

**PUBLIC HALLS COMMITTEE OF THE WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL**

**Held on Monday 11 November 2013  
at 6pm in the Council Chamber, Town Hall, Witney**

**Present**

Councillor: T J Morris (Chairman)

Councillors: Mrs J C Baker                      P J Dorward  
                  Mrs B J Churchill                D S Enright  
                  R F N Curry                            C Holliday (substitute for J S King)

Officers: Town Clerk    Facilities Manager  
                  Deputy Town Clerk

Also present: 2 members of the public

H490 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for their absence were received from Cllr M J C Curry and Cllr J King.

H491 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest in matters to be discussed at the meeting.

H492 **MINUTES**

**RESOLVED:** that the Minutes of the meeting held on 16<sup>TH</sup> September 2013 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman with the following amendments:

Page 2 – Councillor Kind to be changed to Councillor King

Page 3 – Witney Feat to be changed to Witney Feast

Page 5 – ODUÉ to be changed to OJEU

H493 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There were two members of the public present but none wished to address the Committee.

H494 **USAGE STATISTICS AND FURTHER INFORMATION ON HALL HIRE**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Facilities Supervisor as circulated with the agenda, and the revised statistical information tabled at the meeting. The Facilities Manager explained the original report had been based on 9 weeks usage, when in fact it was only an 8 week period.

Cllr R Curry commented that 69% usage at Burwell Hall was excellent compared to 46% at Langdale Hall. He stressed that the Town Council should target 60% to get a decent income.

Considering the closure of Langdale Hall, Cllr Baker commented she had concerns about stating a date at this juncture in case any reports that might be released in the future differed from this. Cllr Morris said that the general idea would be for the Town Council to transfer the bookings and hall hirers to the Corn Exchange. Cllr R Curry stressed that until the Quantity Surveyor's report was received, a decision could not be made on the date of

the closure of Langdale Hall. Once the report had been received, the Council could consider when it would be realistic to let people know.

Cllr Morris suggested that the discussion should be deferred to the end of the meeting and he was minded that bookings should be taken up to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2014. The Facilities Manager reminded members that the Langdale Hall would have to close when the boiler gave up, regardless of any plans to close it.

Cllr Enright congratulated officers on customer feedback. He explained he had received a comment from a hall user that the Town Council should move to taking online bookings. The Town Clerk explained that officers had previously looked into various computerised bookings systems however those that could manage and encrypt personal data including credit card information, had a significant costs attached to it. There was currently an email document that could be completed and returned. Cllr Enright said payments were a different issue but asked whether an online form with click boxes could be introduced. Cllr Morris suggested that an electronic bookings system could be looked at when the Corn Exchange reopened. Cllr Churchill stated that from recent personal experience it was very easy to ring and book the hall.

**RECOMMENDED:** that the report be noted.

H495 **HEALTH AND SAFETY UPDATE**

The Facilities Manager advised that there were no issues to currently bring to Members attention.

H496 **FINANCIAL REPORT**

The Committee received and considered the report of the RFO/Deputy Town Clerk as circulated with the agenda.

Councillor Dorward was pleased to note an underspend and asked the RFO how it had happened. She advised that it was a lot to do with the Corn Exchange being closed. There was an annual budget of £31,718 which had not yet been spent.

The Chairman, Cllr Morris, asked if the property maintenance budget did not get spent could it be transferred to the Corn Exchange project. The RFO confirmed that it would be transferred to an earmarked reserve at the year-end.

**RECOMMENDED:** that the report be noted.

H497 **REVISED REVENUE BUDGET 2013/14 AND ESTIMATES 2014/15**

The Committee received and considered the reports of the RFO/Deputy Town Clerk as circulated with the agenda.

A) **Revised Revenue Budget 2013/14 and Base Revenue Budget for 2014/15**

The RFO explained the revisions to the 2013/14 budget and the estimates for 2014/15. She had also produced an alternative budget showing the effects of opening the Corn Exchange and closing the Langdale Hall during the next financial year. She highlighted the fact that she predicted income would probably fall without rear access into the Corn Exchange making it accessible for some of the hirers currently using Langdale Hall. The RFO also brought to Members attention some of the budget lines which would remain the same even if one of

the halls remained not in use, such as the non-domestic rates, as she was unsure if the exemption would continue.

Cllr R Curry queried the recharges from Central Support and the Works Department and pointed out that the Committee wasn't looking at like for like figures. Cllr Enright pointed out that the Langdale Hall hire income had dropped to £4,700. The RFO confirmed that it should read £47,000.

Turning to the recommendations in the RFO's report, members decided to defer the recommendation relating to the consideration of a loan for the Corn Exchange and the effect on the precept until a later item on the agenda.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. that the report be noted
  2. that the revised revenue budget for 2013/14 is agreed and adopted
  3. to adopt and incorporate scenario A into the draft budget for 2014/15
- B) Schedule of Proposed Hall Hire Fees and Charges 2014/15

The Committee received and considered the Facilities Manager's report as previously circulated.

Cllr Enright felt the changes in price were substantial and asked whether there were any observations on occupation levels due to this. He also asked whether the charges were the same for each session e.g. morning, afternoon etc. The Facilities Manager confirmed that charges were the same and that the Town Council offered a discount and an hourly rate to subsidise the daily rates and as a consequence there had been an increase in bookings.

The Facilities Manager explained that there was a limited amount of data for comparison purposes from prior to her joining the Council, but hoped that useful data was now being captured. The Town Clerk also explained that the previous charging schedule had been very complicated and was now much simpler.

Cllr Enright commented that he had heard people say that Langdale Hall hire was expensive. Cllr Dorward asked what facilities were now in the Langdale Hall kitchen. The Facilities Manager confirmed that there was a dishwasher, but no cooking facilities. There was a fridge and people were able to make hot drinks. Cllr Morris remarked that in the past there had been some discussion about refitting the kitchen, but the Committee had decided not to progress it at the time. The Facilities Manager said it was easy to use Burwell Hall where a kitchen was available and she felt it would be a good idea to have a kitchen in the Corn Exchange when it re-opened.

Cllr Baker queried the hall hire rates for group 1. The Facilities Manager explained that the exclusive hire rate had reduced slightly due to the removal of the kitchen hire cost from the whole cost. Cllr Dorward asked about the hall hire deposits and the Facilities Manager explained they were held against damages in the halls.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. that the report be noted

2. that the proposed hire charge increases be agreed.

H498 **CORN EXCHANGE PROJECT**

A) **Report from Advisory Board Meeting of 24 October 2013**

Cllr R Curry gave a brief overview from the last meeting and explained that they were now in the process of preparing an application to Heritage Lottery Funding. Originally the intention was to make an application for £5m, under the national scheme, however given the difficulty in meeting all of the criteria the Advisory Board had recommended applying to the regional scheme for the lesser amount of under £2m. An application would go to the Heritage Lottery Fund in February 2014.

The current proposal was to get the hall open in phase one within the funds already available. If the Heritage Lottery Fund grant was awarded, it would be possible to progress to phase two. The current plan was to get phase one started and finished before the end of next year.

Cllr Baker explained there were a lot of items discussed at the last meeting including the cost and scope of work, funding operations for loans, progress on applications and fundraising activities, plans for profit and loss for the Corn Exchange. A lot of this work was concerned with the application. Cllrs Curry, Baker, along with the Town Clerk and Jacqui Ibbotson were having another meeting later in the week with the Heritage Lottery Officers to get a better idea of what would be involved.

The Town Clerk explained that there was £100,000 from Section 106 funding from the Curbridge agreement and it was proposed to divert funds from an earmarked reserve to the Corn Exchange project. She also reiterated the complexity of meeting the Heritage Lottery Fund's criteria for the national fund so consequently the Council's only option was now to apply for the Enterprise Fund.

Cllr Enright asked if any other funding pots were being explored. Cllr R Curry remarked there were other charities that could be approached for funds for fitting the Corn Exchange out and equipment. He explained that these bodies would only give funds once the main works had been done. Cllr Enright suggested a fundraising idea in which people could "purchase" a seat and have their name attached to it.

The Town Clerk reminded the committee that the Council had several other large projects at present where funding had been sought from WREN etc. consequently this meant that the Council could only apply to those organisations once in a given time frame.

B) **Public Works Loan Board**

The Committee received and considered the report of the RFO/Deputy Town Clerk as circulated with the agenda.

Cllr R Curry commented that he had been keen to find out about the Public Works Loan Board as it would present all available options to the Committee. Cllr Dorward noted that the WODC loan was 0.5% cheaper than the Public Works Loan Board. Cllr Morris thought that the loan should be looked at as part of the budget setting process; otherwise it would need to wait until the next year. Cllr Churchill asked how many loans the Council could take out. The Deputy Town Clerk/RFO said she had spoken to the Public Works Loan Board and several small loans could be taken out as required.

Cllr R Curry asked when the precept had to go in. The Deputy Clerk/RFO said the final date was January. Cllr R Curry explained by January the cost implications of the project should be known.

Cllr Enright explained that West Oxfordshire District Council had a grant pot available which was a commercial pot based on a safe lending criteria. The District considered it safe to loan to local town or parish councils. The Deputy Town Clerk/RFO mentioned that she had spoken to the Strategic Director, Frank Wilson, who had confirmed there were no applications from other Councils for next year as yet.

H499 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

In response to Councillor Enright's question the Town Clerk explained the reason for going into closed session was to consider commercially sensitive information from a potential consultant.

**RESOLVED:** that the Press and Public be excluded from the Meeting in accordance with Section 1 of the Local Government Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted.

Cllrs Baker and Enright voted against this resolution.

H500 **CORN EXCHANGE PROJECT**

The Committee received and considered the Town Clerk's confidential report, previously circulated.

Cllr Enright said he was not against choosing a supplier if the quote looked sensible. Cllr Curry considered the quote to be sensible and competitive. The Town Clerk showed a report similar to what would be produced by the consultants, as detailed in her confidential report. She reminded Members of the condition survey and explained how this needed to be updated, and would form the basis for the feasibility study relating to the proposed maintenance and refurbishment of the Corn Exchange.

Cllr Churchill cautioned that any plans would have to go through planning and asked when that would happen. The Town Clerk explained these plans were to reopen and include all of the utilities, but the Council would need to be guided by the professionals with that regard. Cllr R Curry explained phase one would include rewiring and structural changes inside such as the walls panelling. Any changes would be minor and within Officers' remit to organise. Cllr R Curry explained that the plans would also advise the Town Council in terms of cost and what could be achieved. Cllr Churchill asked if it was planned to use the funding mentioned earlier in the meeting. Cllr Morris said that planning permission was granted so the S106 funding should be secure and this funding could be advanced. The Town Clerk explained that she had seen the agreement and the funding would be coming to the Town Council divided up into quarter's dependant on triggering occupancy levels of the housing development.

Cllr Churchill asked how long it might take if the Langdale Hall was to be sold. The Town Clerk explained that the Heritage Lottery Fund application would be submitted by February 2014 and the results of that would not be known until July 2014, this being the first round. Cllr Morris thought the Langdale Hall should not be sold for less than the offer that had been turned down a year ago. Cllr R Curry said that no decision would be made at this stage. Cllr Morris said there was work being carried with view to a market appraisal, and the Town Clerk confirmed that the Council's property consultants were currently working on a red

book valuation and sorting some legal queries out in readiness to market the property next year.

Cllr Baker said the aim was to get the Corn Exchange open, but until the report comes back the costs would not be known. Cllr R Curry stated that if the Langdale Hall was closed it would save in the region of £100,000. Cllr Morris suggested the sale of Langdale Hall should not be considered until phase one of the Corn Exchange was complete. Cllr Churchill commented she would prefer the sale of Langdale Hall to happen without the Town Council taking on a loan which the public would have to pay for. The Town Clerk said there was an earmarked reserve for Halls which was spent on Langdale Hall and the Corn Exchange Façade.

Cllr Churchill was happy to propose that funds already identified be spent but she would not support the Council taking out a loan. The Town Clerk explained there was no urgency to sell Langdale Hall as the Council would not have confirmation of funding for phase two until May/June 2014.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. to note the Town Clerk's confidential report
2. that the consultants identified in the Town Clerk's confidential report be appointed to carry out a feasibility study, and on this occasion the Council's financial regulations be relaxed.

Returning to the deferred Officer recommendations from earlier in the evening it was **RECOMMENDED:**

3. that the correspondence from the Cactus Society be noted
4. to accept bookings for the Langdale Hall for 2015 but to state that these may be transferred to the Corn Exchange.
5. that no decision is taken with regard to applying for a Public Works Loan until the feasibility study commissioned in recommendation 2 above is received, if appropriate.

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The meeting closed at 7.20pm.

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Chair.