

What should happen to Highbury Hall?

The future of the Chamberlain family's Highbury bequest to the people of Birmingham is still in doubt. In 1932 the family set up a Trust to run **Highbury Hall, the surrounding gardens and the adjoining Chamberlain House**. The Trust mission is 'to contribute to the general benefit of the citizens of Birmingham'.

The sole trustee of the Trust is **Birmingham City Council**, who also happens to be the sole tenant of the Hall and Chamberlain House. Adult and Family Services maintain offices, and operate a horticultural centre in the gardens and a day centre in the offices for their clients. The City also hires out the Hall for dinners, social events, and the well-known Wedding Fayres.

A few years ago the **Charity Commission** rebuked the City Council because it had not filed accounts for the Trust for many years and it was not operating the Trust as a charity. In response to this in 2003 the Council employed Consultants, **KPMG** to prepare a report that investigated the future of the Trust. The report, which I obtained by using the Freedom of Information Act after the Council refused to publish it, shows that:

- The Trust income is less than its expenditure and the difference is made up by the City Council
- There is a backlog of maintenance for the Hall, estimated then to cost about £650,000
- The Governance of the Trust is unsatisfactory because the Council is the sole Trustee and also uses the buildings and gardens, leading to a conflict of interest

KPMG recommended that new arrangements be put in place for the Governance of the Trust and pointed out that the Council's plan to sell off Chamberlain House, three houses on the estate, and all the land except for the Hall itself, would not raise enough money to pay for the backlog of work and to provide an income to maintain the Hall long-term.

Since then local organisations have tried to influence the Charity Commission and the City Council to adopt a new direction which would see the local community involved in the running of the Trust, and the City Council becoming a tenant that paid an economic rent for any facilities that it continued to use.

Local organisations and individuals, including **Highbury Park Friends**, the **Moseley Society** and **Moseley Community Development Trust**, have developed a **Concept Plan** for Highbury Hall that will:

- Meet the legal requirements for charitable activity by furthering the aims of education, health promotion, reducing poverty, and providing community service and environmental benefits in a sustainable way
- Continue to provide the base for the day centre and the horticultural centre, but operated by the charitable Trust under contract to the Council
- Set up a locally representative and independent charitable Trust that will include City Council representatives. The new Trust will manage

Highbury Hall and Grounds to benefit the citizens of Birmingham in line with the commitment made in 1932

- Preserve the Hall and Grounds for future generations whilst making use of this historic resource for education, employment, health and environmental enhancement.
- Ensure that the Hall and Grounds will play 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.
- Create a sustainable income stream to help fund the above charitable activities through an operating company in accordance with charity law
- Provide functional links between the Hall, the grounds and Highbury Park providing recreational facilities, and community facilities

Since Britannic Assurance departed and Ideal Benefit Society closed down, Adult Services in Chamberlain House is the largest employer in the area. The Concept Plan would have the benefit of keeping jobs in Moseley and King's Heath that would otherwise be lost if they have to move away from the area.

One distraction until recently was an idea put forward by a Ward Councillor that **Riverside Church** could take over the Chamberlain House offices and build facilities for itself and for **Queensbridge School**. This concept has now been examined in detail by the **Tyler Parkes** consultancy and shown to be a complete non-starter. Their report says any improvement to facilities for Riverside Church (which uses Queensbridge facilities on Sundays) that would also benefit the school must be built adjacent to, or in place of, existing school building on the current site.

Meanwhile Birmingham City Council, despite pressure from the Charity Commission and from local organisations, have not started to sort out the Governance, management, financial and maintenance issues. The Chair of the Council's Charities sub-committee, Councillor Alden has told the Ward Committee that this delay is his fault. He is insisting that the back rent owed by the Council to the Trust is paid over, a sum he calculates to be more than £2M. This, however, is not a requirement of the Charity Commission, and all of us concerned about the future of this historic monument do not want to wait indefinitely before we can start the work needed to revive the buildings and gardens and see them benefiting the citizens of Birmingham again in the way they should. A settlement, however, that paid for the outstanding maintenance work and provided some working capital for the new Trust would be vital.

You can help answer the question: "What should happen to Highbury Hall?". You can see our Concept Plan for the Trust on the website of the Moseley CDT at www.MoseleyCDT.com. The KPMG report and the Tyler Parkes report are at the same location. We would welcome your comments on the Plan as part of our public consultation on the future of Highbury Trust.

Comments can be emailed to administrator@MoseleyCDT.com or sent to Moseley CDT, 149-153 Alcester Road, Moseley, Birmingham B13 8JP