

## Walworth Town Hall Design – Consultation Response from the Walworth Society

This response comes from the Walworth Society and is the result of:

- The public meeting that was held on Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> April which was attended by more than 90 people.
- Further discussion of the issues at the Walworth Society meeting of Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> April which was attended by 26 members.
- Discussion of the response amongst the committee of the society.

We would like to thank Southwark Council for the efforts to which they have gone to involve the society in this consultation and in particular its significant presence at the meeting of 5<sup>th</sup> April. We would also preface our comments with an appreciation of the commitment that Southwark Council has made to the retention of civic amenities in recent years both in terms of the retention of existing services in spite of reductions in funding and the creation of new facilities such as the library at Camberwell.

We would like to make the following points in relation to the consultation:

**1. Public Usage.** We are very keen to see these buildings/this group of buildings remain in public/civic use. We believe that they have a fundamental role to play in the future of Walworth owing to their history, their role in the civic life of Walworth to date and their presence as two of the very small number of listed buildings along the Walworth Rd. For them to be disposed of and go into private hands would be extremely detrimental to Walworth.

**2. Heritage Significance.** We understand the desire of Southwark Council to maximise the potential of the listed buildings and we understand that, even prior to the 2013 fire, some of the buildings already posed challenges in terms of ensuring they met necessary minimum access requirements. The Society recognises that these buildings are listed as buildings of national importance for both their external and internal significance. At the meetings that we have attended (including the recent Borough, Bankside & Walworth Community Council), there was recognition of a love for the character of those buildings in their entirety and not solely in terms of their facades. The rich historical and community value of these buildings is also much treasured. There is, therefore, a balance to be struck and we are keen to seek advice from Historic England as to their evaluation of the significance of the buildings following the fire of 2013.

Armed with this information we feel that Southwark Council, its chosen architects and local residents will be in a more informed position to support Southwark in making choices which identify those elements that we would all wish to retain in the redevelopment albeit within a pragmatic context of seeking to liberate as much usable space within the buildings as possible, without causing undue harm to their qualities as listed buildings. We are encouraged by our understanding that Historic England is often a facilitator of sometimes surprisingly radical interventions in historic buildings where this is felt necessary for assuring the building's practical future.

**3. Access to the Buildings.** Linked in to understanding more about the significance of the buildings is a desire to start to get local residents into the buildings. We feel that people will be able better to understand the constraints within which the Council is operating, the historic significance of the buildings and what of significance was and was not lost in the fire, if people can see that for themselves by getting into the buildings. We understand that the Newington Library building was little damaged by the fire and so should be relatively easy to open up. We know that the Town Hall was far more seriously affected but, with appropriate care, people should be able to have some access to parts of the building.

The Walworth Society would be happy to support Southwark in increasing the offer to visitors to the buildings with elements such as an exhibition of the history of the Walworth Road/Walworth area. This might make use of a small number of the some of the artwork and artefacts from the Museum/Library such as a Now and Then of the Cuming watercolour of former Walworth gardens near Morrisons and display of lost pubs.

**4. Uses.** In the meetings that we have attended, there has been a real keenness to explore in an open way the uses that the two building may perform in the future. While people have always felt that homes would be needed for the Cuming Museum, the Newington Library and the Local Archives in particular, we also recognise:

- That the way services are delivered and will be delivered in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is changing.
- The cost constraints that Southwark Council is currently working under.
- That the relationship between Walworth and the Elephant & Castle is changing and that the Town Hall sits at the point of the geographical transition between Walworth and the Elephant & Castle around the Walworth Square.

We would propose, therefore, that:

- A brief strategic review is undertaken of the town centre/civic functions that are needed in the Elephant & Castle and Walworth areas in the light of the forthcoming planning applications from Delancey at their two new sites and L&R at Skipton House which will largely set in stone the shape of the E&C for forthcoming decades. What is needed to make a rounded offer in this evolving part of the borough and what will go where.
- What is an appropriate balance for the Town Hall and Library buildings between Civic uses that may be a drain on costs and the need/desire to generate revenue to support the upkeep of the buildings and create wider income for Southwark.
- What is the resulting appropriate mix of uses for these buildings. We are not necessarily wedded to all of those uses that were originally proposed and are prepared to think about other ideas that might include arts/performance/theatre space. Another potential use might be as a place/space to display the pieces in the Southwark art collection (which is now almost all in storage). Such uses may represent a counterpoint to the offer at the E&C and also create opportunities for Walworth to become a destination for certain services/attraction which it lacks at present.

**5. Process.** We believe that the process of developing the plans for the buildings would be aided by more active participation by the local community. These buildings are central to the development of Walworth as a place and we feel that the community has an important role to play both in supporting the directions that Southwark is seeking to take, bringing a local user perspective to the redevelopment and bringing a creative perspective on issues like uses for the buildings and potential sources of funding. We have seen good templates for participative processes through bodies such as the E&C Community Forum when it was in place and the Elephant Park Park Advisory Group. We believe that setting up such a body for the Town Hall and Library redevelopment, even if the remit of that body was time-limited to get through to the planning stage, would be of real value to Southwark and local people.

**6. Meanwhile Uses.** Linked to the idea of getting people back into the buildings would be meanwhile uses for them. This may be less easy in the Town Hall (although events set in the context of damaged buildings can have a heightened sense of drama) but we feel that there is real scope for Southwark to re-open access and usage of the Newington Library. This would not only help to bring this buildings back into use (at least in part) but also to realise an opportunity to start to raise some revenue to defray the costs of the maintenance of the buildings. The most obvious initial idea would be usage of the Newington Library for arts exhibitions space hire for events, as this is becoming an increasingly strong feature of the offer of the Walworth area. Ideas might also include use as a location for community meetings, incubator space for local small businesses, meanwhile office space and performance space for local theatre groups. We are sure that there are many other potential uses that might have a community or revenue generating benefit.

The Walworth Society: 18th April 2016