

HALLS, CEMETERIES & ALLOTMENTS COMMITTEE

Date: Monday 16th January 2023

Title: Public Halls Report

Contact Officer: Venue & Events Officer - Tomas Smith

Background

Both the Corn Exchange and Burwell Hall are now back open with regular hirers after the Christmas period.

Current Situation

As the new year starts it is hoped that with the addition of the new facilities in the Corn Exchange there will be an uptick in the number of bookings in the hall and general people using the hall. Burwell is welcoming back all the term time groups as well as continuing with its destination of choice for children's parties at weekends. It is worth noting that the recently installed retractable seating in the Main Hall of the Corn Exchange and has already been used with excellent feedback by the Christmas Pantomime. Burwell is open as usual for all its regular hirers.

Following the last meeting of the Corn Exchange Working Party, a new carpet is being progressed in the Gallery Room, landing, and stairs and a 2023 logo for the Corn Exchange is now being used in publications to highlight the 160th anniversary of the building.

Screen and projector

The Screen and projector have been ordered and there is an installation date of Monday 27th February. The installation will take one week and will not interfere with any hirer's bookings in the hall. The addition of the projector and screen will allow for cinema nights to be reintroduced to the Corn Exchange, as well as providing a professional projector for other groups to use in their bookings.

Line Dancing

This subsidised booking has been running in the main hall of the Corn Exchange on Wednesdays for the last 3 months per this Committees agreement. They have been getting free use of the hall by using the first hour of the Witney Town Council Tea Dance booking (12:00 – 13:00) with the Tea Dance starting at 13:30 – 15:30. The Venue and Events Officer has noted that at every line dance session there is a maximum of 7 people who don't stay for the Tea Dance. The 7 people who attend pay £5.00 which goes directly to the line dancing hirer towards the cost of the line dance teacher.

It is the opinion of the Venue and Events Office that this is not a viable endeavour to continue with. There is a definite benefit of the line dancing and exercise that it promotes within the community, but the Venue and Events Officer suggests that the booking should be independent of the Tea Dance and booked independently by the hirer if they would like to continue with it.

Halls Usage

Both halls have been busy, but there is always room for improvement. The previous months' usage figures, compiled by the Bookings Administrator, are attached as Appendix 1. Burwell Hall is running at approximately 50% occupancy while the Corn Exchange is running lower – with the introduction of the new facilities, this is expected to rise significantly over the next 12 months as it will automatically attract and be able to host a significant number of different events to increase overall usage. There have been periods when the hall has been out of action due to the installation of the seating and the Christmas period when there was only the pantomime in the Main Hall, as well as other occasions where Town Council meetings have held precedent over other groups looking to book the Gallery Room. With the refurbishments drawing to a close, hopefully we will be looking at a different picture in 12 months when both venues have been effectively marketed to a professional standard.

Power cut continuity plan

There has been a communication circulated about the possibility of power cuts over the winter and the problems this might cause for hirers in both the Corn Exchange and Burwell Hall. Both halls have emergency back up lights which come on in the case of a power cut, these are battery powered and charge while there is normal power in the halls. When there is a power cut, they will provide 3 hours of light before the battery is spent. Officers have drawn up a plan which means any power cut in the Main Hall would result in an emergency evacuation while the Venue staff ascertained the length of any potential loss of power. Ultimately it will be down to discretion and communication with the hiring group as to whether to cancel or wait for the power to come back on. All groups will have been spoken to on point of arrival and contact numbers will be provided in case of emergency.

Event and Venue Ideas

The Venue and Events Officer, assisted by the Venue & Events Assistant, has been looking at the type of events that he feels would work well in the Corn Exchange over the next year. This list is not conclusive or set and can certainly be added to provide a full and varied series of events throughout the year. In addition, officers are still working to provide an official opening event following refurbishment, but this is proving difficult to accommodate before the end of March.

Progressing the professionalism of the hall, Officers will work on a 'What's on' guide to be published twice a year, this can be used to promote upcoming events, advertise the Town Council's facilities, and look to bring in revenue by selling advertising space in the guide. It would be good to also consider sponsorship of different events where suitable to offset any costs incurred.

- **Table-top market – Fortnightly Saturdays:** Ideally alternating between craft market and antique sales. Run by the Town Council and only having tables in the Main Hall increasing footfall and café revenue.
- **Cinema Nights** – Classic films with interval, bar, online doodle polls for film ideas, suggestion box to get an idea of what people would like to see, costing approximately £200 to hire film for 5 x showings. Tickets £10 Every other week/ once a month, could theme (for example) Great Gatsby with fancy dress etc, BTTF with 80's fancy dress etc
- **Bingo in hall** – weekly or bi-weekly on Tuesday? Community bingo 10:00am – 12:00pm perhaps evening bingo if market is there 19:00pm – 21:00 pm
- **Regular Quiz night** – Using the café if quiet, Main Hall if busy. 3rd Thursday every month? Could donate admission fee to mayors' charity?
- **Children's Holiday Events:** workshops, theatre etc during summer holidays
- **Theatre in the Main Hall:** Handlebards booked for August, look to book more touring companies to utilise main hall, wide range of possibilities
- **Live music in bar** – twice a month on Friday night starting in March. Budget £150 per night for live performer. Strategic bookings to build up reputation as a live music bar by the time summer comes.
- **Live music on square:** Performer outside the café on C/E owned space, seats on the square.
- **Evening Bar Opening:** Thursday, Friday, Saturday in summer, busier in town and we can maximise the use of the outdoor seating
- **Local band night** - Popular local headliner, accompanied with some local support bands. Promoting original music.
- **Marketing venue for Weddings:** Need to get carpet completed and venue professionally photographed then the Venue can be properly advertised.
- **Marketing Venue for Business use:** Approach local businesses and showcase the Venue for conferencing
- **Bowie tribute:** David Bowie tribute, could get a support act to complement
- **60's, 70's & 80's nights:** Cover band or similar
- **Elvis Tribute:** Maybe a Las Vegas casino on arrival then the main event?
- **OXMAT:** Showcase? Open Day? Promotes local youth music

- **Fashion Shows:** working in collaboration with businesses in town, making use of the main hall
- **Street Food Market:** Potentially look to use market square as well as the C/E, pop up food of the world, maybe music in the evening in the Main Hall
- **Open Mic: already established, and running on the 1st Thursday of the month.**
- **Witney Music Festival Collaboration Event:** 3rd June booked, event ideas being discussed with Stuart Foster
- **Murder mystery Night:** A black tie event using café, main hall and Gallery Room, bar open. Would hire in company to run the evening.

These prospective events will be factored into a revised business plan for the hall, with a marketing strategy alluded to earlier in the report. The Venue & Events Officer will present this to a future meeting of this committee.

Environmental impact

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019 – with this in mind Councillors should have due regard to the environmental impact of any decisions they make with regard to its facilities and services it operates

Risk

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

Financial implications

Described here or as stated in the report above.

- Ongoing running costs of 1863 and the Public Halls
- Events expenditure for the coming year. A full cost analysis of programmed events will be included in the reviewed business plan.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and consider the following:

1. The continuation/cessation of the subsidised Line Dancing on Wednesdays,
2. The general agreement on the type of events outlined in the report.