

Corn Exchange Working Party

Date: 2nd September 2019

Title: Phase Two Refurbishment

Contact Officer: Office Manager (Adam Clapton)

Background

The Corn Exchange phase one refurbishment was completed in 2015 and brought the building back into public use as a multi-use venue after a four year closure. Future re-development was always planned and at the time the Council's long term vision was:

'To provide an affordable, accessible, comfortable, multi-purpose flexible Community and Arts Centre for Witney and West Oxfordshire that will have a reputation for excellence.'

There have been a number of comments since that the building lacks any purpose, cannot be 'all things to all people' and as members have previously been advised the number of bookings at the Corn Exchange has stagnated. As a result and compounded by the issues listed below this working party has been tasked with finding a solution to:

- A new long-term vision for the use of the Corn Exchange
- Appropriate re-development to facilitate that vision
- Competitive pricing for the Corn Exchange
- Health and safety provision at the Corn Exchange/number of patrons permitted
- Appropriate storage for a public hall of this size

The terms of reference, including objectives and deadlines for the working party were agreed by the Council on 3rd June 2019 and are attached as **Appendix A** for information.

Current Position

There are a number of differing views and facts that will need to be taken into consideration in order for a vision to be established and a well -planned, prepared refurbishment delivered. Below is information that may be able to help in determining this and who could be involved in further discussions.

Annual Resident's Survey 2019

In April the Town Council issued its annual survey to all residents of the town via the Witney Letterbox magazine. Responses to a particular question asking to rank the importance of future projects listed the phase 2 development the least important behind the long term future of the Lake and Country Park and provision of sports facilities. 28% or 80 respondents felt it should be the most important.

A further question asking to rate satisfaction of the Corn Exchange had the following response.

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| Excellent | 15% (46 responses) |
| Good | 49% (151 responses) |
| Satisfactory | 27% (83 responses) |
| Poor | 9% (26 responses) |

Comments regarding the Corn Exchange in this survey included:

- *Corn Exchange needs to hold more people*
- *The building is now a total waste of space*
- *Used to be widely used. Since doing it up it seems to be less accessible as a community service*
- *I still believe it was a huge mistake taking the stage from the Corn Exchange*
- *Theatre provision as before it was redeveloped*
- *Lost most of its character when refurbished – put it back!*
- *Stage and raised seating in Corn Exchange*
- *Corn Exchange needs nicer softer lighting and more attractive interior*

Events in 2018

The Public Halls team has worked hard in promoting the Corn Exchange in its current condition and there have been several large staged events in the Main Hall, some theatre style and other bistro style. The following table shows a breakdown of bookings in the hall for 2018.

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| Number of bookings theatre style or similar | 22 |
| Number of private parties (bistro style) | 7 |
| General non theatre style use | 123 |

If the Working Party were to recommend that fixed seating and a stage should be re-introduced a number of regular hirers would be affected including; the Specsavers Coffee mornings, Sales (including Dogs for the Blind and Mynt Image Craft and Gift fairs), Over 30's disco, Teddy Bears of Witney show events, WTC Tea Dance, Wrestling and Blood donors some of which may not be able to continue with reduced floor space. It could also affect the number of weddings/wedding receptions which are actively being promoted following the purchase of a venue license.

Consultation

A consultation on the future of the building last took place in 2012 and was open to hall users and the general public. The results of this consultation are included as **Appendix B**.

As members will be aware, the Corn Exchange is held strongly in the hearts of many Witney residents and this working party should be mindful that any major decisions on its future are likely to evoke strong reactions from those who see the building as one thing and those who see it as another. It would be beneficial to consult as widely as possible on its future at an early stage, Mr Terry Powell, a seasoned theatrical veteran and former user has already been co-opted and interest on involvement has been shown from Witney Dramatic Society, Muzo Academy and WOAPA. The Council has a subscription with Survey Monkey which can be used and could run an accompanying

paper survey from the Bookings Office and members should consider who else they would like to ask to be part of this working party.

Conclusion & Key Questions

In discussion with professionals from theatrical companies and with WOAPA it has been intimated that the Council should have a clear direction and vision for the hall before any professionals can be brought in to offer drawings, but Jacqui Ibbotson of Oxford Arts who was involved in the initial discussion and Corn Exchange Trust is willing to talk to the working party and attached is a proposal from Drama by Design of Newbury on what they are able to offer (**Appendix C**).

The key point for the Working Party is to decide a vision for the Corn Exchange. What is it going to be used for? Should it be an Arts Centre? Should it be a Theatre venue? Is it a solely commercial venue?

Considering its commercial viability the Corn Exchange in its current form is subsidised by Witney tax payers to the sum of £75,000 per annum. If a theatre were to be installed would theatre/drama/singing groups etc. come back and use it regularly enough to offset any loss of 'other' hire?

Environmental Impact

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency the Council should also consider the impact any future modifications to the building would have on the environment. The heating and water systems are only five years and were installed at a considerable cost but there may be some scope in the possibility of installing solar panels on the roof and looking at water saving measures in the kitchens and toilets. Likewise, the lighting, acoustics and sound proofing should all be considered moving forward. However Members should be mindful that the Corn Exchange is a listed building in a conservation area.

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.

Taking into account the sensitivity around this building, previous public perception and that the refurbishment in 2014 was not widely welcomed as being everything should be done to avoid damage to the Council's reputation. Any further development needs to 'be right', no promises should be made before any Council agreement and details on progress and cost should be open and promoted.

Financial Implications

- This Working Party has no budget. Any financial and budgetary decisions will need to be agreed by the Halls and Green Spaces Committee. There are earmarked reserves for further development of the hall but further funding would be required to complete any large-scale project.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and decide;

- Which individuals, groups and organizations should be invited to join this working party;
- What further information might be needed to create an informed decision on what the development should comprise, if not at the present time;
- Whether the Council should invite any further professionals to offer quotes for work;
- Whether a detailed survey should be launched for both users and hirers of the Corn Exchange asking targeted questions about its future. Further consultation should also be considered;
- If an estimated budget is needed for the forthcoming year 2020-21 and what rolling budget may be required to deliver refurbishment by 2023-24.

Appendices

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| Appendix A | Corn Exchange Working Party Terms of Reference |
| Appendix B | 2012 Consultation Response |
| Appendix C | Proposal – Drama by Design |
| Appendix D | Corn Exchange Circa 2010 prior to the removal of the fixed stage and retractable seating |