



Committee	Council Meeting
Date	14 April 2025
Agenda Item	10

Halstead Town Council

Proposed Community & Arts Centre

Introduction

The Town Council has been working with the Halstead Community Centre Charitable Trust (known as H4C) since 2009 to develop a new Community Centre on land adjacent to the Butler Road Car Park, which was donated to the H4C, following its formation to manage the land. Initially the trust proposed to build a new Community Centre, and to lease it to HTC.

Significant delays have occurred in achieving confirmation that the land was fit to build on, along with the loss of a large part of grant funding due to concerns raised about the business case for the project. Subsequently the Trust requested (in 2024) HTC to decide how it wished to use the land in pursuit of developing a community asset, once H4C had removed the contamination.

It is now time for the Council to consider its position and, if it believes that it is right to continue with the project, develop a clear business case to produce to funders.

The current estate

The current position is that HTC owns the following properties:

Queens Hall – meeting/event hall/kitchen and HTC offices, Halstead Museum

The Empire Theatre – managed by The Empire Theatre Trust CIO

The Library – rented by ECC

The Pavilion Courtauld Sports Ground

Each of these performs a useful function within the town and is well used.

Queens Hall

A well-appointed meeting hall 144 metres square

It is widely used for the following functions:

Regular weekly and monthly bookings, by the NHS and local clubs

One-off bookings for parties

Council meetings

Bookings cover the whole week and the hall is 75% occupied

The Museum is housed in a room at the Hall and is used on Wednesdays and Sundays by up to 6 volunteers and is visited regularly and enthusiastically by 200-300 members of the public between February and November on those days it is open.

HTC office houses up to 4 office staff, 2 Car Park Wardens and The Safer Streets Warden along with the base for the 2 Town Council Groundsmen, and the 2 caretakers.

Limitations

The main drawback is that there is limited parking.

The Empire Theatre

The Theatre building is owned and the exterior managed by HTC and The Empire Theatre Trust maintains the interior.

The Trust also operates the activities of the theatre which include film showings, live theatre, live music, and dementia friendly singing and films.

Limitations

Difficult access for disabled/visually impaired

Lack of rehearsal and breakout space

Bar area is limited and impacts on access

Number of temporary buildings

Health and safety concerns over number of add-on rooms

The Library

The building is owned and maintained by HTC and rented to Essex County Council for use as a library and is a listed building

This is a well-used library which has developed into a hub for the following activities

WiFi

Computers

Printing

Print directly from your device

Scanner

Photocopying

Study space

Everyone's Literacy Area

Hearing aid battery collection point

Small electrical recycling

Battery recycling

Braintree District Council recycling sacks (one roll per household)

Circus equipment - one week loan available to community groups and organisations (by arrangement)

Children's trail, colouring and crafts

Limitations

There is limited opportunity for expansion and group activities due to the listed status.

Courtauld Sports Ground Pavilion

The Pavilion which is attached but separate from the Bowls Club pavilion provides a small meeting room and changing rooms for the various sports operating at the grounds including, rugby, football, tennis, running club and an open area gym. The rooms are also available for use at a cost by other groups and hold up to 20 people.

Limitations

Limited space in the pavilion

Limited catering facilities

Other facilities

The Conservative Club, High Street

Good meeting facilities but no allocated parking

United Reformed Church

The church offers good catering facilities and meeting space, both large and small rooms.

St Andrews Hall

Small hall with kitchen and some parking

The Community Shed

This supports physical and mental health and wellbeing for the residents of Halstead and beyond, with limited parking

Holy Trinity Church

Small venue offering limited facilities, with limited access with no parking.

What is the need?

It is clear that the existing buildings meet a need to provide events, entertainment, information, museum, office and meeting spaces for public use. What we do not know is what unmet need exists, and whether this can be accommodated within the existing provision or whether developing a further property would be the most appropriate way forward. The future of existing HTC facilities will have to be included in the research.

Such information is essential to enable HTC to produce a relevant Business plan to present to funders to secure funding. While an existing survey exists it is now out of date given the new population in the town.

PROPOSAL

HTC therefore agrees to develop a proposal for a new community facility as detailed below and to use this as a vehicle to consult with current users of the existing estate and all groups within the Town along with the wider public.

In summary the following proposal is intended to stimulate discussion and be the basis of consultation on the potential for a new community building in Halstead:

That the Empire Theatre site be developed by extending the building, on the South Eastern side adjacent to Beridge Road, to include meeting, performance, rehearsal and event spaces possibly, but not necessarily, with space for the museum and HTC offices.

Although a completely new build of the Empire would result in a more modern and practical building, and this has been considered, it would not be possible for HTC to fund such a rebuild, and recent refurbishments have included renovated seating in the theatre and a new roof. There are many in Halstead who are fond of the existing building and would not wish to see it demolished.

Assuming that the H4C Trust completes the decontamination of the site adjacent to the Butler Road car park and that it is leased to HTC as proposed previously, that this be developed to provide additional car parking. We will need to consider a new space, for the existing car wash that will be displaced from the Empire Theatre site. The car wash owner has been informed and is not unhappy with the proposal. He did say that there are old and empty petrol tanks under the forecourt, which have been filled with some kind of foam, so these would need to be removed. In addition a septic tank would be needed underneath the new site for the car wash, to collect the runoff water and dirt.

To soften the impact of the industrial estate bordering this site along Broton Drive suitable landscaping/tree planting is also proposed and provision for EV charging should be considered.

It may also be possible to develop a public realm in this area.

Recommendation : HTC agree :

1 That a survey of the public (supported by existing evidence), users of existing properties and all other interested parties be undertaken to provide evidence to develop a business case for the proposal and that funding of up to £10k be released from EMR for this to take place.

2 Outline drawings for an extension to the Empire Theatre be drawn up and that the cost of these be drawn from the Earmarked Reserves held for the Community Centre Development up to a total cost of £38k

3. That, on completion of the survey and business case in April 2026, HTC determines whether the development should proceed and the next steps to achieving this are planned.

4. That the Clerk be authorised to arrange for Pre-application advice from BDC subject to the normal fees to be drawn from the reserves held for the Community Centre when initial drawings are prepared.

There follow a number of indicative images intended to inform discussion and they do not form any formal decision as to the shape, style or position of any potential extension to the Empire Theatre, if indeed, this were to form the final plan for any proposed centre.

A concept image showing the potential for extending the Empire Theatre



View from above the Theatre showing the potential area.



The photos below detail the side/rear of the site with demountable and other temporary buildings that could be replaced providing modern accommodation.



The following photo provides an idea of the large amount of land that could potentially become the car park once decontaminated probably bigger than the Chapel Street car park:



It is the intention that this document will become a working document that will record the actions taken, ensuring that outcomes and amended proposals are recorded to inform the final decision as to how to proceed along with any business plan required to make application(s) for funding.

Wishlist prepared by Empire Theatre trustees

The trustees have clearly listed every possible activity that might be required in Halstead, particularly if there were no other site available in Halstead. It is important when considering these not to seek to take away from any existing facility which is already providing such services, but to complement what is already available. The Community Shed, the Library, the URC church and the toddler/nursery groups already provide some of the activities suggested.

Section	Features/Programs/Events	Details
Key Features	Flexible Rooms	Built-in dividers for varying group sizes; retractable projector screens for presentations, youth activities, and streaming platforms.
	Music Room	Piano/musical instruments; additional built-in projection screen.
	Cafe/Bar Area	Expanded seating with high stools and window tables; gathering point before events and screenings.
	Upper Mezzanine	Hireable space; office for General Manager and volunteers.
	Auditorium	Soundproofed for simultaneous cinema screenings and other activities.
	Outdoor Spaces	Community garden/allotment, and picnic areas.
	Technology Integration	Virtual reality stations; high-speed Wi-Fi; digital art creation area.
	Immersive Experience Spaces	Interactive History Room with AR exhibits; 360° Projection Room for films and workshops.
Accessibility	Parking	Three proposed disabled parking locations: front, back, and side (Berridge Road).
	Inclusive Design	Space for accessible storage and mobility requirements.

Section	Features/Programs/Events	Details
Community Programs	For Youth	Drop-in streaming activities, tutor groups, and formal educational programs like Explore Learning.
	For Parents and Babies	Baby weighing, breastfeeding clinics, and parent support groups with peer networking opportunities.
	For Pensioners	Coffee mornings with games and social gatherings.
	Neurodiverse/Dementia-Friendly Groups	Choir sessions and inclusive community gatherings.
	Local Arts and Culture	Theatre group meetings; art exhibitions and historical displays in partnership with the Local History Museum.
	Fitness Classes	Regular exercise classes.
	Health and Wellness Programs	Meditation/yoga rooms; nutrition workshops; mental health drop-in support sessions.
	Additional Programs	Coding and tech classes; language meet-ups; book clubs and author readings.
	Local Environmental Groups	Host sustainability workshops/events in garden or green spaces.
Community Engagement Events	Hire Options	Birthday parties/private hire; flexible conference spaces.
	Special Events	Fashion shows; licensed cinema screenings; rotating mural wall; “Art Under the Stars.”
	Cultural Events	Cultural festivals; artist talks; pop-up art markets; film festivals.
	Family-Oriented Events	Family fun days; parent-child workshops; outdoor movie nights.
	Educational/Informational Events	Skill-sharing sessions; expert panels; workforce development workshops.
	Health and Wellness Events	Community health fairs; wellness retreats; outdoor fitness classes.
	Youth/Student-Oriented Events	Gaming tournaments; teen open mic nights; STEM workshops.
	Seasonal/Holiday Events	Holiday markets; Easter egg hunts; winter festivities (tree lighting/caroling).
	Interactive Community Events	Neighbourhood picnics; community mural painting; trivia nights.
	Charitable/Fundraising Events	Charity auctions; food drives; walkathons/fun runs.

Section	Features/Programs/Events	Details
	Special Interest/Social Groups	Film appreciation clubs; board game nights; photography walks.
Local History and Heritage	Museum Relocation	Dedicated mezzanine space with rotating displays.
	Historic Green Space	Preserve former railway line as a historic site.
	Steam Train Exhibit	Permanent exhibit inspired by the Flich Way in Braintree.
Additional Considerations	Kitchen Facilities	Small kitchen; catering by local providers to minimize staffing costs.
	Storage Solutions	Adequate storage for equipment and event needs.
	Eco-Friendly Infrastructure	Living Green Roof; vertical garden; geothermal heating/cooling.
	Digital Creativity Hub	Podcast/recording studio; makerspace with 3D printers and crafting tools.
	Gamification	Mobile app rewards for attendance/volunteering.
	Pop-Up/Seasonal Offerings	Winter ice rink; summer open-air film screenings.
	Smart Technology	App-based room bookings; event notifications; voice-activated assistance for lighting/audio/displays.
	Health and Sustainability Services	Water refill stations; fitness trail.
	Specialist Facilities	Sensory Room for neurodiverse visitors; Repair Café for sustainability.
	Artistic Innovation	Kinetic art installations; projection mapping for visual displays.
	Community Impact Programs	Skills Bank for shared workshops; Volunteer Hub for initiative sign-ups.

Possible survey

Halstead Community Arts Centre Feedback

Do you believe that Halstead needs a Community Arts Centre?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Which activities would you like to see offered at the new Community Arts Centre? Select all that apply.

- Cinema
- Live Theatre
- Cafe/Bar
- Local History Exhibits
- Smart Technology Workshops
- Dementia Friendly Activities
- Other (please specify)

How important is it to you that the Community Arts Centre is accessible to all, including those who are physically or visually impaired?

- Very Important
- Important
- Somewhat Important
- Not Important

How important is it to you that the Community Arts Centre aligns with current thinking on climate and environment?

- Very Important
- Important
- Somewhat Important
- Not Important

How likely are you to use the new community arts centre if it offers the activities you are interested in?

Comment box questions often lead to more detailed responses

Captures deeper insights

Do you have any additional suggestions or comments regarding the proposed Community Arts Centre?

[Comment box]

Please provide your name (optional)

[First Name]

[Last Name]

Please provide your email address (optional)

[Email]