

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

**Held on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2013  
at 6pm in the Council Chamber, Town Hall, Witney**

**Present**

Councillor: T J Morris (Chairman)

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

Officers:	Town Clerk	Facilities Manager
	Democratic Services Officer	Deputy Town Clerk

H406 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

An apology for her absence was received by Mrs J C Baker.

H407 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

H408 **MINUTES**

**RESOLVED:**

- i) that the Minutes of the meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2013 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.
- ii) that the Minutes of the meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2013 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

H409 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

Minutes of 15<sup>th</sup> July 2013

Cllr King asked for an update in relation to the lease of the Madley Park Hall. The Chairman reported that he and Cllr R Curry had met with the Town Clerk and agreed minor changes. The lease had now gone back to the Trust's solicitor. Cllr King asked for a timescale for the finalisation of the lease and the Clerk explained that as the lease was now with the solicitors this was uncertain.

H410 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

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

H411 **OPERATIONAL REPORT**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Facilities Manager. Cllr Enright commented that he believed that before the opening of the iZi bar, the Langdale Hall had been busy with discos and he wondered that now that iZi had closed, this type of booking would increase again. The Facilities Manager replied that there were in fact only two free weekends in the Langdale Hall until Christmas.

Cllr Dorward thanked the Facilities Manager for her report and asked for her opinion on whether bookings were increasing. She replied that she felt that they were definitely increasing, although the Drill Hall in the Langdale Hall was still quiet during the daytime. There had been enquiries for Saturdays and Sundays so there was potential for these to be filled.

Cllr Enright said that it was good news that bookings were increasing, but wondered if the opening of the Corn Exchange should be revaluated if the other buildings were being used increasingly. Cllr Dorward commented that money had been spent on Burwell Hall and this had contributed to its popularity.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

That the report be noted.

H412 **HEALTH AND SAFETY UPDATE**

The Facilities Manager that there had been several failures in the emergency lighting test at the Langdale Hall and that she would report back to the next meeting with costs for repairs.

The Health and Safety of the Witney Feast Fair had gone smoothly this year. Cllr Dorward noted that the parking at the fair appeared to me more orderly and asked if this was different to previous years. The Facilities Manager confirmed that there was an ordered plan in operation this year that included access for emergency services.

Cllr Enright commented that the service at the Golden Gallopers the previous evening had been lovely.

H413 **FINANCIAL REPORT**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Town Clerk/RFO. She explained that the electricity bill at Burwell was high due to the cold snap and also the warm weather in the summer, resulting in increased use of heating and air conditioning. The Facilities Supervisor would be monitoring this and was submitting regular meter readings. The Deputy Town Clerk/RFO noted that gas and electricity costs were due to increase by 10% per annum.

Cllr Churchill questioned whether the lighting in the Burwell Hall was energy efficient. The Facilities Manager replied that it was the most energy efficient possible without changing all of the light fittings. She had in fact reported to the Council on lighting and possible changes to more energy efficient bulbs and fittings earlier in the year, but the changes had not been approved. The Chairman explained that at the time the cost savings had been negligible, but if energy costs were rising perhaps this should be revisited. Cllr Churchill agreed. Cllr Kind queried if timers could be used on the lights but the Facilities Manger explained that retro fitting was difficult.

Cllr Dorward asked why there was a variance between the actual and budgeted figures on the Halls Expenditure. The Deputy Town Clerk/RFO explained that this was due to staff recharges which were done on a quarterly basis. She also pointed out that the staff had used a large percentage of the cleaning materials budget and that the Facilities Supervisor was looking into this.

Cllr Eaglestone asked if the cleaners supplied their own materials. The Facilities Manager explained that they did not, as she could purchase them at a discounted rate and had greater control over what products were used. The halls were always clean and there was a specific regime in place.

Cllr Eaglestone noted that the Corn Exchange was in profit, and the Chairman noted that this was due to the refund on the rates.

Cllr R Curry said that when he compared the costs of the Langdale Hall to the income received, it appeared that hirers were effectively receiving a 250% subsidy, and he felt the same applied to the Burwell Hall. He queried what a fair subsidy for hirers should be and thought that members should be debating increasing the hire charges. He had agreed that community users should receive a subsidy, but not to that extent.

The Chairman thought it was a difficult position as an increase in charges could result in a decrease in hire. Cllr R Curry said that in that case the future of the halls should be considered carefully. The Chairman felt that the halls should be looked at but not in isolation but as part of a bigger picture.

Cllr King suggested that this should be done when next year's charges were being set.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

That the report be noted.

**H414 DISCRETIONARY GRANTS**

The Committee received and considered correspondence relating to grants for Witney Film festival and the Rotary Club of Witney. Cllr Enright thought that the requests were very different. If members agreed to give the film festival free hall hire in preference to the reduced hire rate that had previously been approved, then the Town Council would be seen to be supporting a community event. If the Council gave the Rotary Club free hall hire for its ball, he felt that the Council may as well give a donation to the Rotary Club's charity. Cllr R Curry agreed.

Cllr Dorward felt that if free hire was given to the film festival then it should be made clear that this was not a precedent for future years. He also noted that free hall hire impacted on the availability of the halls for other users. The Clerk commented that the current Council had preferred to give free hall hire if appropriate rather than a monetary grant. The Terms and Conditions of the Grant Applications stated that the Council would consider grants in kind in the form of reduced hire fees.

Cllr King said that he felt that Rotary provided a good service to the town and that free hall hire once a year was a fair recompense. Cllr Dorward agreed with him, especially as Rotary helped at the Carnival, Witney Feat and the Christmas Lights Switch On.

**RECOMENDATIONS:**

- i) To agree to free hall hire for the Witney Film Festival
- ii) To agree to free hall hire for the Rotary Club ball.

**H415 CORN EXCHANGE PROJECT**

The Committee received and considered notes from a meeting at the Heritage Lottery Fund that had taken place on 30<sup>th</sup> August and also recommendations to the Committee.

Cllr R Curry explained that the probability of obtaining a large scale grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund was very small. There had been a Local Enterprise Fund set up, however, providing grants of up to £2 million, and it would be worth applying for funding from this.

There were two main sticking points in relation to the main lottery fund, which was only for local museums and local heritage projects. Even a museum would only have a 1/16 chance of receiving funding. The advice received was not to waste time and money in applying for a grant that was highly unlikely to be given.

It had been recommended that the Council should return to focusing on the Corn Exchange as a 3 stage project. Part one would be to get the hall open and in use and part two would be to raise funds to equip the hall.

Cllr King said that the main problem was that the services needed to be installed throughout the building before any part of it could be opened. Cllr R Curry replied that phase one included replacing services throughout the building. Phase one would involve the front of the building and opening it, for example, as a café area and creating a hall that could be hired out. Creation of a main auditorium would be phase two.

The Chairman recalled that there were originally three options for the Corn Exchange project:-

- i) To refurbish the building
- ii) To remodel the building
- iii) To rebuild

The preferred option was to remodel the existing building, however, now the Committee had been advised that the money for this would not be available. Therefore the project needed to be reassessed and thought as in terms of a refurbishment with a view to future remodelling. Funds could be released via the Langdale Hall towards the remodelling.

Cllr King stated that he did not feel this was viable.

Cllr R Curry explained that phase one would see a hall that would enable activities to be relocated from the Langdale Hall into the Corn Exchange. Financially this would mean closing the Langdale Hall which would save money.

Cllr Enright said that the idea of opening part of the Corn Exchange was very attractive. However, he also felt there were difficulties as unless the refurbishment included some remodelling it would appear that very little had been done in 5 years and the Langdale Hall would be closed too. He thought that the opening of a new area at the front of the Corn Exchange with an auditorium at the rear was positive, especially if this was in place before the closure of the Langdale Hall. He also liked the idea of setting up a charity to run the building.

The Chairman shared Cllr Enright's views. Cllr R Curry also agreed and said that a vision for the Corn Exchange was needed and this needed to be articulated in both words and pictures to "sell it" to the town. This was vital as the project would not be completed in the current Council's term and if the town was behind the project, it would be carried through to completion.

Cllr Eaglestone asked if the inclusion of a stage in the auditorium meant that the idea of two storeys had been abandoned. The Chairman agreed that members had all wanted two floors initially. Cllr R Curry said that two floors would be difficult in reality. The Planning Department at the District Council had advised that any increase in the height of the building would only be acceptable if it could not be seen by local housing or from the other side of the Market Square. This would be extremely difficult to achieve and therefore a second floor was no longer an option. Cllr King suggested it would be better if any sloped seating could be moved hydraulically underneath the floor space.

Cllr Churchill wanted to know how feasible a staged approach to the project was and if it would cost more. The Chairman concurred that Cllr Churchill might be correct in that a phased project could cost more but the problem was if none of the building was opened, it would be more difficult to get funding for the rest. He felt that in this respect a phased approach would cost the taxpayer less.

The Quantity Surveyor had provided information in relation to the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Town Clerk explained that the Council was now in a situation in which it would either need to avoid the odue process or would need to resurrect it with the correct legal process.

Cllr Churchill thought a feasibility study should be done. Cllr R Curry said that the architect would advise on feasibility.

Cllr King thought that the biggest cost would be phase one and Cllr R Curry commented that phase two might not be very expensive. Rebuilding the changing area would be the most expensive phase.

The Chairman said that the project could not go ahead as originally planned unless the Corn Exchange remained closed for a long time.

Cllr King asked if Oxford Inspires were still needed as consultants. The Clerk said that they had provided invaluable expertise and that currently they were not costing the Council any more.

Cllr Churchill was keen for the Council to employ a grants officer for a six month term.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

##### **1. Fundraising**

- a) Following the report of the meeting with the Heritage Lottery Fund, not to continue further with the large scale application
- b) Actively develop a fund raising programme, which may include a smaller application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for capital build, as well as other sources prepared to support the fixtures and fittings, and project work, plus the release of equity in the Langdale Hall
- c) Research short term loan application with the Public Works Loan Board to release funds in the interim

##### **2. Redevelopment Project**

- a) Reaffirm minute and recommendation H243 (4) from 2 July 2013 whereby the Council proceeds with the development on a staged basis as the fundraising campaign dictates.

*Note that it is the intention for the first stage to refurbish/remodel the building, enabling it to be opened as quickly as possible and used, to enable most of the activities now taking place at the Langdale Hall to be transferred in order to release equity in the hall. It is anticipated that once this has been achieved it will be far easier to raise funds for further development and fitting out.*

*The first stage or preliminary development of the hall will include renewal of all utilities and addressing the issues identified in the condition survey produced by Treloar Associates.*

*Target for achieving stage one is winter 2014.*

- b) Investigate the most cost effective and quickest way to get architects drawings and costings for the staged programme of development, ensuring compliance with the Council's Standing Orders and Financial Regulations as well as other legislation that may be applicable to large scale contracts.

H416 **CORRESPONDENCE FROM HEDLEYS SOLICITORS**

The Committee received and considered correspondence from Hedleys Solicitors. Cllr King commented that he thought the Town Council already had a preferred solicitor but the Clerk explained that Hedleys specialised in local authorities. The Committee had agreed to get advice on an operational model for the Corn Exchange and this had been urgent at an earlier point in the project.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

That the report be noted and any further recommendation be deferred to a future meeting of the Committee.

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The meeting closed at 7.17pm

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Chairman.