

Date: 18 April 2013

LOOSE, The Studio, Lacey Street, Widnes WA8 7SQ  
Contact: [jaki.florek@virgin.net](mailto:jaki.florek@virgin.net) or 01928 566261 afternoons 2pm – 6pm

## Re. HALTON HOUSING TRUST PLANNING APPLICATION CASE: 13/00071/FUL

**HHT PROPOSAL:** to build a block of 17 apartments on the site of the now demolished Queens Hall, Widnes, fronting onto Victoria Road and Lacey Street, next to The Studio.

### **OBJECTIONS:**

- 1. Halton Council has policies in place to guide planning decisions, including their *Unitary Development Plan*, and *Halton's Sustainable Communities Strategy*.**

Reports and case studies all agree that **Green Space in communities is vital in contributing to positive social, economic and environmental benefits, and improving community health, well-being and quality of life.** Why will this be ignored? Why won't this apply to this area?

If the plans are approved there will be NO POSSIBILITY OF PUBLIC GREEN SPACE in this area.

**Residents and users of local buildings** who we have consulted do NOT want this site to be built on. It is wrong to ignore us, yet we know this will go through and be accepted. We are in favour of the site being used as a **Community Garden, a Public Green Space.** (Grants are available).

**We object to the plans to build a block of flats on the site of The Queens Hall as it will have a detrimental effect on the area which is now dense with housing old & new.**

Even a relatively small area of Public Green Space can help to **positively reinforce local identity and enhance the physical character of an area.** And it does need enhancing, not worsening.

The **Riverside Ward** is one of the **highest areas of multiple deprivation in Widnes** – granting permission to build on the site will **lower the quality of existing residents' environment** and will **actively exclude them from benefits rightly listed as valuable in the Council's own UDP.**

The Council states their **UNITARY DEVELOPMENT PLAN (UDP)** will guide planning decisions. In **Chapter 3 "Green Spaces"** it states **"the value of greenspace is measured against:**

- its value for **informal or unorganised recreation;**
- its value for **children's play**, either as an equipped playing space or a more **casual or informal playing space;**
- providing a visual break or **visual variety in an otherwise built-up area;**
- its value in **enhancing the overall attractiveness of the area;**
- its contribution to the **health and sense of well-being of the community.**
- Planning Policy Statement 1 (UDP) states "Planning Authorities should... take account of environmental issues such as the need to **improve the built environment** including the **provision of good quality open space...**"

**The Government's Planning Policy Guidance Note 17** emphasises that **"the use of land as open space is no less important than other uses."** **We agree.**

We are aware of the need for affordable housing and current difficulties, but **we request that the needs for this specific area are considered as per the council's own policies.**

### **HALTON'S SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES STRATEGY 2011 – 2026**

**It is a thoughtful and positive document; it must not be seen as a collection of empty words.**

- It aims "to enhance the quality of life of local communities through actions to improve the economic, social and **environmental well being of the area and its inhabitants."**
- The Halton Strategic Partnership Board (responsible for delivering HSCS) is committed to **"Community focus, participation and engagement."**
- HSCS states they work to **"improve the quality of life at a neighbourhood level."**
- "It must also... **co-ordinate the actions** of the council and of the public, private, voluntary and community organisations that operate locally" and
- **"allow local communities to express their aspirations, needs and priorities."**

**WE ARE ONLY ASKING THAT YOU ABIDE BY YOUR OWN POLICIES**

2. The **DESIGN, ACCESS & SUSTAINABILITY DOCUMENT (DASD)** and Plans produced by Denovo Architects show a building development physically separated from and not integrated in any way with the existing environment. Built-in isolation is the opposite of what is needed to strengthen communities. The DASD paints an idealistic picture:

“A central sitting area is indicated, surrounded by scented plants” and “A wildflower area will be planted beneath the new trees in the courtyard”.

- BUT this will **NOT be accessible to existing local residents or be of public benefit**,
- The new flats surround their courtyard like a fortress, and **there is a remote controlled gate (shown on the plans) to keep people out.**

**Town Centre – or Residential Area? There's some confusion:**

- The DASD acknowledges “The current **Halton Council Unitary Development Plan indicates that the site is in a Primary Residential Area**”
- Later, the DASD states of the proposed flats “its **scale and massing is appropriate to its town centre location**”. “The development is for affordable apartments, where levels of car ownership are likely to be low. In addition, **the site is in Widnes Town Centre.**” No it isn't.

**PARKING:** Despite the DASD envisaging car ownership will be low -

- **19 spaces** are shown provided - *within the gated courtyard*
- They will **NOT be accessible to existing Lacey Street residents.**
- Opposite and nearby, existing residents have double yellow lines outside their front doors.
- Existing residents, and visitors to The Studio, and The Spiritualist Church, compete for very few on-road spaces now that the Lacey Street car park has been built on.
- These few spaces will be further reduced due to the new access road and access to the roadside bins cupboard shown on the plans.

3. **“OFF-SITE” OPEN SPACE WON'T BENEFIT LACEY STREET + SURROUNDING AREA.**

- DASD Para 6: “**open space is limited... a commuted sum in respect of any considered loss of open space** is a matter to be agreed between HHT and the Council.”
- The Report To The Development Control Committee (4 Aug 2012) re. the planning application to build housing on Lacey Street car park: “**RECOMMENDATION: approve subject to the entering into a Legal Agreement for the provision of a financial contribution towards off-site public open space**”
- **NOT building on the QH site DOES give the opportunity for ON-SITE public open space.**
- Other residential areas have green space, why not the Lacey Street area? It's not a large amount but **it WILL make a difference visually, practically, and psychologically.**

4. **THE WALLS OF THE STUDIO BUILDING FORM THE EASTERN BOUNDARY OF THE SITE, yet there is no reference at all to The Studio, a live music venue.**

A decision should not be informed or influenced by the Design, Access and Sustainability Document (DASD) as it is contradictory and incomplete .

- DASD: “the eastern boundary (is formed) by a **Community Hall/Spiritualist Church**”
- DASD lists all local amenities including a pub, a barber, and a Spiritualist Church (*next to The Studio*) but not The Studio.
- DASD 7: “The social impact of the new development was **deemed to be minimal.**” On the contrary, **it could be MASSIVE.** The existence of The Studio is not mentioned.
- If The Studio has to limit its activities, or close, **there will be a big social impact.**
- As well as \*live music events which include rock/metal/alternative as well as acoustic, local **charity fundraising events** and **Under 18s events**, there's **band rehearsal rooms**, music-based activities for **people with Mental Health Issues**, a Samba drumming group for **Adults with Extra Needs**, **theatre groups**, **dance classes**, and an ongoing very valuable project delivering free positive music-based activities to **disadvantaged young people funded by The Big Lottery.**

- The above is just a sample of how the building is used; The Studio is used by local people in the community 7 days a week + 6 evenings a week.
  - DASD 8: The **economic impact** statement fails to consider **6 paid jobs** plus volunteer and work experience places would be lost if The Studio closes
- 5. Put simply, it is not a good idea to build a block of flats next to a live music venue. The proposed building development could contribute significantly to the risk of The Studio:**
- **losing its licence for live music,**
  - **losing its income,**
  - **limiting its activities** (see \*above),
  - **closing.**

Briefly, this could be due to noise complaints a) from the proposed new residents – **the first block of flats is closer to The Studio than any existing house**, and b) due to the proposed site use preventing us from taking steps to stop sound leaking to existing neighbours when the **front doors open and close** when people go in and out.



At the time of The Studio passing into our ownership, there was still the corridor attached to The Studio which linked it to The Queens Hall. **It was documented by our solicitor in council meetings that IF the linking corridor was ever demolished we needed to acquire that corner of land and this was agreed.**

When we tried to discuss this later (and the Green Space project) with the council, we were told they had *already agreed* to sell the site to Halton Housing Trust, subject to contract.

Photo: The Studio after the corridor is demolished

**We understand this is not a matter for consideration for the Planning Committee, it is just by way of a short explanation of point 5. which IS relevant.**

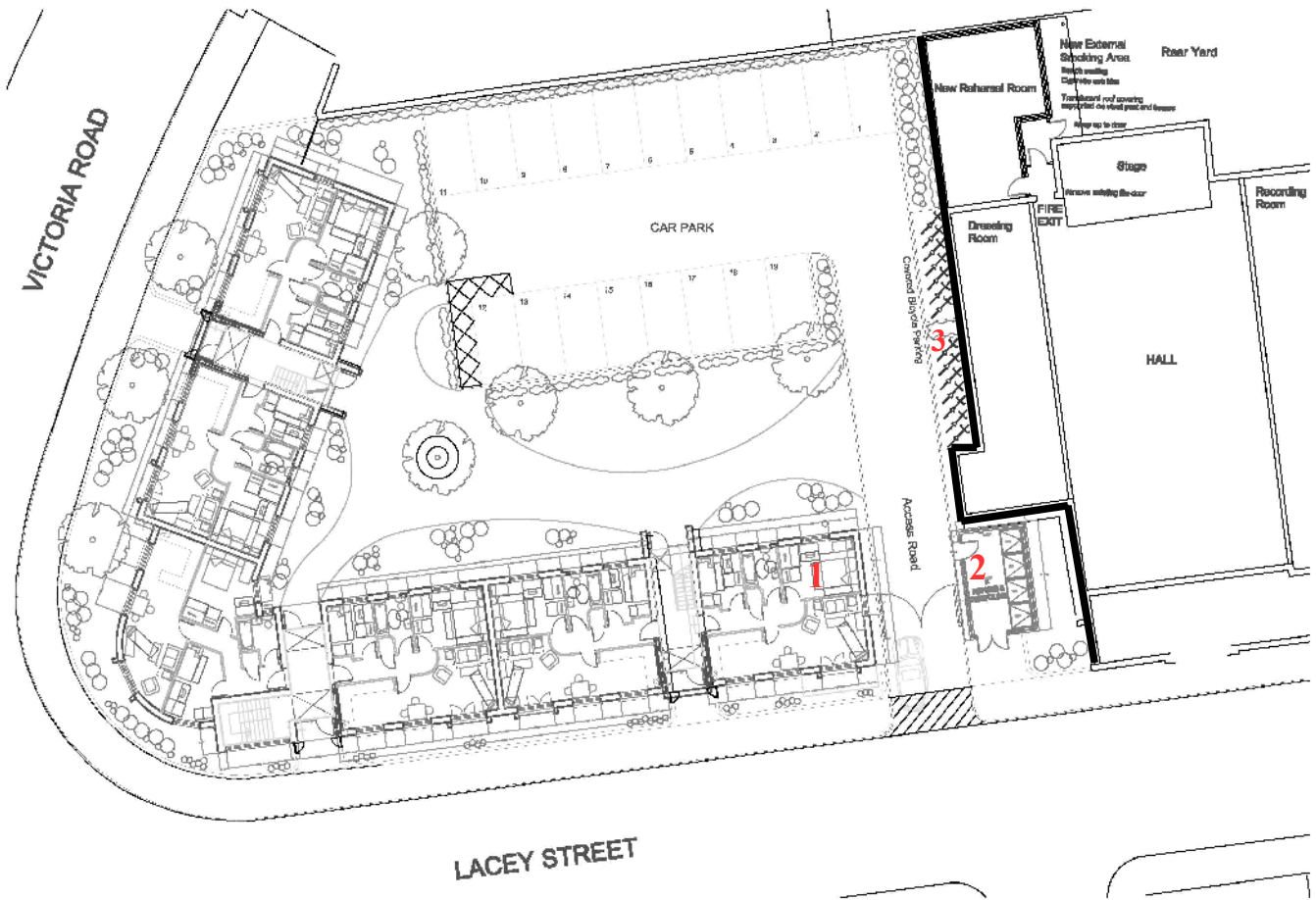
Due to the internal layout of The Studio the only place a side door can go is where **the bin cupboard is shown on the plans**, where the corridor was demolished.

The outdoor smoking area shown on the plans as **the architect's solution is appreciated** but would be a second-best solution as access to it would be via a fire exit at the side of the stage next to the performers' dressing-rooms (they double as rehearsal rooms when no event is on).

#### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:**

- 1. The Studio is owned and run by local not for profit company LOOSE (Company No. 6566823) and is still run by unpaid volunteers. It is a valuable and unique Community Asset, and the transfer of the building is highlighted in Council documents to show positive support of voluntary groups and collaboration with the local community.**
- 2. The Studio (built in 1879) had been owned by Halton Council from 1953 until it closed in 2004. A large room, part of The Studio building, had been demolished to link it via a built-on corridor to the now-demolished Queens Hall also owned by Halton Council, and which also closed in 2004.**
- 3. LOOSE, in a partnering agreement with Halton Council, secured a grant from the Community Assets Fund; we renovated The Studio in 2009 which by that time was totally derelict and we re-opened it in 2010.**





— Boundary Studio walls

- 1 first block of flats is closer to The Studio than the house opposite (or any existing house)
- 2 proposed bins cupboard
- 3 amendment: bicycle shed now moved (it was on our drains)



Front of The Studio – a young band, volunteers + staff



Photo of Studio stage by one of our young people who got interested in photography. Overcoming great difficulties, she is now studying for a degree in photography.