

HEARTH HISTORIC BUILDINGS TRUST

STRATEGIC PLAN 2017-22

INTRODUCTION

This Hearth Historic Buildings Trust **Strategic Plan** provides a forward strategy for the activities we intend to carry out during the five–year period 2017-22 to support the delivery of our mission, including details of the approach we are intending to take. The **Business Plan** for 2017/18 is incorporated in this document and consists of the 'Key Activities for 2017/18' under the main headings of Governance Plan, Development Plan, Property Management Plan and Communications Plan.

The Strategic Plan will be subject to periodic review and adjustment over the five year period it covers. The Business Plan will be monitored and updated at the Trust's Management Committee meetings and comprehensively updated on an annual basis.

THE TRUST'S OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

Hearth Historic Buildings Trust (previously Hearth Revolving Fund) was founded in 1972 by the National Trust and the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society. The 'Objective' of the Trust, registered as an Industrial and Provident Society with the Department for the Economy, is set out in the opening section of the Rules of the Trust, as follows:

'the preservation, protection and improvement of buildings of particular beauty, or of historic, environmental, architectural or constructional merit or interest in Northern Ireland, and to stimulate and educate public interest therein'.

Where possible the Trust carries out this work with a view to regenerating neighbourhoods and demonstrating imaginative new uses for buildings restored in a sustainable way.

In furtherance of this general Objective the Trust is dedicated (Objective Rules para 2b) to:

- i. 'Conserve, restore, repair, renovate and improve such buildings and where thought desirable erect new buildings where such erection is ancillary to a scheme for the restoration, renovation or improvement of existing buildings;
- ii. Provide and manage in any such buildings as aforesaid houses and flats together with amenities, utilities and services of every kind (including shops and premises used for commercial purposes of any nature) ancillary thereto;
- iii. Manage such dwellings for the benefit of persons requiring accommodation;
- iv. Generally promote and encourage the education of the public in historical architecture, understanding of planning, and appreciation of the built environment;

- v. Cooperate with the local authority, local planning authority and all other statutory authorities, voluntary organisations, charities and persons having aims similar to the Trust.'

In the improving property market conditions the Trust intends to continue the practice of the Revolving Fund and (as the former name suggests) transfer through sale the properties it restores to new owners and for new uses, where it is confident that they will continue to be maintained and repaired in an authentic way and to the high standard of the Trust itself – thereby recycling resources for new acquisitions and conservation initiatives.

The Trust has a long, proud and successful record of conservation projects. Over the last 40 years the Trust has restored over 40 buildings - including two lock-keepers' cottages, 36 houses and flats, a restaurant, 3 shops, a tower house with two bedrooms and a dungeon, Portrush Town Hall, and a small museum and educational facility with a café in Sion Mills. These projects are located throughout Northern Ireland and many of them have been sold on with the funding ploughed back into future projects. With the collapse of the property market in 2007, however, it was considered more economically prudent to retain properties for rent. However the improving market should now enable further recycling of resources to recommence.

A further important legacy is the work of its former sister organisation Hearth Housing Association, whose restored housing stock of approximately 100 dwellings, together with existing staff, have recently been transferred to Clanmil Housing Association and to its new Hearth Heritage Division – with agreement that an overview of standards of maintenance and conservation be maintained by the Trust through the Hearth Heritage Advisory Group consisting of members of the HHBT committee.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE PLAN

The Trust shares premises at 7 College Square North, Belfast, with the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, with whom it works closely. As an Industrial and Provident Society the work of the Trust is overseen by a Management Committee with (as per its Rules) a maximum of 15 members. There are currently 12 serving members with a broad range of professional competences, skills and experience. Those competencies include legal, accountancy, architectural, conservation, development and property management. There is currently a good balance of age and gender mix on the committee. The Trust is committed to regular skills audits and to achieving good succession planning as the membership changes over time.

The committee meets on a regular six-weekly basis, with sub-committee meetings and informal business meetings as required between these fixed points. An AGM is held in June each year.

The Trust does not currently employ staff. Prior to the merger of Hearth Housing Association with Clanmil Housing Association, the Hearth staff carried out work for the Trust under a service level agreement on a time charge-out basis. Consequently, while the property portfolio is now managed on a day-to-day basis by commercial property agents, committee

members take a very active role in both overseeing the work of the agents and also in assembling and taking forward new conservation and development projects.

To facilitate this the committee has therefore decided to organise itself into four business 'topic groups', effectively sub-committees, assuming responsibility for particular areas of activity. These activity areas include – financial planning and monitoring; property condition and management; new project assembly and development; and governance and risk management. The topic groups meet, act and otherwise communicate as required between plenary committee meetings, to which they provide a regular report.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The Trust's development programme consists of a single major project which is anticipated to absorb the Trust's energies and resources over the next three years. This is the project to restore and find new compatible uses for the Riddel's Warehouse Building in Ann Street in Belfast city centre. Purpose-built in 1865 for a wholesale ironmonger's business and designed by accomplished architect Thomas Jackson, this listed building has been largely vacant for the past four decades and sealed off as part of a security cordon for the Musgrave Street police station.

The building is a four-storey seven-bay warehouse fronted by offices, with a central atrium bounded by a series of wooden floored, cast-iron supported galleries. The façade is of Newry granite at the ground-floor level with white Belfast brick above. Future uses being considered for the building include a range of arts centre activities for the atrium and galleries, with complementary commercial uses for the office accommodation at the street frontage.

A notional development cost for the project at this time is £3-5million, and the Trust is currently developing the project further while assembling the necessary funding package. Funding is being sought from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Urban Development Grant. Some other potential funders have been identified but it may be premature to approach them before the key funder has been confirmed.

In the meantime the building has attracted much public interest and is being regularly let on a short-term, informal basis as a performance space and studio while the project is being developed in more detail.

PROPERTY MANAGEMENT PLAN

As stated earlier, the property portfolio is now managed on a day-to-day basis by commercial letting agents. This includes the tenanted houses and flats, the shop premises in Downpatrick and the restaurant premises at College Green, Belfast. The holiday lets at College Green and Curry's Cottage, Derrylin, are managed by a member of the management

committee, principally using the AirBnB website. The restaurant and educational facilities at Sion House Stables, Sion Mills, is managed by the Sion Mills Preservation Trust, with oversight and support from members of the Hearth Trust's committee.

Rent reviews and other financial aspects of the property portfolio are managed by the Finance topic group with the property management, condition and repair aspects the responsibility of the Property Management topic group – with regular reports to the full Management Committee where any key decisions are taken. The Property Management group members will carry out a maintenance inspection visit to all premises on a regular six-monthly basis.

A planned maintenance and response repair budget for the properties will be established as part of the annual budget cycle, taking account of the rent reviews and property inspection findings.

As indicated above, the Trust is in the process of selling Navigation House, Sprucefield to the Lagan Navigation Trust, who are already the tenants of the property. The house at 1 Mount Royal Bangor has just been vacated and put on the open housing market by a commercial estate agent.

The Trust has been experiencing difficulty finding regular users for Curry's Cottage, Derrylin, in County Fermanagh. This is a Grade A listed cruck building with a traditional thatched roof, requiring five-yearly re-thatching, and needing repairs to some of its archaic, vernacular wall construction. In its current condition and layout, and given its relatively remote location, it is proving extremely difficult to find a stable, long-term use for this property. The Trust intends to give early consideration to possible changes to the finish and layout of the cottage, which might make it easier to maintain regular occupation of the property – or alternatively, will seek a purchaser of the property better placed to do so.

The operators of the restaurant (Molly's Yard) at College Green have requested a reduction in rental, and advice is being sought by the Trust from the letting agent about market conditions and the appropriateness of the current rental.

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

The Trust's committee is of the view that, in line with the wording of the Trust's Objectives, as set out in the Rules, more attention needs to be given by the Trust to raising public awareness of the architectural heritage of Ulster generally and issues relating to conservation of that heritage, and to the work of the Trust specifically. Whilst Hearth and its work are well-known and highly regarded within the conservation fraternity, it is less well known, understood or appreciated amongst politicians at all levels, local councils and local communities.

The Riddel's Warehouse project however has already caught the attention of the media and the wider public, and offers a unique and exceptional opportunity to raise the profile of

architectural conservation and the contribution such work on landmark buildings can make in fostering a shared feeling of community.

With this in mind in the coming months the Trust wishes to develop a public engagement and awareness strategy which is likely to include some of the following elements:

- A refreshed website explaining the work of the Trust and its future aspirations
- Material for presentations to politicians, funders, community groups and schools
- An attractive prospectus brochure for the Riddel's Warehouse project specifically, showcasing the key elements of the building and the exciting opportunities for new and innovative uses.
- A programme of presentations on the work and importance of building conservation (possibly in conjunction with the UAHS) to, for example, MLAs at Stormont, Belfast City Council in particular, other councils in whose areas the Trust has properties or ambitions, schools and community groups.
- A protocol for speedy drafting and issuing of press releases when events merit - either concerning our own properties or other urgent issues to do with building conservation in Northern Ireland (eg the controversial and unauthorised demolition of listed structures). This is likely to be done in close collaboration with colleagues in the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society.

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