounds.

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MANAGEMENT OF THE TRUST

The Current Situation

The Hall and Grounds are managed by the Highbury Trust. Birmingham City Council's Trusts and Charities sub committee is the sole corporate trustee. We believe this situation means the Council has a conflict of interest. Members of the sub-committee are faced with making decisions in the best interest of Highbury whilst participating in an administration that seeks to benefit from Highbury's assets. For example, while, as Trustees, they might want to charge a higher economic rent for use of the assets, at the same time, as the organisation making use of the Hall and Chamberlain House, they want to minimise the rent paid.

To date, the City Council as sole Trustee has used Highbury as a City owned asset and has failed to operate Highbury as an independent charity; the Charity Commission has recommended that Highbury should operate as an independent charity.

Highbury Trust has a number of assets.

1. Highbury Hall
2. Chamberlain House
3. Residential properties
4. Grounds and Parkland.
5. A much valued history and goodwill from Birmingham residents towards the site.

Highbury Trust has a number of issues that will need to be addressed by Trustees and any future plan for the site. Some of these are:

1. The development of Highbury as an independent charity and for it not to be seen as an asset of the City Council.
2. The development of charitable and or trading activities from the site.
3. The employment of staff to manage the Trust as an independent charity.
4. Urgent repairs to Highbury Hall, estimated to be £670k (by KPMG consultants in 2003). In 2001/02 it is estimated the Hall cost £85,519/y to run.
5. The upgrading of Chamberlain House so it can meet current building regulations for Offices. In 2001/02 it was estimated that Chamberlain House cost £147,615 to operate (See Appendix 2)

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6. The appropriate management of grounds and parkland as they are on the Register of Parks and Gardens of special historic interest in England.
7. The management of four residential properties and tenants on Trust land.

In a wider context, Highbury Trust has the opportunity to apply current thinking about the use of land and buildings to help regenerate communities.

The report by Barry Quirk, Chief Executive of Lewisham Council, was commissioned by government to investigate barriers to the transfer of land and buildings from local authorities and other public sector agencies to the community sector, and where barriers exist, how best to overcome them.

The report states: *'there are no substantive impediments to the transfer of public assets to communities. It can be done, indeed it has been done, legitimately and successfully in very many places.'*

The Development Trusts Association says *"To place land and buildings in community hands is to provide the means for people to create profound and long term transformation in their neighbourhood. This is what community empowerment is really about"*.

We have developed what we feel is an appropriate overall response. The main features are:

1. Highbury Trust becomes an independent charity and operates as a social enterprise to deliver its charitable objectives. There would be a new Board of Trustees administering an updated Memorandum and Articles of Association.
2. The trustees could include representatives from local community groups, local individuals, and representatives from other interest groups in the wider community e.g. the Civic Trust, the Victorian society, the Garden Society. This would create a more dynamic and locally appropriate representation for taking the future of the Hall and Grounds forward and would not be subject to the vagaries of changes in politicians and priorities.
3. The creation of a Trading Company would enable the rental of a proportion of the assets with the income being used to fund the long-term vision of Highbury.

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CONSERVATION AND HERITAGE

The Current Situation

Birmingham City Council has not been able to keep pace with the essential repairs and maintenance, although it has invested a significant amount to maintain Highbury Hall over the years. The City Council has not produced conservation and management plan for the buildings and grounds. Urgent action is needed to retain the historic value of the Hall.

The Hall is in need of repair works, estimated by KPMG to cost approximately £670,000. It is currently used by the Catering Department of the City Council for weddings and other functions and is open to the public on just three days per year.

Part of the Grounds are not open to the public. The old entrance to the dairy from Queensbridge Road is an informal entrance to Highbury Park. The four estate houses are either boarded up, empty or rented.²

Vision for a sustainable future

1. Given the historic importance of the Hall in both architectural terms and its connection with one of the most important politicians in the City, the Hall could be embraced as a living museum re-establishing the connection with Highbury Park incorporating display materials and visitor tea rooms. This would be similar to Aston Hall, Soho House, Selly Manor, Blakesley Hall, Sarehole Mill etc. This would conform to the requirement for a charity to have, for example, educational aims which benefit the public. It could also be marketed as a tourist attraction. The rooms could be let for functions/filming/heritage accommodation provided that the income was re-invested in the charitable aims.
2. The renovation of the grounds and the re-establishment of the connection with the park would increase the attractiveness of both the park and the hall as a resource for community use. Renovation of the grounds could be carried out sensitively to ensure a net benefit for wildlife.
3. The walled kitchen garden could continue to form a resource for an organisation helping people with special needs through the charity, rather than directly provided by the City Council. It could also be extended to grow historic herbs, vegetables and fruit to create a learning resource for local schoolchildren.

² BCC has been making plans for disposal of this land and assets.

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4. Parts of the dairy could be used for various community and educational benefits e.g. urban horticultural studies facility, community orchard, teaching farm, wildlife area. This would be a complementary use to the current area of beehives and the Four Seasons gardening project.
5. Links could be made with organisations concerned with horticultural heritage and conservation e.g. the Wildlife Trust for Birmingham, the Birmingham Botanical Gardens and Martineau Gardens

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EMPLOYMENT AND HEALTH

Present Situation

Currently Highbury Hall and Grounds are providing a venue for social services through the use of Chamberlain House for statutory functions. The Charities Commission has pointed out that this is an appropriate use of Charitable Trust assets but not if the services are directly provided by the City Council rather than by the charitable Trust.

Highbury Hall and Grounds: Vision for improved employment and health

1. Chamberlain House could support a cluster of small businesses from the creative industries. Neighbouring Moseley and Kings Heath has the highest concentration of people working in the creative industries in the City. This approach would bring opportunities for growing and developing employment opportunities, much needed in the locality. This would conform to these charitable aims:
 - a. the prevention or relief of poverty;
 - b. the advancement of citizenship or community development;
 - c. the advancement of the arts, culture, heritage or science;¹

2. Chamberlain House, and the grounds could provide premises for charities and organisations linked to social welfare, nature conservation, horticulture and health – horticultural therapy, green gyms and wildflower nursery (see also Martineau Gardens). This would conform to the following charitable aims:
 - a. The advancement of environmental protection or improvement;
 - b. The relief of those in need, by reason of youth, age, ill-health, disability, financial hardship or other disadvantage.

3. The renovation and maintenance of the Kitchen Garden could provide facilities for adults and children to learn the skills of fruit and vegetable growing whilst ensuring a contemporary use for the historic walled garden conforming to the charitable aim of:
 - a. The advancement of education
 - b. The relief of those in need, by reason of youth, age, ill-health, disability, financial hardship or other disadvantage

4. The restoration of the historic grounds would, in conjunction with restoration of parts of Highbury Park and the Hall, bring the area into greater use as a local and regional facility for outdoor recreation,

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addressing health issues related in inadequate exercise and fear of open space use. Current barriers to use of Highbury Park include fear of crime, inadequate path network, lack of toilets and other 'honeypot' facilities.

5. The restoration of the Model Farm and proposed Community Orchard would provide employment for supervisors, educational staff and community workers whilst providing training opportunities for students of all ages.
6. A link with the NHS Primary Care Trust on the adjacent Uffculme estate could be explored with a view to sharing and combining resources and facilities for mutual benefit.
7. Through the creation of a trading company, opportunities for increased use of the Hall and Grounds for the benefit of the community could be explored. Highbury Trust should be using its assets to generate income that could be used for maintenance . BCC could pay a market rent for the facilities it uses that belong to the Trust.

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EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Present Situation

No educational activities take place on the site at present although in the past, BCC Museum Services organised 'hands-on' historical re-enactment events for local school children.

Highbury Hall and Grounds – the Future – a Regional Educational Resource

1. Highbury Hall and Grounds could form a focus for School and college visits to the hall to learn about the life and political role of Joseph Chamberlain, Victorian life, the Arts and Crafts movement, management of a kitchen garden, Victorian architecture and garden design.
2. Links with Birmingham University and Birmingham City University and Kings Heath Horticultural College (Pershore and Bournville Colleges) could be established to ensure that the resource is utilised in local academic and training courses including political studies courses.
3. A Highbury Fair could be held in the summer
4. The Chamberlain lectures could be held in the Hall in future.
5. The horticultural college in Kings Heath Park to provide training and facilities to address the current national shortage in horticultural expertise pertaining to urban and historic agriculture.

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Summary

Summary of 'the way forward'

- A wider debate needs to occur about the future of Highbury. Highbury Trust should commission a consultation study.
- Highbury Trust should begin to operate as an independent charity in the 21st century.
- Highbury Trust Trustees should work in partnership with the contributors in this report and other local stakeholders.
- Highbury Trust membership should be reviewed to allow local stakeholders and experts in charity / social enterprise to join.
- Highbury Trust memorandum and articles of association should be updated.
- A new business plan for Highbury should be commissioned.
- A management plan for the grounds and buildings should be commissioned.

* Location for comments

* Consultees

* References

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Appendix 2 - Income streams for the Highbury Trust – adapted from KPMG report to BCC dated 24 March 2003.

Highbury Hall

Highbury Hall hosts many different types of event. Analysis of the events for 2001/2 showed them to fall into the following categories: Weddings; City Council/corporate meetings; dinners; other private hires; and open days.

Highbury has bookings for around 83% of available days. Assuming 360 productive days the hall needs to produce at least £560 gross profit per day to cover the level of fixed costs to break even.

With an investment in marketing and an analysis of costs and prices, it is possible that the Hall could break even as a commercial venture.

To become a very profitable commercial venture, the Hall would require a substantial investment in the building.

Chamberlain House

Chamberlain House was built on Trust land. Our (KPMG's) legal opinion is that because of the circumstances of its erection the building is most likely to have become the property of the Trust.

Surveyors estimate that the Trust could raise between £6 and £7 per square foot for commercial rent of the building with the tenant being responsible for the internal maintenance of the building and the owner responsible for the fabric and structure. Our surveyors estimate the market rental to be around £117,000 a year.

The residential properties

The Trust would raise around £725,000 from the sale of properties with vacant possession. Alternatively a market rent would provide £19,000 net income.

Back dated rent

One view that may be taken of the historic accounting position is that the Trust should have received rent for all its properties from 1985 when the use of the properties ceased to be primarily charitable. The Council may owe the Trust around £100,000 each year over 18 years. With accumulate interest of 4% per year the Council would owe the Trust around £2.7M. This does not take into account the £700,000 spent by the Council in 1984 to renovate the Hall.