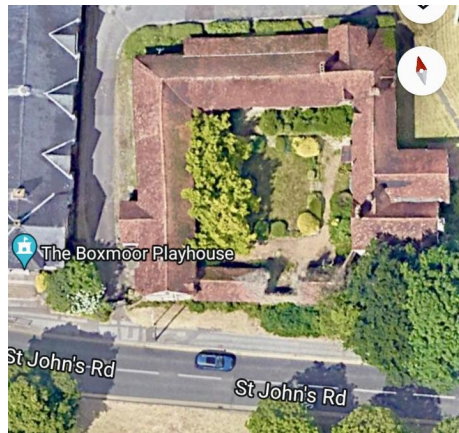

Proposal for The Barn

A creative and wellbeing community hub and café in the heart of Boxmoor.

September 2023



OVERVIEW

We would like to propose the redevelopment of the Heath Barn and Cottage site on St. John's Road into a creative and wellbeing community hub and café. This hub will serve the residents of Boxmoor and the wider population of Hemel Hempstead and surrounding villages. We intend to run this initiative as a Community Interest Company, offering a wealth of opportunities for connection, engagement, learning and growth. It will also provide a variety of options for employment and volunteering for local people.

OUR MISSION

To build community and a sense of belonging in our town by providing a variety of creative opportunities for meaningful social interactions across different age-groups, thereby reducing loneliness and social isolation.

Humans have evolved to be an interconnected species and we thrive when living in community with others. We need connection, play and creativity in abundance in order to live our happiest and healthiest lives. In his recent book, *The Myth of Normal*, Dr Gabor Maté asserts that: 'A society that fails to value communality - our need to belong, to care for one another, and to feel caring energy flowing toward us - is a society facing away from the essence of what it means to be human. Pathology cannot but ensue'.¹ We have seen the vast impact of social isolation and loneliness across different groups in our various professional roles and have been deeply moved by it. If we are to collectively address these problems, we must be proactive in creating opportunities for connection and allowing supportive relationships to flourish across the generations. We believe that by providing a range of innovative offerings at The Barn for people to connect, play and create, we can build a flourishing community that improves overall wellbeing and health for individuals and families.

Much concerning research has been published in recent years detailing the detrimental impact of social isolation and loneliness on our physical and mental health. This is not exclusively an issue for the older generation, however it is worth noting that in Dacorum it is estimated that the proportion of the population that will be over 65 years of age in 2043 is 23.3%, compared to 17.5% in 2021.² Many older people who live alone can sometimes go without interacting with others for over a month.³ Alarmingly, it has been shown that prolonged isolation can be as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes per day.⁴ Recent studies in the United States have found that social isolation in older adults can increase the risk of dementia by 27%.⁵

Thankfully, many organisations and individuals are bringing hope to balance these worrying findings. Dan Buettner, founder of Blue Zones, has identified the key regions of the world where people are living the longest, healthiest lives. These include Okinawa in Japan and Sardinia in Italy.⁶ Of the nine key lifestyle habits identified in these places, three of them relate to human

connection: belonging, putting loved ones first (grandparents, partners and children), being part of social networks that support healthy behaviours (the ‘right tribe’).⁷

Children and families are also in great need of support. The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood’s Shaping Us campaign has recently brought the vital importance of the first five years of a child’s life into public awareness.⁸ In partnership with the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, The Centre for Early Childhood has rightly ambitious aims: to transform society for generations to come using research, action and collaboration. By demonstrating that nurturing relationships, experiences and environments are essential for healthy child development, this work empowers us all to strive to improve life outcomes for children.⁹ We wholeheartedly believe in this mission.

We are passionate about using the powerful tools of play and creativity to support families and individuals of all ages. The human brain is built for play and it is essential for the development of health and happiness.¹⁰ It is not just vital for children, but for adults too; and for fostering secure attachments between a child and their primary care-givers. Play encourages connection, regulates our nervous systems and emotions and enables learning and problem-solving. It can also lead to improvements in mood, attention and focus.¹¹

The importance of creativity in our lives has long been underestimated, especially in our schools. Like play, creativity is for everyone; and the two modalities are intricately linked. The National Centre for Creative Health explains that: ‘Active engagement with the arts and culture, whether through our own creative practice or through our enjoyment of the creative practice of others, is beneficial for the health and wellbeing of us all’.¹² A 2019 World Health Organisation review explores in detail how the arts can impact physical and mental health in various ways, including supporting child development, encouraging health-promoting behaviours and helping people experiencing mental illness. It concluded that there is much evidence for ‘the potential value of the arts in contributing to core determinants of health’, for example in helping to prevent the onset of mental illness and age-related physical decline, amongst many other positive outcomes.¹³

It will be important to keep current scientific research always in mind to ensure our offerings are appropriate and bring value, while also looking at the local context for an initiative such as this. We understand the needs of local families well and we feel that a community hub is much

needed in our town. As well as having a café, which will provide a central point of connection for people, The Barn will enable many exciting wellbeing services to be offered. These could include: a programme of individual, family and intergenerational workshops and groups, a gallery area for local creatives to exhibit their work and the hire of spaces within the building to other professionals offering therapeutic services. These are just a small selection of the ideas we have discussed and we envisage The Barn as an ever-evolving space that would continue to adjust and innovate to meet the needs of our community.

We will strive to become a model of best practice for an inclusive community hub in Hertfordshire, inspiring other towns to also connect their communities in a conscious and meaningful way.

VALUES

- Community
- Compassion
- Creativity
- Empathy
- Inclusivity
- Respect

AIMS

- To address the increasing problems of loneliness and social isolation by providing a variety of opportunities for positive and meaningful social interactions that build community and a sense of belonging.
- To allow supportive relationships to develop across the generations by normalising interactions between different age groups.
- To be a flourishing and dynamic social enterprise, where growth and impact is enabled by various revenue streams.
- To run a welcoming and innovative cafe, which sits at the heart of our space, providing nourishment through food, drink and connection.
- To be a values-based organisation focused on the wellbeing of customers, staff and volunteers.

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- To provide creative, accessible and inspiring groups and workshops that positively impact the lives of local people.
 - To create an environment where all members of the community feel accepted and valued.
 - To be a sustainable and ethical organisation, which mindfully brings new life and purpose to the Heath Barn site, while valuing its heritage.

OUR BACKGROUND

We are Boxmoor residents and our eldest children have just started to attend The Hemel Hempstead School. We are very invested in the area, and the town as a whole. We have spent many months discussing ways in which we could use our professional experience, knowledge and skills to support our local community.

Jo has a background in medicine, teaching and pastoral work, with a particular interest in mental health and additional needs. She has taught in two local primary schools and worked as a Thrive practitioner supporting the emotional and social developmental needs of children. She co-authored the book *Mental Health and Wellbeing in Primary Education: A Practical Guide and Resource*. She is currently working as a Specialist Therapeutic Tutor for children with additional needs.

Lisa has a background in retail production and buying, as well as experience in hospitality during her time working in Melbourne, Australia. She set up *First Mummies' Club* in 2013, running creative evening workshops for mums, alongside *Crafty Crusaders* at her sons' school for two years. Lisa illustrated for the magazine *Motherdom* for a year and was commissioned to illustrate the front cover of a book - both had a mental health focus for new parents. Lisa has a strong interest in the benefits of the arts for wellbeing, having completed an art therapy and wellbeing foundation course. More recently she has enjoyed working creatively with older people experiencing memory loss and dementia at The Heather Club.

THE LOCATION

We are investigating the possibility of developing the The Heath Barn and Cottage site, which provides the most fantastic central location, off the main road running through Boxmoor village. There is ample parking and a large inner quadrant, which would be ideal for outdoor activities.

The Heath Barn and Cottage is a Grade II listed property, dating back to the 16th century. We have acquired copies of photographs which were taken there during the 1960s and stored in archives at The Horniman Museum in London. Our research has shown that Boxmoor Playhouse was once part of the original 16th century Heath Barn farm site, when it was named 'Heath Barn Theater'. A promotional flyer from the 1970s details an event hosted on behalf of Dacorum and Chiltern potters guild, signifying a historical association with the arts at this site. In more recent years, the buildings were used by the Dacorum Music School and the students of The Hemel Hempstead School. Our understanding is that the last use for music lessons was in 2019.

We are desperately concerned that the land and buildings might be developed for housing, rather than being renovated and repurposed to enrich and serve the community.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY

We see our overall target market as being composed of many different groups of people from Boxmoor, Hemel Hempstead and the surrounding villages. We will recreate a village ethos within The Barn, which mirrors the spirit that existed within small communities in the past. Our services will be especially beneficial to those members of the community who may feel lonely and unsupported.

We suggest a phased opening of workshops and groups. This is not intended to limit our interactions with other groups within the café, but would allow us to put our primary focus on one group in each phase. By building engagement with families first through social media marketing, we hope that this will lead to interest from the groups suggested in Phase 2 and 3.

Phase 1: Focus on children and families.

Potential workshops, groups and therapies include: Sensory play, art and crafts for wellbeing, singing, mindfulness sessions, cookery classes, groups for carers of children with additional needs, groups for young carers, parenting support, health and wellbeing support for women and seasonally-themed café area for spontaneous, free-flow play and interactions.

Phase 2: Focus on the older generation and their carers.

Potential workshops, groups and therapies include: Sensory play, arts and crafts for wellbeing, singing, mindfulness sessions and cookery classes specifically for the older generation; intergenerational groups e.g. crafts and singing for young children and those over the age of 65; 'Mens sheds' and 'Repair shops' to encourage connection and skill sharing across the generations; walking groups for retired or bereaved men and women; befriending schemes for older people who live alone; groups for carers of those with dementia; and special interest groups.

Phase 3: Other groups, for example young people and men.

Potential workshops, groups and therapies include: Arts and crafts for wellbeing, singing, mindfulness sessions and cookery classes specifically for young people and men; social groups and special interest groups; support groups for specific mental health difficulties; and homework clubs for young people.

Dacorum Borough Council state in their vision for 2020-2025 that they plan to work 'in partnership to create a borough which enables the communities of Dacorum to thrive and prosper'.¹⁴ The council is committed to making Dacorum an age-friendly place, ensuring 'engagement and participation in the community'. We feel our initiative aligns with this vision and addresses the nationally recognised 'Five Ways to Wellbeing': Connect, Be Active, Keep Learning, Take Notice and Give.¹⁵

Our proposal is solution driven. As a society, we have learned to look outside of our communities for help and support, when support can in fact be found within. The Barn will create a buffer - a wrapper of joy, discovery and learning - to help overcome the difficulties felt in communities. It will be a safe space for relationships to form organically.

By creating clarity around our mission and values, we hope local individuals will actively choose to participate in the diverse and dynamic workshops and groups that we intend to run. We hope that shared interest and familiar, family-structured sessions will appeal to many and that they will also recognise the potential for connecting with others and the importance of creating new bonds. Our hope is to strengthen each individual's sense of purpose and belonging within the town. We hope to encourage residents to continue learning, stretching themselves with new skills and ideas and to gain a sense of fulfillment, mastery and confidence.

We are excited about introducing an intergenerational awareness to Dacorum through our initiatives at The Barn. The intergenerational model pushes boundaries by understanding the qualities and attributes that varying age groups have to offer. Older adults bring patience and wisdom, and through interaction with families, they benefit from increased feelings of usefulness and belonging. Meanwhile social and emotional skills in children and young people improve when interacting with other age groups.

As we have described, there is an abundance of evidence that supports the role that arts, heritage and culture activities have to play in supporting health and wellbeing. Through our offerings, we hope to encourage positive associations around holistic approaches to health. Social prescribing is growing in popularity and the UK is leading the way with 'Arts on Prescription' programmes. Evidence from the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP) suggests it can improve feelings of connection and belonging and lead to improvements in health-related behaviours, 'particularly when social prescriptions work alongside community organisations'.¹⁶ The Barn could be an ideal host for social prescribing initiatives, forging links with GP surgeries and various health professionals.

BUSINESS MODEL AND FUNDING

We have begun to look into potential business models and it seems it will be best to run The Barn as a Social Enterprise, specifically a Community Interest Company (CIC). We understand that running in this way will allow us to function as a non-profit organisation, run for the benefit of the community. We will have various revenue streams, including the sales of food and drink from the café, charges for workshops and groups and income from hiring rooms and spaces to external professionals and therapists. We will both take a salary, but all profit will be channeled directly

back into the business. We intend to offer a number of 'pay what you can' options for workshops and groups, thereby ensuring we are accessible to all during these challenging economic times.

We will be able to potentially access a variety of funding streams, both locally and nationally. This funding will be vital for initial renovation of the buildings. The funding options include:

- Dacorum Borough Council Community Grant
- UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- Hertfordshire Community Foundation Grants
- The Green initiative
- National Lottery Connected Communities Fund
- National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Arts Council England National Lottery Project Grants
- Tesco Community Grants
- The Baring Foundation
- BA Better World Community Fund
- Comic Relief funding opportunities
- The Sackler Trust funding opportunities

We understand that operating as a CIC would require us to have a number of independent trustees on the board so that we can apply for grants.

Other funding options would include fundraising through community events, Crowdfunding and seeking local corporate investment and sponsorship.

IMPACT

It will be essential to demonstrate the positive impact that The Barn has, both for feedback to our community and customers and to our funders and investors. Initially, it will be important to provide data concerning how many people of different age groups are accessing the services provided, their reasons for attending/visiting, their overall satisfaction and the subjective impact on their lives. Overtime, it will be possible to gather more specific qualitative data regarding the positive impact on individuals and families e.g. case studies and testimonials.

We will plan to actively seek continuous feedback from all who use The Barn. There are various ways in which we could do this, including:

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- Feedback forms completed on site following workshops and groups.
 - Feedback forms regarding the food and service in the café.
 - Online feedback forms on website.
 - Comments and reviews on social media pages.
 - Testimonials from customers explaining the impact that our offerings have had on their health or wellbeing.

MARKETING PLAN

We intend to implement a phased and dynamic marketing strategy. The Barn's success will be dependent on gaining recognition and support from local residents and this will involve communicating information clearly and consistently. Strong brand identity is fundamental to conveying a professional, warm and welcoming feel, which we hope will ripple through and into the bones of The Barn, the activities and people within it. Our attention to detail through design, colour and the 'voice' we use will be consistent, friendly and understandable for all. This will align throughout our signage, menus, website, advertising, social media and communications; both in personal interactions and in print. We will want local residents to associate us with our key values, thereby developing a reputation as reliable, proactive, trustworthy and organised leaders.

By sharing snippets of the renovation and phoenix-like rising from the ashes, we hope to create intrigue amongst local residents who pass by. A sizable, branded 'Coming Soon' banner, together with our website address and Instagram handle, will help create interest and online traffic to our website and a visual journey on Instagram. Our social media campaigns and website will be linked, resulting in an accumulation of names and email addresses, invaluable for us as a new business and essential for capturing and retaining interest. We will be able to alert followers to our news, menus, events and bookable sessions through bi-weekly communications.

We are aware that not everyone in our community will be familiar with the digital world, therefore alongside our targeted digital marketing, we will reach out to local people in person and through printed advertising in publications such as local newspapers, Boxmoor Direct and through flyers on community boards, in local care homes and places of worship.

We are fortunate to have many friends and contacts in the local area, which will be an absolute strength when creating a conversation and buzz around this new initiative. Write ups in The

Gazette & Express, Hemel Today and Herts Advertiser, along with their online strands, can be utilised to create a sense of trust and legitimacy to support our marketing efforts. This will be an opportunity to get creative, voice our enthusiasm, have fun and be bold. We have experience of podcast and radio interviews in our professional roles. Engaging with these forms of media would allow us to achieve greater reach through local and county radio, sharing the joy and message of our initiative through long-form conversations.

We will continually assess which marketing approaches and strategies are most engaging and effective. We will continue to evaluate trends or changes in social media and adjust our approaches accordingly.

POLICY AND LEGAL MATTERS

It will be essential to have a robust system of policies and procedures for operation of The Barn. This will include:

- Creating clarity around our aims and values by having a written constitution and set of rules accessible by all staff, volunteers and customers.
- Policies and potential training for staff would need to include: safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults; DBS checks for staff and volunteers (and safer recruitment); fire safety and health and safety (in relation to the buildings, outside space and specific activities); first aid, medical emergencies and mental health first aid; equality, diversity and inclusion; food hygiene standards; privacy policy and GDPR (in relation to personal information stored for marketing purposes).
- Ensuring planning, building regulations and permissions are in place (services to include electrics, gas, plumbing and water).
- Registering as a CIC with HMRC, registering as a food business and for VAT (café & shop).
- Keeping updated records for sales, assets and equipment, budget, forecast, audited accounts and bank statements. Having a papertrail for grants and expenditure relating to salaries.
- Ensuring appropriate Public Liability Insurance is in place and that the premises are insured. Ensuring that all external practitioners and facilitators have their own appropriate insurances.
- Organising secure payment systems for making bookings via the website.
- Obtaining permits and licenses for music and entertainment.

COLLABORATION

We are inspired by many local charities and businesses who are already engaged in innovative community work. The Barn will be very well placed to learn from and collaborate with these organisations. Our vision is one where similar businesses can enhance the work of one another. We intend to reach out to Liberty Tea Rooms, Sunnyside Rural Trust, The Box Moor Trust and Electric Umbrella in Hemel Hempstead and Open Door in Berkhamsted. We hope it would be possible to join or create a network of collaborating businesses, charities and therapists.

We would love to run a lively, annual festival with other local organisations to celebrate Boxmoor and the wider communities in Hemel Hempstead. There would also be potential to source locally grown food to serve in the café and share leftover produce with charities, such as DENS.

It will be beneficial to invite established community-minded and family-orientated organisations, especially those with a large following, to experience The Barn for themselves. They would be able to share their experiences with their audience online. The nature of what we are trying to achieve within The Barn will need to be reflected in the way we market our initiative beyond its walls. We will need to actively partner with organisations who work with residents at both ends of the age spectrum, other social enterprises and charities in Dacorum, GP surgeries and local schools.

SUMMARY

We realise this vision for The Barn is far-reaching and it will take hard work and commitment to bring it to life. However, we strongly believe that courageous new initiatives like this are needed not only to support our communities during difficult times, but also to provide preventative work and protection from future health and wellbeing challenges.

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