

## ***Hebden Bridge Community Association***



Media release

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### **YORKSHIRE TOWN PIONEERS COMMUNITY CONTROL OF ITS TOWN HALL**

A pioneering experiment in direct community control of public buildings and services gets under way this week in the Yorkshire town of Hebden Bridge.

The former mill town in the south Pennines will be, as far as is known, the first community in the country to take over responsibility for its Town Hall building when control is passed from the local authority Calderdale council to that of a charitable trust, Hebden Bridge Community Association. Transfer is scheduled for midnight on Wednesday March 31st.

“We are putting into practice a new model for the management of public buildings and the delivery of public services,” says Peter Hirst, chair of the Community Association. “All the major political parties are currently discussing ways in which local democracy can be reinvigorated. Our experience here will directly contribute to these key debates.”

The Community Association’s commitment is to maintain the Town Hall in public ownership for the community. Its trustees accept, however, that this definition of public ownership may not be a traditional one. “For almost a hundred years, public ownership has been synonymous with ownership by the national or local state. But

there are other models available. We've looked back to nineteenth century models of mutuality and common interest in trying to establish a democratic and accountable mechanism which works for the twenty-first century," Peter Hirst adds.

Hebden Bridge Community Association is a member-led charity operating on cooperative principles, with trustees chosen by the members in annual elections. Currently, about 520 local people and organisations have signed up to become members of the Association, more than one in ten of the total population of the town.

Under the arrangement agreed with Calderdale council, the Association acquires 40 year leasehold ownership of the buildings and land, for a nominal £1 a year. Calderdale council will continue to use the building to deliver public services, and will become a tenant of the Association, to which it will in future pay rent. Rent levels have been calculated to reflect broadly the previous cost to the authority of maintaining the building itself, the principle being one of no net financial change for the authority.

Negotiations between the Association and Calderdale council began more than two years ago, following government encouragement of the principle of asset transfer of public buildings to community control. Peter Hirst pays tribute to the Calderdale councillors and officers who helped bring this innovative deal to fruition

The Association will be using its control of the Town Hall to bring new services and facilities to the town. It has already begun the work of converting currently empty offices at the rear of the Town Hall into a new public hall. Another initiative will see the building licensed for the first time for civil weddings and civil partnerships.

"A new chapter in the life of our Town Hall starts on Thursday. We'll be working hard to put in place solid foundations, so that the building plays as important a role in the twenty-first century as it did when it was first built in 1897," Peter Hirst says.