

SAVING THE CIVIC:

RESUSCITATING THE BEATING HEART OF WHITCHURCH



This report is an updated version of a report '*Saving the Civic: The case for a Civic Centre for Whitchurch*', initially presented in July 2024. This new version:

- examines the present situation since the closure of the Civic Centre, and the historical context
- considers the importance of a civic space in community life
- reviews past and possible future uses of the Civic Centre
- presents some suggestions of how a venue might be operated in future
- suggests what needs to happen next to maintain momentum.

A note on the author: Garry Churchill MBA M.Ed lives in Whitchurch. In his professional career he worked extensively across the UK as consultant and adviser on arts and cultural projects with local authorities, funding bodies and arts and cultural organisations. His experience included acting as lead consultant on various capital projects in the arts, and as an adviser to Arts Council England on applications for capital funding from the National Lottery. This report reflects discussions in the 'Save our Civic' group but is written in a personal capacity.

Garry Churchill, April 2026

PART 1: INTRODUCTION:

Who and what are driving the discussions about redeveloping the Civic Centre?

The Civic Centre is owned by Shropshire Council and leased to Whitchurch Town Council. As owners of the building, Shropshire Council inevitably has to take the lead in making decisions about the building and what happens to it.

At a public meeting in January 2024, Shropshire Council outlined six possible options for the building. This led to a campaign group being formed which as 'Save our Civic' has arranged a series of consultation, awareness-raising and lobbying events. The 'Save our Civic' group includes people with a wide range of relevant professional expertise including engineering and construction, finance, business, marketing, arts management, venue management and community engagement.

Following the local elections in May 2025 a new joint Working Group was established with representatives of the two councils and of the 'Save our Civic' group to co-ordinate planning for the repair/rebuild of the Civic Centre.

Discussions in various forums to date have focussed on:

The strategic need – why does Whitchurch need a Civic Centre, what do people want, and what would be its role in the future development of a growing town?

The technical need – what is the most cost-effective solution to the problems presented by the building? Can effective mitigation, repair and renewal give the building a new lease of life for another decade or more? Or is a replacement/rebuild solution preferable or affordable?

The financial need – without a major source of capital funding, can the problem be addressed at all, or does it have to sit in the pile marked ***“Too difficult – Can’t afford”*** for years to come?

The need for demonstrable action – if there is no visible progress local voters will increasingly become cynical about the capacity of Shropshire and Whitchurch Councils to deliver change. The risk is the town’s reputational and economic decline, and social and political alienation as people become disillusioned.

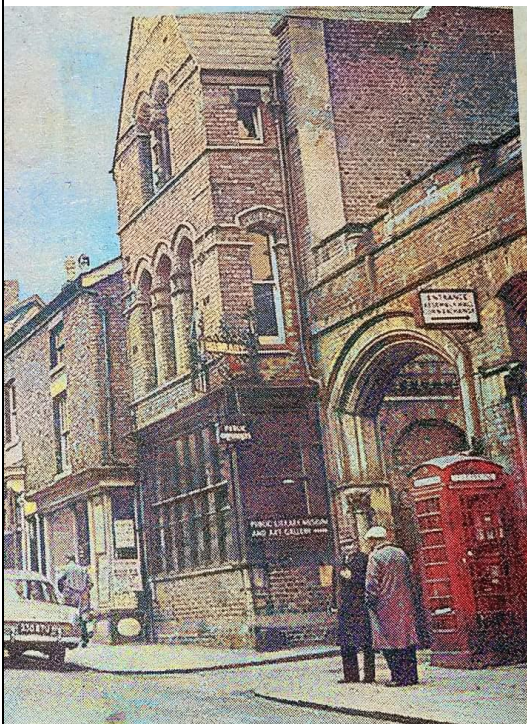
As controversial new housing estates bring in new residents, will they seek their cultural and social opportunities elsewhere rather than contribute to the community of Whitchurch? A thriving re-established Civic Centre would counter the risk of community failure and the social decline into a dormitory town for commuters and home-workers who don’t connect with Whitchurch.

The need for a transitional management organisation to emerge – there are strong arguments for the project ultimately to be led by a community-led organisation. A not-for-profit organisation would be able to access capital funds, including arts funding, not necessarily available to local authorities. Revenue budgets would be eased by the scope for considerable input of volunteers in a community-minded town such as Whitchurch to undertake many tasks, such as front-of-house duties, under professional management leadership.

PART 2: THE PRESENT PROBLEM

Progress? The Civic Centre and the long march of history

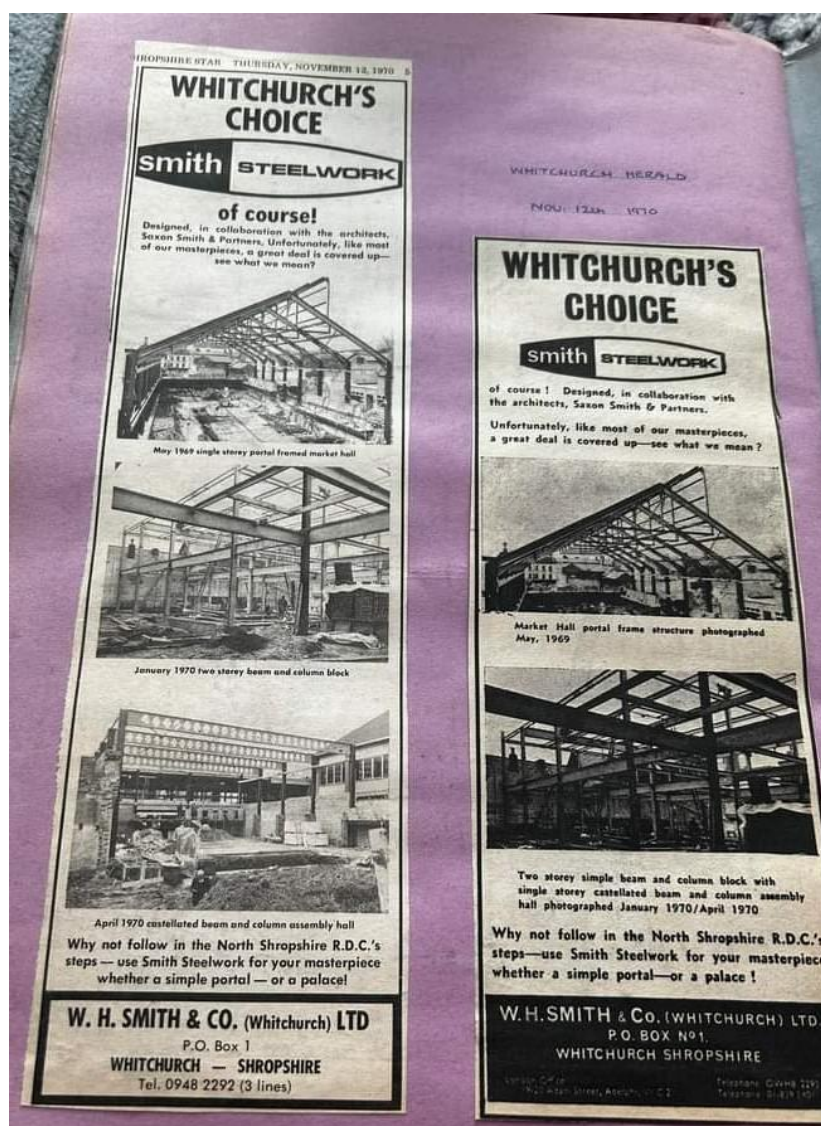
For almost four centuries the townspeople of Whitchurch have demonstrated the need for a shared civic space that would meet a range of social, cultural, community, commercial and public needs.

No 1 1636	Market Hall	The first Market Hall was built in 1636 .
No 2 1718	Market Hall, Corn Exchange and Town Hall Parts extant	This was replaced by a covered open Market Hall and Corn Exchange in 1718 , with a Town Hall above. This was constructed by the Lord of the Manor, the Earl of Bridgewater. The old town hall is recalled in the name of the adjacent Old Town Hall Vaults public house, birthplace of the composer Edward German.
No 3 1874	Town Hall, complete with Market Hall, Corn Exchange and Assembly Rooms Demolished in 1969	This was replaced in 1874 at a cost of £6,100 by an imposing new Victorian Gothic Town Hall, complete with Market Hall, Corn Exchange and upstairs Assembly Rooms. This occupied a large site further up the High Street, stretching back to St Mary's Street, made possible by the demolition of Georgian buildings on the west side of St Mary's Street and of the Coach and Horses Hotel. (The public right of way between the two streets was upheld later when the present Civic Centre was built on the same site.)  Apart from the markets, the building provided a base for balls, concerts and public meetings, and during World War Two cinema showings. The upper part was fire damaged on 20 December 1941 and taken out of use but the street level buildings continued in use until the whole was demolished in 1969 after almost 100 years of use.

No 4 1970	Civic Centre Closed in 2023 following discovery of RAAC concrete.	A new Civic Centre was opened on the same site on 20 November 1970 by the North Shropshire Rural District Council which had succeeded the Whitchurch Urban District Council. This was the fourth public hall in the town. In 2012 a £1.68m facelift and modernisation was carried out. <i>Original sketches for the design</i> The Centre was home to a multi-use community hall, market hall, town library and the offices of Whitchurch Town Council. The range of uses of the Civic Centre are summarised later (p. 6). In 2023 unsafe RAAC concrete was discovered in the building. Following a technical survey the building was deemed unsafe and was closed in September 2023 as being potentially dangerous. Options for the future have been debated since then.
No 4a or 5???	Remediated, refurbished Civic Centre – or a new design and new building???	A decision must be made to rescue the present building with appropriate remedial work, or to build a new public space. The Civic Centre sits within the Whitchurch Conservation Area. Any change of use, or changes to the site including demolition, would need to be compliant with its Conservation Area status. Meanwhile, there has been no progress in dealing with the physical state of the disused building which is deteriorating, including reports of water ingress.

Structural issues with the building

We know that the building was constructed with a steel framework fabricated and erected by engineers W H Smith and Co of Whitchurch.



We also know that the problem identified by the consulting engineers is the RAAC, not the steel frame.

*“The property is a braced steel frame with precast concrete beam and block floors to suspended floors ... and Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) to the roof areas ... The RAAC present in some areas is classified as Red (Critical)”.*¹

We have seen examples elsewhere of a new roof being fitted to heritage buildings which could be a model for remediating the Civic Centre.

However, to date, so far as is known, there has not yet been an independent, detailed and costed professional study to report on the feasibility and scope for removing and replacing the problem RAAC materials and replacing them with new structures while retaining the original steel framework.

¹ Source: Structural Inspection Report T21023/23/001, by Thomas Consulting, for Shropshire Council, October 2023

PART 3: WHY DO WE NEED A CIVIC CENTRE?

What does *civic* mean?

Civic implies belonging to or created by the people of a community, meaning engagement with ownership of the concept, rather than ownership in a legal or real estate sense.

As shown by the review on pages 3 and 4, Whitchurch Civic Centre is the result of the need and desire of the people of the town, as expressed over hundreds of years, to have a shared space for social, cultural, community, commercial and other public needs.

This could not have been achieved without the intervention of successive bodies responsible for local administration – first the Lord of the Manor, later the Victorian municipal bodies, then the district and later unitary authorities covering north Shropshire.

In the present situation Whitchurch Town Council and Shropshire Council, as the bodies responsible for civic leadership, have a duty to engage with the community and help facilitate a solution to ensure the town has a civic space to meet current and future needs, by reinstating a key public asset and amenity. A busy and active civic space, meeting the widest possible range of community needs is a key element in maintaining Whitchurch's local identity.

The duty of public authorities is to facilitate community solutions. They can and should marshal and co-ordinate the necessary resources, by pulling together community support and goodwill and all the possible sources of finance required from national and local government, charitable, private sector and community interests.

The importance of a civic space in community life

A flourishing civic space, for social, cultural, community, commercial and other public needs, would play a vital role in community life and promoting community cohesion and well-being.

Without it there are fewer opportunities to bring people together in shared activities. This is especially important in integrating communities in an expanding town where new people have moved in following new housing developments and demographic changes. Without a civic space people are more likely to pursue their leisure and cultural interests elsewhere, taking money out of the town, reducing the footfall for local shops, and weakening the sense of local identity and pride. This has been strongly demonstrated since January 2024 when the threat of the town not having a civic space aroused considerable opposition.

Across England there is a range of challenges that threaten the viability of small market towns, such as maintaining thriving high streets, attracting inward investment, which tends to flow to the big cities, and the disadvantages of limited public transport, limited employment opportunities to help retain skilled and ambitious young people, and a shortage of affordable housing for young people and people in low-paid jobs.

The risk for Whitchurch, without a renewed civic space, is that it becomes another faceless dormitory town where people come home to sleep after working, shopping and socialising elsewhere, contributing to increased traffic out of town each morning and an increasingly empty high street during the day.

How was the Civic Centre used until its closure?

The following is not comprehensive but illustrates the many activities that were possible by having a Civic Centre in the town:

<i>Public services</i>	• Dedicated professionally-staffed Library with a range of resources including collections and access to IT • Information point with a staffed reception desk • Central point for information with posters and leaflets • Base for the Town Council and civic meetings • Polling Station for local and parliamentary elections • Centre for election counts for local and parliamentary elections • Use by other county services e.g. social services, youth justice teams • Public toilets for the town centre
<i>Cultural and community</i>	• Drama productions, e.g. Whitchurch Little Theatre Group and Whitchurch Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society • Pantomime • Dance • Professional opera, e.g. North Wales Opera Studio • Music performances, e.g. Shrewsbury Symphony Orchestra and other classical music, popular, tribute bands, and folk music • Comedy nights • A central base for festivals, e.g. Blackberry Fair, Food Festival, Caldecott Festival, Walking Festival, Edward German Festival • A focal point for town-wide events e.g. Christmas Lights Switch-On, Lantern Parade • Yoga, taekwondo, judo, karate, Pilates • Professional wrestling shows • Slimming clubs • Walking football, wheelchair rugby, indoor bowls, badminton • Line dancing • Activity sessions for pre-school children • Dog training
<i>Social</i>	• Receptions, including wedding receptions, parties, dinners and dances • Charity coffee mornings organised by different groups in the town • Meetings of local clubs • Warm hub in winter
<i>Commercial and trading</i>	• Weekly indoor market and adjacent to outdoor market • Special markets e.g. Christmas • Craft fairs

PART 4: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

What could be different?

A remodelled or rebuilt multi-purpose venue could do other things in addition to the already extensive list above (page 7). For example, the venue could offer:

- regular film screenings, as daytime and evening showings for general audiences
- film programmes catering for different audience segments such as children's films, showings for audiences with special needs such as dementia-friendly or autism-friendly, 'art house' films and foreign language films, etc
- big screen showing of satellite broadcasts such as National Theatre Live, Royal Ballet and Opera, and big stage musicals (at present audiences have to travel to Wem, Market Drayton or further for these)
- community activities for groups with particular needs, e.g. for people with disabilities
- more events for young people including the under 18s
- exhibition spaces for better display of local and visiting work
- studio space for classes and activities such as yoga, pilates and dance
- offices for civic use and rental
- a re-energised market.

An advocacy document '*The New Civic Centre Coming Your Way Soon*' prepared by Stella Ashbrook and members of the Whitchurch Business Group set out the case that Whitchurch needs a fresh and dynamic vision, and that despite limited funds, we can still revitalize our community. Positive changes will lead to increased involvement, benefiting businesses, social well-being, and the entire community. The case is made that with dedicated effort and a clear vision, the council and the working group can drive meaningful change and transform the Civic into a community hub.

Needs assessment

Research on past use of the Civic Centre and future needs was commissioned in 2025 by Shropshire Council². The consultants, Strategic Leisure Ltd, identified a key theme from all of the consultation meetings as the importance of the Civic Centre to the community. Described as a 'focal point for the town', the stakeholders highlighted how the Centre's closure had a broader impact on the high street, leaving a hole and leaving the town lacking momentum. This applies to the events, groups and activities it hosted, in addition to the services which have been displaced or no longer operate in the area.

While the research found that local stakeholders would like to see a new building replace the existing Civic Centre as a better long-term option, this did not take account of the higher likely costs and the difficult funding climate. Replacing the roof would not change the nature or capacity of the Civic Centre, but a complete rebuild would take much longer as well as being much more expensive.

² Whitchurch Civic Centre – Assessment of Need. A Report by Strategic Leisure Limited, July 2025

To optimise the use of a rejuvenated Civic Centre, provision needs to be designed to be as multi-functional and flexible as possible to meet the needs as reported by Strategic Leisure.

However, as noted in the introduction (page 2), final decisions cannot yet be made on the question of repair or rebuild until substantial capital funding is identified. Before this can happen independent, detailed professional studies will be required to report on the technical issues and feasibility of different options and to produce reliable cost estimates.

For the future, two essential changes compared with the previous operation of the Civic Centre will be needed:

1. a different **staffing model** will be needed to provide the professional programming and marketing expertise needed to manage the venue more proactively
2. a different **governance model** will be needed to bring in a range of expertise from the community and oversee the strategy, business plan and performance of the venue. (The local authorities could of course be part of this but the venue need not be run by either the town or county authority.) An arms-length not-for-profit organisational structure would give greater operational independence.

Lessons from other venues

We have drawn from our experience of other venues around the country, and looked at several examples of flourishing cultural venues elsewhere in Shropshire (such as at Market Drayton and at Ludlow). We are interested in how they meet the needs of their local communities and illustrate how a renewed Whitchurch Civic Centre might operate. Amongst key conclusions are that:

1. Both strong support from the local community and the support, encouragement and practical assistance of the local authorities are essential.
2. A not-for-profit structure, as a charity or community interest company, enables the physical assets to be leased or owned securely for public benefit. A Community Asset Transfer could be considered.
3. Once capital costs are met, the ongoing revenue implications can be managed within the earned income and regular fundraising of the venues. Café and bar sales underpin income from ticket sales, lettings and hires.
4. Substantial regular input from volunteers is invaluable, but professional leadership and management is essential, to provide imaginative programming and to shape and lead the venue's identity, supported by a professional multi-channel marketing operation.
5. With professionalised programming and marketing there is scope for much more intensive capacity utilisation of the venue. Higher usage levels will generate more earned income. A revitalised/remodelled/rebuilt Civic Centre need not require revenue support at a significantly different level than the current model.

PART 5: CONCLUSION

Since a packed public meeting in January 2024 there has been a range of support for addressing the problem of the closed Civic Centre. This has been expressed through:

- the action group 'Save our Civic'
- the Whitchurch Business Group
- a residents' consultation survey
- a needs analysis conducted by external consultants
- the support of North Shropshire's MP
- the establishment of a Joint Working Group with representatives of the two councils and of the 'Save our Civic' group.

We propose that at this stage, two and a half years since the Centre was abruptly closed, the **essential next steps** are:

1. Identify major sources of capital funding. Shropshire Council as owner of the building has to lead on this.
2. Plan to maintain the three indispensable elements in the site:
 - a town library, as a fully equipped professionally run service
 - a venue for performances, meetings and functions, and
 - a base for the indoor market.
3. Develop options for future running of the Centre. The Working Group could lead on this with full involvement by the 'Save our Civic' group. 'Save our Civic' would prefer it to be operated by a new body, likely to be a not-for-profit community-based organisation, rather than a local council.
4. Develop a Shadow Board of what might become a Community Interest Company or similar to operate and manage the re-opened Centre, leased from the Council (or possibly through a Community Asset Transfer).
5. Develop a Business Case showing how the Centre might generate income and operate with a viable budget. This would have to balance community interests and the commercial reality of needing to generate income to cover running costs.

Garry Churchill

April 2026