

Repurposing Gravesend County Court: A Catalyst for Community Development and Engagement

Abstract:

This paper delves into the promising advantages of repurposing the abandoned Gravesend County Court into a versatile community space, encompassing a children's activity centre, after-school club, and remote working facility. The initiative aims to breathe new life into the town centre by providing a diverse array of amenities alongside a welcoming coffee/canteen space, thus establishing itself as a pivotal community hub and enhancing the overall well-being of the local residents.

Introduction:

Gravesend, a historic town in northwest Kent, is known for its vibrant community and historic landmarks. However, like many towns, it is faced with the challenge of revitalising unused public buildings, such as the old county court. This paper proposes the transformation of the county court into a community hub that fosters social interaction, promotes local businesses and contributes to the economy's growth.

A New Life for Gravesend County Court:

The Gravesend County Court, with its rich history and central location, is an ideal candidate for repurposing. By converting the court into a nursery, community space, and a remote working area, we can meet the evolving needs of the community while preserving the building's historical significance.

Background and Rationale

Since the acquisition of the building, all decisions have been informed by comprehensive market research and expert architectural consultations. Additionally, I have been working with a local historian regarding the significance of the building and will continue to work with him to ensure that historians and other interested parties will be able to have access to the site to keep that dimension ongoing.

A particularly insightful market report (attached separately) has validated both the commercial viability and community value of the proposed development.

Following thorough review and engagement with business partners, the vision which included a performing arts theatre, pre-theatre coffee service, and an afterschool club/nursery has been refined into a more adaptable, phased development plan. This revised approach prioritises flexibility, better serves the evolving needs of the local community, and enhances the project's long-term sustainability and resilience in a changing market environment.

Proposed Use of Space (please see the attached plan)

Area	Proposed Use
Front Room	Light coffee service area for pre-show and daytime activity
Courtroom	Performing arts theatre venue (furniture removed; lighting & sound system installed) and a lettable community space
Rear Rooms	Refurbished for use as nursery, after-school club.
Other Areas	Maintained or enhanced without structural alterations

Front Room - The Coffee/Canteen Area:

The integration of a coffee/canteen area would add another layer of functionality, providing a social space for individuals to eat, drink, and converse. This space would also support local businesses by sourcing local products, further stimulating the local economy. Also the kitchen area of the canteen would be used to supply food for the site, food for the nursery and for any event that may be held on site.

The coffee shop could offer a welcoming remote working space for members of the community. The advent of remote working has increased the demand for communal workspaces where individuals can work independently yet in a structured environment. The proposed workspace would cater to this need in Gravesend and surrounding areas, offering a supportive atmosphere that encourages productivity and collaboration. This could be ideal for people in the local area to drop their children off in the nursery and then to work on their laptops in the remote workspace- a concept that is very useful for the mothers and fathers whose children are new to childcare and getting settled into the nursery.

- **Opening hours**
- Monday 7:30 to 6:30pm
- Tue to Thursday 7:30 to 11:00
- Friday to Sat – 7:30 to 00:00
- Sunday 7:30 to 11:00
- Staff number: 2 full-time, 6 part-time

Courtroom - Performing arts theatre venue

The existing courtroom furniture will be removed, making way for the installation of lighting and sound systems that will transform the historic space into a vibrant performing arts theatre and multifunctional community venue. Repurposing the old courtroom as a welcoming community hub will breathe new life into the building, allowing it to host a diverse programme of events and activities, from theatre productions, musical performances, and talent shows and competitions to seasonal celebrations, antenatal classes, and therapeutic support groups.

This initiative aims to create an inclusive environment where people of all ages and backgrounds can come together to learn, celebrate, and express themselves. By fostering

opportunities for creativity, connection, and personal growth, the transformed venue will strengthen community ties, encourage collaboration, and cultivate a deeper sense of belonging and civic pride.

Opening hours

- Monday 7:30am to 9pm (Activities and Performing arts training sessions)
- Tue to Thursday 7:30am to 11:30pm (Activities, Performance and Performing arts training sessions)
- Friday to Sat – 7:30am to 00:00 (Activities, Performance and Performing arts training sessions) - We don't anticipate hosting the full-length show or late activities every weekend, we'd like to request this schedule to accommodate those occasions)
- Sunday 7:30 to 11:00 (Artistic training sessions and small showcase)
- Staff number: 4 full-time, 16 part-time

Rear Rooms - Nursery, Children's activity centre; after-school club:

A nursery, children's activity centre, or after-school club would serve as an invaluable resource for the local community, particularly for busy working parents. By offering childcare services in the heart of the town centre, would significantly alleviate the juggling act many parents face in managing their careers and childcare duties. The central location would offer unmatched convenience for drop-offs and pickups, streamlining daily routines for families.

Moreover, situating such a facility in Gravesend presents a unique opportunity for children to be fully immersed in the rich history and vibrant culture of the local community. This not only enhances their educational experience but also fosters a strong sense of belonging within the community.

Recent data from the childcare sufficiency assessment highlights the growing demand for childcare places among children aged 0-4. With only 867 places available for the 884 children in need, it's evident that demand will continue to rise. Given the upward trajectory in local economic activity, increased foot traffic, and ongoing housing developments in and around Gravesend, it's evident that the need for such services will only continue to rise. Establishing such a facility in Gravesend aligns perfectly with the town's trajectory towards becoming a bustling hub of diverse business opportunities and contributes to a thriving, diverse community fabric in the local community.

- Opening hours: 7:30am to 6:30pm
- Number of children: 26
- Age range of the children: 6 months-5years
- Staff number: 6 full-time, 2 part-time

Conclusion:

The repurposing of the County Court, a Grade 2 listed building in Gravesend Town Centre into a multifunctional community hub would not only preserve the building's historical significance but also meet the changing needs of the community. It would foster community engagement, support local businesses, and offer much-needed services such as childcare and a remote working space. The project therefore presents a valuable opportunity to enrich the town centre and enhance the lives of Gravesend's residents. In addition, it falls directly in line with the Councillor Shane Mochrie-Cox vision 'to bring a town centre destination where local community and tourists want to meet, shop, eat and drink, and which fulfils its historical trading roots and supports the development of the area and new businesses overall'.