



# THE HIGH WYCOMBE SOCIETY

## *newsletter*

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### **An Asset to the Town**

SIX YEARS have passed since The Environment Centre on Holywell Mead opened its doors to the public. Converted from a derelict café with one-off capital grants totalling £600,000, mostly from Biffaward's Landfill Tax fund, it has become a magnet for environmental campaigners and has provided a constant stream of stimulating and attractive exhibitions on environmental themes. A band of hard-working volunteers have watched the doors, supervised the children's activities, kept the building tidy and raised funds to support its work. 20,000 visitors last year – adults and children – have been fascinated by the Spring webcam in the blue tits' nest, the colony of bees who live in The Centre but make their way out through a tiny tunnel in the wall to forage for nectar, and all the other exhibits.

Now, it seems, all this may be under threat when the current lease expires in October. The Centre costs £30,000 a year to run, including a permanent part-time member of staff, heating (recycled woodchips!) and insurance. Annual grants from Wycombe District Council have covered about one-third of this total and the rest has been raised by the Trustees' own efforts. But now, understandably in these straitened times, the grants have ceased, and also, we hear, a "market rent" of over £8,000 per annum has been proposed.

The building is, legally, still the Council's property. In October they could, in theory (and subject to planning requirements and the terms of the original grants), take it over and "redeploy" it for any purpose. But would it really make sense, at a time when the national political parties are vying with each other to be "green", to lose this environmental asset to our town? And could the Council or anyone else really run the building as efficiently as the team of volunteers who last year contributed 5,500 hours of their time free of charge?

Perhaps the Trustees can do even more to put the enterprise on a stronger footing, e.g. by strengthening their ties with education. However, we do hope that the town's decision-makers will recognise what a local asset we have in The Environment Centre and will join with the Trustees to find a way to enable it to continue.

*Chris Woodman*



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...caring about our town: past, present and future

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