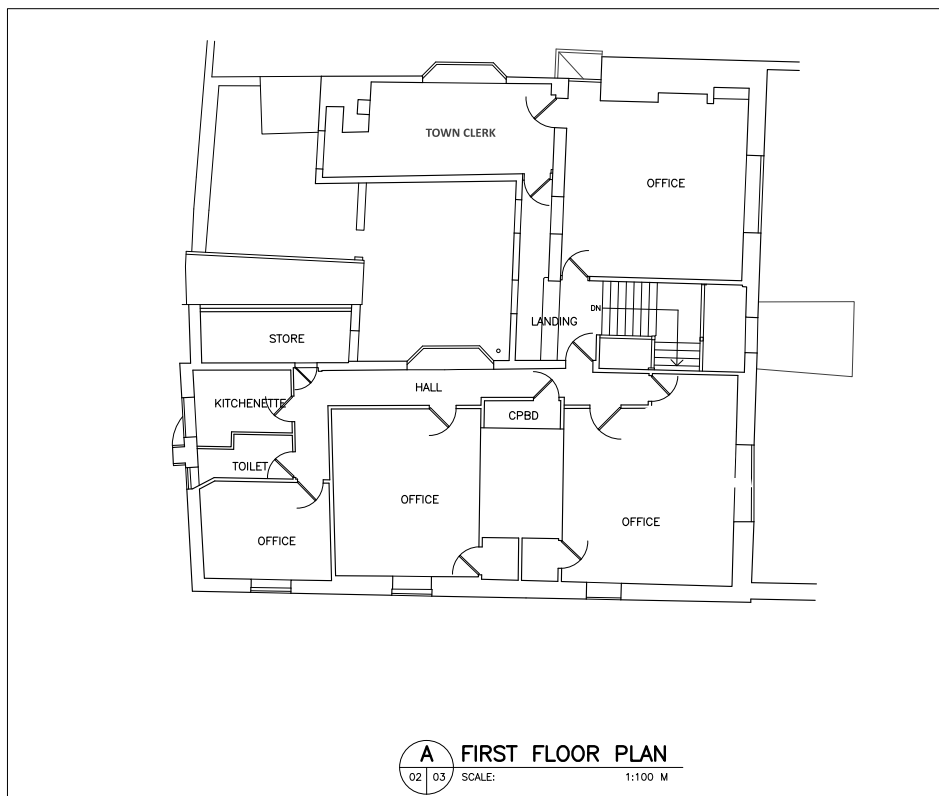
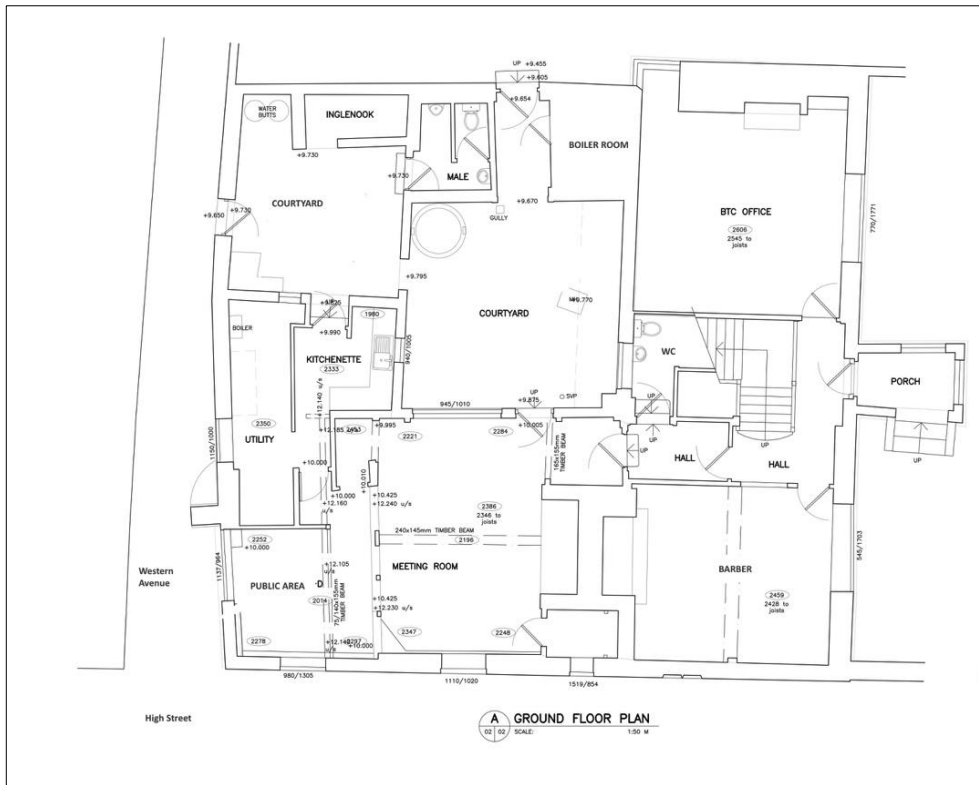


# STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE ALMONRY

ABRIDGED



Plan of the Almonry - current layout



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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 The Almonry**

The Almonry, 69 & 70 High Street, Battle, is a Grade II\* listed oak framed timber house, built in the C15. It has since been partially rebuilt, added to and some parts even demolished over the centuries. The Almonry was part of the Battle Abbey estate until 1926, when it was sold into private hands. In the 1970s, the property was sold to East Sussex County Council to enable the garden to be incorporated into the redevelopment of the adjacent market site. In 1987, Battle Town Council purchased the Almonry House and Gardens for £110,000 with a Public Works Loan Board loan, as it was felt that the house should be secured as part of Battle's heritage.

### **1.2 The Vision for the Almonry**

- To improve the facilities at the Almonry to better serve the Town Council and the community
- To preserve and promote the heritage of the Almonry building in accordance with Battle Town Council's Heritage Charter
- To boost the local economy by serving as a centre that will support and promote the heritage offering in the town for residents, businesses, and tourists

## **2. The Facility**

### **2.1 Current use**

Since the purchase of the Almonry in 1987 various attempts have been made to make it financially viable (as a heritage centre, café and shop) but its lasting use has been as Town Council Offices. The Council currently has use of a general office, shared with a Rother District Council Customer Services Officer, a large meeting room, used for Town Council and other meetings, and a Town Clerk's office. A further five rooms - one on the ground floor and four on the first floor - are let to tenants, and the Arts Council Accredited Battle Museum of Local History is housed in the Almonry grounds. The meeting room and the 'arbour' in the (award winning) gardens are currently licensed as a wedding venue.

### **2.2 Condition**

A building condition survey undertaken in 2019 reported that "the building appears to be in reasonable condition however, there are several repair and maintenance works which are required in the short-term and longer-term. Where past repairs have been undertaken some have been carried out using inappropriate materials that have caused further decay, such as hard cement mortars for repointing or short-term fixes such as uPVC rainwater goods and single-ply roofing systems painted over the original defective material."

### **2.3 Accessibility**

Residents with reduced mobility, such as wheelchair/mobility scooter users, must currently access the building by ringing a bell on the outside wall. They then have to be redirected to the side gate on Western Avenue and helped into the Almonry through the kitchen by way of a portable ramp. The meeting room has no hearing loop and it is accessed from the hallway by a steep ramp. There are no toilet facilities suitable for visitors or staff with reduced mobility. Different internal levels and steps down to the one internal toilet make negotiating the building difficult for those with impaired sight.

### **3. Needs Analysis**

Any proposals for the future use of the Almonry need to meet the needs of potential users and support the development of the town as a whole.

#### **3.1 Battle Town Council**

At the 2011 Census, the population in Battle numbered 6673, with a slightly higher percentage of females to males. The working age population was only slightly higher than the 'dependent' population, with relatively low numbers of young adults (15-44) but much higher numbers of older age groups. There were high numbers of one parent households, probably reflecting the relatively elderly population, living alone following the death of a spouse. The housing requirement for Battle up to 2028 was 475 dwellings in Battle and 48 dwellings in Netherfield, as allocated by Rother District Council Core Strategy 2014. This includes the housing requirement that will be met by the Blackfriars site (BA11)/ Tollgates & Lillybank developments and other smaller developments given Planning Permission since 2011 This development will significantly increase the population, thus increasing the need not only for social and leisure facilities, but also support services.

##### **3.1. 2 Services**

The Town Council is responsible for four allotment sites, a cemetery and the closed churchyard at the Parish Church of St Mary, local street lighting, bus shelters and playing fields. The Council's responsibility for tourism is met through close relationships with other organisations. Since 2011 it has proactively expanded its services, developing the 'new' cemetery, increasing its management of woodland and wildlife areas and starting a development programme for the Recreation Ground with new sports and play facilities. Further improvements are included in the Council's Action Plan, including the replacement of the Pavilion with modern day changing facilities and a clubroom/refreshment area. The Council is collaborating with the Battle Health Pathway project team to build all-weather pathways within the Rec, together with a cycle skills track and nature garden.

##### **3.1.3 Council Needs**

- The Town Council office is proportionately understaffed compared with other councils in the area. It is likely that additional office staff will need to be accommodated within the next three to five years in order to support the growing population and the ambitions of the Council to better serve residents, workers and visitors and also develop the town. Additional office space will therefore be required.
- A large, welcoming Reception area is needed to accommodate a one-stop-shop for BTC and RDC enquiries and information.
- A formal Council meeting room, to be used for both formal and informal meetings needs to accommodate a table large enough to seat 14 plus sufficient space for the viewing public.
- Rooms on the first floor are required for letting in order to provide an income for the Council. In October 2019, a survey was undertaken that showed a need for improvements to the heating, toilet facilities, kitchen facilities and security (Appendix J). It is clear that the heating system, water system, kitchen and toilet facilities need to be repaired and that lighting and fire safety need to be improved.

### **3.2 Services providing social support**

Residents from Battle and surrounding villages in need of specialist advice about Rother District Council services often find it difficult to travel to the Town Hall in Bexhill due to time, finances or lack of suitable transport options. One to one and small group meetings to provide specialist RDC help and advice could be arranged for residents of Battle and villages such as Ashburnham, Mountfield, Netherfield, Robertsbridge, Salehurst and Sedlescombe at The Almonry who could travel on the Community Bus service, which accepts bus passes. Small rooms are also required for the local MP's surgeries and for help and advice sessions by specialist providers such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Age UK, mental health groups and veterans, associations (in line with the town's obligations under Armed Forces Covenant signed by Battle Town Council).

### **3.3 Community groups and organisations**

Community meeting rooms are available at the Memorial Halls and Emmanuel Centre but there is a shortage of small meeting rooms in the town. Several small community groups meet at The Almonry, but verbal reports have been received that other groups are put off by the standard of the facilities. Key requirements are acceptable kitchen and toilet facilities, good lighting and heating and security for those using the building at night.

There is also a need for a centre that organisations can call their own. One very interesting recommendation from the community is the formation of a Civic Society group in Battle, based at The Almonry, which would provide a drop-in hub for the town. Staffed by volunteers, this would act as an extremely useful independent link between the Town Council and community groups. Information about current issues and Council projects could be displayed so that views can be collected and analysed where local clubs and organisations would be encouraged to display details of their activities, meeting times and contact details. The President of the Chamber of Commerce might also find desk space useful within the civic hub in order to provide a presence for local businesses.

### **3.4. Tourism and Heritage**

#### **3.4.1 Heritage of the Almonry**

Although the Almonry garden is open, public access to the building is limited to the Council office for enquiries etc and to the meeting room to attend Council meetings. Visitors cannot access these rooms to just look around them. When residents do have a reason to visit The Almonry for the first time, they invariably mention how wonderful the building is. This is a sad reflection on how the building is not being seen, let alone used, by the residents who own it.

In 2017, a series of open days were held at The Almonry, to solicit opinions and comment from the community on a grant funded project. They also published an online community opinion survey via Survey Monkey. The top heritage project that respondents wanted Battle Town Council to pursue was the restoration and conversion of the Almonry and Gardens into a Town Heritage centre, linking with the museum to explain the architectural heritage of the building and the valuable local heritage located in the development of the town, trade and Industry, including Iron working and gunpowder, war and conflict, the tradition of non-conformism, radicalism and suffrage.

#### **3.4.2 The Needs of Tourism in Battle**

In January 2020, Battle Town Council agreed unanimously to support the Battle UNESCO World Heritage status bid. This could give Battle a new global identity and raise its profile around the world, resulting in increased international tourism. If the bid is successful, Battle would be able to access funds from a global body to protect and conserve the site.

#### **3.4.3 The economic benefit of tourism**

The centre of Battle is a conservation area with over 50 listed buildings, providing a rare showcase of historically important buildings, laid out in their original planned configuration, mainly opening onto open countryside and, as such, providing significant value and interest to both visitors, academics, architectural historians and town planners. Despite this value however, the High Street and its environs, including Upper Lake, are currently at critical risk due to modern day issues related to traffic, pollution, planning pressure and changing consumer-spending habits. Coupled with recent economic austerity following the financial crisis of 2007-08, this has resulted in the town's increasing reliance on tourism, evidenced by the high propensity of cafes, coffee shops and small gift shops in the town. Anecdotal accounts from traders, the Chamber of Commerce and major venues such as St. Mary's Church, support this evidence, with the majority identifying the difficulties they are facing attracting sufficient paying clientele as a major constraint to their opportunity to adequately maintain their property, grow their businesses or simply remain financially viable.



### **3.4.4 The Need for a Tourist Information Point**

Research by 1066 Marketing between 2009 and 2016 indicated that 70% of people visiting Battle stated History and Heritage as their primary influence but the town has no Tourist Information Centre to widen their interest and length of stay in the town. The majority of visitors who come to Battle, do so to visit Battle Abbey and are predominantly unaware of the breadth and depth of Battle town's stand alone architectural, social, economic and cultural history. This is also the case for tour operators who usually do not allow sufficient time for visitors to explore the town, focusing only on the Abbey site and Battlefield or who just use Battle for a 'comfort stop'.

Within the large amount of research which was undertaken for the Heritage Lottery application, it was found that: 'for those visitors who do arrive specifically to explore the town's history and environment, the research and anecdotal evidence from social media suggests that they find the town inaccessible and difficult to navigate and the heritage difficult to access or interpret. The outcome of these issues is a sense of disappointment and frustration, resulting in complaints to those they encounter and on social media. They leave early and fail to return or promote the town in a positive light to their friends and family.'

There is an urgent need for a centrally located Tourist Information Point providing leaflets, advice, exhibitions and information videos to inspire visitors to explore areas of the town that they may be unaware of. Basing such a service in the Almonry would meet this need and be of great benefit to the town.

### **3.5 Office accommodation**

The need for further commercial office accommodation in the town was considered but deemed to be uncertain, especially in the light of possible changes to work patterns as a result of COVID 19.

## **4. Options**

### **4.1 Overview:**

The refurbishment and redevelopment of the Almonry has been integral to the Finance and General Purposes Committee's Action Plan since 2015. A Working Group, set up under the then Deputy Mayor, proposed that the Town Council should apply for a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund to enable the extension of the Almonry by reinstating the original wing over the rear courtyard and the removal of partitions so as to enable the internal space to be reconfigured. A conservation architect was appointed and planning permission was obtained.

In August 2018 a proposal was submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the creation of a Heritage Education and Tourist Information Centre at The Almonry. The application was unsuccessful. Council agreed that the building work to renovate and extend The Almonry should be actioned by applying to the Public Works Loan Board(PWLB) for up to £600,000 to be repaid over 50 years, with any remaining costs being met through the Almonry Repairs

Earmarked Reserve, Community Infrastructure Levy monies and possibly grant funding from Rother District Council. It was acknowledged that it would be necessary to increase the precept



to cover these costs, but the loan would be at a fixed rate and, if applied for immediately, the Council would benefit from current low interest rates. It was thought that if there was a delay until after Brexit, interest rates were likely to be higher.

In response to a request seeking public opinion regarding the Council's proposal to apply for up to £600,000 from the Public Works Loan Board, only 11 responses were received. All supported refurbishment of the Almonry, with four varied recommendations to restrict the works to urgent repairs initially. Due to concerns raised by this group of residents and a suggestion to undertake a further consultation, the application was delayed.

In May 2019, a new Council was elected and a new Working Group was formed to take the 'Almonry Development Project' forward. Battle Town Council has considered many options and offered all the viable possibilities for comment by residents in a questionnaire circulated in the Annual Report (Appendix L). These options range from selling The Almonry and re-siting the Council offices to repairing and refurbishing the building and rebuilding the south wing to provide a Town Hall encompassing Council offices with space for a wide range of social, tourist and heritage services, together with a community facility, that has full public access. Transfer of heritage responsibilities to the National Trust or English Heritage was explored but found not to be feasible since neither body was willing or able to take this on.

The main options and the cost of associated works (according to lowest tender received and not taking into account reductions currently under negotiation) are as follows:

1. Repair and refurbishment, removing partition walls and reconfiguring existing space, rebuilding of the south wing to add new space at ground and first floor levels £685,248
2. Repair and refurbishment, removing partition walls and reconfiguring existing space £535,127
3. Repair only, to include works to make the building safe and replacement of failing services £340,805
4. Sell The Almonry

Taking into account both costs and benefits, the Working Group has concluded that, whereas repair and refurbishment might meet some of the identified needs in the short term, they do not meet the present or the future needs of the Council or of the town as it expands. The first option, on the other hand, would not only add new usable floor space at ground and first floor levels, but would also enable more flexible use of existing space and provide fully accessible toilet facilities for staff and visitors with mobility problems. A two-phase approach was considered, but proved to be uneconomic.

The repair only option would necessitate relocating the Council to other premises and selling the property would necessitate relocating the Council and the Museum.

## **4.2 The Battle Town Hall Project**

The proposal for the Battle Town Hall meets the full range of needs identified in Section 5 above. It would provide full public access in compliance with the Equality Act 2010 and enable Battle Town Council to provide services and facilities in accordance with the Council Plan published in 2019, namely a one-stop-shop for Town and District Council enquiries, improved facilities for use by local groups/charities, space for meetings/consultations, and a Tourist and Heritage Information Area. It comprises the repair and refurbishment of The Almonry and the rebuilding of the south wing to offer fully accessible facilities and flexible space.

### **4.2.1 Capital works required to complete the project:**

- Remove partitions in the entrance area;
- Create a new reception area for the Town and District Council's information hub and a tourist information area;
- Restore and refurbish The Almonry, highlighting the phases of development and revealing its architectural features;
- Remove incongruous modern alterations and partitions;
- Rebuild the south wing of the building and remove walls to create flexible space;
- Create full access via Western Avenue and provide an accessible toilet within the building;
- Install audio-visual equipment.

### **4.2.3 Benefits:**

Flexible space to meet current and future needs of the town providing:

- Public, fully accessible Council offices with space for additional Town Council staff
- Formal Council meeting room;
- Town and District Councils information hub in a customised space;
- Battle's only publicly owned heritage building will be open to the public (ground floor) to learn about and appreciate Battle's heritage;
- Tourist & Heritage Information Area for visitors;
- Private interview/meeting areas for use by Town and District Councils, social service providers, MP etc;
- Flexible community space;
- Administration/temporary archiving space for the Town Council;
- Focus for the UNESCO World Heritage bid;
- Small meeting area/desk space for public hire;
- Display space.

#### 4.2.4 Projected Project Costs

The Council put the project proposal out to tender and received three tenders, two of which were considered acceptable, subject to further negotiation on value engineering. The tenders were broken down so as to identify separate elements to facilitate their inclusion or exclusion

Item		Amount	Comments
Repairs		£340,805	repair & maintenance of current asset
Refurbishment & rebuild of south wing		£344,444	improvements and new works
Discrete items	Decorated screen	TBA	Screen for current meeting room to be designed
Temporary relocation costs		£30,000	This could be reduced as tenants have been working from home and may be willing to do so again for an agreed period.
Professional fees		£41,434	
	Total	£756,683	

**4.2.5 Projected Project Funding**

Source	Amount	Date Applied	Confirmed	Comments
BTC Earmarked Reserve - Tourist Information Point	£12,000	N/A	EMR	
Almonry Project budget	£21,000	N/A	Budget	Transferred to an EMR at the end of 2019/20
Almonry Maintenance budget	£12,000	N/A	Budget	Transferred to an EMR at the end of 2019/20
Public Works Loan Board	£600,000		To be applied for	Oct 2019 - Council agreed not to rescind decision to apply to PWLB. Current budget would enable a loan of only £450,000
BTC Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds	£42,660		Currently available, subject to Council approval	Available when work starts on housing development(s)
RDC Strategic CIL funds	£100,000		To be applied for	Not available until after Dec 2020
Covid-19 Emergency - Heritage At Risk Response Fund	£25,000		TBC	
Arts Council	£10,000		To be applied for	For screen in current meeting room
RDC Community Fund	£30,000		To be applied for	For a discrete item within the project - may not be available post-COVID
RDC Capital funding	£10,000		To be applied for	Approach RDC for capital funding contribution towards accessible facilities

**4.2.6 Projected Annual Income:**

Source	Amount	Comments
Rent from tenants	£15,500	No change other than review of rents per agreements
Room hire	£3,000	Should increase further when improved facilities can be seen
Weddings	£1,000	Could increase further when improved facilities can be seen and building work is completed

**4.2.7 Financial Risk Assessment**

Without funding in place, the project cannot go ahead.

The cost of borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board increased between the decision in December 2018 to apply for a loan of up to £600,000 and present day. When the decision was made, the fixed annual repayments over a 50 year period were £21,000. The annual budget has an allowance to meet repayments at that level. Due to inflation, the purchasing power of the annual repayments is likely to diminish quite considerably over a period of 50 years, but the Council has not yet applied for the loan because of public concerns. In the meantime the interest rate has increased. Annual repayments for the full amount would now be approximately £27,900. The current annual budget of £21,000 for repayments would enable borrowing of only £450,000 at current rates (31st May 2020). The Council has an additional £21k in Ear Marked Reserve for this project due to the delay in application for agreed loan.

The programme of works could be staged. For example, the rebuilding of the south wing could be delayed pending the receipt of CIL money or grant applications eg towards the provision of access for the disabled. However, following advice from all tenderers, the programme of works should not be staged due to disproportionate increased costs and disruption due to office displacement.

The value of the property is projected to be £560,000 on completion of the repairs, refurbishment and the rebuilding works, compared to £527,000 if just repairs and refurbishment are undertaken, £480,000 if only repairs are undertaken and £445,000 in its current condition.

**4.2.8 Timetable**

Action	Date	Comments
Agree intended provider	17 March 2020	
Begin consultation	19 March 2020	
Conclude consultation	19 June 2020	
Agree action	30 June 2020	
Secure funding	30 Nov 2020	TBC
Commence work	01 Jan 2021	TBC

**4.2.9 Sustainability of the Project**

The refurbishment of The Almonry and rebuilding of the south wing to provide a future proofed, fully accessible public building with sufficient flexible space to support the town now and in the future.

**5. Monitoring and Evaluation of the Almonry Town Hall Project**

The Almonry and its architectural heritage, together with the high street townscape and rural setting, will be conserved, restored and preserved for future generations. It is expected that the development of the Almonry will better showcase the historic townscape, improve the built environment and make Battle a much more vibrant and pleasant place to visit and spend time in. This will encourage people to shop locally and support local events and activities.

The aims and objectives of the development of The Almonry will be monitored. Information will be gathered annually and reviewed by the Finance & General Purposes Committee.

The main groups of people that will benefit from the project are:

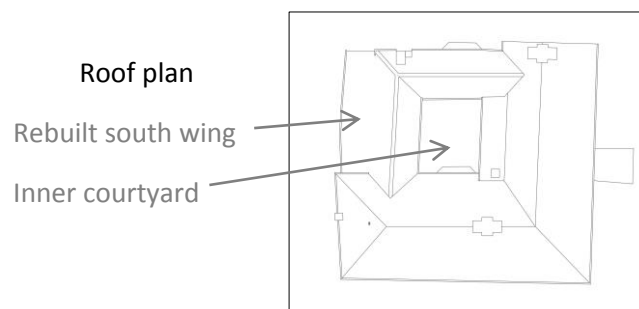
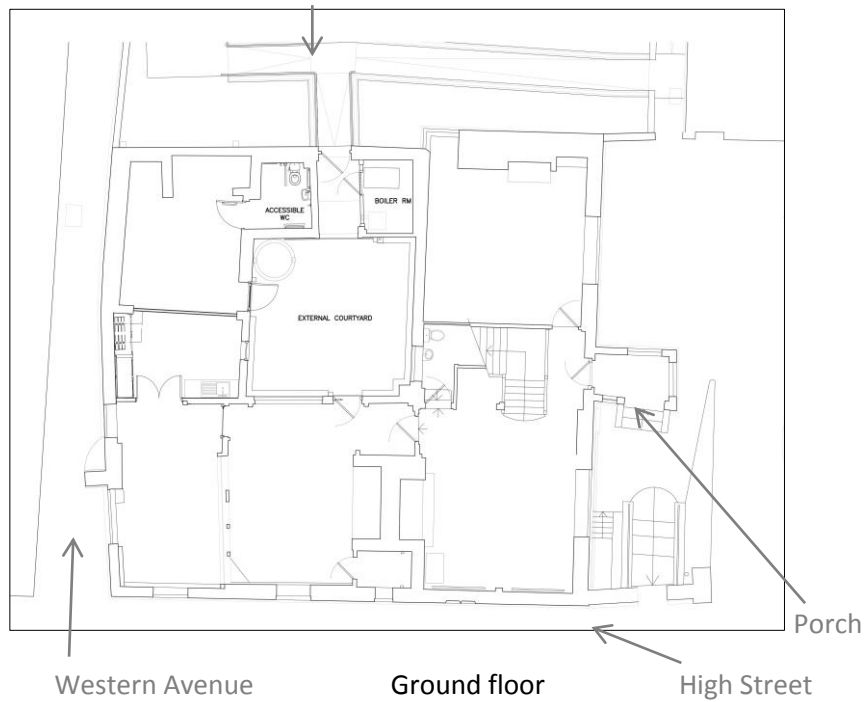
1. Residents
2. Visitors to the town of all ages and nationalities
3. Residents and visitors with disabilities
4. Council staff
5. Local groups engaged with heritage (e.g. Battle Museum of Local History, Battle & District Historical Society, Battle Conservation Group)
6. Other local groups
7. Local retailers, restaurateurs, accommodation providers etc.

Areas to be monitored and evaluated, will include:

- Improved town appearance
- New business growth
- Positive social media dialogue on community pages
- Increased number of community events and activities
- Increased tourism
- Change in perception of Battle as being a place solely for visiting Battle Abbey

### Plans for rebuilding of the south wing

Access path from Western Avenue





## **6. Conclusion**

Battle Town Council will consider the recommendations from the Working Group, together with the results of the questionnaire and comments from residents in its deliberations to come to a decision regarding the future of The Almonry.

**Appendices** may be found in a separate document, Strategic Plan for The Almonry - Appendices