

HALLS, CEMETERIES & ALLOTMENTS COMMITTEE

Date: Monday 11th March 2024

Title: Public Halls Report

Contact Officer: Venue & Events Officer

Background

The Corn Exchange

The Corn Exchange recently hosted an event to a company where the main hall was used for both physical attendance of over 100 employees with other nationwide staff joining via WebEx to view the content on the main screen. Excellent feedback received from the hiring company that aligns very well with the business plan.

Gallery Room Conferencing Equipment

Officers have been researching to improve the IT facilities in the Gallery Room to improve the experience for existing internal and external customer and increase future hiring opportunities.

Historically the option has been to use a pop-up projector screen and portable projector which would be set up by request for any group who wished to use it. Officers felt that this is an outdated way of operating, acknowledging the needs of the modern businesses and the requirement for the Corn Exchange to be viewed as a modern multipurpose venue. Officers have researched the best use of the budget available to get the maximum return in both aesthetic and functionality and having reviewed multiple options have concluded that the most practical, responsible and sensible way to proceed is to use the projector screen that was replaced in the Main Hall and the existing Epsom projector. The projector would be ceiling mounted and integrated into the new infrastructure, and the projector screen would be situated on the left-hand wall of the Gallery Room as you enter.

Please refer to **Appendix 1** for details of the lowest quotation obtained that includes supply and installation of all equipment, setup and configuration, plus 6 months support which can be extended. Soundbar, web camera and microphones would be provided which will allow for easy use and can be marketed to businesses and other hirers as a valuable addition to the functionality of the Corn Exchange as a multipurpose hall.

The equipment has the added benefit of enabling hybrid/live streaming of Council meetings, a recommendation of the Council in 2021. The Policy, Governance and Finance Committee were in favour of supplying the equipment and delegated the decision on purchase to the Democratic Services Officer. Since that time, the landscape has changed, and the Government has reached a decision to not allow Councils to hold virtual meetings; this equipment meets the criteria to provide this option in the future.

Maintenance update

In April George Murray Carpentry will commence work on the new storage solutions in the Corn Exchange. Work will be focused on three areas listed below and will run consecutively to minimise disruption to the hall and its hirers. Works and benefit are as follows:

- **Understairs:** Work will be undertaken to create a lockable cupboard which will serve to store the summer POS and the 'A Frames' used to advertise the events, this will keep signs out the way in the evening and will make the area under the stairs look clearer and more presentable for people visiting the venue.
- **Hall Passageway Storage:** The area directly to the right when you walk into the Main Hall has become a default storage area for the café outdoor furniture, including parasols, as well as the logical place to store the round banquet tables used for events including the Civic Reception, weddings, and seated music events. By installing a lockable doorway across the corridor this equipment can be shut away and the rear of the seating will be smart and presentable to the public when entering the Main Hall. The door will be painted to match the rest of the corridor and a snap frame will be fixed to it allowing for additional advertising. The access to the kitchen will not be impaired and there will be no disruption for any group using the hall.
- **Stage Storage:** As you enter the Main Hall, behind the doorway on the lefthand side of the hall leading to the green rooms, the stairwell is going to be converted into a hall storage area. The Main Hall has approximately 80 loose chairs and 25 trestle tables which are currently stored at behind the wing curtains and main curtain at the back of the hall. This is not recommended as hirers need these areas clear to access and use, as well as becoming a health and safety risk as stored items are not visible behind the curtains. The new storage area will comfortably store all the equipment and when being built the Venue Officer will look at the possibility of future proofing the build if there was any way to adapt for additional levels of storage. The door leading out of the Main Hall will be re-hung so that it won't open into the storage area, the stairs on that side of the stage will be removed and a stud wall will be installed to run to the ceiling behind the stage and finished to a standard which will blend in to the existing décor. This side is not designated a fire escape route, so this will not affect any fire escape routes or impact the capacity of the Hall for seated or standing events.

Reduced Hall Hire Request

The Council has a schedule of fees and charges for Hall hirers which are agreed annually during budget-setting, usually for 4-hour hire slots. As policy, these charges are set by the Council and are therefore upheld other than minor movement, including temporary introductory charges and 2-hour fees (where the other 2-hours can be let).

A request has been received from White Feather Spiritual Events to reduce from a 4-hour slot to a 3-hour slot for its regular fortnightly weekday evening booking in the Gallery Room at the Corn Exchange. The Bookings Office has calculated a 3-hour 2024/25 charge at £53.40, a reduction from the 2024/25 4-hour charge of £69.00.

The hirer has been a regular customer at the Corn Exchange for approximately ten years and has therefore provided a regular income stream for the Council throughout that time. The request does, however, not fall within agreed guidelines and if the Committee were agreeable, it could set a precedent. If the Committee is not favourable, there is a risk that if the hirer were to leave, the council may not be able to fill the position with a replacement, although the Venue staff would work to ensure this vacancy would be filled as soon as possible. Recommendations following later in this document.

Staffing

All staff continue to work well and strive to uphold the reputation of the Town Council and hirers using the halls. No recent change of personnel.

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 regarding 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.

- Loss of earning by reducing set hours for room hire
- This could be offset, or income increased by a greater number of bookings for smaller slots

Financial implications

Described here or as stated in the report above.

No historical data collated at present however using experience and knowledge operating a flexible booking system would attract more potential customers.

A budget of £5,000 was set aside in 2021 to enable the Council to hold hybrid/virtual meetings. Following the Government decision on this, the budget was added back to the general reserve/rolling capital fund. A supplementary estimate would be required for the purchase of the equipment.

As the quote contains a specialist offer of equipment, equipment, training and support on hybrid meeting technology this is the only quote obtained by officers.

Recommendations

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

1. That, the request from White Feather Spiritualist Group be permitted from 1st April 2024 and revisited if a request is received from a new regular hirer prepared to pay the full 4-hour slot for the session is received and/or at six monthly intervals.
2. That, members support the attached quote for the upgraded conferencing system/hybrid meeting technology in the Gallery Room at the Corn Exchange.