

The Falcon Centre, Wylam

Community Hub - steps towards a *Pre-feasibility Study*

This document forms an appendix to the brief for the PFS study - both as at 12-11-20

Introduction – history and uses

The Falcon Centre was built as the village school in 1910 and was occupied as such until relocation of the school to a site close by in 1974. Northumberland County Council despite limited resources was able to open part of the building as a branch library in August 1976. Other parts were set aside for community use and in June 1981 the Parish Council opened the Wylam Railway Museum in one room at the east end.



The building is still owned by Northumberland County Council. The Council manages the Centre and pays for maintenance, insurance and running costs. It recoups these costs in part from rents and charges paid by users. Current or recent users have included the Library, the Museum, pre-school play and story groups, drop-in yoga, and storage for an artisan social enterprise bakery.

The future of the building

The building as it stands has limits on what it can be used for without adaptations. The Library and Museum spaces are single purpose and fully occupied. An open area (part of the former school hall and a classroom) is more flexible and has been used until recently by the playgroup and for a variety of other small scale community activities. The former school kitchen next to this area to the west is now vacant and capable of other uses.

The building is arguably much underused. The Library (and with it the Museum) is open Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and Saturday mornings only, though this may change depending on an ongoing review of its library services by the County Council, launched in autumn 2019.

It is hoped that the library service review will conclude that Wylam Library can remain open and perhaps even expand in terms of hours. But this cannot be guaranteed. The underuse of the building now and its obvious potential for new uses has prompted a group of users and other interested parties to pro-actively plan for bigger and better things for the building and the wider site.

We are at the beginning of what could be a lengthy process, but equally we might need to move quickly if circumstances change due to the library review, Covid-19 fallout or otherwise.

Summing up this section, the overriding vision for the Centre is inspired by the creation in other towns and villages elsewhere of what have been described as:

'Community hubs based in designated multi-purpose buildings should be at the centre of communities, providing safe spaces for people of all ages, so everyone, toddler, teenager to the retired can participate in education, economic and cultural life.'

The Falcon Centre in context

The Centre is located towards the south of the main village off Falcon Terrace in a predominantly residential area. It is well placed for the railway station, nearby bus stops on Main Road and close to the rights of way that converge on the village both north and south of the river, especially the multi-user route known as the Wylam Waggonway, now part of the National Cycle Network.

The Library is highly valued locally. The pre-school playgroup provided an important community service, but shut recently. The Railway Museum attracts a steady flow of visitors from around the world due to Wylam's place in early steam railway history. But in absolute terms usage of the building is not on average very high.

Wylam is well off compared with many villages for buildings with indoor space for community uses of all sorts, either run by themselves or through hiring them out. The Wylam Institute and the Parish and Methodist churches a little further west and north are the key providers. We are also well served with two small general stores, four pubs, two restaurants and a coffee shop.

Care must be taken to ensure any changes at the Falcon Centre are complementary to these facilities and not directly competing. The local GP's practice has recently closed its surgery in Wylam and all services are now in Prudhoe about 2 miles (and up a hill) away. It is hoped that it may be possible to offer the practice some sort of base back in the village if the project succeeds.



Work being done already

This exercise is being progressed by the unincorporated Falcon Centre Action Group, made up of interested residents and users of the current Centre. The group is moving towards adopting a constitution to achieve a more formal status and in doing will explore its relationship to other bodies such as the Parish Council.

The Group has been exploring preparatory actions in relation to the building and this includes making a recent application to the County Council for the Centre to be declared an Asset of Community Value - no response as at November 2020.

Community mapping is seen as a key part of the process and a through-the-door survey of all residents has just been finished and is being written up. Younger people are being approached via social media now. This will be followed by contact with community organisations active in the village and a related survey of other buildings and facilities available for community use already. The Parish Council will join us in these latter two exercises.

Lastly (for the moment) the Group is seeing what volunteer based research can be done before engaging professional help in order to look at funding, at the three key themes which might inform the eventual shape of the centre (see below under objectives) and at its own legal status.



Objectives of the Pre-feasibility Study will be to:

- 1 To use the results from the community mapping exercise (people, places, organisations) to identify unmet needs for community provision in Wylam, noting carefully what already exists.
- 2 To study how to optimise the usable space at the Falcon Centre, covering the existing building and the wider site, including options for both adapting the existing building and new build.
- 3 To examine the potential for a focus on each of the following:
 - Tourism and heritage
 - Health care and wellbeing
 - Activities for young people
 - Provision for small businesses
 - Ancillary catering
- 4 To advise on introducing environmentally friendly technology and activities into the centre.
- 5 To develop a preferred option for creating a sustainable future for the Centre covering:
 - Impact on the very local surroundings
 - Ownership and management options, including community representation
 - Immediate design and capital costs and possible short term funding sources
 - Ongoing revenue costs and possible long term income streams to meet these

Work stream for the PFS and beyond

Step 1 - now

- Finalise PFS brief
- Seek funding for PFS
- Community mapping
- Preparatory volunteer research



Step 2 - next

- Wrap up mapping and research
- Issue brief & invite tenders for PFS
- Let contract for PFS
- Stakeholder engagement (NCC/PC)



Step 3

- Receive PFS report
- Consider findings
- Decide on preferred option
- Commission further studies if needed



Step 4

- Consider outputs from further studies
- Provisional capital funding enquiries
- Community engagement
- Decide on scheme to be progressed



Steps 5, 6, 7

- Apply for capital funding
- Consider revenue cash flows
- Provisional revenue funding enquiries
- Move to final scheme!