

Summary Project Viability Report

Potential Redevelopment of Convent Hall, Rostrevor



June 2024



1.0 Introduction

Insight Solutions were commissioned by the Kilbroney Parish to carry out a Project Viability Report focussed on the Convent Hall, Church Road, Rostrevor, County Down. It is the ambition of Kilbroney Parish and the wider community to redevelop the Convent Hall building to bring it back to community, social and/or economic use, and to ensure its historic and heritage significance is preserved and protected.

This Summary Report presents the key findings of this Project Viability Report.

1.1 Building Details and Background

The Convent Hall building is located directly off Church Street, east of St Mary's former school with Church Street merging with Kilbroney Road – the main trunk road between Rostrevor and Hilltown. It is situated on the edge of Rostrevor village, within an area of low-density residential housing which includes some commercial outlets and other social buildings. The site shares boundaries with the Parish Church and St Bronagh's Primary School.

It comprises two distinct, although integrated parts - the original constructed 'block' and the more recently added annexe (overall 2829 sq. feet or 262.9 sq. metres). The building accommodates, on the ground floor, a double height entrance atrium, a function hall with stage, a stairwell landing and plant rooms. The first-floor level comprises a stairwell landing/lift lobby, a store, 2 bathrooms, 4 bedrooms and the circulation space between the rooms. While there is no parking within the confines of the site, there is a car park on the opposite side of Church Street which belongs to the attached Church and enables parking relatively close to the building.

Given the nature of the main block, it is suggested the building dates from the mid to the late 19th Century, with the Parish Church recorded as dating from 1848.



1.2 Heritage Significance of The Convent Hall

The Convent Hall has upmost heritage significance within the Rostrevor and wider area. It originates from when the Sisters of Mercy had been invited to found a convent and school in Rostrevor by the parish priest, the Reverend Bernard Mooney in 1864, with the four Sisters taking up residence in 1865 in the vacated Parish House while the Convent and School was built. The Sisters moved into the newly completed Convent Hall building in September 1867 with the purpose of providing education by the Sisters of Mercy to poorer children from the Rostrevor and surrounding areas. It also extended to providing an industrial department to the school for adults in a separate apartment with a work store where they learned plain and crochet work, for which they received payment to support their incomes and took literacy classes – acting as a key catalyst to increasing income and improving lives of local people.

In more recent years, the Convent Hall was used by the girls' school as a dining hall and as additional space for school performances and other social activities. Subsequently, it was used for Irish Dancing classes and ad hoc community events but has remained unused for many years.

1.3 Current Condition

A full Building Condition Report was completed by Watts, a leading consultant to the property and construction industry with 50 years' experience across all building types and market sectors.

The Building Condition Report included a visual inspection of the property and reported findings on its general features, forms of construction, state of repair and provided an itemised schedule for repair and improvement. In its conclusion, the report stated that:



'The Convent Hall is in poor condition, primarily as a consequence of damp and related fungal, (dry rot), infestation. The property however includes a "modern" annex that is largely in good condition although roof leaks are apparent. It is imperative that the dry rot infestation is addressed quickly to prevent accelerating deterioration. To restore the property to its former condition substantial refurbishment is required. This shall include restoring original window openings, providing new windows and doors, re-slating the roof, renewing the external render and the internal plaster, renewing timber floor structures and replacing all internal joinery items plus upgrading the existing mechanical and electrical installation.

Whilst the property does not currently appear on the Listed Buildings List, it is listed on the 'At Risk Register' and is situated within the Rostrevor Conservation Area. Due to this, any changes to the external façade would principle be subject to listed building consent.



'Serious or critical issues' were outlined including: structural form, main roof, chimney stacks and roof projections, external/internal decorations, ceiling types, floor structures and finishes, internal walls and partitions, internal joinery/doors, sanitary fittings, fire compartmentation, electrical supply/distribution and lighting.

The condition of the Convent Hall building, having been derelict for several years, is worsening and should the building not be conserved and sustainable re-use be developed, it will fall into a greater state of disrepair with the fear that it may become unsalvageable.

Estimated costs carried out by Watts for conserving the property and returning it to full, statutory compliant functionality is **£352,524.00** (which includes a Contingency of 10% and VAT of 20% but excludes fit out costs which will be dependent on end use).

2.0 Stakeholder Engagement/Community Consultation

2.1 Overview

Project Promoters understand that community buy-in and support for the project is critical, and to date engagement has taken the form of:


- Survey work carried out between April and June 2024 with a total of 360 responses;
- Engagement with Newry Mourne and Down District Council Social Enterprise Agency;
- Engagement with Development Trusts NI (not for profit organisation specialising in supporting community organisations to own and manage their own capital assets);
- Best practice visits to Made in Mourne and Moneydarragh Community Hub.

2.2 Survey Findings

The findings of the survey work carried out between April and June 2024 provides key, relevant and up to date insight into community needs, challenges, appetite and ideas for the sustainable redevelopment of Convent Hall.

An overview of findings of this survey are presented below.

2.2.1 Respondent Profile

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 89% of respondents had lived in the Rostrevor area for more than 10 years, demonstrating a strong sense of community and a vested interest in the area• The majority of respondents were aged between 41-60 years old (45%) and 26-40 years old (27%).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 74% of respondents were female• 26% of respondents were male
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 90% of respondents were from the Catholic background.

2.2.2 Top 10 Key issues

Based on how people rated the following, the table below presents a hierarchy of key issues faced in the community (from most to least).

Rank (1 is most key issue, 10 is least)	Issue	'Very Poor'	'Poor'
1	Activities for disabled people	29.39%	42.49%
2	Enterprise/business development opportunities	24.60%	46.01%
3	Health and wellbeing services	22.01%	38.36%
4	Education and Training Opportunities	15.09%	43.08%
5	Activities for Women	12.34%	34.49%
6	Activities for Older People	9.43%	34.59%
7	Activities for Young People	13.21%	28.62%
8	Social Opportunities	10.09%	30.91%
9	Cultural and Heritage Activities	7.52%	26.65%
10	Activities for Men	2.84%	21.14%


Respondents outlined the following as key issues within the community.

Dereliction	Lack of GP Practice and healthcare facilities in the area	Limited amount of venues or availability to run services/activities
More activities for men than women (e.g. Men's Shed) and need for women's activities	Lack of provision or activities if you are not a member of a club or pub attender	Lack of shops and services e.g. business hub, museum, bakery, community shop etc.
Lack of changing facilities in Kilbroney Park	Limited opportunities for people with disabilities to engage	Lack of support for local businesses
Need to build on cultural/natural potential of the area	Lack of support/facilities to support local artists and creatives	Limited intergenerational activities/working
Lack of activities for young people outside of sporting provision	Shortage of childcare in the area	Lack of services or activities outside of church provision

2.2.3 Potential Impact of Redevelopment


When asked about the importance of aspects in relation to the potential redevelopment of the Convent Hall, respondents stated the following.

85% feel that an important derelict building will be preserved and restored.


	<p>'The Convent hall is a parish asset, and as such, I think that it is imperative that its place in our local history is kept.' (Respondent)</p> <p><i>'This building has an emotional and historic link to many of us as we attended school events in this hall. I remember being a shepherd in my school play (my first time on stage) In this hall I watched a documentary about Neil Armstrong walking on the</i></p>
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	<p><i>moon. In this hall I experienced the life and times of Tom Dunn through music, song & prose this could not be recreated to the same affect in a new building. This building had historical importance due to its age and the community connection with it. It must be preserved.’ (Respondent)</i></p> <p><i>‘Many people have great memories of the Convent Hall...Yes make it safe and more functional, but preservation and restoration is important as Rostrevor’s charm will be lost with too many pointy new buildings that just look out of place.’ (Respondent)</i></p>
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95% feel that the derelict building will have a functional purpose for local people.


	<p><i>‘All derelict buildings in Rostrevor should be redeveloped and used for social/community and various activities of benefit to the locality.’ (Respondent)</i></p> <p><i>‘Important to make use of buildings already here in village.’ (Respondent)</i></p> <p><i>‘The restoration, refurbishment and upgrading of the Convent Hall is a much-needed development.’ (Respondent)</i></p>
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88% of people feel that redevelopment will improve village appearance.


	<p><i>‘The derelict building is an eyesore. Any improvements are to be welcomed.’ (Respondent)</i></p> <p><i>‘The redevelopment would enrich the wider community and improve the image of the adjoining school and chapel.’</i></p>
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	<i>Redeveloping this building I believe would create a link between the two.’ (Respondent)</i>
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87% of people feel redevelopment will create opportunities to engage in history, culture and heritage related activities.

	<i>‘Younger people will have a chance to hear and know about the beautiful building and what the nuns contributed to that area.’ (Respondent)</i>
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93% of people feel redevelopment will create new shared spaces which can be accessed by all local organisations.

	<i>‘A shared space where all members of the community can enjoy social and cultural activities.’ (Respondent)</i>
	<i>‘My children are in lots of groups including local choir and they have no space for practice. We need more space for community groups to gather.’ (Respondent)</i>

2.2.4 Potential Uses of the Redeveloped Convent Hall

The overall ideas and suggestions for uses of the redeveloped Convent Hall are listed, as follows, with specific uses for ground floor and first-floor use outlined later in this analysis.

Health Centre	School activities (close proximity to local schools e.g. St Bronagh’s)	Health and wellbeing initiatives (e.g. medical screening, physio)
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Tea/coffee facilities for funerals and community events	Heritage/history initiatives	Community sales
Health and fitness classes	Educational/training activities	Mental health and wellbeing services for all ages (including counselling, support groups)
Social activities	Showcasing local produce and products from artists, creatives, entrepreneurs	Community cinema
Community events, performance area and rehearsal spaces	Affordable space for local groups	Community classes (including photography, music, art classes, language classes)
Services for the elderly including health and wellbeing, craft classes and gardening.	Farmer's market	Childcare and services/activities for parents and young children
Tourist information services	Community meals service	Activities that support church funds
Religious activities including Sunday School, prayer room, reflection.	Co-working space/hub	

Many respondents felt that any redevelopment should take into consideration the following:


- Improving the overall appearance of Rostrevor.
- Complementing other activities and facilities including those in local schools and churches.
- Retaining the original style of the building and sympathetic restoration.
- Ensuring the building is self-sufficient and that redevelopment considers running and ongoing costs – this may involve charges for rental etc.

- The newly developed building should ensure provision for all ages and backgrounds.
- Disability access must be retained.


2.2.5 Ground Floor Space

When asked what the best use of the **ground floor space** is at the Convent Hall:


52% of respondents felt it should be a space for community organisations to undertake regular activities.

	<p><i>'Ground access facilitates easier entry etc. for all community and would lend to use for church and community events.'</i> (Respondent)</p>
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42% of respondents felt it should be a space for members of the community to use for events.

	<p><i>'Open to all communities to pay for used space for events.'</i> (Respondent)</p> <p><i>'All three sound great and hard decision, but a larger event space in Rostrevor would be fantastic.'</i> (Respondent)</p>
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6% of respondents felt that it should be a space for business/enterprise.

	<p><i>'Options for those who work from home to rent a desk so they get out of the house and can meet others.'</i> (Respondent)</p>
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Some respondents felt that its use should not be binary, and should be multi-use with options for rental to different groups, organisations and businesses.


The full list of ideas for the Ground Floor Space is as follows:

Nursery facility	Event space
Space for creative/cultural activities	Artists' studio space
For use by local schools	Gallery
Funeral teas/gatherings/Chapel of rest	Shop
Community cinema	Children's' party space
Craft workshop space	Carpark for school and chapel
Prayer centre	Christmas events/sales
Rehearsal/performance space	Theatre
Co-working space	Heritage centre/museum


2.2.6 First-Floor Space

When asked what the best use of the **first-floor space** is at the Convent Hall:


46% of respondents felt it should be a space for community organisations to undertake regular activities.

	<i>'Weekly group classes, hire the space i.e. exercise classes, yoga, lessons in computing - anything that will interest all ages in the community.'</i> (Respondent)
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34% of respondents felt that it should be a space for members of the community to use for events.

	<i>'Adult classes, staged events, concerts and plays.'</i> (Respondent)
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10% of respondents felt that it should be a space for business/enterprise.

	<i>'Again, very difficult to decide, but we seem to have some great entrepreneurs in the area, a space similar to Made in Mourne's enterprise space in Killeel would be good.'</i> (Respondent)
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10% of respondents felt that it should be used for housing/accommodation.


	<p><i>'Lack of accommodation in the Rostrevor area.'</i> (Respondent)</p>
	<p><i>'There are plenty of small rooms and a large sitting room.'</i> (Respondent)</p>
	<p><i>'Affordable housing with provision for those in social need.'</i> (Respondent)</p>
	<p><i>'Emergency accommodation for abused women or men would be wonderful.'</i> (Respondent)</p>

The full list of ideas for the First Floor Space is as follows:

Citizen's Advice or similar services	Business hub
Housing or accommodation	Permanent home for local groups to store records (e.g. Community Association)
Events, concerts and plays	Entrepreneur showcase space
Community classes	Space for Saturday Book Corner
For use by local schools	Parish office space


2.2.7 Additionality and Displacement

73% of respondents felt that new community facilities at the Convent Hall would add substantial value and make a long-term difference.


	<p><i>'There is a particular need for a larger space that can be used by all the community.'</i> (Respondent)</p>
	<p><i>'Located close to the Chapel, the Hall would provide a valuable resource for small scale events and activities.'</i> (Respondent)</p>

	<p><i>‘As a long-term resident of Rostrevor I hope to see the restoration of the Convent Hall to its former use as a valuable community facility and I welcome a future new lease of life for the benefit of our community, especially our youngest members.’ (Respondent)</i></p> <p><i>‘Over the decades there have been numerous attempts to create a shared ‘neutral’ venue welcoming and open to all sections of the community. The restoration of the Convent Hall would at long last fulfil this objective.’ (Respondent)</i></p>
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21% of respondents felt that new community facilities at the Convent Hall would add value and be of some benefit.

	<p><i>‘It would add some benefit, but I am not convinced it would add enough. I would suggest this would be better demolished or repurposed as office space for the parish office.’ (Respondent)</i></p>
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6% of respondents felt that new community facilities at the Convent Hall would duplicate what already exists.

	<p><i>‘There are other buildings in the town that could be used for this.’ (Respondent)</i></p> <p><i>‘There are many similar halls in the village e.g. Cloughmore Centre in the Park, New meeting rooms in the square, various church and school halls...the list is endless.’ (Respondent)</i></p>
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2.3 Alternative Perspectives

It is important to pay attention to the following comments which present alternative perspectives to the redevelopment. Whilst these were minimal, and any negative comments were in the minority, they must be taken into consideration when developing activity/service plans for the space.

'I would suggest this would be better demolished or repurposed as office space for the parish office.' (Respondent)

'The building isn't needed, wasting money.' (Respondent)

'Not housing and/or accommodation.' (Respondent)

'Demolish it and move on to restore the boys school which is a much better community site.' (Respondent)

'Demolish.' (Respondent)

'I think the building is problematic and presents issues that need to be addressed. You have two fabulous buildings, old and new, between the chapel and school. This building detracts from each. I would opt for demolition and put money towards redevelopment of Harmony Hall instead as a community cinema/enterprise space.'
(Respondent)

'There is already ample space in our town for meeting rooms etc. no more is needed it would just be another waste of space and money.' (Respondent)

'I don't believe funding for the convent hall should be the priority. We have an underutilised facility...the youth club which should be converted into a fully functional community hub open to all 7 days a week...365 days a year. There's ample room to develop in the car park area that's locked up or at the front where the old school buildings lie derelict. Let's seek funding for a proper hub.'
(Respondent)

3.0 Conclusions

There is a strong support for the redevelopment of the Convent Hall building, which has strong historical and heritage value for many people within the community.

- (i) The project would add to an enhanced streetscape within Rostrevor and improve the image of the village, contributing positively to the local economy.
- (ii) The use of the ground floor for community use and the upper floor for either accommodation or enterprise/commercial use seems to be the preferred social enterprise model to help ensure long term sustainability and financial independence.

4.0 Next Steps

This project would benefit from further business planning, professional design and legal input to fully understand the options outlined and help advance the project. Kilbroney Parish will continue to liaise with Dromore Diocese and seek further assistance from the Architectural Heritage Fund, through the Project Development Grant, to help advance this project further.