

Briefing note : Watford Velmurugan Hindu Temple and the proposed disposal of Beechwood Family Centre

Purpose

This note sets out the case for urgent intervention by Hertfordshire County Council in relation to the proposed disposal of the Former Beechwood Family Centre, 453 St Albans Road, Watford, currently occupied by Watford Velmurugan Hindu Temple.

The Temple is not seeking preferential treatment or asking Hertfordshire County Council to disregard its responsibilities for public assets. It is asking for a fair and reasonable opportunity to acquire its established home at a properly assessed market value, with sufficient time to assemble the necessary funding.

The immediate request is that Hertfordshire County Council pauses or extends the current disposal timetable and agrees at least a six-month community purchase window before entering into a binding sale with a third party.

Background

Watford Velmurugan Hindu Temple was founded on 19 November 2011 and initially operated through weekly worship at Haines Way Community Centre.

As the congregation grew, the Temple moved in July 2017 to premises at Exchange Road under a three-year lease from Watford Borough Council. Around eighteen months later it was required to relocate because of a defect with the building.

In April 2019, the Temple moved to the Outdoor Bowling Green at Woodside, Garston. Before completion of the anticipated occupation period, it was again asked to vacate because of other plans for the site. A public campaign followed, attracting nearly 15,000 petition signatures and resulting in additional time being provided.

Watford Borough Council subsequently worked with Hertfordshire County Council to find a replacement home for the Temple. This led to the Temple taking occupation of the Former Beechwood Family Centre in 2022.

The building was in poor condition. The Temple community invested substantial voluntary labour, time and money in making it suitable for worship and community use. Watford Borough Council also assisted with the relocation and restoration process.

The initial lease was followed by a further two-year lease from May 2024 at £30,500 per annum, together with legal costs.

During this period the trustees sought greater long-term security. They requested a longer lease and asked to be notified and given an opportunity to purchase if Hertfordshire County Council decided to dispose of the site.

In June 2026, the Temple was informed that Carter Jonas had been instructed to dispose of the site. The trustees again sought a longer lease and asked to discuss purchasing the property before it was marketed. They were told that the property needed to go to the market and understood that they would receive the sales information when the property was offered for sale.

The property was marketed on 15 September 2026. The Temple became aware of the sale through press coverage on 16 September and received notification from the Council subsequently.

The current marketing process invites offers by 12 noon on 22 October 2026.

On 18 September, the Temple also received proposed heads of terms for a further five-year lease at £35,000 per annum, but containing a six-month break clause. The trustees' solicitors are seeking a longer period of security.

Why this is more than an ordinary property disposal

Watford Velmurugan Hindu Temple has become an established religious and community institution.

It is understood to be the only Hindu temple in Watford and serves around 700 families regularly. Its reach extends beyond Watford, with substantially larger numbers attending major religious festivals.

The Temple provides regular meals and free food to hundreds of people, supports elderly residents who rely upon it for companionship and community, provides religious and values-based activities for children and young people, and participates in interfaith activity.

For some older members in particular, the Temple provides a regular social network that addresses isolation and loneliness.

The site is also a consecrated place of worship. For Hindu worshippers, the consecrated deities are not simply statues or fixtures within a building. They are central to living religious practice and devotion. The loss of an established Temple therefore carries consequences quite different from the relocation of an ordinary community meeting room.

The community has also transformed the Former Beechwood Family Centre from a building in poor condition into its current use through considerable voluntary effort and financial contribution.

Matters requiring review

There are legitimate questions about whether the disposal process has adequately taken account of the site's established community and religious use.

First, the Temple had expressly told Hertfordshire County Council that it wanted to purchase the property if it became available. It had also asked to be notified in advance. The trustees nevertheless became aware of the actual marketing exercise only once it was already underway.

Second, religion or belief is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. Section 149 requires a public authority, when exercising its functions, to have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those sharing a protected characteristic and others. The Council should therefore be able to demonstrate what consideration was given, before the disposal decision was taken, to the effect of potentially displacing an established minority-faith institution and the community activities conducted from the site.

Third, the Council's responsibility to obtain best consideration under section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972 should not be interpreted as an automatic requirement simply to accept the highest headline bid. The current marketing particulars themselves reserve the Council's right not to accept the highest or any offer.

Furthermore, the Local Government Act 1972 General Disposal Consent (England) 2003 permits local authorities, subject to its conditions, to dispose of property at an undervalue of up to £2 million where the authority considers that the disposal would contribute to economic, social or environmental wellbeing. The Temple's preference remains to acquire the property at a properly established market value, but the existence of this discretion is relevant when considering the wider public value of preserving the site's community use.

The requested solution

The Temple is not asking for the open-market process simply to be abandoned in its favour.

It asks Hertfordshire County Council to:

1. pause or extend the current 22 October 2026 tender process before any binding agreement is entered into with a third party;
2. provide the Temple with at least six-month community purchase period within which it can assemble funding and make a credible offer based on an independent assessment of market value;
3. meet urgently with the Temple trustees, their representatives and Watford's elected representatives to agree a workable process;
4. disclose whether an Equality Impact Assessment or equivalent Public Sector Equality Duty assessment was undertaken in connection with the proposed disposal;
5. review the history of engagement with the Temple, including its previous requests for a longer lease, advance notification and an opportunity to acquire the freehold;
6. consider whether an Asset of Community Value nomination and the policy behind the Community Right to Bid should inform the approach to the disposal; and
7. maintain secure occupation arrangements while those discussions and fundraising efforts are undertaken.

This approach would preserve Hertfordshire County Council's ability to secure proper value for a public asset while providing an established Watford community institution with a genuine opportunity to purchase the home which public authorities themselves helped it establish.

The issue is therefore not whether Hertfordshire County Council should give the property away. The issue is whether a public authority should allow a long-established community and faith institution, with which it has an existing landlord relationship and whose desire to purchase was already known, a reasonable opportunity to compete for its permanent home before that opportunity is lost.