

This report is a summary of Wemians' views on the future of the White Horse. As such, those views can form the basis for the Town Council to formulate/adapt/elaborate and provide a platform for its thinking/policy. I would suggest the following:

The project to renovate the White Horse must be very responsive to the views and needs of the community.

Work must go-ahead at all speed - the building is deteriorating. However this must not be at the expense of the quality and appropriateness of design and work. It must also take in account the need to carry out all necessary archaeological investigations.

The White Horse is seen as being of great importance to Wem, both as remembrance of its past and a potential catalyst to its revival and regeneration as a bustling and vital market town.

The incorporation of public space on the ground floor would do much to increase the footfall at this end of the High Street. This is crucial to the regeneration of this part of town.

Affordable accommodation is desperately needed in Wem. The preferred option is for rented flats (social). These are seen as the best solution since once flats are sold they are lost to social housing.

The archaeological aspects were not explicit in the report though there is a legal requirement for them to be incorporated.

Best Wishes

Shelagh Richardson

Hon. Sec.: Wem Civic Society



Wem Civic Society

Report of Survey (March/April 2024)

White Horse Hotel – Wemians' views as to its preferred future usage

1. Background

Pre-Covid, Civic Society suggested to the then leader of Shropshire Council, Cllr Nutting, that the White Horse be purchased by the council. The upper floors to be used for rental flats, which would provide desperately needed social accommodation in Wem, and a much-needed income stream for the council. The lower floor should provide public space for various functions. These should be decided in line with significant input from the population of Wem.

Time has passed. Shropshire Council has now purchased the White Horse. The need for affordable accommodation within Wem and additional income streams for the county council have intensified, as has the need for neutral public space in Wem.

The building is a Grade II listed building with mediaeval features. Its renovation, without damaging those features, has to take place. It would also offer the opportunity to trigger a revamping and restoration of this part of the High Street. All evidence points to the importance of 'Heritage' in reviving market towns.

2. The Survey

The Civic Society committee decided that a survey employing paper questionnaires would offer the best approach. It was less likely to attract multiple responses by individuals and would limit participants to Wem and the surrounding parishes. It was thought that the latter group would comprise people who visited Wem frequently and that therefore their opinions were important.

The questionnaire was drawn up to get a balance between collecting sufficient information but not being too long nor too complex to discourage people from completing the form. No order of preference was offered for the various functions listed in order to simplify matters. Respondents were asked to indicate all favoured functions.

The survey was intended to run from March 19th to April 6th. There were some comments that the intervening public holidays had made it difficult for some people to participate so the survey was extended to April 11th. Collection boxes were placed in the Castle Inn, Wem Baptist Church, Wem Methodist Church, Wem Co-op, Wem Library, and Wem Town Hall. We are grateful for their help. The local media (Whitchurch Herald), Wem Civic Facebook page, and the Wem Local website carried information about the survey. We are also grateful to Penny O'Hagen, Wem Town Clerk; Geoff Soul, Mayor of Wem; Cllr Paul Johnson; Cllr Edward Towers; Helen Morgan, MP; Pat Edwards, (Wem Methodist Church); Simon Thornley (Wem Co-op); Richard & Dee Lear (Castle Inn); the staff and members of Wem Baptist Church, Wem Library, Wem Methodist Church, and Wem Town Hall for their

support. Most of all, our thanks has to go to the Wemians who gave their time to complete the survey forms and have produced some thoughtful and valuable insights.

207 completed questionnaires were collected. Further comments about 'not realising the survey was finished' were received. Another opportunity to participate was made available at the Wem Civic Society stall during the Wem Spring market on April 27th. A further 12 questionnaires were completed and dropped into a collection box. This also offered the chance for discussions by a number of shoppers with Civic Society members at the market. The total number of questionnaires returned was therefore 219.

3. Results

Total Number of Responses = 219

a. Respondents by **Location**

Wem	169
Parishes adjoining Wem	50
Other	0
Total	219

b. Should the White Horse remain a **Community Asset**

Yes	11	5.0%
No	8	3.7%
*Not Completed	200	91.3%

c. Would you support a **Crowd Funder**

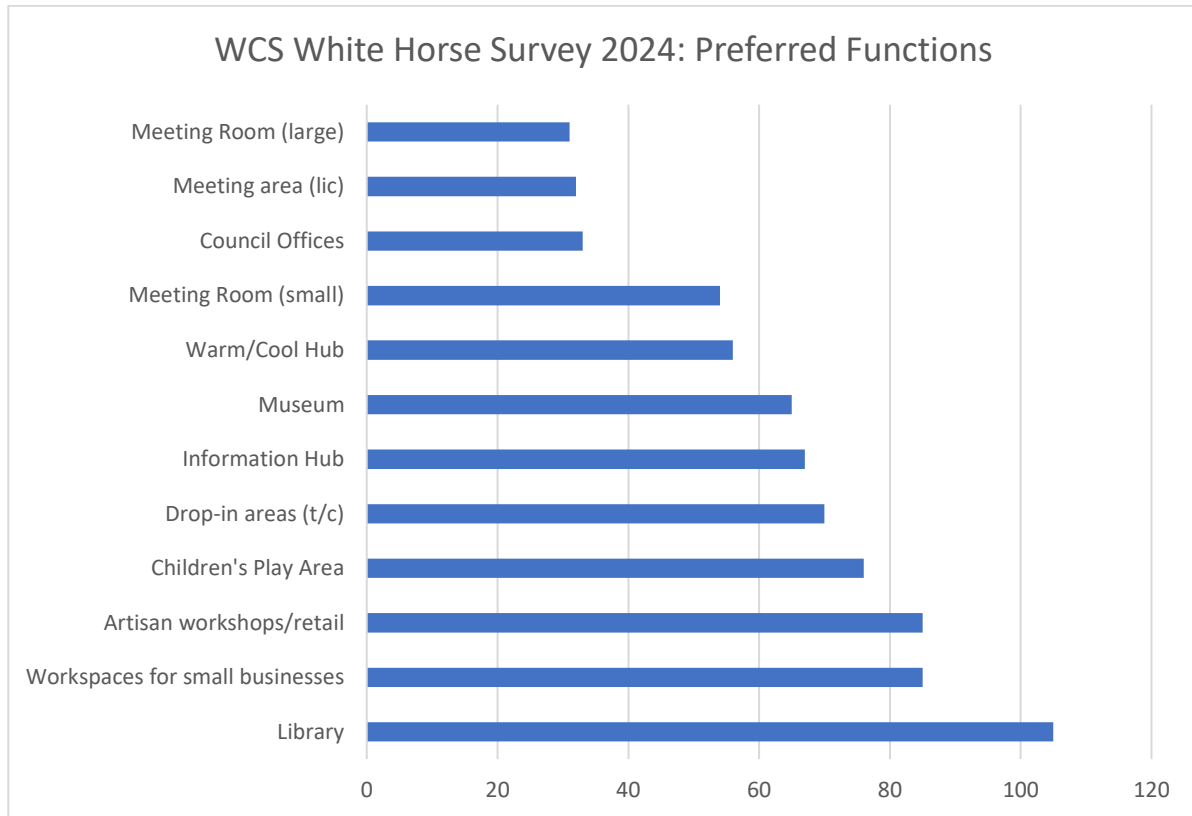
Yes	110	50.2%
No	58	26.5%
Not Completed	51	23.3%

d. **Function of Upper Floors**

Private Flats (rented/sold)	42	19.2%
Affordable Flats (sold on open market)	49	22.4%
Affordable rented flats	91	41.6%
Not Completed	37	16.9%

*The low number of respondents to the question about the White Horse becoming a community asset is likely not an aversion to the idea of community assets but the concern that once the committed

volunteers moved on, we would be back where we started. Such projects need to be able to regenerate. Community assets usually find the initial raising of capital comparatively easy. Maintaining revenue streams, less so.



Total Responses = 219

	No.	%age
Library	105	48%
Workspaces for small businesses	85	39%
Artisan workshops/retail	85	39%
Children's Play Area	76	35%
Drop-in areas (limited facilities)	70	32%
Information Hub	67	31%
Museum	65	30%
Warm/Cool Hub	56	26%
Meeting Room (small)	54	25%
Council Offices	33	15%
Meeting area (licensed)	32	15%
Meeting Room (large)	31	14%

There were other suggestions for the use of the ground floor.

Other Functions:

Accommodation on all floors	11
Banking Hub	3
Pub	3
Tea Shop	2
Advice Centre	2
Betting Shop	1
Bike Shop	1
Businesses on all floors	1
Community Shop	1
Community Transport Hob	1
Hotel/B&B	1
Newsagents	1
Post Office	1
Shops	1

Some of contradict more widespread views, e.g. not undermining existing businesses.

4. Commentary

Memories of the rebuilding of Wem Town Hall run deep. At the very least, many people regard that project as a breach of faith. There was a consultation period, and the general conclusion was that the views of Wemians were totally ignored and the town ended up with a building that was not fit for purpose, for instance:

- the stage is inadequate for most dramatic performances;
- the area for cinema seating is wide and short, the reason that is usually long and narrow is obvious;
- the market hall is too small;
- booking office, information desk, café, reception area and entrance to the main hall share the same space. This leads to confusion when the building is busy.

The present site is made to work by the staff, volunteers, and users but it could have been much more beneficial to the community if note had been taken of the town's views.

The importance and affection for the White Horse held in the town cannot be over emphasised. There is much anger about the eyesore that the building presents and the effects on outsiders' views of Wem. There is even more anger that the deterioration has been allowed to happen. It is regarded as an important part of Wem's heritage.

Many see the renovation of this building as a potential catalyst for the revival of the High Street.

The maintenance of the original façade is seen as important.

Concern was expressed about the traffic problems in the area and the state of the pavements, with resulting difficulties for people with disabilities or young children.

It was pointed that the building could be multi-functional incorporating a number of the functions listed.

The importance of not undermining existing businesses was raised.

The support for the siting of the library here should not be taken as a desire to see the library move. The present location is very convenient with the nearby car park. However with the present building being leased, many are concerned that this might result in the service being moved to the periphery of the town with implications for usage and damage to the service. [There is also the concern that the ground floor of the White Horse would be insufficient to house the library. The present library is bursting at the seams and a move to smaller premises would not help the service.]

There has long been support for a museum in Wem, many wanting one that celebrated the town's industrial and retail past. A pop-up museum or circulating collections were suggested. Museums that are effectively 'connected' to their locale can increase footfall significantly.

The relationship between the flats and public space was raised with the suggestion that one of the flat occupants should act as concierge for the whole building.

5. Conclusions

- a. The White Horse is seen as being of great importance to Wem, both as remembrance of its past and a potential catalyst to its revival and regeneration as a bustling and vital market town.
- b. The incorporation of public space on the ground floor would do much to increase the footfall at this end of the High Street. This is crucial to the regeneration of this part of town.
- c. Affordable accommodation is desperately needed in Wem. The preferred option is for rented flats (social). These are seen as the best solution since once flats are sold they are lost to social housing.