

Report to Policy and Resources Committee – 1st September 2025

Feasibility Study: Oare Gunpowder Works Visitor Centre and Associated Land

1. Executive Summary

Faversham Town Council (FTC) has been exploring the transfer of the lease for the Oare Gunpowder Works Visitor Centre and potentially the surrounding land from Swale Borough Council (SBC). The site, owned by Brett Aggregates and designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument, represents a significant ecological, historical, and community asset for Faversham.

FTC's Strategic Plan (2024–2028) places community, environment, and heritage at its core, all directly supported by this proposal. The transfer would safeguard the long-term future of the Visitor Centre and surrounding land, create opportunities for environmental education, heritage interpretation, tourism, and community engagement, and ensure that the site is managed for public benefit.

Swale Borough Council has made £60,000 available to support feasibility, design, and planning permissions, mitigating initial risks. FTC is well-placed to take forward this responsibility, supported by staff, volunteers, and community partnerships.

2. Strategic Context

2.1 National and Local Significance

- **National heritage value:** The site was central to Britain's gunpowder production during the 17th–19th centuries.
- **Environmental value:** Now a biodiverse country park supporting wildlife, walking, and outdoor learning.
- **Community value:** In FTC's 2024 Residents' Survey, 25% of respondents cited proximity to countryside, including Oare Gunpowder Works, as a key benefit of living in Faversham.

2.2 Alignment with FTC's Strategic Plan (2024–2028)

- **Community:** Provide inclusive venue hire, events, and programming.
- **Environment:** Promote biodiversity, sustainability, and climate action.
- **Heritage:** Protect and interpret Faversham's unique heritage for future generations.

3. Current Situation and Opportunity

- The Visitor Centre and land are currently leased by SBC from Brett Aggregates.

- FTC has already expressed interest in taking over the Centre and has developed proposals for phased use of the building, café, and venue hire.

4. Proposal

4.1 Lease and Legal Arrangements

- SBC proposes a reassignment of the full lease to FTC. This could be managed in stages, ie Stage 1 reassignment of the Visitor Centre only following by Stage 2 reassignment of the land, however this would incur double legal costs. We are also not sure what the situation will be in two year's time with local government reorganisation and may miss the opportunity to reassign the full lease
- The General Power of Competence allows FTC to manage the site.
- A long lease is essential for eligibility for external funding and grant support.

4.2 Operational Model

- **Café:** Seeking funding for updating the visitor experience, including a café area. Seek a third party to run the café under a separate agreement
- **Venue Hire:** Reconfigure the exhibition area to create a flexible, hireable venue for community, educational, and corporate use.
- **Programming & Events:** Nature walks, biodiversity workshops, heritage interpretation, partnerships with Kent Wildlife Trust, Kent Bat Trust, Anna Outdoors, and others.
- **Volunteering:** Work closely with the Friends of Oare Gunpowder Works to support maintenance and programming.

5. Financial Forecast & Viability

5.1 Costs

- **Maintenance & Insurance:** FTC facilities team to manage; larger works sub-contracted.
- **Seasonal Staffing:** Weekend and Bank Holiday cover.
- **Capital Investment:** Estimated £55,000 for café fit-out, funded by a grant

5.2 Income Projections

- **Venue Hire:** £1,200 in Year 1, rising to £4,000 by Year 3.
- **Café/Concessions:** £500 in Year 1, rising to £6,000 by Year 3.
- **Events:** £500 in Year 1, rising to £2,000 by Year 4.

5.3 External Funding

- £60,000 SBC feasibility fund available until March 2026.
- Potential grants: FCC Communities, UK Shared Prosperity Fund, environmental partnerships.

6. Risks and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
High maintenance costs	Use in-house staff + volunteers; phased upgrades; external grants.
Uncertain café viability	Pilot with vendors; concession model to limit FTC exposure.
Seasonal visitor variation	Diversify income via venue hire and events.
Heritage constraints	Work with specialist designers and secure planning permissions early.
Community concerns	Transparent consultation, strong partnerships with Friends group.

7. Community and Environmental Benefits

- Increased local engagement through events, volunteering, and education.
- Strengthened environmental stewardship and biodiversity action.
- Preservation and celebration of heritage.
- Modest local economic benefit via tourism and local suppliers.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The transfer of the Oare Gunpowder Works Visitor Centre and associated land to Faversham Town Council represents a unique opportunity to protect and enhance one of the town's most valuable ecological and heritage assets.

Recommendations:

1. FTC formally accepts the transfer of the lease from SBC.
2. Commission design and feasibility work using the £60,000 SBC fund.
3. Liaise with the Friends of Oare Gunpowder Works in designing an operational plan.

4. Implement a phased operational plan (2025–2027), starting with pilot catering and venue hire.
5. Seek external grant funding for capital and revenue support.
6. Develop strong community partnerships to ensure long-term sustainability.

Louise Bareham

Town Clerk

23rd August 2025

Oare Gunpowder Works – Criteria for devolved services and assets

Strategic Alignment Faversham Town Council's Strategic Plan 2024-2028	<p>The transfer of Oare Gunpowder Works meets the following Strategic Pillars:</p> <p>Community: To encourage a safe, thriving and inclusive community</p> <p>By actively seeking the input and participation of residents in decision-making processes, the Council ensures that diverse perspectives and needs are considered in the development of policies and initiatives.</p> <p>Environment: To support and enhance the natural environment</p> <p>The Council actively implements and supports initiatives that reduce carbon emissions, promote renewable energy, and enhance green spaces within the town. Efforts include advocating for sustainable development practices, conserving local wildlife habitats, and encouraging community participation in environmental projects. Educational campaigns and partnerships with environmental organisations further amplify the Council's mission to foster a culture of sustainability and resilience against climate impacts. By prioritising these environmental goals, Faversham Town Council aims to ensure a healthy, diverse, and thriving ecosystem for current and future generations.</p> <p>Heritage: To protect and develop Faversham's heritage</p> <p>The Council actively supports the conservation of historic buildings, landmarks, and cultural artefacts, ensuring they remain integral parts of Faversham's landscape.</p>
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Financial Viability	<p>Five-Year Financial Forecast for Café</p> <p>Assumptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No rent costs • £60,000 UKSPF grant from SBC for initial feasibility, design, planning permissions. Grant used in matched funding in seeking other grants. • Café Concession provides an income • Venue rental and events provide an income <p>Year 1: Startup and Operational Costs</p> <p>Equipment Purchase:</p> <table> <tr> <th>Item</th><th>Cost</th></tr> <tr> <td>Servery counter/table</td><td>£5,000</td></tr> <tr> <td>Non-refrigerated counter space for cake display</td><td>£2,500</td></tr> <tr> <td>Coffee machine (automatic or semi-automatic)</td><td>£8,000</td></tr> <tr> <td>Instant hot water unit</td><td>£1,000</td></tr> </table>	Item	Cost	Servery counter/table	£5,000	Non-refrigerated counter space for cake display	£2,500	Coffee machine (automatic or semi-automatic)	£8,000	Instant hot water unit	£1,000
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	Soup kettle	£500
	Contact grill	£1,500
	Jacket potato oven	£2,000
	Refrigerator and Freezer	£3,500
	Combi (bake-off) oven	£6,000
	Induction hob	£1,200
	Microwave oven	£500
	Hot display unit	£3,000
	Multideck refrigerated drinks unit	£4,000
	Menu board	£1,000
	Dishwasher	£3,500
	Total Equipment Cost	£43,200
<p>Final Recommendation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek grant funding for initial capital. 		

Community Need and Benefit Residents' Survey 2024	Residents' Survey 2024: 25% of respondents noted the proximity to the countryside as a positive, with some mentioning Oare Gunpowder Works and highlighting the walks. Further surveys will specifically ask for feedback on Oare Gunpowder Works.
Legal and Governance Considerations	The building and land are owned by Brett Aggregates and are held under a 125 lease agreement to Swale Borough Council. Initially we would seek to obtain the building under a long lease (required to enable grants), with the option to take on the land (17 acres). The Town Council has the General Power of Competence and therefore has the appropriate powers. Legal advice will be obtained from the Town Council's solicitors. Contracts and agreements would be drafted by the Borough Council's solicitor.
Operational Capacity	Option 1 The Town Council directly employs experienced staff to run the café. This has now been dismissed. Option 2

	<p>The café is let to a third party to run with the Town Council receiving a rental. An interest has already been received.</p> <p>Option 3</p> <p>No café</p> <p>Space can be let to third parties/volunteers/employees to facilitate environmental projects.</p> <p>TUPE may be a consideration if taking on the land, which is currently managed by a Swale Ranger 2 days per week or could be managed by existing staff and volunteers.</p>
Sustainability and Long-term Management	<p>Current facilities staff will be able to manage the maintenance of the building.</p> <p>Opportunities highlighted in the Asset SWOT</p> <p>Tourism Growth – With strategic marketing, the site could attract more visitors, boosting both heritage engagement and café sales.</p> <p>Education & Events – Hosting school visits, workshops, and guided tours could enhance community engagement and increase revenue.</p> <p>Local Supplier Partnerships – Collaboration with local food producers and businesses to enhance the café's sustainability and authenticity.</p>

	<p>Funding & Grants – Potential to secure external funding for community café, heritage and sustainability projects to support the site.</p> <p>Cycle & Walking Tourism – The site's location within a nature reserve and near walking/cycling routes presents opportunities for attracting outdoor enthusiasts.</p> <p>Venue Hire - Reconfiguration of the layout would enable the space to be hired out for an income.</p> <p>Revenue - Potential revenue from the café and venue hire could make the operation cost neutral.</p>
Risk Management	<p>1. Financial Risks</p> <p>High maintenance and conservation costs – The site requires ongoing upkeep, especially given its historic structures and ecological significance.</p> <p>Uncertain revenue streams – Income from a café, events, or grants may not cover operational costs if FTC were to operate the café. However, with no additional staff there is less risk.</p> <p>Liability costs – Increased insurance premiums and potential claims from accidents or damage.</p> <p>Funding shortfalls – Reliance on external grants or donations, which may be uncertain or competitive.</p> <p>Initial investment burden – Costs of setting up a café.</p> <p>Fluctuating visitor numbers – Seasonal variations could impact financial stability.</p> <p>2. Operational Risks</p> <p>Resource and staffing challenges – Managing the site effectively requires trained staff and volunteers.</p>

Health & safety hazards – Risks associated with an old industrial site, including unstable structures and environmental factors.

Café viability concerns – SBC has not received any interest in running a café, having tried for a couple of years. However, we have received interest.

Site accessibility issues – Limited parking, uneven pathways, or lack of transport links could deter visitors.

Event management complexities – Planning, permissions, and logistics for events could be resource-intensive.

Sustainability pressures – Ensuring environmentally friendly practices while balancing financial constraints.

3. Reputational Risks

Community opposition – Concerns from residents about commercialisation, changes in site usage, or governance transparency.

Failure to deliver expected benefits – If the council struggles to maintain or improve the site, it may damage public trust.

Environmental mismanagement – Perceived failure to protect wildlife or heritage could attract criticism.

Conflict with stakeholders – Potential disputes with existing site users, heritage groups, or conservation organisations.

Business failure – If the café or other income-generating activities fail, it could reflect poorly on the council's management.

Negative media coverage – Any controversies, safety incidents, or financial losses could impact the council's reputation.

Decision-making and Transparency	<p>Already discussed at the Strategic Working Group and Policy and Resources Committee.</p> <p>Further comments to follow as project progresses.</p>