

SUBJECT:	Letting of the Former Abergavenny Library
DIRECTORATE:	Resources
MEETING:	Cabinet
DATE:	21st May 2025
DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:	All

1. PURPOSE:

This report is to secure authority to grant a lease for the Former Abergavenny Library.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

That Cabinet agrees the following:

- (i) To award the lease tender to Monmouthshire Muslim Community Association.
- (ii) To delegate authority to the Chief Officer for Resources to negotiate the lease in accordance with the tender award.

3. KEY ISSUES:

Background

3.1 The Former Abergavenny Library was closed in 2014/15, with the library relocated following completion of the development of the new hub at the Abergavenny Town Hall. In the subsequent years, the former library has been utilised for a number of services including Adult Education and most recently MCC's Pupil Referral Service (PRS).

3.2 In late 2024, Cabinet declared the asset surplus and granted approval to transfer the asset to MCC's Landlord Services in order to commence marketing the property. The objective was to explore opportunities to maximise social benefit and generate a financial return from an otherwise vacant asset.

3.3 Following a period of marketing, a tender deadline was set for receipt of proposals including detailed business plans for the respective uses. A range of offers were received. Tenders were evaluated based on an established scoring matrix with weighting applied to:

- The proposed use and its suitability at a former *Carnegie* building – with due consideration for the property's planning status and restrictive covenant (prohibiting uses that may result in disturbance to neighbouring properties e.g. restaurants or bars).
- The evidence of demand for the proposed use – including adherence to the Council's Community and Corporate Plan.
- The proposed terms – inclusive of the lease term, rental offer and repair obligations.

- Due diligence undertaken and experience – acknowledging the age and condition of the property and potential investment required (subject to use), as well as the competency of the tenderer to manage the property.
- Financial sustainability – the business plan and financial standing of the tenderer, inclusive of their funding and medium-term financial outlook.

3.4 **Appendix A** contains an extract of the scoring matrix, with the names of the tenderers redacted to protect their existing commercial or accommodation arrangements. Following completion of the evaluation, it is recommended that the tender is awarded to the highest scoring applicant - the Monmouthshire Muslim Community Association (MMCA).

3.5 Monmouthshire Muslim Community Association are a not-for-profit group proposing to occupy the building for the creation of Monmouthshire's first Mosque and Community Centre. The proposal identifies the demand, need and subsequent gap in current provision for the rapidly growing Muslim population in Monmouthshire, serving people of diverse racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. An extract from the Business Plan can be found in **Appendix B**.

3.6 The proposal aims to bring the former Abergavenny library into beneficial community use by providing a mosque and community centre to facilitate educational, social, economic and recreational value for Muslim residents of Monmouthshire and the wider community. The proposal outlines the intention to contribute to improving the health and well-being of all members of the community, encouraging economic growth by making Monmouthshire a more inclusive and attractive place to live, promoting interfaith dialogues and supporting the local community including refugees who have made their home in the area.

3.7 The Former Library is considered highly suitable for this purpose due to its central location, capacity and configuration. The proposed use falls within the properties existing Use Class (D1), therefore no planning consent is required for the occupation. Subject to the approval of the recommendations within the report, a Certificate of Lawfulness will be applied for to provide assurance that no material change of use is required.

3.8 The 2011 census showed that almost half (47%) of the Muslim population in Wales resided in Cardiff. The second highest was found in Newport (15%) followed by Swansea (12%). 74% of Muslims resided in these three local authorities. Abergavenny has the highest number of Muslims within Monmouthshire but not a single mosque in contrast Newport which has eight, Cardiff has 24 and Swansea has 7 mosques. The 2021 census showed 1.2% of Monmouthshire residents identified their ethnic group within the "mixed or Multiple" category, up from 0.7% in 2011. With no access to a place of worship within the County, residents are having to travel to mosques in other Local authority areas and this has proved challenging in terms of travel, arriving at specified prayer times and during Ramadhan. This also means that children do not have access to learning education facilities on a daily basis as is a norm for the religion in the rest of the world.

- 3.9 MMCA are currently located at St Michael's Centre where they have successfully operated alongside other uses and religious groups, with ongoing support from the trustees of the facility in Our Lady and St Michael's parish. This has evidenced an increase in the number of residents attending the Friday prayers who live and work in Abergavenny and surrounding areas. The Friday prayer provision is also accessed by local business owners, teachers and the hospital staff at Neville Hall Hospital. For Muslim people after the home and the workplace, the mosque is the most frequented place. In accordance with the Community and Corporate Plan's commitment for Monmouthshire to be a place of sanctuary, the letting of the property to MMCA will enable the county to build on its commitment to being a welcoming, safe and inclusive community.
- 3.10 Under the proposed terms of a lease to MMCA, the property will be let for 30 years. A rental will be paid for occupancy of the property, generating a financial return to MCC, and it is not proposed that a rental concessionary grant will be required. The property will be let on a fully repairing and insuring basis, transferring the obligations to maintain the asset to the tenant.
- 3.11 Within the group, there is a reasonable level of experience in property management and the business plan outlines an intention to invest in the property, inclusive of energy efficiency measures. Sustainability upgrades, whilst challenging on a building of this type and listed status, are being actively explored by the prospective tenant.
- 3.12 MCCA have outlined their proposed funding and financial strategy, which proposes utilisation of religious contributions, revenue through educational classes, crowd funding events and business partnerships. This business case has been informed by successful operating models in nearby counties such as Iqraa Mosque in Newport, Cardiff's New Mosque & Islamic Cultural Centre, and Bristol's Central Mosque. The intention is to also apply for capital grants including the National Lottery Community Fund, Muslim Charitable Foundations Grants and Protective Security Funding Scheme.
- 3.13 MMCA's proposal directly correlates to the objectives of the Council's Community and Corporate Plan 2022-2028, and the objectives of the Asset Management Strategy to utilise community assets to optimise social value. The Community and Corporate Plan's commitment to tackle inequality, create a fair and safe place to live are reflected in the recommendation to award the tender. MMCA's proposal will repurpose a community asset and facilitate educational, social, economic and recreational uses. The use will also encourage economic growth by attracting new residents by making Monmouthshire a more inclusive and attractive place to live. The principles of Monmouthshire's commitment as a county of sanctuary is reflected in MMCA's business plan.
- 3.14 Should this report's recommendations be approved, MCC's Estates Department will commence drafting of legal agreements and progress towards lease completion and handover of the property. It is proposed that the tenant would

commence a period of public engagement with neighbouring properties and local partners, such to aid the transition into the property and mobilisation of the scheme.

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION:

4.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment has been undertaken, attached as **Appendix 3**.

4.2 A summary from Section 8 of the Integrated Impact Assessment identifying the significant positive and negative impacts is detailed below.

Positive Impact

- The proposal will enable an underutilised asset to be repurposed.
- The proposal to offer the site for community use will enhance the availability of opportunities that are open, accessible and of interest to people of all ages and abilities.
- This proposal will strengthen and widen the opportunities available by providing a mosque and community centre to facilitate educational, social, economic and recreational value for Muslim residents of Monmouthshire and the wider community.
- Developing the site as a community asset/opportunity will further extend the range of opportunities and activities within the community.
- Monmouthshire's commitment as a county of sanctuary is about improving outcomes by providing a welcoming environment, challenging discrimination and negative perceptions and ensuring equality of opportunity where possible. The proposal strives to promote good relations between groups ensuring vibrant and cohesive communities.

Negative Impacts

- The creation of an additional community facility in close proximity to a number of existing community assets may negatively impact the sustainability of other assets.

5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

Option	Benefits	Risks	Recommendation
Do not award the tender – retain the property	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Whilst the property would be vacant, the property would be retained for the delivery of other council services should the need arise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• That the property falls into disrepair and remains underutilized, in conflict with the commitments of the Asset Management Strategy to maximise the use of property.• The property would continue to result in costs to MCC through utilities and business rates.• Reopening the property for an MCC service may introduce	

Option	Benefits	Risks	Recommendation
		additional revenue costs and budget pressures.	
Award the tender to MMCA and progress with granting of a lease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The property is a well-known asset and is suitable for the community use proposed. MCC would offset any ongoing running costs associated with the asset and generate a financial return. Would enable policy objectives around community enablement and social value to be supported, in accordance with the Asset Management Strategy and Community & Corporate Plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> That the proposal is unsuccessful and other potential uses have failed to be achieved. That MCC forgo an opportunity to repurpose or develop the site to meet other policy objectives. That the asset fails to perform in accordance with the Business Plan and arrears created or the asset returns to MCC as a liability. The duplication of services could detract from existing community assets and tenants, impacting their own viability and sustainability. 	Recommended the tender is awarded to MMCA and the Estates Department progress draft legal agreements.
Award the tender to an alternative proposal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject to negotiation, a potentially greater financial return could be derived from alternative commercial uses. A shorter lease term could be entered, thereby protecting MCC's position should the proposal be unsuccessful and therefore isn't bound by a long lease commitment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acceptance of an alternative offer would be contrary to the scoring matrix and established process by which tenderers are awarded. The alternative offers may require planning consent, and uncertainty over whether change of use will be granted could delay progress of the letting. Subject to negotiation, a potentially greater financial return could be derived from alternative commercial uses. The duplication of services could detract from existing community assets and tenants, impacting their own viability and sustainability. 	

6. EVALUATION CRITERIA

- 6.1 Landlord Services, supported by MCC Legal, will be responsible for negotiating the draft lease agreement and ongoing management of landlord and tenant communication. The asset would be monitored and managed in accordance with the commitments of the Asset Management Strategy.

7. REASONS:

- 7.1 The property is vacant and tenders have been received to purchase or lease the asset. A tender evaluation has taken place against a scoring matrix, which has recommended award of the tender to Monmouthshire Muslim Community Association. The scoring criteria and evaluation is made on balance, judgement and experience.
- 7.2 The property lends itself to a range of different uses and has potential to generate a financial return to MCC. Maximising the use of property that is under-utilised features in the principles of the Council's Asset Management Strategy.
- 7.3 Award of the tender to MMCA will enable the development of Monmouthshire's first Mosque and Community Centre, helping to address a longstanding desire for provision within the County. The proposed lease of the property will secure the provision of the new facilities for the benefit of the Muslim community and wider population, providing access to services not readily available locally.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 8.1 The annual running costs (utilities and business rates) of the former library at the time of occupation was approximately £24,000 per annum. Whilst MCC will not be incurring these costs since the property has been vacated, MCC are continuing to incur holding costs (standing charges, business rates). Upon completion of the lease, this liability will be transferred to the tenant. Leasing of the property will also generate an annual rental of £6,000 pa.
- 8.2 By supporting these proposals, MCC would potentially be forgoing any alternative use and/or development of the property. The site has potential for different commercial uses that may generate a higher market rental, however the properties former use as a 'Carnegie building' may make sure uses unachievable or inappropriate. The property is also subject to a restrictive covenant.
- 8.3 MCC will not incur any capital costs under the proposal, with the cost of ongoing operation and running costs met by the tenant.

9. CONSULTEES:

- Landlord Services
- Joanne Chase, MCC Legal Services
- Lucinda Boyland – Community Development and Delivery Manager
- Cllr Laura Wright – Ward Member

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Appendix 1 – Scoring Evaluation
Appendix 2 – Monmouthshire Muslim Community Association's Business Plan
Appendix 3 – Integrated Impact Assessment
Appendix 4 - Redline Plan

12.AUTHOR:

Nicholas Keyse, Acting Head of Landlord Services