

WALLINGFORD TOWN COUNCIL
THE REGAL
BRIEF FOR DEVELOPMENT FEASIBILITY REVIEW

1. Introduction

We are looking for a property development solutions expert – with commercial and residential development experience - to evaluate the feasibility of a preferred concept for the redevelopment of a building and site owned by Wallingford Town Council, and to recommend an alternative route if the preferred scheme is not considered feasible. The building is The Regal Centre, Goldsmith's Lane, Wallingford, OX10 0DN.

2. Objective

At its meeting on 18 March 2024, Wallingford Town Council took the following decision in public session:

“It was proposed by Councillor Sandall, and seconded by Councillor Pannett, and RESOLVED that a professional be appointed to explore and progress Option 1B, or if that is not suitable, identify the best possible alternative, using the Section 106 for professional fees, clarifying the access issues as a first priority and finding a solution, with a clear timeframe with identified milestones, to avoid drift; the first milestone being the next meeting of the Full Council in April 2024 when the professional should be appointed” (Full Council, 18 March 2024, Minute 692/23)

(Option 1B is to retain the existing community space by redeveloping the site in partnership with a third party to create a multi-function space, including a community hall of some kind. Components of a multi-function space might be a community hall, offices (potentially used by community organisations) and residential accommodation. An alternative could be any of the other five options identified. See Appendix for fuller description of options.

3. History of this site

The building known as 'The Regal' was constructed 1933 to serve as a cinema. The cinema opened in March 1934 and ceased to operate nearly forty years later in March 1973.

It was set back from the road and had a small car park in front. The brick facade was relieved by slender windows on each side, while the central section had a white stucco finish, with three windows, above which was 'The Regal' sign.

The building was almost identical to the Regal Cinema, Bicester and the Regal Cinema, Tring.

In 1975 it was purchased by the Town Council, the floor levelled (it was previously sloping), and converted into a community centre becoming known as The Regal Sports and Social Centre.

New buildings have been erected on the former car park, which now hide a view of the former cinema from the street. The Town Council also owns this building, 9 St Martin's Street which comprises one retail unit (currently let) and two floors of office space, currently empty and formerly housing the Town Council Office.

4. History of the project

The community centre was closed by the Town Council in August 2017 due to health and safety concerns and has remained vacant ever since.

At that stage, the Town Council was typically subsidising the operation of the centre by around £20k each year, although in some years this figure doubled, especially when repairs were needed. In other words, the centre was running at a loss.

Since closure, the Council has explored options, particularly redevelopment into a multi-functional space, and in doing so, has identified significant challenges.

Two sets of architects' drawings were developed for a possible multi-functional space and these were the subject of public consultation.

The delay in finding and realising a suitable solution is a cause of significant frustration both within the Council and the wider community. This is largely due to the location of the building and the significant investment (and risk) that any development would entail as explained in Section 6 below. The delay was further compounded by the COVID pandemic.

Whilst closed, the Council is continuing to spend around £8k each year maintaining the building.

The Town Council does not have the resources to undertake a major redevelopment of the site.

5. Options

At a high-level, there are effectively two options: (1) to retain this particular indoor community space (in whatever form, existing or otherwise), or (2) not to. There are then variations of both high-level options

The table overleaf depicts those options and variations.

Option 1 Retain this particular community space (in whatever form, existing or otherwise)	Option 2 Do not retain this particular community space
A. Make good the existing building and re-open	A. Sell the site and use the revenue to create a new central community space
B. Redevelop the site in partnership with a third party to create a multi-function space, including community hall	B. Sell the site (and no new community space)
	C. Remove the existing building and increase car parking space for residents
	D. Do nothing

6. Challenges encountered

There have been two significant challenges in progressing the preferred option: cost (a multi-million pound sum) and access.

The site is arguably ‘landlocked’, with adjoining areas of land owned by three parties: Beechcroft Homes, South Oxfordshire District Council and the Town Council itself. The Town Council would require permission of both Beechcroft and SODC to access The Regal for major development purposes. The access issues have proved especially intractable.

The existing building is poorly constructed.

7. Community sentiment and sensitivity

A parish or town council is not statutorily obliged to provide an indoor community space, although many do, e.g. the archetypal parish hall. However the current Town Council wishes at the very least to facilitate the provision of such spaces for the community.

A claimed lack of a hireable community space is felt keenly by some within the community. It is argued that existing space is oversubscribed or not of appropriate size.

For long-term residents of Wallingford, there is understandably nostalgia relating to The Regal and the place it has played in the life of town over the last century.

There is also understandable frustration within the community (as well as the Council itself) that The Regal has remained closed since 2017 with the future of the space remaining unclear and the Council’s discussions necessarily held in confidence.

8. Scope

We expect you to address/consider/include:

- We expect you to pursue the feasibility of Option 1B to its fullest extent, before deciding which of the alternative options would be the second most preferable and achievable
- Make in-person contact on behalf of the Town Council with Beechcroft Homes, one of the adjoining land owners, to explore options and resolve outstanding issues
- Make in-person contact on behalf of the Town Council with the relevant officers at South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC), the other adjoining landowner, to explore options and resolve outstanding issues
- You will need to demonstrate (and evidence) to the adjoining land owners the strength of feeling within the community for the redevelopment of The Regal site as a community space, including the resolution of the access issues
- As part of the above, it is likely that you will want to facilitate a meeting between senior representatives of the Town Council such as The Mayor with both adjoining land owners
- The expectation is that Beechcroft Homes or South Oxfordshire District Council would place a charge on Wallingford Town Council for accessing The Regal site for major redevelopment purposes
- Fully appraise yourself of all legal considerations (and associated processes), including those for a local authority when managing and determining the future of a public asset
- A detailed understanding of land registration concerning the site and immediate surrounding areas
- Audit the availability of community space in Wallingford and provide evidence of demand in relation to the growth of the town. Up to now, only anecdotal information has ever been offered
- The need for public consultation, especially given the divergence of views and strength of feeling
- The suitability of combining residential accommodation and a rentable community space in the same building, and associated issues of conflict, including examples of where this has been achieved successfully
- Initiate and take calls from and meet with individual Town Councillors and District Councils as required, being aware that differences of opinion are likely to exist
- Be aware that the Town Council is likely to need to manage another major capital project concurrently, that this is the Town Hall Conservation Project and is also currently working on a major redevelopment of the Bull Croft
- Be aware of the levels of capacity and capability within the Town Council to manage a project of such scale
- The Town Council does not have the resources to undertake a major redevelopment of the site Around £500k of Section 106 monies are exclusively available for making

good or redeveloping The Regal (Option 1 – see Appendix), of which £280k needs to be spent by 2026

- Fully appraise yourself of public financing options, or private/public financing options, and the level of funds that the Town Council has available for this project
- The level of operating subsidy (if any) that the Town Council might be willing to absorb in maintaining the community space
- Be aware that 9 St Martin's Street, the building constructed on the front area of The Regal, is also owned by the Town Council. This consists of an empty office space spread over two floors, formerly occupying the Town Council Office, and a single retail unit with a frontage in St Martin's Street. See reference also in Section 3 above.

We do not want you to:

- We do not want a re-articulation of issues and challenges that we are already aware of. This clearly would be very frustrating. This piece of work needs to be solutions-focussed
- The project is not constrained to previous architects' drawings; they represent a vision at a particular moment in time
- This needs to be kept separate to other major projects that the Town Council is currently undertaking, specifically the Town Hall Conservation Project and the Bull Croft Redevelopment. A high-level awareness of these projects however is useful, primarily for understanding demands on internal capacity and capability and funding.

9. Timetable

Publication of Request for Tender or Proposal: w/c 15 April 2024

Deadline for responses, including quotations: 17 May 2024 (or 24 May 2024)

Date of appointment: 24 June 2024 (Full Council meeting), or possibly 22 May 2024 (Full Council meeting)

Deadline for completed work if appointed: 30 September 2024

Preferred date for final decision: The Council wishes to come to a final decision on the future of The Regal (and potentially initiate a phase of public consultation) on 21 October 2024 (Full Council meeting)

10. Evaluation criteria

Proposals will be evaluated according the following criteria:

Criteria 1 - Understanding of the brief and the context (X%)

Criteria 2 - Relevant professional capability and experience (X%)

Criteria 3 - Proposed methodology (X%)

Criteria 4 - Calibre of individuals who will be working on the assignment (X%)

Criteria 5 - References of former/existing clients (X%)

The appointment will be made by the Full Council. Proposals may be evaluated beforehand by a sub-committee of Members and Officers. A minimum of three responses will be tabled at Council.

11. Contacts

Your point of contact at the Town Council during the course of preparing your response and quotation is Luke Whitcomb who can be contacted at meetings@wallingfordtowncouncil.gov.uk or alternatively, on 01491 835357

If appointed, you would have access to all Town Councillors, the Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer, and others.

12. How to respond (and by when)

Responses and expressions of interest should be sent to Michelle Taylor, the Town Clerk at townclerk@wallingfordtowncouncil.gov.uk, copying in Luke Whitcomb, Meetings Officer at meetings@wallingfordcouncil.gov.uk

The Council's postal address is Wallingford Town Council, 8A Castle Street, Wallingford, OX10 8DL.

The deadline for responding to this brief is Friday, 17 May 2024 (or Friday, 24 May 2024)

13. Documentation

Your submission should demonstrate:

- a clear understanding of the brief and context
- a description of how you would approach and undertake the work
- a clear understanding of the challenges involved and how you intend to address these
- a description of your professional capability and experience relevant to the project
- the names of individuals who will be working on the project and their competencies and professional experience
- a high level of satisfaction from other clients

14. Budget

The budget available for this work is XXXXX [this may not appear, subject to legal requirements]

15. Additional information

If appointed, you would have access to the following:

- Full Council paper, 18 March 2024
- Full Council minute, 18 March 2024
- Reports on The Regal to Full Council and/or any of its communities since 2017
- Previous legal advice
- Architects drawings 1 (and any associated public consultation output)
- Architects drawings 2 (and any associated public consultation output)
- Previous contact with potential developers/partners
- Previous contact with adjoining land owners
- District and Town Councillor Keats-Rohan's proposal, 18 March 2024
- Revised Neighbourhood Plan references, including policies

16. Confidentiality

Whoever is appointed will be required to sign a Confidential Disclosure Agreement

APPENDIX - OPTIONS

At a high-level, there are effectively two options: (1) to retain this particular indoor community space (in whatever form, existing or otherwise), or (2) not to. There are then variations of both high-level options

The table below depicts those options and variations:

Option 1 Retain this particular community space (in whatever form, existing or otherwise)	Option 2 Do not retain this particular community space
E. Make good the existing building and re-open	C. Sell the site and use the revenue to create a new central community space
D. Redevelop the site in partnership with a third party to create a multi-function space, including community hall	F. Sell the site (and no new community space)
	G. Remove the existing building and increase car parking space for residents
	H. Do nothing

The following commentary describes the merits and dis-benefits of each option and variation.

Option 1A – Make good the existing building and re-open

Pros:

- preserves the historical and cultural significance of the existing building
- maintains the sense of identity and nostalgia for residents who have fond memories associated with the building
- allows for the continuation of community activities and events in a familiar space
- provides immediate access to community facilities without the need for extensive and disruptive redevelopment or relocation
- Section 106 monies (around £500k) would be available to do this, but can only be used for this particular space
- this does not remove the opportunity to redevelop the site as a community at a later date

Cons:

- doesn't sufficiently address the poor quality of the existing structure
- potentially more costly to maintain than a new building going forwards
- missed opportunity to incorporate other needed elements within the space
- requires significant financial investment to address safety concerns, repairs and upgrades
- limited improvements to address accessibility, functionality and modernisation of facilities
- risk of future closures or safety issues if underlying structural problems are not fully addressed (this appears to be the original reason why the Town Council at the time chose to keep the building closed)

Option 1B – Redevelop the site in partnership with a third party (e.g. another local authority, a developer, a housing association) to create a multi-purpose space, ideally including community hall, offices and residential accommodation

Pros:

- meets different needs and provides a revenue stream
- the offices could act as a community hub, with the Town Council, other public authorities (e.g. Police) and community bodies (e.g. Citizens Advice Bureau, organisations working with young people) basing themselves there
- Section 106 monies (approximately £500k) would be available to do this, but can only be used for this particular space

Cons:

- the number of partners who would be willing to do this is very limited, the most obvious being the neighbouring land owners who have a vested interest and who could resolve the access issue
- some third parties might not be interested in the community space element
- is additional residential accommodation needed in the centre of Town, and if so, what kind?

(Note: Councillor Katharine Keats-Rohan's proposal, submitted to the Full Council meeting of 18 March 2024, is an example of this variation)

Option 2A – Sell the site and use the revenue to create a new central community space elsewhere

Pros:

- potential to generate significant revenue from the sale of the site
- opportunity to create a new community space that better serves current needs

- ability to invest in modern facilities and amenities for the community
- removal of the financial burden associated with maintaining the current building

Cons:

- Loss of a community landmark and potential cultural heritage site
- potential resistance from residents who are emotionally attached to the current building
- uncertainty regarding the feasibility and availability of suitable alternative locations
- the revenue could only be used as capital

Option 2B – Sell the site (and no new community space)

Pros:

- opportunity to generate revenue from the sale of the property
- removal of financial responsibility for maintaining the current buildings
- flexibility for the buyer to repurpose the site according to their needs
- potential to attract investment and development to the area
- increases WTC capacity to focus on other major projects, i.e. Town Hall Conservation Project, Bull Croft Redevelopment

Cons:

- loss of community asset and potential historical landmark
- disruption to existing community groups and activities
- uncertainty regarding the future of the site and its impact on the surrounding area
- doesn't provide additional community space in the centre of the Town
- the revenue could only be used as capital
-

Option 2C – Remove the existing building and use the space to create additional car parking

Pros:

- parking capacity is limited in the centre of the Town
- residents' parking in the centre of Town is very limited and this is a concern often expressed to the Town Council

Cons:

- realistically, how much additional capacity does the site provide?

Option 2D - Do nothing

Pros:

- preserves the historical and cultural significance of the existing building
- maintains the sense of identity and nostalgia for residents who have fond memories associated with the building

Cons:

- a large empty space continues within the centre of the Town which even if redundant, costs the Town Council, e.g. minimum of £8k at today's prices, plus any repairs
- damages the reputation of, and confidence in, the Town Council
- the community expects us to come to a decision and resolve this