

January 2022

Pye Green Community Centre

Frequently Asked Questions

To help answer some of the frequently asked questions raised by residents and users of Pye Green Community Centre, Hednesford Town Council have composed this document.

Q1) Is the Council closing Pye Green Community Centre, or gifting it to one organisation for sole use?

No, Pye Green Community Centre is categorically not closing and will continue to operate as a Community Centre. The decision taken by Hednesford Town Council on 7th December 2021 enables Hednesford Town Council to inform the Landlord of the building, Cannock Chase District Council, that they wish to assign the current lease over to 1st Hednesford Scouts.

If the assignment of the lease is approved by Cannock Chase District Council, 1st Hednesford Scouts would not have sole use of the building and it would continue to operate as a Community Centre available for public hire.

The Community Centre is not being gifted to the Scouts and, if the assignment of the lease is approved, the current lease and financial responsibilities associated with managing and operating the building would be legally transferred to that organisation.

Q2) Does Pye Green Community Centre need “saving”?

No, the preferred route of the Council will secure a vital community asset for generations to come. Pye Green Community Centre will still operate as a Community Centre for hire and use by the community.

Q3) Why are the Scouts taking over?

The Scouts will not be taking over. The preferred route is that the current lease for Pye Green Community Centre will be assigned to the Scouts and that they will manage the Community Centre.

Pye Green Community Centre operates with a financial burden on the tax payers of Hednesford which currently amounts to subsidising a number of local businesses (hirers) with public money.

There are a number of core principles that are central to any decision making around the future of Pye Green Community Centre including;

- the Community Centre remains available for community use
- any organisation has financial stability to support the operation of the Community Centre
- any organisation considered operates not-for-profit, is a charitable organisation or similar constituted community group and must not be a private business of any kind
- any organisation is rooted in the community of Hednesford with a longevity and demonstrable record of service to the Town.

In an exploration of the potential options, the Scouts are a not-for-profit Charitable Organisation which has existed in our community for over 100 years serving the youth and families of Hednesford. With the Council's preferred route, this will secure a base for scouting in Hednesford as well as a Community Centre for wider use to support clubs, activities, organisations and businesses into the future.

Assigning the lease to the Scouts will significantly reduce the operating costs and address the ongoing financial burden of Pye Green Community on the tax payers of Hednesford.

Q4) When is this all due to happen?

The Council is working towards a completion date of 1st April 2022. This will give adequate time to communicate and work with stakeholders and complete the legal processes. This may change depending on the progress being made with each element of the process.

Q5) Why is the Council doing this?

As part of asking to be your Councillors in 2019 the Hednesford Residents and Volunteers highlighted the significant financial contribution from your Council Tax towards running Pye Green Community Centre and how this was affecting the ability of the Council to do anything else for the community of Hednesford.

Since being elected in 2019, the Council has been working to find a way to relieve this financial burden on the tax payers of Hednesford whilst retaining its use as a Community Centre for the community of Hednesford.

Covid pandemic aside, the use of the main hall has always been the primary source of hire and the meeting room hire has been incidental. The gap in income from businesses, community groups and others hiring has remained fairly static. In broad terms the numbers are:

£33,000	Income from hire (per annum)
£40,000	Income from Council Tax in the year (per annum)
£18,000	Income from Council Reserves (previous Council Tax, per annum)
£91,000	Expenditure to run Pye Green Community Centre including staff costs

Former Councillors took on a substantial loan from the Public Works Loan Board to build an extension on Pye Green Community Centre and this is repaid every year at £17,000. The original intention was to apply for a grant from the Coalfield Regeneration Fund to cover the costs of the extension, when this was declined a decision was made at that time to proceed with the extension but with a loan and to cover the costs incurred from future Council Tax from Hednesford tax payers.

As a Council we do not believe it is responsible to leave this as the status quo from our time as service to our community and have had a number of conversations, discussions and debates to consider options, opportunities and ways forward to relieve the financial burden on the tax payers of Hednesford whilst retaining the use of the centre for the community.

Councillors over the last few years have spoken to residents of Hednesford, surveyed the users of Pye Green Community Centre and looked at alternatives to understand the options to secure the future of Pye Green Community Centre.

Doing nothing and retaining the status quo would present the Council with a few options. It could,

- Keep the priorities as they have been for the last couple of years and run down the reserves of the Council to fund the deficit until reserves are exhausted
- Raise the precept or Council Tax for Hednesford residents to cover the gap in either reserves or the in-year contribution
- Increase the hire rates to a rate to cover the council tax contribution and stop the subsidy of private businesses by the tax payers of Hednesford. The increase in rates would expect to be in the order of three to four times the current rate and significantly different to other facilities in the area

- Stop or significantly reduce all other Council activities including the ongoing work for the regeneration of our town and community across many initiatives enjoyed by all residents of Hednesford

Making a decision to address the financial deficit of Pye Green Community Centre allows the Council to focus on the priorities of the whole community building on the successes of the last two years with year round events, grants to support businesses and community groups, Hednesford Life Magazine, outdoor cinema and so much more and the plans to expand community engagement and youth provision across the town.

Q6) How are hirers affected by the Council decision?

Pye Green Community Centre will continue to operate as a Community Centre and will continue to be available for hire and used by community groups, organisations and businesses.

Week day evening hire in the main hall will continue to serve the community through the use of 1st Hednesford Scouts. Weekday evening hire for meeting room space will continue to be available for hire and use by community groups and others. To facilitate the outdoor development of young people, 16 weekends will impact on the use and hire of the main hall.

All other times Pye Green Community Centre will continue to operate unaffected for hire and use by all community groups, charities, organisations businesses and interested parties serving the community of Hednesford.

Q7) How are the Council helping those impacted by the Council decision?

Following the decision by the Council on the evening of Tuesday 7th December 2021 all hirers (and staff) have been spoken to individually to share the Council's preferred way forward and those hirers affected by the decision have been offered full support to find alternative and nearby venues in the local area. This will continue in a manner individual to each hirer as guided by the conversations with each hirer.

The Council can help facilitate conversations with potential alternative locations within the immediate area and slightly beyond the town parish boundaries at the invitation of interested parties. The options may typically include some of the following or others identified as suitable to type of activity or interest being promoted.

- Aquarius Ballroom and Function Suite
- Valley Heritage Centre
- Prospect Village Hall
- Cannock Wood & Gentleshaw Village Hall
- Hayes Green Community Centre
- Huntington Village Hall
- St Peter's Church Hall
- Our Lady of Lourdes Centennial Hall
- Salvation Army, Trinity Church
- St John's Church Hall
- It is also noted that other schools in the wider immediate area may also be suitable for example Hazel Slade Primary Academy, Five Ways School, Gorsemoor, Redhill, Moorhill, Chadsmoor J&I, Cannock Chase High School, Cardinal Griffin
- Working Men Clubs at Belt Road
- Blewitt Street, Pye Green Road
- Church Hill, Wimblebury Road
- Local Secondary Schools
- Kingsmead and Staffordshire University Academy
- Local Primary Schools; St Peter's, St Joseph's, Pye Green Academy, West Hill, Poppyfields

This is not in any way fully exhaustive or indeed every potential venue being appropriate to every potential activity but is indicative of the potential options available. Some of these options might not be currently structured to accept hire and the Council can help facilitate support to address what is required.

Q8) Is the Council against small businesses?

Absolutely not, as well as supporting these businesses to relocate and establish themselves in new locations, we do not foresee that any business will close and their customers within our community and beyond will continue to support and benefit from their services and activities.

Elsewhere, 40 businesses and community groups across the town were supported with our annual grant scheme as they emerge from Covid. An open application process saw unprecedented numbers of groups and businesses engaging with the Council to support their service to our community at a scale never before seen by this Council.

Q9) What about other hirers?

All hirers have been spoken with and assured of their continued use. This includes some of the community use raised as concerns by some residents including the Citizen's Advice Bureau and the community food table managed by CHASE Lighthouse.

To facilitate a smooth transition for the future the Council will move from its more general approach to hire agreements to a clear structure of formal hire agreement with each hirer over the coming weeks.

Q10) Will this mean staff lose their jobs?

Pending the decision of Cannock Chase District Council Cabinet in March 2022, Hednesford Town Council will enter into a formal consultation with all staff, considering the existing role and responsibilities within the Council operated Pye Green Community Centre and those required with the future operation of the Community Centre.

The Council is fully aware of its obligations under the Transfer of Undertakings and Protection of Employment 2006 Regulations (more commonly referred to as TUPE) and will work with each staff member accordingly.

Q11) Why didn't the Council consult with everyone before deciding?

Since being elected as Councillors in May 2019 the new Town Council has been transparent and has broadcast every meeting on Facebook, even before the pandemic forced other Councils to consider broadcast online.

Throughout the pandemic where online only meetings were permitted and also since face-to-face meetings have been mandated again every meeting is broadcast online via Zoom to Facebook Live.

Every meeting has an open section of the meeting where any resident can attend and ask any question of the Town Council. This contrasts significantly with other Councils locally and in particular Cannock Chase District Council where notice of any public questions requires 10 days notice and meetings are broadcast live now but not recorded for the community to view afterwards.

As a diverse group of independent Councillors working together since 2019, the priorities of the Council have been open and published on the Council website, were clear and transparent in the literature provided to each house prior to the elections in May 2019, a survey of residents and centre users was undertaken and the results published and all Councillors are visible and available within the community throughout the year.

Q12) Why is the decision about Pye Green Community Centre being made in secret?

A Council must consider sensitive matters in Confidential business after the exclusion of the public. These papers are prepared and circulated in advance to all Councillors and remain confidential to Councillors. The reasons for Confidentiality are defined in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and are both extensive and specific.

This is a guide from Wirral Borough Council

<https://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/documents/s50026354/1972%20Local%20Govt%20Act%20Schedule%2012A.pdf>

That said, the Council has made a commitment to do things differently to previous administrations and other Councils and to be as open and transparent as possible. In this case there is clearly information which the Council has used as a basis of its decision which impacts itself, Council staff, hirers and others where the integrity of those professional relationships needs to be maintained. The Council cannot comment on the specifics of these without breaching confidentiality itself. We commit to release information when we can in a manner which reflects a holistic approach to a complex and sensitive decision.

Q13) Do any of the Councillors personally gain from the decision regarding the future of Pye Green Community Centre?

No Councillor has or will benefit from this decision.

Councillors are asked to declare an interest in any item on every agenda at every meeting as well as declaration of interest which is published on the District Council website. Councillors are also asked to consider if they have a Conflict of Interest also where their participation in a debate, decision or vote might result in personal gain in some way.

Earlier this year Hednesford Town Council considered and approved an enhanced approach to this as it was recognised that many Councillors are embedded in many community activities and the perception of gain or advantage could be seen for some decisions. This was approved by the Council at its meeting in July this year.

In this particular instance it was noted that two Councillors declared an interest in the item but neither of these Councillors has a Conflict of Interest as a result of this interest.

Further it should be noted that no Parish or Town Councillor in Hednesford or anywhere else in the Country receive any kind of income, salary or allowance. District and County (Principal Authority) Councillors do receive an allowance.

Q14) Do the Councillors live in Hednesford?

Yes, to be elected or co-opted to the role of Councillor on the Town Council an individual must satisfy one or more criteria around residency or working in Hednesford.

https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Part-1-Can-you-stand-for-election-P-and-C.pdf

The current Councillors all live, work or volunteer within the ward boundaries of Hednesford Town Council.

Q15) Is the Council led by the Chase Community Independents Group?

At a Town or Parish Council there is no Cabinet or Leader as such. Each Council is composed of a number of residents who may or may not be members of a party or group registered with the Electoral Commission who work together on all decisions that the Council makes.

The current Councillors are based around those elected as Hednesford Residents and Volunteers in May 2019. At the time the electorate replaced all ten of the previous Councillors with nine Councillors from this group and one Labour Party member. Of the nine Hednesford Residents and Volunteers at the time this

included five people with no political party declaration and four Councillors who declared they were members of the Green Party of England and Wales.

There have been a number of changes including people leaving the role of Councillor, others joining the Council by co-option and some individuals leaving national political parties. At the time of the decision five Councillors are recognised to represent Chase Community Independents Group, five not aligned to any declared registered political party. At the meeting, where this particular decision was taken, one of the five Chase Community Independents Group Councillors had sent apologies and was not present.

Update: There are currently eight Councillors and two Councillor vacancies. Of the eight Councillors, four represent the Chase Community Independent Group.

Q16) Why did the Council restate its assets in 2020 in the annual accounts statement?

Historically the Council has stated its assets, things it owns, to include Pye Green Community Centre. A review by new Councillors following election in 2019 and advice from both the Internal and External Auditors over various administrative aspects of the Council found a number of errors around aspects of the Council functions and it is the duty of the Council to correct these in a timely manner.

Hednesford Town Council does not own Pye Green Community Centre and as such cannot state this as an asset of the Council and it should not be declared as such in its financial declarations. Once understood and discussed with the independent Council auditors the financial statements were correctly submitted and signed off by the Council.

The submissions and advice of previous Councils is a matter for them. We have no reason to believe that previous Councils acted intentionally in these errors, rather that they were honest mistakes arising from a different interpretation of what are at times complex rules and regulations for a small authority.

Q17) Does this decision need the permission of Cannock Chase District Council before it can be implemented?

Throughout the process confidential conversations were undertaken with the Property department of Cannock Chase District Council who were fully apprised of the preferred route of the Council. Cannock Chase District Council officers explained clearly and consistently the process to assign the lease.

Now a decision of the Hednesford Town Council has been undertaken this would allow for the formal processes to be discussed with the preferred partner and Cannock Chase District Council.

The current lease will require a variation in order to assign the lease to the Scouts and we are currently preparing the information Cannock Chase District Council require for their Cabinet report. It is expected that Cabinet will make the decision on whether the lease can be assigned at their March meeting.

Q18) What will happen to the existing Scout Hut on Mavis Road, Hednesford?

1st Hednesford Scouts lease the land from Cannock Chase District Council and how they resolve the lease and the use of the land afterwards is a matter for Cannock Chase District Council.

Q19) Are Hednesford Town Council aware of a petition to "Save Pye Green Community Centre"?

Yes, the Council is aware a petition is being circulated and we welcome active and positive engagement with the democratic processes by our whole community. We hope that the information composed here gives the reader a true and accurate representation of the facts of the situation and the decision the Council has made.

UPDATED AND ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

Questions from members of the public at the Finance, Personnel and Operations Committee Meeting 11th January 2022

Q20) Alan Pearson: “As an ex-Chair of Hednesford Town Council, why can the current Council not afford to keep the centre, when they are now receiving an extra £50k in precept from previous councils, but it was affordable then”.

Answer

Affordability is a relative term, depending on what your outgoing commitments are as well as your income. The previous Council committed future Councils to the annual debt repayment of £17,000.00 per annum, for a period of 20 years from their decision to take out a loan to refurbish PGCC.

The previous Council did not have a specific plan for how this sum would be repaid, for example by generating additional net income through the centre. The latter has not been the case and therefore it is the default position that the annual debt repayment is paid from either annual precept (Council tax) revenues, or Council reserves.

The current Council administration was elected on a manifesto stating their intentions to increase town regeneration and community activity and has chosen to allocate current precept funding to these programmes and projects, as per its election promises.

This currently leaves a shortfall of approximately £18,000.00 per annum, which is situated in the PGCC cost centre (budget) and as such is approximately equivalent to the loan repayment figure, that is being funded from reserves. The Council did not consider it to be sustainable to continue funding the loan repayment from reserves indefinitely, when other demands can also be made on these reserves (including long term maintenance costs of PGCC i.e. roof renovation, plumbing repairs) and as such a proposal has been approved (by Full Council in December) which provides a solution to this problem.

The agreed proposal relieves both this loan repayment debt, and the additional annual subsidy in running costs of a further £40,000.00 per annum, and removes the need for a long term maintenance reserve.

Q21) Paul Richards: “At the last public meeting you stated that there were going to be other options to be discussed, can we now know what these options were?”

Answer

This is answered at Question 9 below.

Q22) CCDC Cllr Sheila Cartwright:

a. “At the last meeting the gentleman to the left of the Chair (Cllr Jones) stated that previous Councillors had left the finances in a right mess, and that in 2 years the council would be bankrupt,

she would like to know why was it ok when they left but not now? What has happened to the finances?"

Answer

So far as we are aware, that statement was not made to Cllr Shelia Cartwright at any Council meeting of Hednesford Town Council. At the Council meeting on 7th December, in the public participation section, Cllr Shelia Cartwright told the room that "someone" had come up to her in the car park and said "you left the council finances in a right mess". Cllr Shelia Cartwright did not name that person.

Whilst the former Council administration may state that "all was ok when they left", It became apparent on their departure that they did not have a financial strategy in place for the loan repayments or a sustainable plan to generate an increased income to assist with making the loan repayments.

It is explained in the answer to Q1 that this Council administration had distinctive objectives they wished to deliver, as per the manifesto the electorate had voted in favour of and that the current Council considered it a better use of funds to invest in the town and community.

b. "Why was CCDC not notified of HTC intentions of assigning the lease before any decisions were made, also when CCDC were notified, it was via Cllr Paul Woodhead and Cllr Mandy Dunnett which is not the correct procedure?"

Answer

The opportunity of assigning the lease was discussed with CCDC officers prior to the Council deciding in December and CCDC were aware of the Council's plan and that it would be brought before Full Council for a decision. Once Full Council had voted in favour of the lease assignment, CCDC were notified by a member of the elected PGCC Task Force.

4. Emil Hertzberg: "How can you make the decision to give notice to hirers to leave, when you have not yet been given permission from CCDC and have not replied to the questions from CCDC? If businesses are made to leave and permission is not given how will the loss of rent be covered?"

Answer

The Council reserves the right to cancel or refuse any booking and does not require the authority of CCDC to do this. HTC has provided all five affected hirers with three months written notice which is not a legal requirement.

Loss of room hire fee at any time is a question for HTC to address by way of its relevant internal processes.

Regarding the dialogues between the landlord (Cannock Chase District Council) and the tenant (Hednesford Town Council), these are confidential but are underway and it is untrue to state that questions have not been answered.

Q23) Cllr Arthur Roden: “Why was there a letter from Phil Foster thanking the Council for handing over the lease to the scouts, in the pack for the Council meeting 7th December where the decision was made?”

Answer

The letter referred to was a draft document contained within confidential Council papers (sent to Councillors) accompanying a confidential report to full Council which was discussed and debated in private business on 7th December 2022.

As such, this question demonstrates a breach of the Councillor code of conduct by way of breaching confidentiality.

6. Paul Richards:

a. “This is the community’s centre, why was there not a consultation advising the public of your intentions before the decision was made?”

Answer

It can be seen from question 7 that a public survey was undertaken.

b. “Why are you trying to strip the community of their greatest asset?”

Answer

HTC is not trying to strip the community of their greatest asset.

The decision by Hednesford Town Council is to assign the lease of the Community Centre to another organisation. Pye Green Community Centre would continue to operate as a Community Centre, however it would be managed by a different organisation.

c. Why does everything have to revolve around Market Street?

Answer

This question contains a broad assertion, the details of which were not clarified by the questioner.

The pandemic affected towns and cities across England and to assist with the recovery the government launched the Welcome Back Fund. This new EU funding had strict criteria and was assigned to the town centre as the purpose of the funding was to boost footfall in the town centre and encourage people to shop locally. As such £20,000 of ERDF funding (not HTC funding) was allocated for various events and activities in the town centre.

The Nutcracker trail, Bumblebee Transformer, Christmas entertainment at the lights switch on event and activities planned for January – March of this year are all funded by the Welcome Back Fund.

Q24) Emil Hertzberg: “Last year a survey was put out asking if the public wanted to keep the centre, 91% of residents said yes, they did, why has this been ignored, and why have you gone with the 9% that didn’t?”

Answer

The figures and statistics quoted by Mr Hertzberg within this question are inaccurate. This question was answered in the meeting by Cllr Sharon Jagger when she advised that of the 17,000 residents only a small proportion (comparatively) had completed the survey.

The survey had also been completed by people that lived outside of Hednesford and therefore it was considered that the survey was not an accurate reflection of the views of Hednesford residents (tax payers) who are subsidising the Community Centre.

Q25) Emil Hertzberg: “The Scouts already have a building and have financial backing, why can they not buy somewhere else?”

Answer

Hednesford Town Council are unable to answer questions on behalf of other organisations.

Q26) Alan Pearson: “Is it true that all 4 options (in the December Council paper for decision) involved the Scouts?”

Answer

No, it is not true that all 4 options contained within the Confidential Council Paper for decision on 7th December 2021 involved the Scouts. Cllr Sharon Jagger asked if Councillors in attendance (at the Committee meeting) whether they were in agreement for Cllr Darrell Mawle to read out the 4 options Councillors had discussed, permission by all HTC councillors present was granted and the four options were read out. The answer to this question can be heard on the audio/visual record of this meeting.