

PUBLIC HALLS COMMITTEE OF WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL

Held on Monday 10 March 2014
At 6pm in the Council Chamber, Town Hall, Witney

Present

Councillor: T J Morris (Chairman)

Councillors:	Mrs J C Baker	C Holliday (substitute for RFN Curry)
	Mrs B J Churchill	J S King
	P J Dorward	C K Woodward
	D S Enright	

Officers:	Town Clerk	Facilities Supervisor
	Mrs E Snook	

2 members of the public and 1 member of the press

H112 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

An apology for his absence was received from Councillor R F N Curry.

H113 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Mrs J C Baker declared a personal interest in agenda item 9 – Sale of Langdale Hall – as one of the agents is known to her.

H114 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2014 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman

H115 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

The members of the public present did not wish to speak.

H116 **OPERATIONAL REPORT**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Facilities Supervisor, as circulated with the agenda.

The Town Clerk commented that the Facilities Supervisor had been very pro active in contacting local businesses to directly promote the halls. The Facilities Supervisor explained that he found that passive advertising did not often produce bookings and he confirmed that this direct approach was producing interest and bookings. He commented that it was difficult to accommodate new regular bookings but there was availability for ad hoc and one-off usage.

Cllr Mrs Baker suggested that contact could be made with the various “breakfast” meetings. The Facilities Supervisor agreed that this was a good idea and that he would welcome input from Members in order to contact the right people.

Cllr Morris suggested that the figures advising of hall usage would be useful as a percentage of the revenue available. The Town Clerk commented that this would be complicated because of the charging structure and Cllr King advised that he would like the current format to remain.

Cllr Enright suggested that with the closure of local establishments, this could be a good time to revamp the Friday evening fund-raisers which had been successful in the past. It was commented that many of the local public houses, etc. were finding times hard as more people went into Oxford for Friday and Saturday night entertainment.

RECOMMENDED:

- 1) that the report be noted.
- 2) that officers examine the computer booking system to see whether it is possible to present a revenue percentage figure alongside the existing usage figures.

H117 FINANCIAL REPORT

The Committee received and considered the reports of the Town Clerk, as circulated with the agenda.

- a) Income and expenditure report to 31 January 2014

In answer to a question, the Town Clerk confirmed that the production of the report by the Council's contract accountants DCK Beavers was working satisfactorily. She also confirmed the details of costs relating to contract mobile phones and the three phones within the halls.

- b) Medium Term Financial Strategy and Savings

The Town Clerk's report contained details of the Council's medium term financial strategy for the current year and a three-year forward projection. She commented that changes would be made based on the position with Langdale Hall and Corn Exchange going forward, with figures for the Corn Exchange being based on information from two years ago, before its closure.

The Chairman requested that Members consider the medium term strategy in order to identify any potential cost savings, which could then be investigated.

Cllr Dorward queried the costs for the Corn Exchange and the Town Clerk commented that there were on going costs relating to fire alarm compliance and testing, which required a telephone line, there were also costs relating to a retainer for alarm maintenance, water rates, electricity, etc. She confirmed that a rates rebate had been received.

RECOMMENDED: that the reports be noted

H118 EXCLUSION OF PRESS & PUBLIC

The Committee considered the Town Clerk's recommendation to exclude the press and public because the next two agenda items were believed to be commercially sensitive and prejudicial in the public interest.

In so doing, Cllr J King proposed that Mr Powell should attend the meeting for the item on the Corn Exchange, as a member of the Corn Exchange Advisory Board.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that in accordance with section 1(2) of the Public Bodies (admission to Meetings) Act 1960, and as extended by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the public, including the press, be excluded from the meeting because of the confidential nature of the following business to be transacted.

(As Jacqui Ibbotson from Oxford Inspires had not arrived, it was agreed to consider the following item first. The two members of the public and the press left the meeting at this point.)

H119 **SALE OF LANGDALE HALL**

a) Langdale Hall Red Book Valuation

The Committee received and considered the Valuation Report from the Council's agent, as circulated with agenda.

The Chairman confirmed that the Red Book Valuation had been carried out by an agent fitting the appropriate criteria and was an independent member of RICS. The agents had produced the report for guidance in a professional way and were in no way connected to the Council and were free from bias. The report did not formulate the value, rather what the principles should be. He added that he was surprised at the value.

Members considered the suggested value and commented that the rights of way could devalue the property, and that any interested parties could be looking at the land rather than the building.

RECOMMENDED: that the report be noted.

(As Jacqui Ibbotson had arrived, it was agreed to consider the following item at this point, she entered the meeting, together with Mr Powell from the Corn Exchange Advisory Board, at this point, being 6.35pm.)

H120 **CORN EXCHANGE PROJECT**

a) Heritage Lottery Fund Application

Jacqui Ibbotson, Oxford Inspires, was in attendance to give a verbal update.

She advised that the Corn Exchange Advisory Board had undertaken research into capital funding, and found that many funding streams were either no longer available, or the project did not meet the criteria; they had therefore been directed to the Heritage Lottery Fund as the most suitable to obtain a sizeable grant. Officers from the Heritage Lottery Fund had been to visit and had met with Members and Council Officers. She outlined the basis of the bid, and expanded on the details given in the Town Clerk's confidential report.

Jacqui commented that the bid had needed to stress the difference it could make to the community – to promote working with volunteers, include disabled and baby facilities and provide a good environment. The Advisory Board had been advised to keep the application under £2million and therefore it would be necessary to look again at the tenders from the architects should this bid be successful.

Jacqui advised that a response to the initial application would be received around June, and if accepted there would be a timetable for the stage 2 application and a development period of a year to discuss the design, heritage work, etc. with the opportunity to clarify the sample design and make any changes. (She envisaged a consultation in August, a visit in October and a final consultation in February.) It might also prove necessary to appoint a few staff members (freelance) during the project time.

Jacqui commented that if successful, the Heritage Lottery Fund would be looking for partner funding, e.g. sale of Langdale Hall, support from WODC and targets for fund raising by the Town Council within the community, etc.

Cllr Mrs Baker thanked Jacqui Ibbotson for attending the meeting and giving a very clear report. She was aware of the enormous effort required by all concerned with the bid and was hopeful of positive news later in the year.

In answer to a question, Jacqui confirmed that there would be opportunities to alter the plan as long as the outcomes remained the same. It was agreed that funding and/or grants from WODC and OCC would be good.

Cllr Mrs Churchill commented that she would be in favour of consultation with the public and it was agreed that this would be part of the process if the bid were successful.

Members agreed that this was a wonderful opportunity to promote the heritage of Witney, to encourage tourism and to be inclusive of other sites. It was agreed that this was the best way forward for a sizeable grant and that consideration of other options could be discussed if the bid was unsuccessful.

The Chairman thanked the Corn Exchange Advisory Board and the Town Clerk for their hard work on the project.

RECOMMENDED:

- 1) that the reports be noted.
- 2) that copies of the bid be circulated to Members.

(Jacqui Ibbotson left the meeting at this point, being 7.05pm.)

b) Update on Phase 1 of the Corn Exchange Refurbishment

The Committee received and considered the report of the Town Clerk, as circulated with the agenda.

The report advised that the pre-refurbishment asbestos survey showed that there was asbestos in the building. The agents will meet the contractors on site to discuss a plan of disposal or rectification. The Town Clerk advised this would put back the tendering process until the impact on the Council's overall budget is clear. She agreed to keep Members up to date as information is received.

Members discussed these findings, agreeing that this work did need to be carried out, following which they could consider how it impacted on the phase 1 timeline and budget.

Members were pleased to note that the Town Clerk had had an encouraging meeting with the Planning and Conservation Officers from West Oxfordshire District Council.

RECOMMENDED:

- 1) that the report be noted.
- 2) that the work to deal with the asbestos be agreed, with an estimate of the costs being referred to the next Council meeting.
- 3) that once the above work is completed (2), the Committee re-examines the budget for phase 1.

(Mr T Powell left the meeting at this point).

H121 **SALE OF LANGDALE HALL**

b) Town Clerk's Report

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk, as circulated with the agenda.

Cllr Mrs Churchill queried whether the previous offer was still on the table. The Town Clerk confirmed that they remained interested; however she had been advised that the sale should be on the open market.

Cllr Enright was concerned that the Council could find itself in a situation where the Langdale Hall was sold and the Corn Exchange was still shut. He was advised that the Langdale Hall could be taken off the market should the Corn Exchange project be delayed.

The Committee discussed the three companies that had been approached to act as the Council's agents for the sale of Langdale Hall. In consideration of "openness", Cllr Enright commented that he would like the local press to be advised of the situation and the Town Clerk agreed that a press release would be issued in due course.

RECOMMENDED:

- 1) that the report be noted.
- 2) that Langdale Hall should be put on the open market for sale.
- 3) that agent no.3 as detailed in the Town Clerk's confidential report be appointed as the Council's agents for the sale of Langdale Hall.

The meeting closed at 7.30pm

Chairman