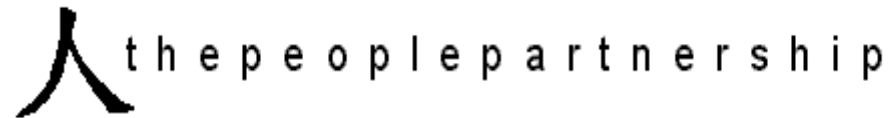


Wells City Council Portway Annexe research

October 2021



Introduction

Project Background

- The Portway Annexe (PA) has been a community asset since it was built in 1900
- It has provided education as the Blue School Girls school, and has been the only dedicated building for adult education in Wells whilst under the tenancy of Somerset Skills & Learning (SS&L)
- Somerset County Council (SCC) were going to put the PA up for sale when SS&L lease ended in December 2020
- There was a campaign by local groups to have it registered as an Asset of Community Value to prevent the sale of the building to a developer and to give community groups a chance to purchase it as a Community Asset Transfer
- Wells City Council (WCC) agreed to purchase the building with Government loan of £620,000 - this loan would result in a small rise in the Council's annual precept for the year 2021/2022, equivalent to 14p per week
- In the meantime, WCC have committed to conduct a Public Consultation in order to input into the decision making process, not least the business plan

Overall Project Objectives

- 1 To explore the range of facilities, services, social enterprise, activities, education and other opportunities that residents of Wells and beyond would like to see offered both inside and outside the PA
- 2 To explore the relative importance of a range of different factors (financial, emotional, practical, etc) in determining what is offered in the PA going forward
- 3 To establish the extent to which the residents of Wells and beyond agree or disagree with WCC's decision to buy the PA from SCC
 - And to understand what is driving their opinions

Qualitative Research method & sample

- An Open Day was held at the PA on Saturday 31st July between 10am and 4pm
- Residents of Wells and beyond were given the opportunity to look around the building and to give both their spontaneous and prompted reactions to / expectations of what the PA could/should be used for moving forward
- A total of 42 people were interviewed, providing representation of:
 - Gender (fairly even spread male/female with a slight skew to females)
 - Age (18-80+ evenly spread across ages)
 - Lifestage (evenly spread across lifestage and whether living with others/alone)
 - Geography (slight skew to residents local to PA/those who live in Wells, but with some representation of those who live further afield)

Quantitative Research method & sample

- Paper questionnaires were delivered to every household in Wells from 1st August 2021
- An option to complete the survey online was offered
- The survey included an explanation of the background to the purchase – details are in an Appendix
- The survey was closed on 31st August 2021
- A total of 255 completed questionnaires were received – 91 on paper and 164 online

Summary

Summary (1)

- The sample responding to the survey is small, and is not representative of the population of Wells – it is heavily skewed to those aged over 60. For this reason the results should be treated as indicative rather than definitive
- In addition, the survey attracted very few responses from those living outside Wells, who we understand form part of the intended population who would benefit from the Portway Annexe
- Of this survey sample the large majority are in favour of the Portway Annexe purchase
- There is little difference by demographics in opinion of the Portway Annexe purchase, and indeed those aged under 60 were especially favourable. This means it is likely that an accurate survey representing the population would have yielded the same result
- However, there is a small minority in our sample who strongly disagree with the purchase – these are largely men aged over 60. They are influenced mostly by cost considerations

Summary (2)

- The most important consideration impacting possible uses of the Portway Annexe is the opportunity to improve lives and develop the community – mentioned by three-quarters of respondents
- Personal learning, and costs, are also important to many
- Over half would like to see an internal atmosphere in the Portway Annexe that feels modern, stimulating and welcoming
- These considerations are largely consistent across demographics. However older people (60+) are slightly more likely to also consider accessibility, flexibility of use, and availability as soon as possible
- The small group in our sample who are families with children share the main consideration of community development. They are slightly less concerned with opportunities to develop their own skills, or with costs associated with Portway Annexe, and are slightly more concerned with a good internal ambience

Summary (3)

- Two possible purposes of the Portway Annexe stand out as most popular – namely education and training, and workshops. Each of these were chosen by around three-quarters
- Music-related activities were also popular, being chosen by nearly half. Music-related activities are especially popular among those under 60, so it is likely that demand for music is understated in our sample, given the skew towards 60+ among respondents
- While less than half favoured space to work, it is possible that this too is understated by our sample. Over half of those at the family life stage would like to see space to work
- Likewise though parent/ toddler groups received relatively little endorsement from our sample, we do not know what response would have been among those with toddler-aged children
- Compared with the total sample, it is notable that music-related activities and exhibition space are both mentioned by around half of those who see a community development opportunity. However, this group generally mentioned all purposes and facilities more often, indicating perhaps a higher engagement with the future of Portway Annexe

Summary (4)

- Specific facilities such as a café with wifi access, secure cycle parking and electric car charging were each mentioned by less than half the sample. However it is possible requirements for these facilities were understated as they were combined in the same question as purposes
- With particular regard to a café, it is likely that the required internal ambience would be hard to achieve without the social hub that a café would provide
- In addition, most of those who favour music-related activities would also like to see a café

Main findings - Qualitative

Conclusions from the Open Day

- General agreement that the PA needs to be actively managed in order to deliver its community vision which means
 - Development of a clear policy / criteria for what sorts of organisations are eligible to apply to occupy the building
- Consideration needs to be given to
 - Overall mix of organisations needed in order to deliver the vision
 - The need to balance financial return with delivery of the vision (some parts of the building will probably need to subsidise other parts)
 - The importance of choosing organisations / services that will be present much of the time so the building has atmosphere / buzz, and feels as though it is a community hub - renters should guarantee how much time they would actually be using it
 - How best to create an effective, dynamic community management team, including representative range of volunteers from the community, as well as council members and, ideally, a paid manager(s)/ caretaker(s)

Main findings - Quantitative

Sample demographics

- Survey responders do not represent the whole population of Wells. Hardly any are under 30, and 69% are 60 and over, compared with 40% of the adult population.
- Survey responders also show a female skew, and most of them live in Wells rather than the wider area

Age – Wells City adult population

■ 15-29 ■ 30-44 ■ 45-59 ■ 60-74 ■ 75+

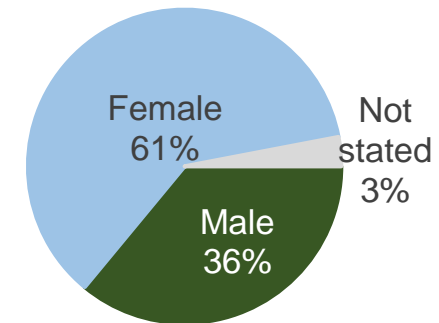


Age – Survey responders

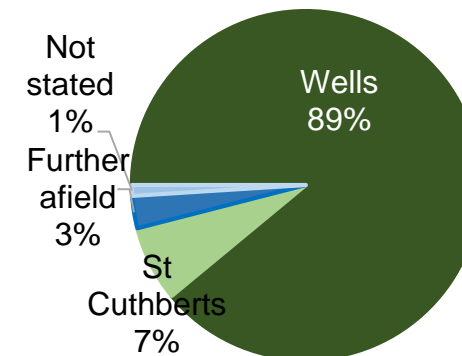
■ 18-29 ■ 30-49 ■ 50-59 ■ 60-69 ■ 70-79 ■ 80+ ■ Not stated



Gender

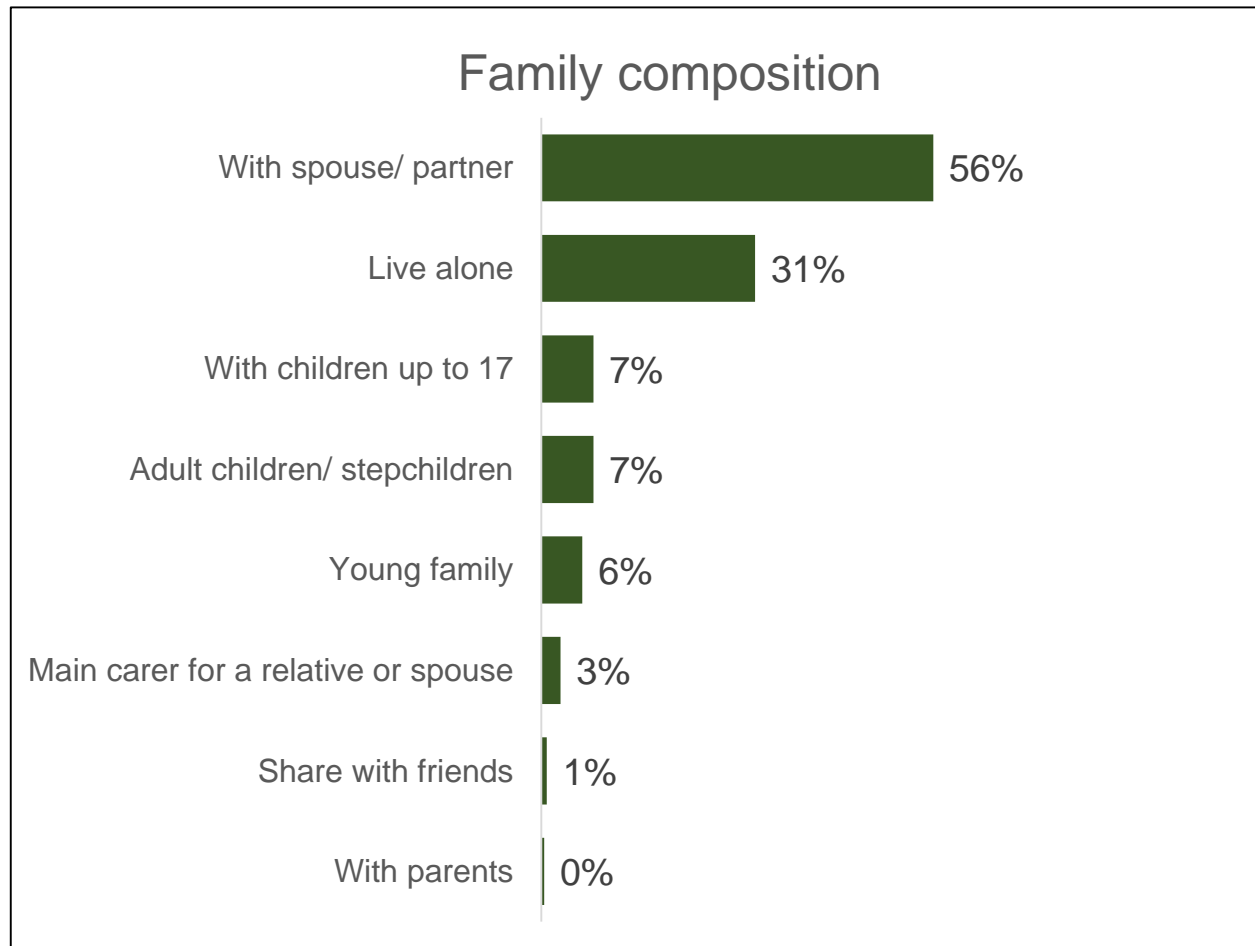


Location



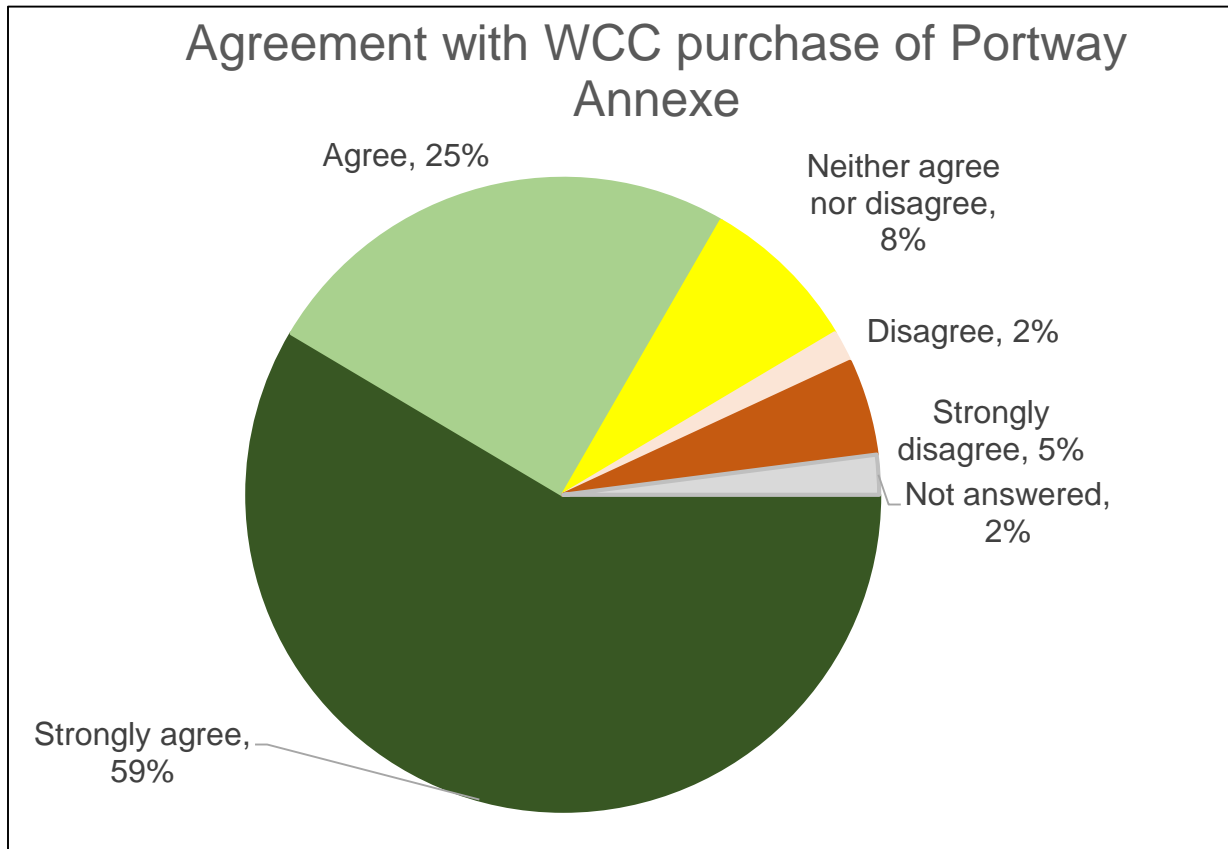
Base total sample (255)
Population base 2011 census

Sample demographics continued



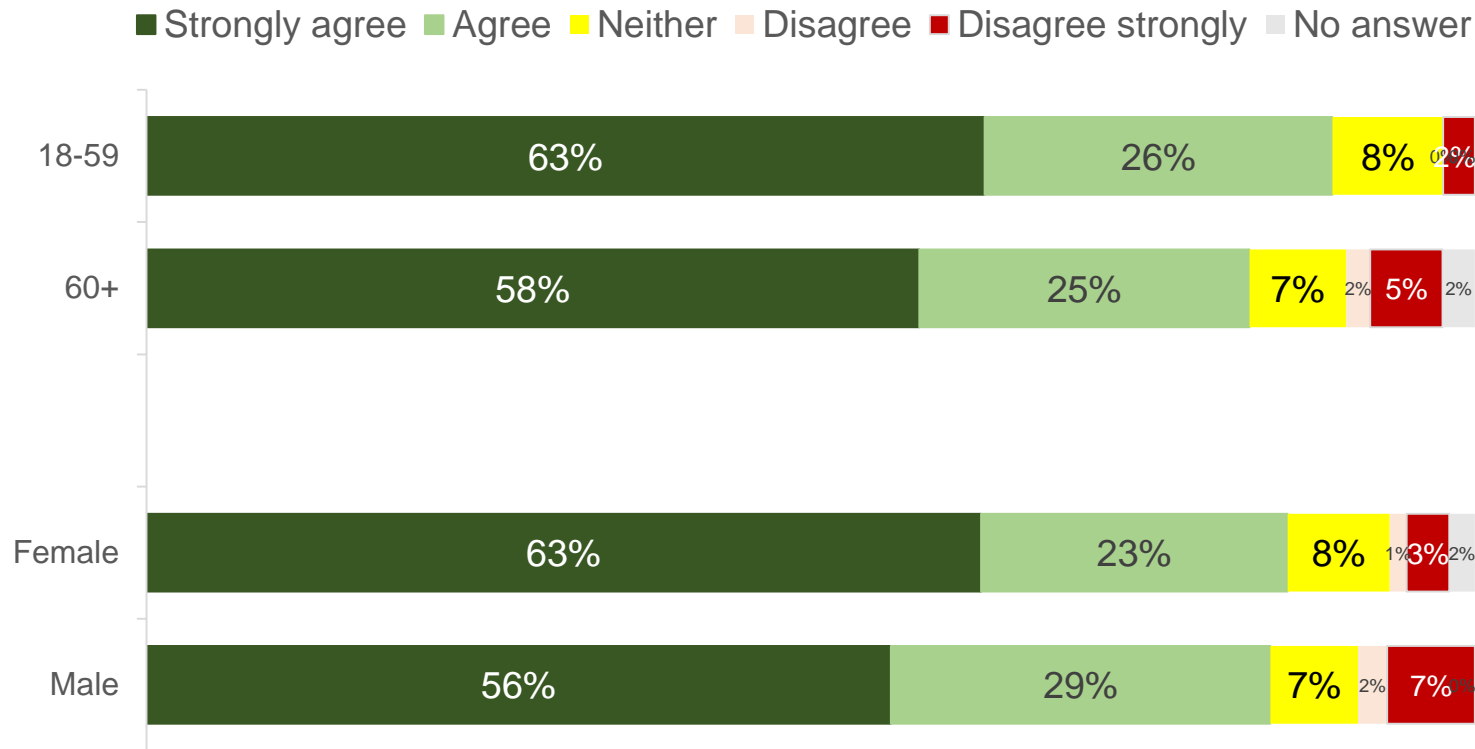
- Given the age profile, most survey responders are living alone or as a couple
- The preferences of the few in our sample who have children are analysed separately later
- Very few are main carers and we do not have enough in the sample to analyse separately

Opinion of WCC purchase of the Portway Annexe



- The large majority are in favour of the Portway Annexe purchase. 84% agree with it, and nearly six out of ten strongly agree
- Only a small minority (7%) disagreed with the purchase; however most of those disagreed strongly

Opinion of WCC purchase of the Portway Annexe



- There is little difference by demographics in opinion of the Portway Annexe purchase
- Those under 60, and females, are slightly more strongly in favour
- The small group who disagree strongly with the purchase are mostly over 60 and male

Q3. Wells City Council has taken the decision to buy the Portway Annexe from Somerset County Council. Based on your answers to the first two questions, which statement below best describes your view about this decision? Base 18-59 (84), 60+ (165). Female (156) male (91)

Opinion of WCC purchase of the Portway Annexe - reasons strongly agree (59%)

- **WCC in best position to fulfil local needs and interests, as well as to help improve the lives of others, can be flexible and responsive to the needs of the local population**
- **It is the duty of WCC to provide community space**, community space that serves the people and is maintained by the people (democratic and non-political), needs to be run professionally for the benefit of Wells and the surrounding area
- WCC needs to think about providing **sufficient community services for an increasing local population**
- Wells needs more **accessible community space**, e.g. Citizens' Advice, Library, Computers for the Terrified/ older residents, music / toddler groups, somewhere for teenagers to meet and chat over drinks and snacks, services / groups for those with mental health issues / physical disabilities - needs to focus on intergenerational mixing
- Want the **next generations to have the same opportunities** to use it for education, arts and crafts, mother and toddler groups
- Will provide **affordable opportunities for education and creativity**
- PA could make an important contribution to **community engagement, cohesion, cooperation and sharing; it could help reduce isolation and help foster care, respect, fulfilment and well-being - a society is judged by its cultural values**
- Important to **maintain Wells' heritage** - architecturally interesting arts and crafts building, beautiful, community asset since 1900
- **PA provides good community parking**
- **Should not be sold for short-term profit**

Opinion of WCC purchase of the Portway Annexe - reasons agree (25%)

- **Views generally focused on community benefit in a similar fashion to those who strongly agree but with more emphasis on**
 - Balancing community benefits with costs
 - Practical benefits such as community parking
 - Need for properly thought through plan illustrating business case for purchase and making the building financially sustainable - some concern that PA may fall prey to renting out to businesses for workspace etc unless this is in place
 - Desirability of considering environmental aspects, e.g. solar panels , consideration of carbon footprint
- **Strong desire for WCC to show leadership and innovation**

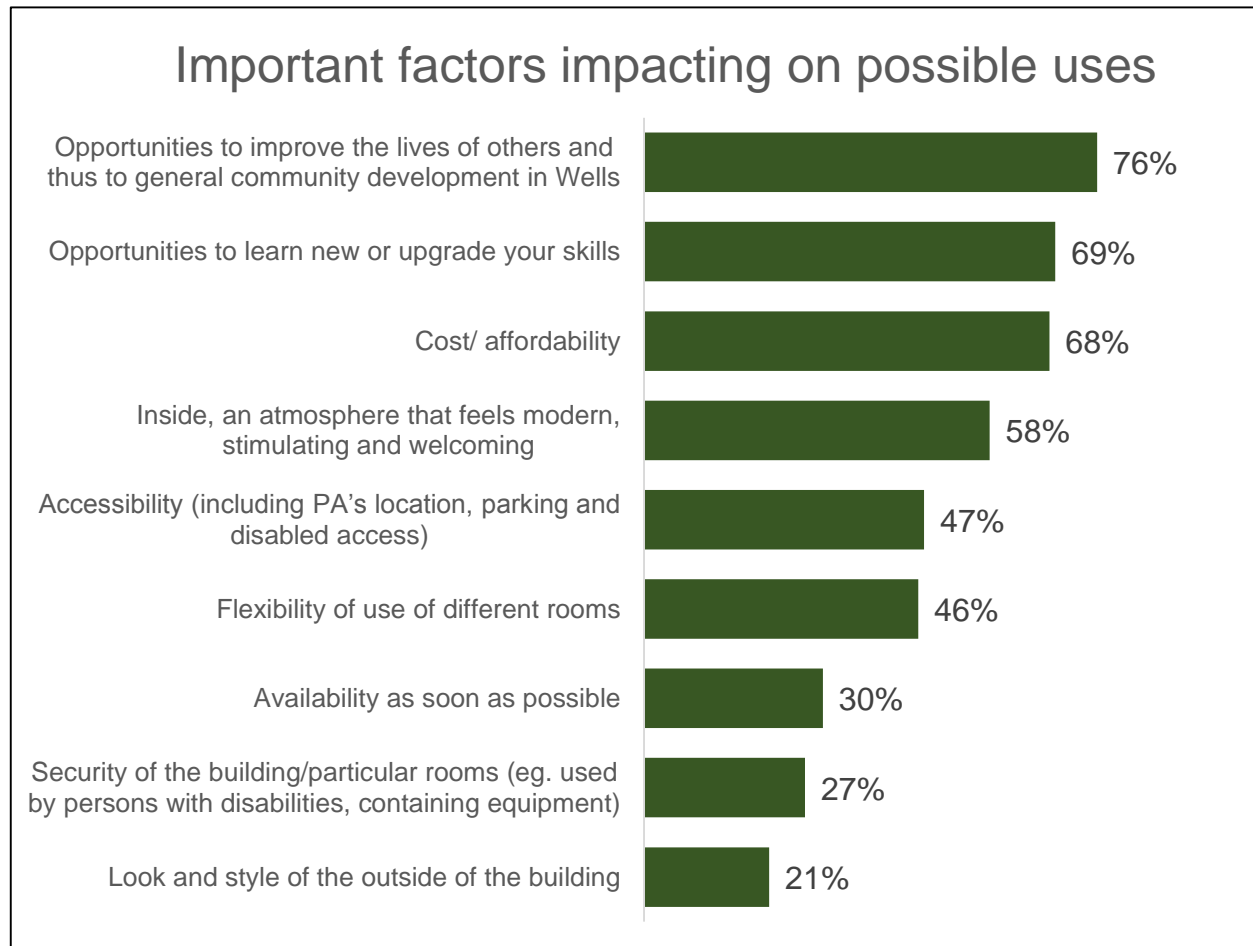
Opinion of WCC purchase of the Portway Annexe - reasons neither agree/ disagree(20%)

- **Theoretically positive but concerns around**
 - Actual state of the building and costs involved - is it worth the investment? (e.g. cold, not sound proofed, leaks in the roof)
 - Is there sufficient demand - there is spare capacity elsewhere, e.g. Museum
 - Is this the best use of funds versus other possible investments?
 - Lack of financial projections and cost of maintenance

Opinion of WCC purchase of the Portway Annexe - reasons disagree/ strongly disagree(7%)

- **Only a very small minority disagree/strongly disagree and all concerns are linked to finance**
 - **Inadequate business plan** - unconvinced finances will work, money pit, impossible to make such an old building 'modern and stimulating', no consideration of running costs, community facilities / services will not be able to pay much rent / they will also need the car park for their tools / equipment eg creatives, music makers etc
 - **Prefer money was spent elsewhere** eg Lawrence Centre/Town Hall, should not pay for more space when other venues are not being used - no audit of other community facilities has been completed, listed activities already available elsewhere in Wells
 - **Why are we having to pay for something that is already ours?** 14p/week precept very high - would not be supported by residents, should claw back the money from those who are actually using the building, should transfer the building to Strode free of charge, should wait and see if devolved to the city following unitary changes
 - **Should sell to a developer** and make one of the conditions that they replace with something sustainable

Factors impacting possible uses of Portway Annexe



- The most important consideration impacting possible uses of the Portway Annexe is the opportunity to improve lives and develop the community – mentioned by three-quarters
- Personal learning, and costs/ affordability are also important to many
- The internal atmosphere is a consideration for over half
- Other factors such as accessibility, flexibility and swift availability were important to less than half

Factors impacting possible uses of Portway Annexe – by demographics

	18-59	60+	Female	Male
<i>Base</i>	84	165	156	91
Opportunities to improve the lives of others and thus to general community development in Wells	80%	74%	78%	73%
Opportunities to learn new or upgrade your skills	71%	68%	73%	65%
Cost/ affordability	64%	68%	66%	69%
Inside, an atmosphere that feels modern, stimulating and welcoming	56%	58%	59%	57%
Accessibility (including PA's location, parking and disabled access)	42%	48%	52%	38%
Flexibility of use of different rooms	39%	49%	49%	40%
Availability as soon as possible	18%	36%	35%	22%
Security of the building/particular rooms (eg. used by persons with disabilities, containing equipment)	24%	27%	26%	26%
Look and style of the outside of the building	19%	21%	21%	21%

- The considerations impacting possible uses of the Portway Annexe are largely consistent across demographics
- Older people (60+) are slightly more concerned with accessibility, flexibility of use, and availability as soon as possible
- Women are also more concerned than men with accessibility and swift availability

Factors impacting possible uses of Portway Annexe – by lifestage

	Have children up to 17	No children
<i>Base</i>	<i>30 – NB low base</i>	225
Opportunities to improve the lives of others and thus to general community development in Wells	83%	75%
Opportunities to learn new or upgrade your skills	60%	70%
Cost/ affordability	57%	69%
Inside, an atmosphere that feels modern, stimulating and welcoming	63%	57%
Accessibility (including PA's location, parking and disabled access)	23%	50%
Flexibility of use of different rooms	43%	46%
Availability as soon as possible	20%	31%
Security of the building/particular rooms (eg. used by persons with disabilities, containing equipment)	17%	58%
Look and style of the outside of the building	13%	22%

- The small group in our sample who have families with children share the main consideration of community development
- They are slightly more concerned with a good internal ambience
- They are slightly less concerned with opportunities to develop their own skills, or with costs associated with Portway Annexe
- This group are generally not concerned about accessibility or security

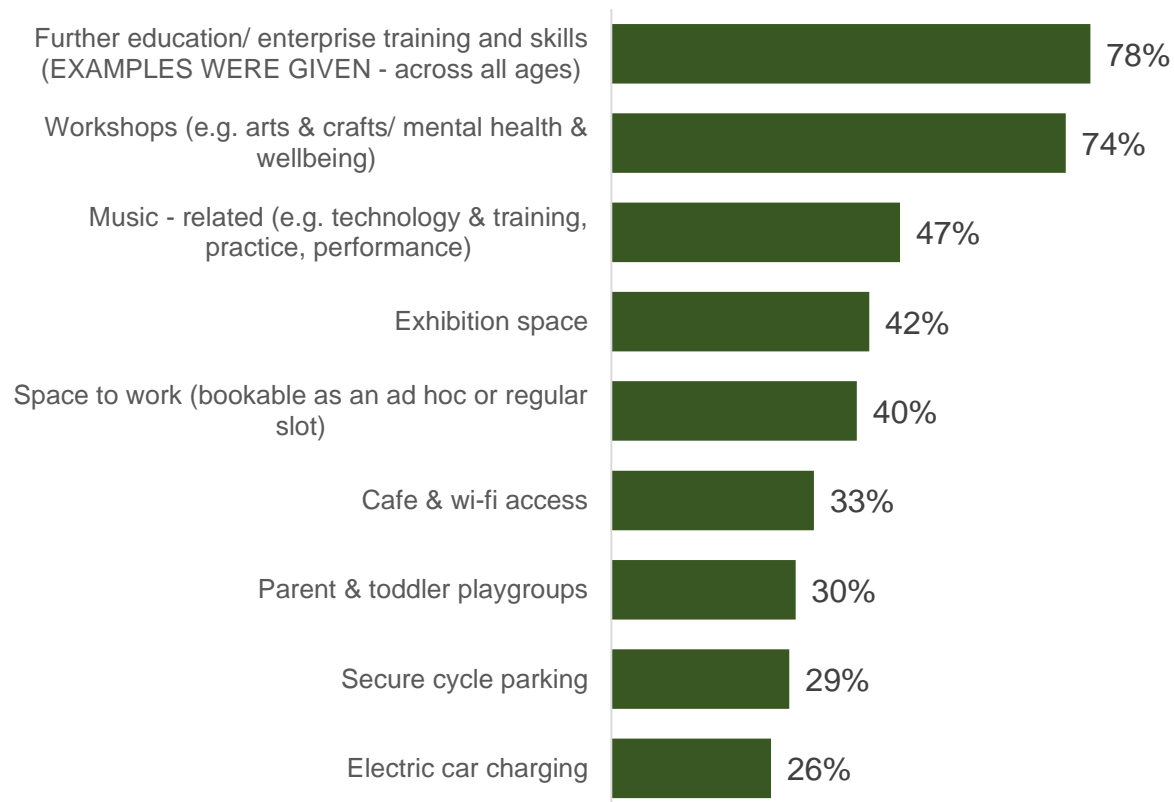
Factors impacting possible uses of Portway Annexe – by overall opinion

	Agree with PA purchase	Do not agree with PA purchase
<i>Base</i>	215	<i>36 – NB low base</i>
Opportunities to improve the lives of others and thus to general community development in Wells	82%	39%
Opportunities to learn new or upgrade your skills	75%	36%
Cost/ affordability	67%	72%
Inside, an atmosphere that feels modern, stimulating and welcoming	63%	28%
Accessibility (including PA's location, parking and disabled access)	49%	39%
Flexibility of use of different rooms	52%	11%
Availability as soon as possible	34%	6%
Security of the building/particular rooms (eg. used by persons with disabilities, containing equipment)	29%	14%
Look and style of the outside of the building	24%	8%

- Among those who agreed with the purchase of the Portway Annexe the most important considerations impacting possible uses are the opportunity to improve lives and develop the community and for personal learning.
- Costs and the internal atmosphere are also important to many of this group
- Around half of those who approved of the purchase were also influenced by accessibility and flexibility of use
- The small group who did not agree with the purchase were influenced mostly by cost considerations

Preferred purposes/ facilities of the Portway Annexe

Purposes, facilities and opportunities chosen



- Two possible purposes of the Portway Annexe stand out as most popular – namely education and training, and workshops. Each of these were chosen by around three-quarters
- Music-related activities were also popular, being chosen by nearly half
- Facilities such as café and wifi access, secure cycle parking, and electric car charging receive less endorsement. However this is possibly because they were combined in the same question as purposes. It is possible that these facilities are required, while not being seen as the main purpose of the PA

Preferred purposes/ facilities of the Portway Annexe – by demographics

	18-59	60+	Female	Male
<i>Base</i>	84	165	156	91
Further education/ enterprise training and skills (EXAMPLES WERE GIVEN) - across all ages	74%	81%	81%	74%
Workshops (e.g. arts & crafts/ mental health & wellbeing)	76%	74%	81%	63%
Music - related (e.g. technology & training, practice, performance)	54%	45%	49%	46%
Exhibition space	38%	43%	42%	42%
Space to work (bookable as an ad hoc or regular slot)	39%	39%	42%	36%
Cafe & wi-fi access	30%	34%	35%	29%
Parent & toddler playgroups	30%	31%	30%	31%
Secure cycle parking	20%	33%	33%	21%
Electric car charging	26%	25%	26%	26%

- The main preferred purposes of the Portway Annexe are similar across age group and by gender
- Music-related activities are especially popular among those under 60 – over half of this age group would like to see this offered
- Those over 60 were also particularly keen on secure cycle parking – a third of them would like to see this
- In general, women mentioned more purposes and facilities than men – workshops in particular appeal more to women than men

Preferred purposes/ facilities of the Portway Annexe – by lifestage

	Have children up to 17	No children
<i>Base</i>	<i>30 – NB low base</i>	225
Further education/ enterprise training and skills (EXAMPLES WERE GIVEN) - across all ages	57%	81%
Workshops (e.g. arts & crafts/ mental health & wellbeing)	70%	75%
Music - related (e.g. technology & training, practice, performance)	53%	47%
Exhibition space	47%	41%
Space to work (bookable as an ad hoc or regular slot)	57%	38%
Cafe & wi-fi access	23%	34%
Parent & toddler playgroups	33%	30%
Secure cycle parking	13%	31%
Electric car charging	17%	21%

- Those with children have similar preferences for usage than those without – though with some small differences
- Those with families are especially interested in space to work – this might be due to their age rather than family lifestage
- However, the usage they choose most often is workshops
- They are less interested in further education or enterprise training than those without children

Preferred purposes/ facilities of the Portway Annexe – by overall opinion

	Agree with PA purchase	Do not agree with PA purchase
<i>Base</i>	215	36 – NB low base
Further education/ enterprise training and skills (EXAMPLES WERE GIVEN) - across all ages	83%	44%
Workshops (e.g. arts & crafts/ mental health & wellbeing)	81%	33%
Music - related (e.g. technology & training, practice, performance)	52%	19%
Exhibition space	46%	17%
Space to work (bookable as an ad hoc or regular slot)	44%	19%
Cafe & wi-fi access	36%	8%
Parent & toddler playgroups	33%	14%
Secure cycle parking	31%	17%
Electric car charging	27%	17%

- Over half of those who agree with the purchase of the Portway Annexe would like to see it used for each of further education, workshops, or music-related activities
- The small group who did not agree with the purchase did not favour any particular purpose or facility, though further education received the most endorsement

Preferred purposes/ facilities of the Portway Annexe – by development opportunity

	Mention development opportunity	Do not mention
<i>Base</i>	193	62
Further education/ enterprise training and skills (EXAMPLES WERE GIVEN) - across all ages	84%	58%
Workshops (e.g. arts & crafts/ mental health & wellbeing)	82%	50%
Music - related (e.g. technology & training, practice, performance)	53%	29%
Exhibition space	48%	23%
Space to work (bookable as an ad hoc or regular slot)	44%	27%
Cafe & wi-fi access	37%	18%
Parent & toddler playgroups	35%	17%
Secure cycle parking	35%	8%
Electric car charging	30%	13%

- The table shows the preferred purposes and facilities by those who were impacted by “*Opportunities to improve the lives of others and thus to general community development in Wells*” and those who didn’t mention this
- Those who see an opportunity for community development mentioned all purposes and facilities more often – indicating that all of these would contribute to some extent
- Compared with the total sample, it is notable that music-related activities and exhibition space are both mentioned by around half of those who see a community development opportunity
- Of those who mentioned music-related purposes 69% also mentioned café and wifi access (figure not shown in table)

Conclusions & recommendations

Conclusions & recommendations (1)

- From our survey sample there is strong support of WCC purchase of the Portway Annexe. While the sample does not accurately represent the whole of the current population of Wells, indications are that a more representative survey would have yielded a similar outcome.
- However there is a small minority who strongly disagreed with the purchase on cost grounds. WCC should be mindful of this in future communications on the subject.
- Most of those surveyed want Portway Annexe to be used to improve the lives of, and benefit to, the community
- To deliver this benefit education training and workshops were felt to be the most important uses of Portway Annexe.
- Music-related activities were also favoured by many, and especially by those under 60

Conclusions & recommendations (2)

- Over half of participants wanted an atmosphere in the Portway Annexe that is modern, stimulating and welcoming
- The challenge becomes how to create this atmosphere in a financially feasible fashion - a cafe, on the face of it, was less popular than other facilities and purposes since less than half of participants mentioned one in the quantitative survey
- However, a cafe was extremely popular at the Open Day and remains the most obvious way in which to create a community focus for the Portway Annexe, which may serve emotional and practical needs across generations
- The way in which the Portway Annexe is projected and communicated to the community will help people see the potential for its use and identity; but there needs to be enough inside the building to reinforce this community sense of life and vitality

Appendix

The survey included a brief introduction to the Portway Annexe – details below

PORTWAY ANNEXE COMMUNITY CONSULTATION



Wells City Council is currently taking advantage of various opportunities – transfer of the Recreation Ground and Bishop's Barn and possibly the Market Place...and now Portway Annexe.

The Portway Annexe (PA) has been a community asset since it was built in 1900. It has provided education as the Blue School Girls school, and has been the only dedicated building for adult education in Wells whilst under the tenancy of Somerset Skills & Learning (SS&L). Some background to the PA is worth noting:

- Somerset County Council were going to put the Portway Annexe up for sale when SS&L's lease ended in December 2020.
- There was a campaign by local groups to have it registered as an Asset of Community Value to prevent the sale of the building to a developer and to give community groups a chance to purchase it as a Community Asset Transfer.
- Wells City Council agreed to purchase the building with a Government loan of £620,000, which is still being considered and may result in a small rise in the Council's annual precept, equivalent to 14p per week.
- In the meantime, WCC is aiming to find out what you think about what kind of asset the Portway Annexe could be for the community of Wells and Mendip.

The Portway Annexe has the potential to offer a range of facilities, services, social enterprise, activities, education and other opportunities that you may demand, with a vibrant, innovative and inclusive atmosphere. But we need to know a bit more about what that demand is likely to be and what you want the building to be like. We also need community buy-in and support. This short questionnaire is one element of a broader public consultation, as flagged up in the last edition of Wells Voice. Other components will include a community open day and detailed discussions with potential users of the PA in the form of focus groups and in-depth interviews.

We have kept this questionnaire fairly short, not least because a lot of consultation work has already been done in Wells in various contexts. But the PA is a unique building in Wells and your views on it are important factors in shaping City Council decisions and priorities.