

Executive Summary



Wigtown Church Hall

July 2023

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Wigtown is located East of Stranraer and South of Newton Stewart in Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland. It is the largest settlement on the 20 mile long Machar's peninsula, and one mile from the village of Bladnoch. Wigtown is a small town with a population of less than 1,000 but was once a Royal Burgh and the former County Town of Wigtownshire. It is designated as Scotland's National Book Town.

As part of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland's Radical Action Plan, it has been decided by Presbytery that Wigtown Church Hall has to be sold/disposed by the end of Dec 2023.

Wigtown and Bladnoch Community Initiative along with individual members of the Church congregation are keen to see the building retained for the benefit of the community of Wigtown and to develop its place as a central resource for residents and visitors alike. There have been several ideas already put forward for how the building could be used, and this project aims to acquire the building for the community and develop it into a sustainable community asset.

ABOUT WIGTOWN CHURCH HALL

The Church Hall comprises a one storey purpose built church hall premises of brick and blockwork construction situated on the northside of Lochancroft Lane, near to the town centre. Internally, the premises comprises a traditional church hall and accommodates a large main hall, kitchen, private offices/rooms, storage areas and a series of toilet facilities. The flooring throughout is solid and overlaid in a combination of carpet, vinyl and wooden flooring dependent upon the location within the premises.

It is currently used by various church and community groups for meetings, recreational activities (such as table tennis and badminton), a toddlers play group, local flower and produce festival and occasional performances.

We understand from the Church that the hall currently breaks even with a range of charges for booking the hall.

The Hall was originally build with funds raised from the community and there is therefore a strong connection and strength of feeling towards its continued use and benefit to the people of Wigtown.

WHAT WE DID

In March 2023 all households in the Royal Burgh of Wigtown were invited to complete a survey about the proposals for asset transfer and future use of the asset. 700 paper surveys were delivered to every household within the Royal Burgh. Additional copies were made available at Machars Action and the Wigtown Post Office. The survey was also made available online for people outside of the Royal Burgh to also have input.

Email invitations were also sent to 21 identified potential stakeholders.

An open day was held at the Church (from noon to 7pm) where the community were invited to come along and talk about the proposals.

This built upon research undertaken by W&BCI in 2018 and 2022 in relation to the former bank of Scotland building, now the Wigtown Bunkhouse and apartments and the Wigtown Bowling Club.

The survey had 105 completed responses, representing 137 residents.

WHAT WE FOUND

Assets in the Area:

Conversations at public events and with stakeholders revealed the following common themes:

- Traffic free roads - easy parking.
- Peace and solitude readily available in a wide variety of places - beaches, woods, sites of historical interest.
- Gardens to visit & a good selection of lovely tea-shops.
- Creative community
- Scotland's National Book Town – this has put Wigtown on the map – Book Festival brings tourists and creative energy to the town – great selection of bookshops
- Area of great natural beauty – unspoilt scenery – close to the sea – bird hides locally – range of outdoor activities locally including walking and cycling
- Safe area with low crime
- Wigtown is central to almost all of our surrounding areas making it a very practical town to live in. ☑
Range of community events – including Spring Fling, Riding of the Marches, Agricultural Show, Walking Festival and the Book Festival
- In the town - a willingness to change to grow the positive aspects, which leads to prosperity for the town.
- Good schools

Challenges in the Area

The survey identified the biggest challenges as being around employment, housing, Health and Social Care, vibrancy and training, matching the feedback from face to face consultation which indicated the following key themes:

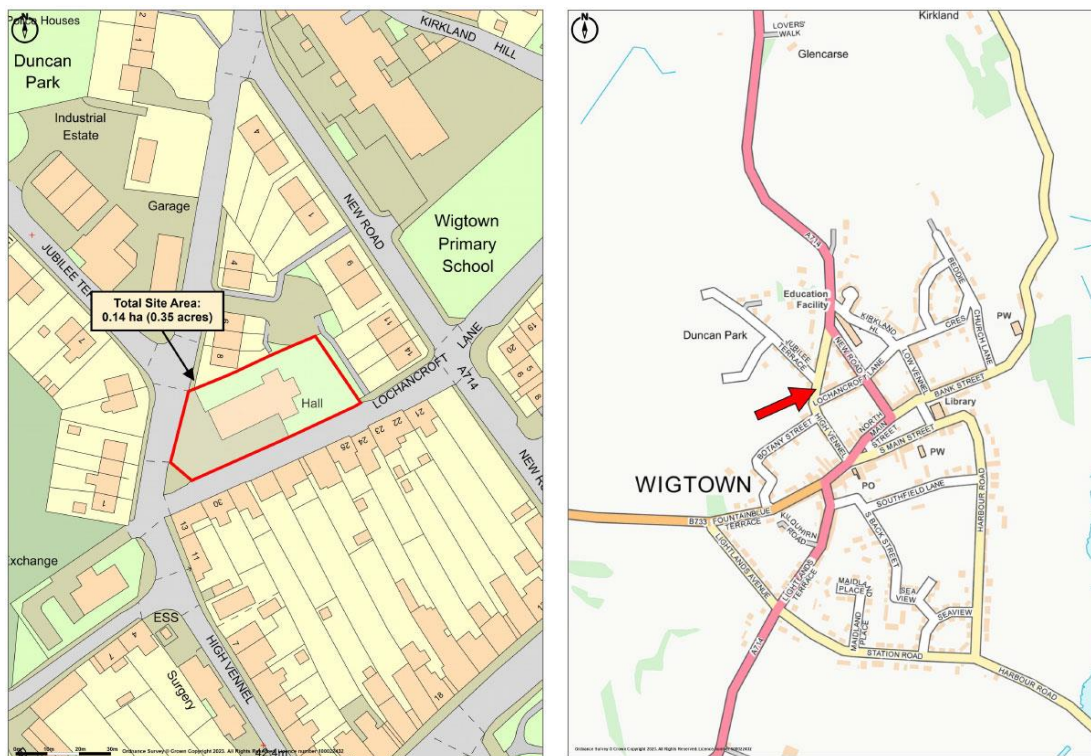
- Poor GP Services & NHS resources locally
- Lack of affordable housing
- Roads need improved and more child friendly spaces
- More accessible walks, more varied range of shops
- Somewhere to eat out 7 days a week and evening
- More activities for younger kids
- Demographic analysis shows that the area has a higher percentage of retired people than the national average. Local people expressed concern around young people leaving the area, and the lack of vibrancy that follows that
- Limited public transport – irregular bus services, that don't necessarily drop passengers near their destination (for example although there is a bus to Newton Stewart, it does not drop passengers near the health centre, requiring two taxis to access this service – the Doctors surgery in Wigtown is only open part time)
- Poorly maintained roads
- Everything is very seasonal with regards to tourism - difficult to sustain a business.
- Lack of jobs outside agriculture and retail/catering industry mean young people want to go elsewhere
- There are hidden pockets of poverty and deprivation in Wigtown and the surrounding area. While the area ranks towards the middle of the Scottish Index for Multiple Deprivation, there are some concerns around employment and income. The area surrounding Wigtown is in the 10% most deprived in terms of access to services

- Lack of employment opportunities, especially for young people. Low wages locally. Local people told us there is a lack of employment opportunities, especially for young people, and that there are low wages locally. Demographic analysis shows that there is a high proportion of young people claiming youth unemployment benefits (9.8%, compared to 3.8% nationally). There is also a high percentage of people who are unemployed (excluding students) that never worked before (20.7%, Scotland = 13.9%)
- Not enough accommodation for visitors – especially during the Book Festival

There is a sense that this a forgotten corner of Scotland – there are very few services provided here, with local people having to travel to Dumfries or Stranraer

THE CHURCH HALL ASSET

The survey outlined the asset for consideration in this project:



Other assets available in the immediate area that compete for target customers include:

County Buildings: Main Hall and Supper Room: Capacity 150 and 80 respectively

Wigton Festival Company Print Room: Capacity 50

Wigton Baptist Church: Small meeting room – Capacity 15

Machars Action: Small Meeting Room – Capacity 15

The Capacity for the Church Hall is 150 in the main hall and 25 in the small meeting room.

SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY PURCHASE

There was overwhelming support for the community purchase of the Church Hall with 92.4% of respondents saying that the W&BCI should purchase the building.

Those in favour saw the hall as a local asset that supported a number of groups that traditionally used it and were unable to use other facilities in the town due to cost or suitability for activities. Accessibility was a key issue, with many feeling that the hall was a welcome and accessible space for community groups. The majority felt that it would be a loss to the town.

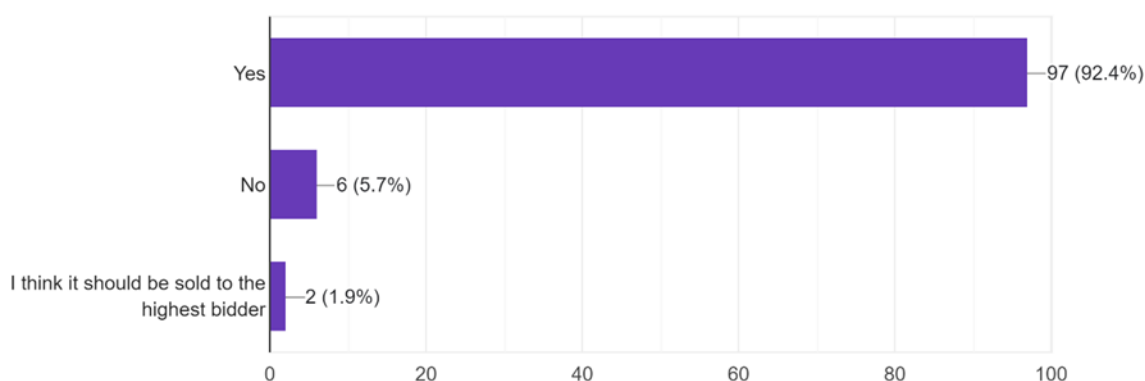
Those not in favour of the purchase cited that there is already an underused hall in County Buildings and having the Church Hall would be competition that could impact the viability of County Buildings, which is an important historical building.

Those not in favour also said that the building should be demolished and affordable housing build in its place as it is situated in a residential area.

There were concerns raised in the open response section about the viability of maintaining the space and whether the community would have a say in how it would be used versus how much funders would dictate the final use.

3.1 - Do you think that WBCI should purchase the Church Hall to manage on behalf of the community of Wigtown?

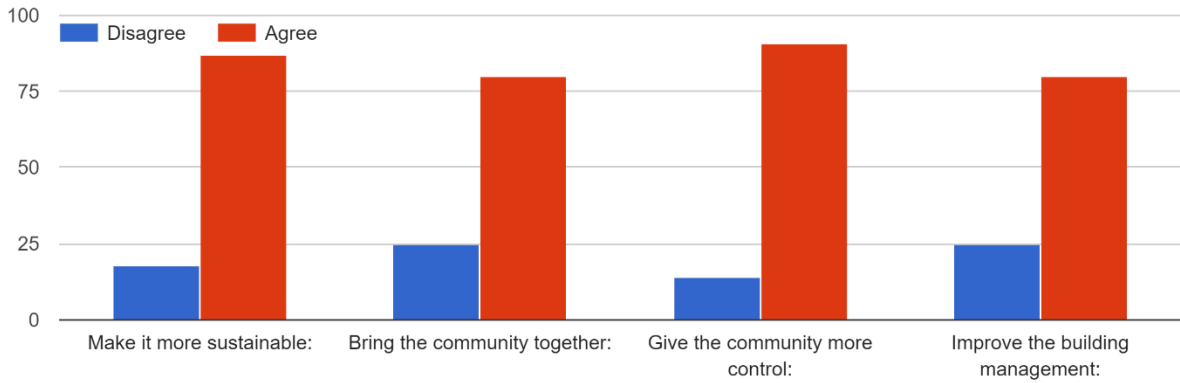
105 responses



The survey asked whether taking they agreed or disagreed with the following statements? "Taking the Bowling Hut into community ownership and developing it as a community space will..."

1. Make it more sustainable.
2. Bring the Community together.
3. Give the community more control.
4. Improve the building management.

3.3 - Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? "Taking the Church Hall into community ownership and developing it as a community space will..."

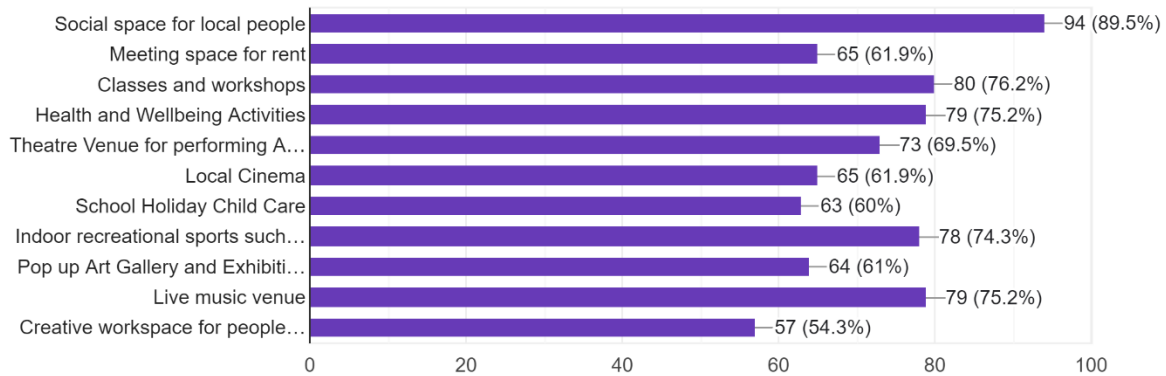


SUMMARY OF PROPOSED USES

The community engagement was designed to allow local people to “Think Big” about what the Church Hall building could be. An initial list of possible uses was created from early engagement, and this was presented as part of the 2023 survey. Respondents were also asked to contribute other ideas.

The top five options received over 70% support including: Social Space for local people, Classes and Workshops, Health and Wellbeing Activities, Indoor recreational sports and as a Live music venue. The other high response was for a Theatre Venue for performing arts (69.5%).

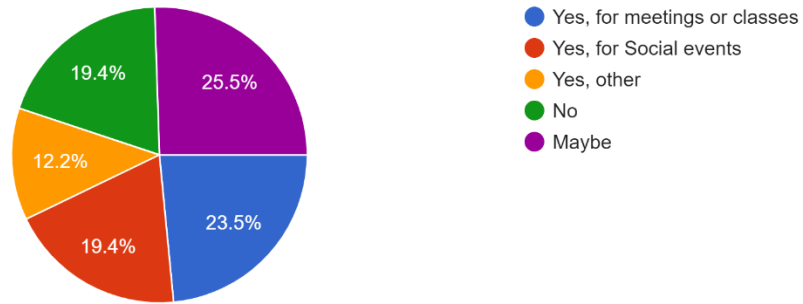
3.5 - If the consensus supports community ownership which of the following ideas should be incorporated in the plans for a Church Hall buildin...ts box below: You can select as many as you want. 105 responses



Over 55% of respondents said that they would use the Church Hall for meetings, classes, Social Events or other.

3.7 - Are you, or a group you are part of interested in using the building as a venue?

98 responses



ALTERNATIVE FUTURE USE FOR THE ASSET

Whilst there has been ongoing demand for Church buildings by other religious groups and organisations, we have noted an increase in demand from such parties more recently. We would also note that such buildings have also been acquired for use as sale showrooms, dance/fitness studios, licensed and leisure use, crèche and nurseries, with others converted into commercial accommodation and/or residential dwellings.

In respect of the subjects themselves, given the locational characteristics and overall size, there are only likely to ever be a finite number of prospective purchasers at any given time.

DELIVERING THE COMMUNITY PURCHASE OF THE CHURCH HALL

W&BCI Governance

The organisation is a Company Limited by Guarantee (SC557595) incorporated on 14 February 2017, with clear community benefit within its articles but it is not a registered charity. It is led by a committee of 7 elected board members and works on behalf of the community for the benefit of local people. There are over 50 members. The company's geographical boundary is determined by the Royal Burgh of Wigtown.

A board skills audit showed that there is a high level of skills across the board with some small training needs around communication and marketing.

Legal Structure

Wigtown & Bladnoch Community Initiative is a registered company (SC557595) but not a charity though it does have an asset lock and clear charitable objectives.

ACQUIRING THE ASSET

The Church Hall is currently on the open market with a valuation of £85,000. The Church of Scotland has indicated that they wish to dispose of the asset by the end of the 2023 calendar year, however we are hopeful that we will be able to extend this to the end of March 2024 to enable applications for grant assistance.

NEXT STEPS

The next steps for the Community are outlined below:

- **Secure Stage 1 Funding to develop a business plan and undertake relevant surveys of the building structure.**
- **Secure Stage 2 funding for the purchase of the building**
- **Operate the Asset in its current state and promote its use for community groups and organisations.**
- **Secure funding to make essential repairs and upgrades to ensure that the building does not fall into further disrepair and improve its commercial offering.**
- **Secure funding to make the building more sustainable and reduce its carbon footprint and energy costs.**
- **Consider further development of the site to increase the service offering.**