

Slough Borough Council

Report To:	Council
Date:	30 November 2023
Subject:	Petition - Urgent Appeal to Save Community Hub (Unit 26 Wexham Business Village, Wexham Rd, Slough, SL2 5HF)
Chief Officer:	Pat Hayes, Executive Director, Property and Housing
Contact Officer:	Kunwar Khan, Democratic Services and Scrutiny Manager
Ward(s):	Upton Lea Ward
Exempt:	No
Appendices:	None

1. Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1 This report sets out the details of a Petition on Urgent Appeal to Save Community Hub (Unit 26 Wexham Business Village, Wexham Rd, Slough, SL2 5HF), which has been received under the Council's Petitions Scheme.
- 1.2 The Council is invited to review and agree its course of action in relation to the petition.

Recommendations:

Following the debate, the Council is asked to resolve what action it wishes to take with regard to the Petition, noting the service officer's recommendation provided below:

Council notes that:

- a. Cabinet agreed an Asset Disposal Strategy at its meeting on 18 September 2023.
- b. As the same Cabinet meeting, in response to a Member question, the Leader confirmed that Unit 26 Wexham Business Village would be sold via auction to ensure that best consideration was obtained and the current occupier would be free to bid for the asset as part of this process.

Commissioner Review

Commissioners have reviewed the report and made no comments.

2. Report

- 2.1 This report advises the Council of a Petition – Urgent Appeal to Save Community Hub (Unit 26 Wexham Business Village, Wexham Rd, Slough, SL2 5HF) – which has been received under the Council’s Petitions Scheme.
- 2.2 Council’s Petition Scheme, inter alia, states that if a petition has, or acquires 1,500 valid signatures the issues will be debated at a Full Council meeting (i.e. a meeting to which all elected Members are invited).
- 2.3 The Petition has surpassed the threshold of triggering a debate at full council and contains **1,564** signatories on the Council’s website.
- 2.4 The Petition text reads as follows:

Urgent Appeal Save Community Hub

We the undersigned petition the council to remove for sale Unit 26 Wexham Business Village, Wexham Rd, Slough, SL2 5HF currently on auction due on the 21st September 2023 and have a review meeting with the current tenancy holder Blackbeard Academy Ltd (Blackbeard Community Projects CIC) to discuss viable options.

Blackbeard MMA Community Hub Faces Imminent Closure, Urgently Seeks Support to Preserve Vital Community Resource

Slough, 4th September - The Blackbeard MMA Community Hub, a beacon of hope and transformation in the Slough community, is under threat of being taken away from its users without notice. In an unexpected turn of events, the Slough Borough Council has put the beloved community hub up for bidding to private investors, without providing prior notification to the Blackbeard MMA organisation or allowing them the opportunity for first refusal. With just 20 days remaining before the building goes up for bidding, the local community is rallying together to save this vital resource.

Founded in 2010, the Blackbeard MMA Community Hub has served as a cradle of champions, nurturing, and producing skilled martial artists who have achieved excellence on national and international stages. However, the impact of the hub extends far beyond the realm of sports.

The Blackbeard Community Projects CIC, a non-profit organisation closely associated with Blackbeard MMA, is dedicated to enhancing the Slough community through a wide range of activities, workshops, and support services. These initiatives are designed to empower the local youth, equipping them with life skills, leadership training, mentoring, and the tools to overcome the challenges they may encounter in their daily lives.

"We are deeply saddened by the sudden turn of events that has put the future of the Blackbeard MMA Community Hub in jeopardy," said Nomaan Khalid at Blackbeard MMA. "Our hub is more than just a building; it is the heart and soul of our community, a place where dreams are nurtured, and lives are transformed. We have consistently strived to make a positive impact on the lives of young people in Slough, and it is disheartening to see our efforts jeopardised."

Community members and supporters of Blackbeard MMA are urgently calling for the Slough Borough Council to reconsider this decision and explore alternative solutions that will allow the hub to continue its vital work.

"We implore the Slough Borough Council to reconsider their decision to auction off our community hub," continued Nomaan Khalid "There are numerous vacant buildings in Slough, and we believe that preserving the Blackbeard MMA Community Hub would be a testament to their commitment to community development. Together, we can ensure that this valuable resource remains accessible to the people it serves."

Blackbeard MMA is urging concerned citizens, supporters, and community leaders to join them in their efforts to safeguard the future of the hub. Those interested in helping can get involved by signing petitions, raising awareness on social media, and reaching out to local officials.

For further information and to stay updated on the situation, please visit Blackbeard MMA's official website <http://www.blackbeardacademy.co.uk> or follow them on social media channels @blackbeardmma.

About Blackbeard MMA Community Hub:

The Blackbeard MMA Community Hub is a cornerstone of the Slough community, fostering talent, personal development, and community engagement since its inception in 2010. Through its association with Blackbeard Community Projects CIC, it continues to provide essential services, support, and opportunities for local youth and the broader community.

Comments from the Service

Unit 26 Wexham Business Village was part of SBC's Investment Portfolio. The Council's reason for owning it was to generate a financial return. It was leased under a commercial arrangement to a limited company (Blackbeard Academy Ltd). It is not recognised as a "Community Hub".

The property was sold at auction on 21st September 2023, as part of Phase One of the Asset Disposal Programme, and the sale completed on 2nd November 2023. There was dialogue with the tenant before and during the transaction period. Arrangements have been made to introduce the tenant to the new owner of the property, to enable discussions around any ongoing lease arrangements.

Supporting Information for debate

- 2.5 The Petition Organiser will be invited to the council meeting to speak on the Petition (up to five minutes) and the Petition will then be discussed by Members of the Council for a maximum of 15 minutes. The Mayor has discretion to extend this time taking account of the degree of public interest in the issue, the level of support given to the petition and the number of elected members wishing to express their views on the subject.
- 2.6 Following this discussion, the Council will need to decide what action to take with regard to the Petition. As this matter relates to an executive function, the Council can decide whether to make recommendations to Cabinet. In this particular case,

Cabinet considered the subject matter on 18 September 2023. At that meeting, Cabinet approved an updated Asset Disposal Strategy. This Strategy confirms the following:

- a. That consideration will be given as to whether an asset is required for Council service delivery priorities or by partners in furtherance of delivery of the Council's priorities. In these cases, a business case will be required to ensure that the full economic costs of using and running the building are met.
 - b. As a general principle, all disposals will be on commercial terms and demonstrably evidence that the test in section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972 is met, namely that the disposal is for best consideration reasonably obtainable. Any decision to dispose of an asset for less than best consideration, with the exception of disposals to comply with statutory obligations, should be approved by Cabinet.
 - c. Various disposal methods will be considered, including the use of auctions. Where a property is sold via auction, the successful bidder will be required to exchange on the day of the auction and there will be a set timetable to complete the disposal.
- 2.7 In response to a Member question at Cabinet on 18 September 2023, the Leader confirmed that the Council was currently in Phase 1 of its disposal programme and that this focused on disposal of investment and development portfolio and that the asset in question was not an asset of community value or an operational asset. The Leader responded in particular on Unit 26 Wexham Business Village asset, stating this is not regarded as a community asset and that the proposal is to put it to auction that week, delivering a transparent disposal at best value. The disposal would not necessarily lead to displacement of the current occupant, as this would be a matter for the new owner and the current occupier is free to bid for the site.
- 2.8 Since the cabinet meeting, the asset was sold via auction. The asset was sold to an individual for a value considerably in excess of the reserve and completion took place on 2 November 2023. The sale is subject to the lease, although it should be noted that the occupier was occupying the land under an expired lease and therefore will need to negotiate any ongoing arrangement with the new owner.
- 2.9 The Scheme indicates that the Council's response to a Petition will depend on what a petition asks for and how many people have signed it but may include one or more of the following;
- Taking the action requested in the Petition;
 - Considering the Petition at a Council Meeting;
 - Holding an Inquiry;
 - Commissioning relevant research;
 - Organising a public meeting;
 - Mounting a wider public consultation;
 - Meeting with the Petition Organiser or representatives of signatories;
 - Providing a written response outlining the Council's views on the subject;
 - Referring the issue to the Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committee **OR**
 - Referring the issue to the relevant Committee/Cabinet;
 - Consulting statutory partners and local service providers;
 - Instigating discussions with the voluntary and community sectors; and
 - Making representations to Commercial or other Interests.

The Recommendation may incorporate the following options:

- Considering the Petition at a Council Meeting;
- Mounting a wider public consultation;
- Meeting with the Petition Organiser or representatives of signatories;
- Providing a written response outlining the Council's views on the subject;
- Consulting statutory partners and local service providers; and
- Instigating discussions with the voluntary and community sectors.

2.10 In this matter, Cabinet has already considered the circumstances of the individual unit and recently reviewed and updated the Council's strategy. It is therefore recommended that Council note this; Leader's response at September's cabinet meeting; and the fact that the asset was put to auction on 21 September 2023 in order to deliver a transparent disposal at best value and now has been sold.

3. Implications of the Recommendation

3.1 There are no particular implications arising from the recommendation, given that Members are simply asked to note the rationale and process for the disposal of this asset.

3.1 Financial implications

3.1.1 There are no adverse implications from this, given that the sale was completed in accordance with the agreed Asset Disposal Strategy.

3.1.2 The asset disposal programme and sale of properties are critical to the financial recovery of Slough Borough Council.

3.2 Legal implications

3.2.1 Slough Borough Council adopted a new petition scheme in July 2010. This Petition meets the criteria listed in the [Council's Petition Scheme](#).

3.2.2 Under the Council's published Petitions Scheme, a petition that contains 1,500 signatures triggers a debate at Council.

3.2.3 Disposal of a property asset or freehold is an executive function and therefore reserved to Cabinet. Full Council does not have the power to direct Cabinet to take a particular decision on this matter. When deciding, Cabinet must take account of relevant policies, its legal duties and in particular its duties under 'Disposal of land by principal councils' ([Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972](#)) and the financial implications of any decision. Any decision to dispose of an asset at less than best consideration reasonably obtainable is reserved to Cabinet. This particular asset was discussed in response to a Member question at the Cabinet meeting on 18 September 2023 and the asset – Unit 26 Wexham Business Village, Wexham Rd, Slough, SL2 5HF – has since been sold via auction to ensure that best consideration was obtained.

3.2.4 This asset was held by the Council as an investment asset and is a commercial unit. The current occupier was permitted to bid for the freehold of the site at the auction and will be able to negotiate a new lease arrangement with the new owner.

Risk management implications

3.3.1 The Council has significant financial challenges and needs to make revenue savings and generate capital receipts to fund some of its services in the short to medium term. This requires it to dispose of a significant number of its surplus assets and when doing so, to ensure it receives the best consideration reasonably obtainable. When disposing of assets, the Council must ensure it understands any legal constraints on the site and any protected uses. Legal support is provided for every asset disposal to review the title documents and consider any usage restrictions.

3.4 Environmental implications

3.4.1 No environmental implications have been identified as a direct result of this report.

3.5 Equality implications

3.5.1 The Equality Act duties apply to the Council when disposing of assets. The Council will consider its service delivery priorities when considering the most efficient use of its assets and when deciding to dispose of an asset.

Background papers and information

- [Petition.](#)

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