

CLOSURE OF RETAIL OPERATIONS AND REVIEW OF SUPPORT SERVICES FROM THE RURAL ACTIVITIES GARDEN CENTRE

Cabinet Member & Portfolio	Councillor Eddie Lavery – Cabinet Member for Community & Environment
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Papers with report	Petition Hearing Appendix Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment

HEADLINES

Executive Summary

This report recommends closing the retail operations at the Rural Activities Garden Centre (RAGC) in West Drayton by 31 July 2025, due to ongoing financial losses. Alongside this, the Council proposes to consult on the future of support services currently delivered at the site for those in receipt of assessed social care services, with a proposal to meet assessed needs by relocating them to a new, enhanced garden facility at the Civic Centre campus in Uxbridge. The Council will consult with other attendees at the site, who attend on a voluntary basis. Even though the Council has no duty to the volunteers, it feels consultation is appropriate, recognising that a small number have done so for some time.

While the retail element is proposed to be closed, the future of the wider RAGC site remains under consideration, pending feedback from the consultations presented above.

The RAGC has long provided horticultural therapy and community retail services. However, the retail side is no longer viable—requiring a £137k subsidy in 2024/25, with sales income down 42% year-on-year. The site also faces significant capital investment to remain compliant with health and safety standards. With a small number of statutory care users, the current model is unsustainable.

The proposal, to be consulted further on, seeks to ensure:

- Continued tailored support for statutory care users, such as relocating at the Civic Centre campus, with access to enhanced services, including Adult Learning and Library Services.
- Full compliance with the Council's Care Act 2014 duties in meeting the needs of those with assessed social care needs

- Support for non-statutory volunteers through further engagement and help transitioning to alternative placements or employment, including with local partners such as Heathrow and biodiversity organisations.

Initial engagement with volunteers has taken place, staff consultation is also underway and a petition hearing was held on 11 June 2025 in response to two petitions received by the Council. Further consultation is planned before any final decision.

The proposed changes would remove the need for ongoing Council subsidies and avoid future capital costs. While closing the retail operation reflects prudent financial management of taxpayer funds, the Council remains fully committed to supporting those with care needs and ensuring volunteers are guided through any transition with care and clarity.

<p>Putting our Residents First</p> <p>Delivering on the Council Strategy 2022-2026</p>	<p>This report supports our ambition for residents / the Council of: An efficient, well-run, digital-enabled council working with partners to deliver services to improve the lives of all our residents</p> <p>This report supports our commitments to residents of: Safe and Strong Communities</p>
<p>Financial Cost</p>	<p>Subject to consultation and any final decision, the relocation of support services to the Civic Centre campus, and the closure of the Rural Activities Garden Centre site would remove the current subsidy to operate the centre, which totalled £137k in 24/25 and is projected to increase in future years.</p>
<p>Select Committees</p>	<p>Residents' Services Select Committee Health and Social Care Select Committee</p>
<p>Ward</p>	<p>Colham and Cowley</p>

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet:

- 1) **Agree to cease retail-side operations based at the Rural Activities Garden Centre in West Drayton on or before 31 July 2025, noting its continued loss-making commercial position and the public subsidy required.**
- 2) **Agree further consultation on the future of the services at the RAGC site for those in receipt of assessed social care services with a commitment to ensure identified needs continue to be met, along with further consultation with those who attend the RAGC as volunteers and on proposals to:**
 - a) **Relocate those with assessed care needs to the Civic Centre Campus in Uxbridge to provide enhanced horticultural services and development opportunities.**
 - b) **Support voluntary service users to move to partner organisations within the local area offering a more diverse range of activities including horticulture and biodiversity, and opportunities for paid employment positions should they desire to do so. The Council would provide training and assistance where required.**
 - c) **Consider no change in the location of voluntary and support services for those with assessed social care needs.**
- 3) **Note the initial engagement that has taken place with those with assessed social care needs and volunteers, with regard to the proposal and duly considers the petitions and views received during the petition hearing held on 11 June 2025, as set out in the report.**
- 4) **Note that staff consultation has commenced as part of the proposal in relation to the closure of the retail-side of the Centre.**
- 5) **Note that there will be further consultation and engagement with regard to the proposals using independent advocacy, where appropriate.**
- 6) **Subject to the conclusion of the above and taking into account consultations and the Equalities Impact Assessment, delegate authority to the Cabinet Member for Community & Environment, to make a decision on the future of the RAGC site and relocation of service provision accordingly.**

Reasons for recommendations

The recommendations propose ceasing retail-side operations at the Rural Activities Garden Centre (RAGC) by 31 July 2025. This is due to the retail element becoming financially unsustainable—requiring a £137k subsidy in 2024/25, with sales income falling by 42% year-on-year. Continuing the retail operation would not only demand further public subsidy but also significant capital investment to meet health and safety standards. In the context of limited usage

and wider financial pressures, this is no longer a sustainable use of Council and taxpayer resources.

The recommendations also propose further consultation on the broader services at the RAGC site. For the individuals with assessed care needs, the Council will continue to meet its statutory duties under the Care Act 2014. The proposed relocation of support services to enhanced garden facilities at the Civic Centre in Uxbridge, is designed not just to maintain, but to enhance the support available. The Civic Centre campus also offers improved integration with Adult Learning and Library Services, proximity to other support networks, and opportunities for more diverse and meaningful engagement.

For volunteers who do not receive statutory assessed social care needs, the Council recognises the value of their contribution and the importance of continuity. The proposal includes consultation with them on tailored support to help them transition to alternative placements with local voluntary sector partners or into employment opportunities. This includes potential partnerships with organisations such as Heathrow and biodiversity-focused groups, offering training, skills development, and broader community involvement.

The recommendations also acknowledge the public interest in the future of the site. Initial engagement with volunteers and those with assessed social care needs has already taken place, and a petition hearing was held on 11 June 2025 in response to two petitions. These views will be carefully considered and will help shape any final decisions.

Staff consultation has commenced to ensure that any changes are managed fairly and transparently, with a focus on minimising redundancies and supporting redeployment wherever possible.

Recognising the practical importance of the RAGC to its volunteer community, the Council is committed to further consultation and engagement. This will include the use of independent advocacy where appropriate, to ensure that all voices are heard and that any transitions are handled with care and dignity.

Finally, subject to the outcome of these consultations and considering the Equalities Impact Assessment, it is proposed that authority be delegated to the Cabinet Member for Community & Environment to make final decisions on the future of the RAGC site and any relocation of services.

Alternative options considered / risk management

No change and to continue to operate as at present – this would not be a financially sustainable option for the reasons stated in the report.

Select Committee comments

None at this stage.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1. The Rural Activities Garden Centre (RAGC) was first established in 1981 and was designed to provide educational and supported learning opportunities for residents with additional needs including learning difficulties, disabilities, and mental health conditions with an emphasis on horticultural therapy. The centre also operates as a community retail garden centre, selling a range of local produce and seasonal plants to the public, some of which are grown on site.
2. Over the last few years, the Council has also seen a reduction in the number of attendees with assessed social care needs who use their personal budgets to attend. These clients have support from the RAGC staff, and some have additional 1-1 support. Other volunteers at the site have enrolled in activities through self-referrals, or signposting from GP services and the Adult Learning service. However, there is no obligation for the Council to provide these services, and there is no charge made for this provision. All gardeners will be offered a social care assessment to see if they should be in receipt of assessed social care services.
3. The RAGC receives a substantial subsidy for services used by a relatively small number of residents. In addition to this, there is an ageing infrastructure at the site, and it is considered that substantial repairs will be needed to ensure that the site can continue to operate in compliance with health and safety regulations as a retail operating garden centre.
4. Subject to consultation, the Council is proposing that for those with assessed social care needs, that their support continues at the Civic Centre campus in Uxbridge, offering horticultural placements across the site's gardens and public realm areas, which now incorporate the new Uxbridge Library and planned new Register Office. This will provide opportunities to greatly enhance the gardens and public realm areas at the Civic Centre campus which will be used for weddings, library events and visitor recreation. It is proposed that those with assessed social care needs will be offered the opportunity to work alongside the Council's green spaces teams to develop and care for this well used outdoor space, whilst also benefitting from working in close proximity to other key support services such as the Adult Learning Centre and the Library Service. Any placements would be in line with the existing weekly plan which users currently follow in order to meet their assessed needs.
5. For the wider volunteer team, the Council does not have a statutory duty to provide services. Nevertheless, the Council has engaged with them as part of these proposals about new volunteer placements of a similar nature through collaborations with voluntary sector partners or by facilitating pathways to paid employment with commercial operators so they can further develop their professional skills. To this end, officers have been working in partnership with third sector organisations, including Heathrow Special Needs Farm and the London Wildlife Trust, to facilitate a much wider range of opportunities should that be required, including routes for employment for those that wish to explore it. Additionally, the Council will continue to offer skills training and other educational opportunities to assist with employment opportunities within the horticulture and biodiversity sphere of learning and skills development. Further engagement and consultation will take place with volunteers as proposed in the report before any final decisions on the RAGC site are made.

6. Whilst considering the proposed relocation of the voluntary and support services that are offered at the site, which is subject to further consultation, it is, however, proposed to cease trading to the public from the garden centre no later than 31 July 2025, as set out in recommendation 1.

Financial Implications

This report recommends closing the retail side of the Centre and consulting on the future of the Rural Activities Garden Centre site and the relocation of support services to the Civic Centre campus for residents with assessed social care needs and support for volunteers who also attend.

The operational cost of the RAGC over the last 2 years is shown in the table below:

	2023/24 Outturn £'000	2024/25 Outturn £'000	Proposed Operating Model
Staffing	281	294	109
Non-Staffing	42	52	31
Income	(71)	(69)	0
Public Health funding	(140)	(140)	(140)
General Fund Subsidy	112	137	0

Income generation at the site has failed to cover operating costs with General Fund subsidy required to maintain the service, £112k in 2023/24 and £137k in 2024/25.

The 2025/26 budget includes an income target of (£167k). If this income were to be achieved, the operation would still require General Fund subsidy of £49k to maintain current operations. However, income generation for prior years has been significantly below the budgeted level. If actual income achieved in 2025-26 is in line with the average of the prior two years at (£70k), this would increase the subsidy required this financial year to £146k.

The cost of the proposal to relocate those with assessed care needs to the Civic Centre Campus in Uxbridge to provide enhanced horticultural services and development opportunities is also shown in the table above. This removes General Fund subsidy and delivers a General Fund base budget saving of £49k per annum. The current level of Public Health funding is to be maintained. Individual Care and Support for the client group will continue to be funded by Adult Social Care.

Furthermore, the implementation costs for garden and public realm enhancements will be provided as part of the social value we receive for works being undertaken to the Civic Centre by our current contractors - at no additional cost to the council.

Maximum redundancy costs are estimated at £171k, however this would be reduced as much as possible through re-deployment options.

The proposed funding strategy for the redundancy costs is for the statutory element to be charged to Transformation Capitalisation, and for the discretionary element along with the pension fund strain costs to be funded from the central redundancy budget included within the 2025/26 MTFS.

The closure of the site also removes the need for capital investment to resolve outstanding condition and Health and Safety issues.

Projected capital costs if the site was to remain open are £1,251k, which would have a revenue impact of approximately £95k per annum to fund the borrowing requirement.

RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION

The benefit or impact upon Hillingdon residents, service users and communities?

The proposals in this report, including those subject to further consultation, aim to deliver a sustainable and integrated model of care for Hillingdon residents. While the retail closure addresses significant financial losses and avoids future capital investment, the Council remains committed to supporting individuals with assessed social care needs by enhancing access to services such as Adult Learning and Library Services at the Civic Centre campus. Volunteers, though not statutory service users, will be supported through tailored transition plans, including opportunities with local partners like Heathrow and biodiversity organisations.

The Equalities Impact Assessment underscores the Council's duty to ensure that any changes do not disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, and that all transitions are managed with dignity, fairness, and inclusive consultation, whilst giving the right support to enable residents to manage through change.

Consultation & Engagement carried out (or required)

On the proposals set out in this report, the Council commenced initial engagement with users on 30th May to advise that the retail side of the garden centre provision would be closing. Adult Social Care have engaged with those that have assessed social care needs to assist them with relocating to the new site. As set out in the report, on the broader services provided at the Centre, the Council plans further consultation and engagement with both volunteers and those with assessed social care needs before any final decisions are made.

Furthermore, two petitions opposing the proposed closure of the Rural Activities Garden Centre were received and considered at a petition hearing on 11 June 2025. The first petition, hosted on change.org, and the second, hosted on the Council's website. At the hearing, both lead petitioners presented their cases directly to the Cabinet Member. These are set out in full in the Appendix, however, key points raised included:

- The lack of early and transparent public consultation.
- The significant social and emotional impact the closure would have on vulnerable adults with learning disabilities and their families.
- The value of the RAGC as a long-standing, community-based social care resource.
- Objections to the portrayal of the RAGC as a commercial operation, with petitioners highlighting its social enterprise ethos.

- Requests for an 18-month grace period to develop an alternative business model and calls for an independent public consultation.

The Cabinet Member acknowledged the contributions of petitioners and confirmed that their views would be made available to Cabinet as part of the decision-making process. In response to the petitions and the concerns raised, the Cabinet Member has taken them into account in this report, including as follows:

- The recommendations reaffirm the Council's commitment to continuing statutory support for individuals with assessed care needs, ensuring that any relocation—such as to the Civic Centre campus—will enhance access to integrated services and opportunities.
- The recommendations include a clear commitment to further consultation and engagement with volunteers, including the use of independent advocacy where appropriate, to ensure all voices are heard before any final decision is made.
- The Cabinet Member has also ensured that the Equalities Impact Assessment and the outcomes of the petition hearing are integral to the final decision-making process.
- The recommendations reflect a balanced approach - acknowledging the financial and operational challenges of maintaining the RAGC retail arm in its current form, while prioritising the wellbeing, continuity of care, and future opportunities for both users with assessed social care needs and volunteers.

The Cabinet Member for Community and Environment has also received and considered 531 letters from residents asking for the centre to remain open.

CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS

Corporate Finance

Corporate Finance have reviewed this report and concur with the Financial Implications set out above, noting the recommendations to seek approval to close the retail operations at the RAGC before or by the 31 July 2025, due to the financial loss and the public subsidy required to operate, alongside this approval to undertake further consultation on the future of the care and volunteer services at the RAGC site, including options to relocate, supporting transitions to local partners or maintaining current arrangements.

Furthermore, it is noted that even if the RAGC 2025/26 approved Income target budget of £167k was achieved there would still be a need for a General Fund subsidy of £49k, however, based on prior year income achieved there is potential that the subsidy could increase to £146k.

It is also noted, if the proposed operating model is to be taken forward this option would eliminate the need for General Fund subsidy, which would equate to a general fund base budget saving of £49k. The potential maximum redundancy costs are estimated at £171k, with the view to mitigate this amount through redeployment options, with the remaining cost being proposed to be funded by capital receipts under the Transformation Capitalisation directive, in the event that capital receipts are insufficient, these costs will be funded from the approved 2025/26 budget for the RAGC.

Additionally, if the RAGC site were to remain open there would be a necessity for essential health and safety works to be completed, the projected costs for these works are £1,261k.

Legal

There are no legal impediments to the recommendations set out within this report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

NIL

PETITION HEARING APPENDIX

Two petitions were received by the Council in relation to proposals regarding the future of the Rural Activities Garden Centre on West Drayton Road. They were both considered at a petition hearing held on 11 June 2025 in the Council Chamber, attended by each lead petitioner and other Members of the public with an interest in the matter.

Details of the two petitions received are set out below:

Petition 1 - Stop LBH closing Rural Activities Garden Centre - an irreplaceable social care resource. Petition hosted on change.org

At the time of finalising this Cabinet report, the online petition had over 5,932 signatories with the following preamble:

At a hastily arranged meeting on 30th May, young adults with learning disabilities and their families were shocked to be informed by Hillingdon Council that it had decided to close the award-winning Rural Activities Garden Centre (RAGC) on West Drayton Road, without consultation with those impacted.

For over 40 years, vulnerable young adults with autism and/or learning disabilities from all over Hillingdon have attended this centre for social support and to benefit from confidence-building activities by working as volunteer gardeners, supervised by the brilliant staff at the centre. This work produces plants and other garden items for sale to the public, substantially subsidising the centre. At the time of writing, the council web site describes RAGC as its "hidden gem".

Over 50 people attended the meeting on 30th May and, sad to say, there were tears from some of those who attend the centre after they learnt of the planned closure. Their professional carers and a local GP at the meeting expressed alarm at the impact any closure would have on the lives of the vulnerable people they care for.

We have very little time to stop this closure as Cllr. Eddie Lavery (Ickenham and Harefield Ward) is planning to rubber stamp the closure decision at the Cabinet meeting at the Civic Centre on 26th June (from 7pm). This meeting can be attended by members of the public as observers. If this closure goes ahead, it will have a life-changing impact on some vulnerable young adults so surely there should be proper consultation. If you agree, it would be great if you could sign this petition to request that the closure decision is withdrawn so that the irreplaceable support provided by this unique centre can continue.

Petition 2 - Stop the London Borough of Hillingdon's Closure of the Rural Activities Garden Centre on West Drayton Road, Uxbridge UB8 3JZ. Petition hosted on the Council website.

At the time of finalising this Cabinet report, the online petition had over 1013 signatories with the following preamble:

We the undersigned petition Hillingdon Council to Stop the Closure of the Rural Activities Garden Centre on West Drayton Road, Uxbridge UB8 3JZ

For over 40 years, vulnerable young adults with autism and/or learning disabilities from all over Hillingdon have attended the award-winning Rural Activities Garden Centre (R.A.G.C.) on West Drayton Road, Uxbridge UB8 3JZ

These young adults have significantly benefited from confidence-building activities by working as volunteer gardeners, supervised by the brilliant staff at the centre. This work produces plants and other garden items for sale to the public, substantially subsidising the centre. At the time of writing, the London Borough of Hillingdon web site describes R.A.G.C. as its "hidden gem".

At a hastily arranged meeting on Friday, 30th May 2025, young adults with learning disabilities and their families were shocked to be informed by the London Borough of Hillingdon that it had decided to close the award-winning Rural Activities Garden Centre (R.A.G.C.).

Over 50 people attended the meeting and, sad to say, there were tears from some of those who attended the centre after they learnt of the planned closure. Their professional carers and a local GP at the meeting expressed alarm at the impact any closure would have on the lives of the vulnerable people they care for.

Councillor Eddie Lavery (Ickenham and Harefield Ward) is planning to make the closure decision at the Cabinet meeting at the Civic Centre on 26th June 2025 from 7.00 p.m. This meeting can be attended by members of the public as observers.

We the undersigned petition the London Borough of Hillingdon Council to stop the closure of the Rural Activities Garden Centre (R.A.G.C.) on West Drayton Road.

Key Objections Against the Proposed Closure.

The closure of the Rural Activities Garden Centre (RAGC) would result in:

- 1) a significant, negative and detrimental impact on the lives of the vulnerable young adults with autism and/or learning disabilities who use the centre.*
- 2) a significant, negative and detrimental life-changing impact on the lives of the families, staff and professionals who support and care for the young adults with learning disabilities*
- 3) the removal of vital and irreplaceable social support for vulnerable young adults with autism and/or learning disabilities*

In its proposed closure of the Rural Activities Garden Centre (RAGC), the London Borough of Hillingdon has acted unfairly and undemocratically:

- 4) The families and young adults with learning disabilities were informed of the proposed closure at extremely short notice on Friday, 30th May 2025, less than a month before the Council Cabinet's decision is to be made on Thursday 26th June 2025.*
- 5) Limited time was afforded to those interested and concerned parties to express their opposition to the proposed closure i.e. families, staff, professionals and members*

of the medical profession who support and care for young adults with learning disabilities.

- 6) *The Council has failed to provide a wider local public consultation and engagement exercise and has failed to provide any transparency on its proposed closure of the centre.*
- 7) *Accordingly the Council has not consulted more broadly and widely with those both directly impacted by the proposed closure and local residents.*

At the petition hearing, each lead petitioner presented their petition and case to the Cabinet Member, in accordance with the Council's petition scheme. These are set out below in summary, in the minutes of the petition hearing:

Minutes from petition hearing on 11 June 2025

"The Cabinet Member considered two petitions in relation to the Rural Activities Garden Centre (RAGC).

The Cabinet Member first considered the petition: *Stop the London Borough of Hillingdon's Closure of the Rural Activities Garden Centre on West Drayton Road, Uxbridge UB8 3JZ*, hosted on the Council website. The lead petitioner was in attendance and addressed the Cabinet Member. Concerns were raised regarding the closure of the RAGC, particularly given the lack of public consultation and the Council's failure to meet statutory and legal obligations. The RAGC's enriching environment, which included various facilities and opportunities for local schools and groups, was emphasised. It was submitted that the proposal to improve horticultural social care services at the Civic Centre was misleading as it would leave many people with additional needs without provision. The Council's portrayal of the RAGC as a commercial garden centre was challenged as it was noted the RAGC's remit was for it to be run as a social enterprise and not as commercial business. It was also noted there had been funding challenges since April 2010. Council withdrawal of funding from the RAGC's café and, at Council request, withdrawal of RAGC applied for grants was further highlighted. An 18-month grace period for the RAGC to create a social enterprise business plan was requested. The need for an independent public consultation was emphasised and an assessment of alternative options was urged.

The lead petitioner for the change.org petition: *Stop LBH closing Rural Activities Garden Centre - an irreplaceable social care resource* addressed the Cabinet Member, emphasising the RAGC's irreplaceable value as a social care resource. The RAGC's positive impact, particularly for users with learning disabilities and mental health issues was highlighted. The long-term commitment of volunteers and the community atmosphere at the RAGC was noted and its support work and collaboration with other organisations was emphasised. The Council's lack of consultation with impacted families was questioned. Petitioners called for the withdrawal of the closure plan without a proper public consultation.

The Cabinet Member thanked the petitioners for carefully stating their views and noted that this information would be made available at the Cabinet meeting."