

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

WEDNESDAY 15 MARCH 2017

Public Halls Sub Committee

The Public Halls Sub Committee reports to the Amenities Committee, primarily established to deal with the issues and complexities associated with the two largest halls run by the Town Council, the Corn Exchange and Langdale Hall.

In total there are four public halls in which the Town Council has an interest; the other two being Burwell Hall and Madley Park. The latter is successfully managed by the Madley Park Hall Trust.

The Corn Exchange and Langdale Hall

About this time last year negotiations were taking place between the Town Council and group of volunteers known as the Corn Exchange Witney Trust (CEWT), and the sale of Langdale Hall was progressing.

The Corn Exchange was closed for a significant period of time pending repair and refurbishment, and during this time it was decided that the best way to run this hall was to have it operated by a Trust, having successfully transferred the management of Madley Park Hall to the Madley Park Hall Trust. Clear advantages included the fact that the Trust could apply for funding which was not open or available to the Town Council. However, to cover the cost of refurbishment it was decided to sell the Langdale Hall.

It is pleasing to report that Langdale Hall has now been withdrawn from sale due to careful management of Town Council finances. Whilst it currently stands empty the Council has set the policy it will remain as a community hub and the Council is exploring options on how to bring it back into use. As a result the Council is working with several community groups who have been displaced by local authority cuts and looking for accommodation to run day services. The Council is always mindful of the sustainability of such facilities versus the benefit to the community. We are currently looking into the cost of bringing the Langdale Hall back into operation which will have to be carried out within the Council's available finances.

The Langdale Hall is expected to have a different profile of usage to the Corn Exchange, and thus will not compete for the same market. This will mean that Witney will have two substantial meeting places in the heart of the town, which will be of significant benefit to the local community.

Sadly negotiations over the Corn Exchange with the CEWT stalled last autumn and the Council is now faced with the permanent management of this hall. The main issue of contention was centred on the lease, and many discussions took place to try and find a way forward. Whilst an ambitious vision was envisaged prior to the refurbishment ***to provide an affordable, accessible, multi-purpose, flexible, community and arts centre for Witney and West Oxfordshire that will have a reputation for excellence*** the Council acknowledges, for the time being, it will be run as a 'Public Hall' rather than an 'Arts Centre', and if there is an appetite for arts, this will establish over time.

To ensure the day to day smooth running of the Corn Exchange, the Town Council has recently appointed a Public Halls Officer, as well as relocating its bookings office in the foyer. It is hoped that the opportunity for direct contact will be taken advantage of by interested parties and potential users of the hall.

Since the completion of phase one of the refurbishment, thought has been given to some of the many requests from the public who have either used or considered using the hall. Some of the improvements now include having Broadband and WiFi to cover all main areas, a larger hydroboil water unit for instant hot water for refreshments, a new bookings and administration desk in the foyer, and a hearing loop installed. Other improvements under consideration include fitting curtains throughout, CCTV, improving the kitchen facilities, and a licenced bar. Recently some work has also been carried out with regard to the cost of booking the hall, as it is important users are charged at a rate which is seen to be fair and reasonable, especially when compared with similar sized venues offering similar options for use.

The Council is confident that the Corn Exchange offers a really pleasant and well placed community facility for the people of Witney, and with increased usage, will build a strong identity.

Burwell Hall

Burwell Hall on Thorney Leys estate remains a vibrant and busy hall with very few regular hireable sessions available. The Council carries out planned maintenance during the summer to ensure it remains in good condition. The Burwell Hall has the added benefit of being attached to the recreation ground which is ideal for family and children's parties.

Currently the halls are used for a wide variety of activities, from Blood Donation Sessions and regular Tea Dance to Tumble Tots, Jazz Nights, the Bridge Club and Seniors Coffee Mornings, and are also available for private parties and functions.

The Town Council is looking forward to a very successful year for the halls.

CLlr Peter Dorward, Chairman of the Public Halls Sub Committee.