

Witney Corn Exchange Redevelopment:
Quantifying residents' enthusiasm for and
potential usage of new facilities

Research Findings & Recommendations

Witney Town Council

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1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Primary Objectives

- Quantify the level of interest and support for various options, identified in phase one of the consultation process, for the use of the Corn Exchange going forward
- Obtain a quantified indication of potential take up/usage of service offerings and facilities provided via the Corn Exchange
- Obtain a quantified indication of how much residents would be willing to spend on potential service offerings and facilities provided via the Corn Exchange
- Identify any major differences and similarities between the expectations, requirements of various groups of the local population (i.e. age, gender etc)

Secondary Objectives

- Communicate a clear message to Witney residents that the Corn Exchange needs to be financially self-sufficient in order to survive (i.e. 'use it or lose it').
- Provide an opportunity for town councillors, and the Town Council as a whole, to continue to build a positive profile with Witney residents.

2. PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

2.1 Survey respondents

Respondents were all Witney residents aged 13 and over.

2.2 Response rate

608 questionnaires were completed - 15% on-line and 85% off-line. This represents a response rate of about 2% of the Witney population. While this rate appears low, it is not uncommon in the area of public consultation and provides a solid overview of the views of those who were motivated to 'have their say'. It should be noted that, during the on-street interviews, a number of residents themselves were heard to comment that:

"Witney residents can be very apathetic when it comes to this sort of thing".

A few made comments such as:

"I thought I should come and have my say as I know people aren't very good at taking part in these things."

2.3 Age Profile

The majority of respondents fell into the 26-59 and 60+ age ranges. In total they represented 86% of those who took part.

Q2. Age - analysis ranges	No.	%
13-15	18	3%
16-25	60	10%
26-59	281	46%
60+	244	40%
No answer	5	1%
Total	608	100%

It should be noted that the total number of respondents aged 13-15 (18) was low so caution been applied when drawing any conclusions about this particular group.

2.4 Gender and Marital Status

Slightly more females took part than males.

Q 21. Are you male or female?	Total
Female	54%
Male	44%
No answer	2%

Two thirds of respondents were married, co-habiting or in a long-term relationship and a third were single.

2.5 Parent/Guardian

30% had at least one child aged 15 or under.

2.6 Work Situation

37% of respondents worked full time, 34% were retired. Together these two groups represented over two thirds of respondents. A higher proportion of men worked full time while a higher proportion of women worked part time. These demographics are generally consistent with those of the Witney population as a whole.

26. What best describes your work situation?	Male	Female	Total
Retired	32	35	34%
Student	11	7	9%
Unemployed/not in paid work	2	6	4%
Work full-time	49	28	37%
Work part-time	6	23	16%

In the main, there was a high level of consistency of findings across both genders and all age ranges from 16 upwards.

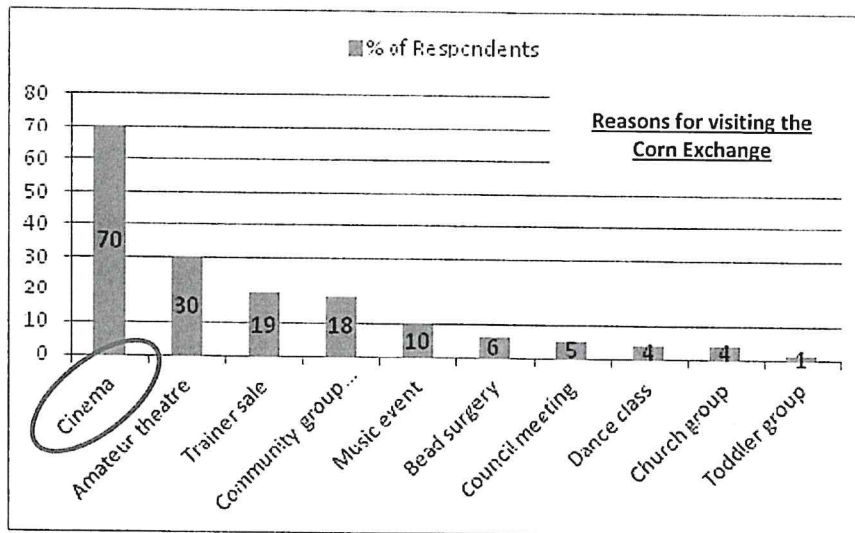
3. FINDINGS

The following key findings emerged from analysis of the research data. While these are primarily based on the quantitative and qualitative data captured via the survey questionnaire, we have also included anecdotal evidence, where relevant, that was provided through conversations that on-street interviewers had with residents while conducting the survey.

3.1 Previous Usage

97% of respondents had previously been to the Corn Exchange. 85% had visited at least once within the last 2 years with 61% having visited within the last 12 months.

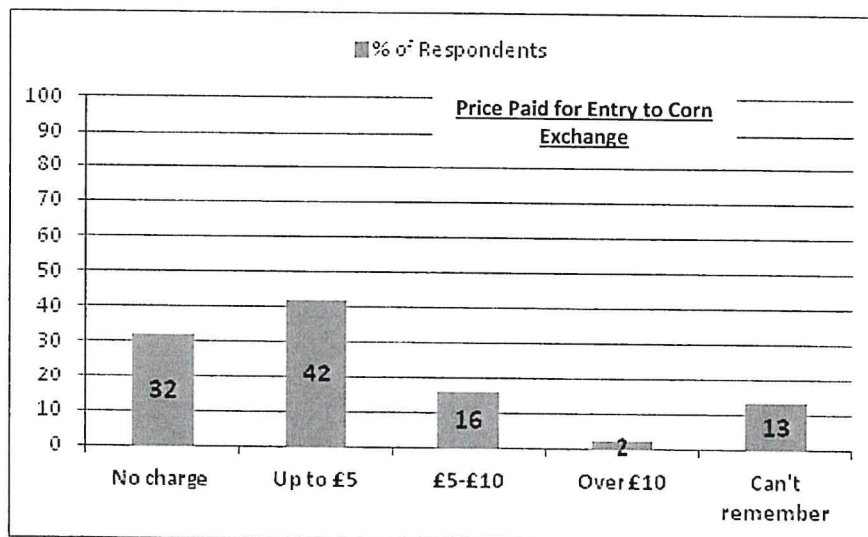
The following provides an overview of what respondents had, most recently, been to the Corn Exchange for:



The cinema had been the most popular activity with 70% of respondents having attended. Other activities saw much lower usage - the next most popular being amateur theatre (30% attendance).

19% had been to a trainer sale and additional comments confirmed that residents had attended sales of other goods such as tools, books and arts and crafts.

We asked people to recall what they had paid for entry to the Corn Exchange. 32% had free entry. Those who did pay had usually gone to see a film and had spent no more than £10 for entry with 42% paying under £5.



3.2 Awareness and Engagement

99% of respondents had heard of the Corn Exchange. There was a strong sense that the building was important to the local community – 95% answered ‘very’ or ‘quite’ important - and that there was a high level of personal interest in its future – 94% answered ‘very’ or ‘quite’ interested.

This was backed by additional comments such as:

“It is good that Witney Town Council are doing this consultation as this is important for the community – to keep it as a community building rather than serving medium to large businesses.”

"It's part of Witney's heritage – it must not go"

"Something needs to happen rather than having it as a 'white elephant'. It's central to Witney."

3.2 Main Function(s)

We asked people to tell us to what extent they supported various ideas for the main function(s) of the Corn Exchange. These ideas were generated during Phase One of the public consultation.

The four most strongly supported main functions were:

<u>Functions</u>	<u>% Very/quite strong support</u>
1. Space to rent for social/community events	94%
2. Amateur theatre	88%
3. Independent cinema/art house	79%
4. Professional theatre	77%

With reference to space to rent for social/community events a number of comments illustrated respondent's thinking on specific uses, for example:

"Old folk's dances, family parties, wedding receptions. All these should be charged at a price anyone can afford".

"Should be a community centre with special emphasis on the elderly".

Theatre was a popular option and some appeared to be surprised and delighted to see professional theatre on the list of potential options making comment such as:

"Oh, professional theatre that really would be great!"

For some the idea of theatre stimulated thoughts about a wider remit:

"would be good to expand options beyond 'theatre' to include music/bands, arts and evening classes"

Many people commented, specifically, about the cinema that was provided previously at the Corn Exchange. A number of people, mainly in the older age ranges, were quite adamant that this function was, and should continue to be, the most important function of the Corn Exchange.

"Cinema should be John again".

"Return of Screen on the Green which provides cinema access at the South end of Witney"

The idea of having a **one top shop for Town Hall services and public meetings** at Corn Exchange, although 5th on the overall support 'ranking', did meet with the approval of 65% of respondents. However there was some confusion over what this actually meant.

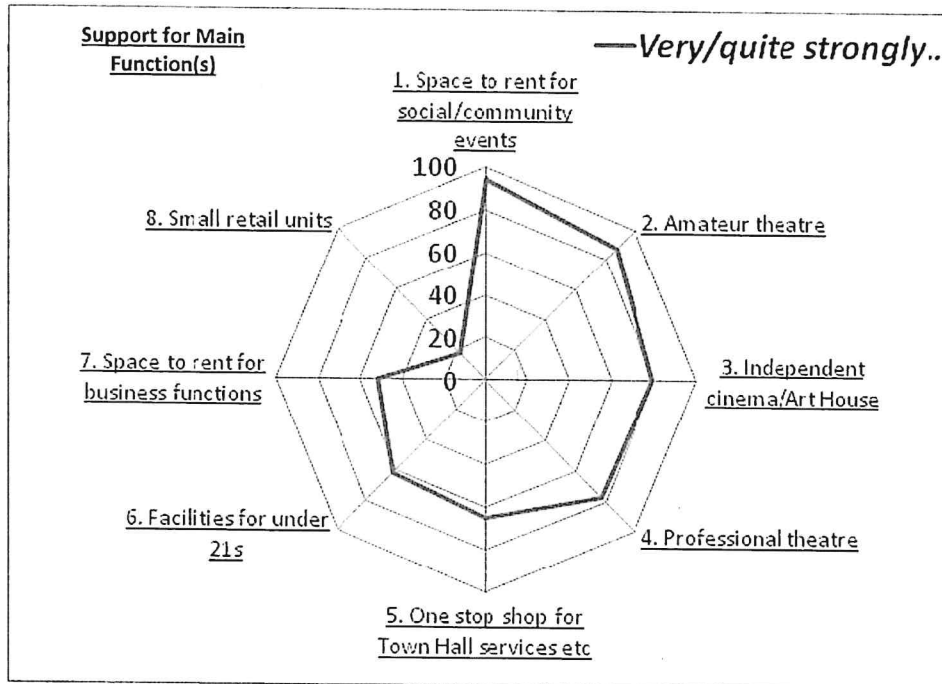
"I don't understand – either or both? To replace existing facilities or in addition? Yes to a place for public meetings."

Some people we spoke to on-street had mobility issues and were very keen to support any opportunity to make the Town Hall facilities more accessible given that the current Town Hall is *".. a bit of a nightmare"* in that respect.

The least supported options were space to rent for **business functions** (50%) and **small retail units** (18%). However, some respondents suggested:

"Mix of community and private use – one to fund the other".

The following graph shows, the percentage of those who expressed their support as 'very' or 'quite' strong for each function. The further the point is from the centre of the graph, the greater the support.



Facilities for under 21s was shown 'very' or 'quite' strong support by 63% of respondents. Some were not always clear about what these facilities would be but others shared quite specific ideas for example:

"Facilities for under 21s could be drama group or cinema"

"Important to provide a meeting place for young people (teenagers) on the weekend with music, x-box and low cost refreshments. (Could have vending machines and keep the cost down)"

"Regular discos, some for younger children, some for teenagers – up to 18 who can't go to pubs"

Some additional ideas were suggested for the main function(s) including:

"Creche"

"Arts centre with music & theatre – multi purpose"

"Tourist office"

"Move CAB"

"Community cafe"

Music/chamber hall"

"Gentleman's club"

3.4 Specific Facilities

Respondents were invited to express their view on the importance of including a range of specific facilities within the future plans for the Corn Exchange. These, again, were informed by Stage One of the public consultation process.

Each of the six options were seen as 'very' or 'quite' important for inclusion in future plans for the Corn Exchange by 50% or more respondents. The following shows the facilities ranked in order of perceived importance:

<u>Facility</u>	<u>Very/Quite Important</u> <u>%</u>
1. Performance area	94
2. Large floor space	90
3. Exhibition/gallery space	80
4. Kitchen facilities for hire	79
5. Licensed bar	51
6. Cafe/restaurant	50

Comments indicated that the importance of the **performance area** was strongly linked to the desire to accommodate theatre as well as live music events.

Some commented that provision of a **large floor space** could be sufficiently met by the **Langdale Hall** and that, together, the two halls could fulfil a range of requirements. For some, there seemed to be some confusion about the future of this other public hall with speculation that it was *"being sold"*.

"Large floor space has been marked 'not very important' on the assumption that the Langdale will be kept."

"Good to put the building to good/effective use AND not sell Langdale so the two can be used in tandem"

Some were particularly supportive of the **exhibition/gallery space** in relation to supporting the arts:

"I feel strongly that we should have a local arts facility in Witney to keep that side of thing local and alive."

Kitchen facilities for hire were, by many, seen as going 'hand in hand' with the well-supported main function of providing space to rent for social/community events.

There were mixed feeling about providing a **bar and cafe/restaurant** at the Corn Exchange. Many expressed concern that there were *"already too many cafes and bars"* in Witney and that any addition could impact on the survival of the existing local businesses.

However, a good number of respondents saw value in providing such facilities in order to enhance the experience when visiting the Corn Exchange, especially for theatre, cinema and live music events as well as to generate an income stream.

There was an overall consensus that, if bar, cafe or restaurant facilities were included they would need to be secondary and complimentary to the main function(s) of the building.

There were a number of suggestions for additional considerations such as:

"talks", "guest speakers" and "lectures"

"Bouncy castle"

"Trampolines"

"Small meeting room"

"DDA very important"

"Use small room for people to see the local police for up to date community information"

"Cafe opening onto Market Square"

"Refreshments throughout the day – also a place to meet friends and relax"

3.5 Activities for Children/Teenagers

We asked parents and guardians to tell us what they thought their children would enjoy and be likely to use in the future. This was an open-ended question which returned a large number of responses. While a range of activities were suggested the most popular ideas included:

- Live bands/music
- Drama/plays/pantomime
- Dance
- Cinema
- Toddler/play groups/soft play
- Youth events
- Parties

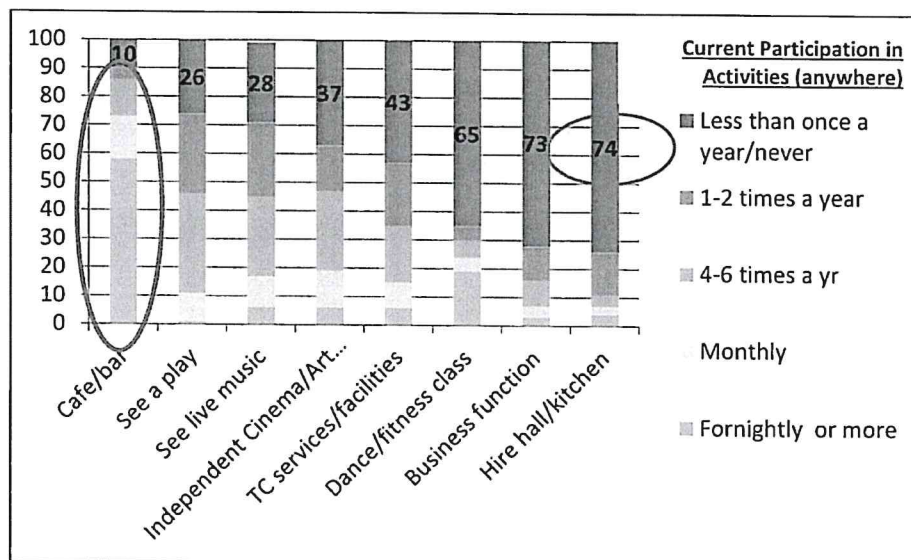
3.6 Current Interests and Potential Usage

3.6.1 Current Interests

We asked respondents to tell us how often they visited or used specific types of service and facilities. These could be anywhere, not just Witney, but the aim was to obtain a picture of what residents currently do and how frequently.

The following graph shows the various activities sorted by frequency.

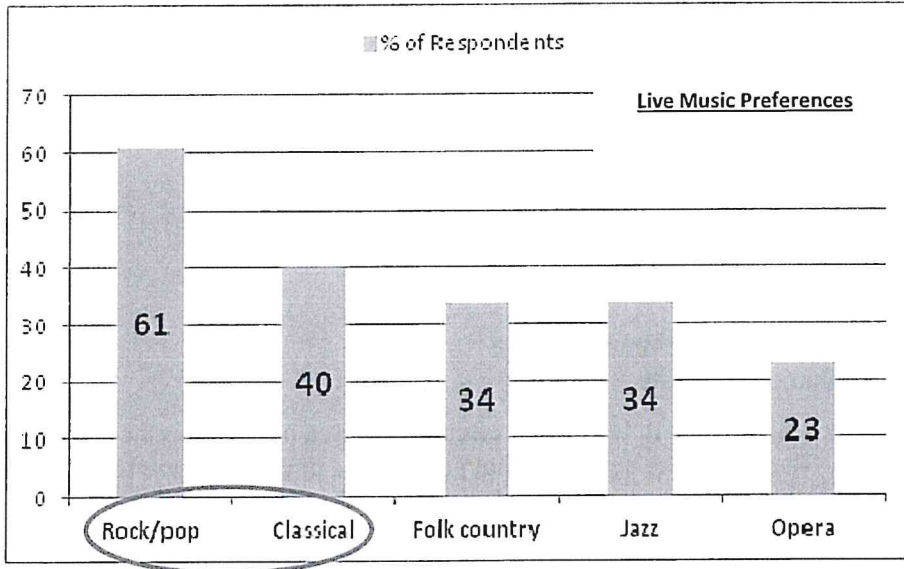
- The most frequent activity, on the far left, was **visiting a cafe/bar** – over half of respondents (58%) do this fortnightly or more.
- The least frequent activity was **hiring a hall or kitchen facility** – over half (54%) said they never did this and an additional 20% said they did this less than once a year.



Of those who said they went to see **live music**, we asked what kind of music they liked to see. The following shows that **rock and pop** (61%) is by far the most popular genre followed by **classical** (40%). Examples of other kinds of music that people told us they liked were:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>"Acoustic evenings."</i> | <i>"Choral"</i> | <i>"Witney music festival"</i> |
| <i>"Hip hop"</i> | <i>"R&B"</i> | <i>"Metal"</i> |
| <i>"Community choir"</i> | <i>"Cajan/Breton"</i> | <i>"Blues"</i> |
| <i>"Jooles Holland"</i> | <i>"Musical theatre"</i> | <i>"Irish dance music"</i> |

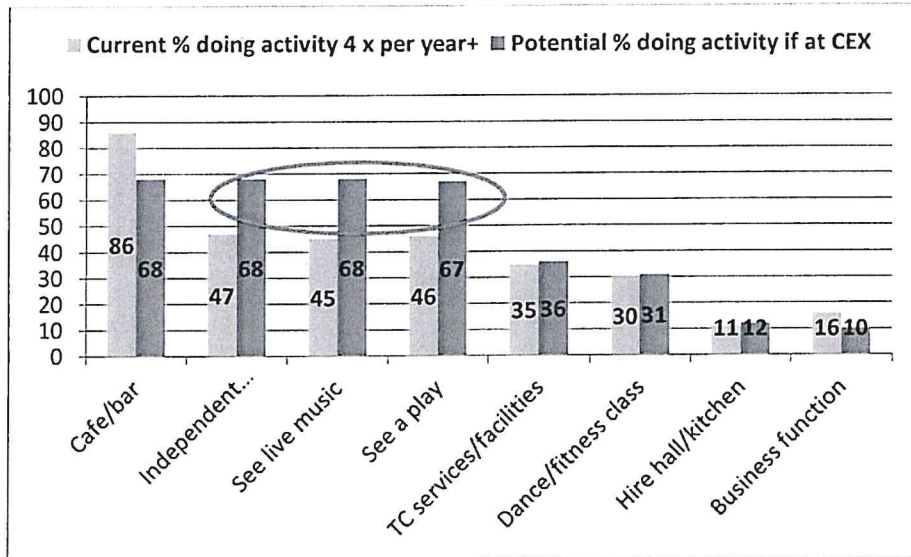
It is also worth noting that younger people said they went to see live music more frequently than the over 60s. Conversely, this older group go to independent cinema/art house more often than the younger age groups.



3.6.2 Forecast Usage and Implications

Respondents were asked to forecast how often they would be likely to do various activities if they were available at the Corn Exchange. We used a frequency threshold of 4 or more times a year to compare their current activities with their anticipated engagement with those same activities *if provided at the Corn Exchange*.

Using the threshold of 4 times or more, previous uptake (16%) and future uptake (10%) in respect of hiring hall or kitchen facilities appear markedly low. There is a similar picture for attending or hiring for business functions.



Where applicable, we asked respondents why they would choose to do one or more activity more frequently if they were available at the Corn Exchange. The most common reasons were preference to stay local (70%) and to support the Corn Exchange (63%).

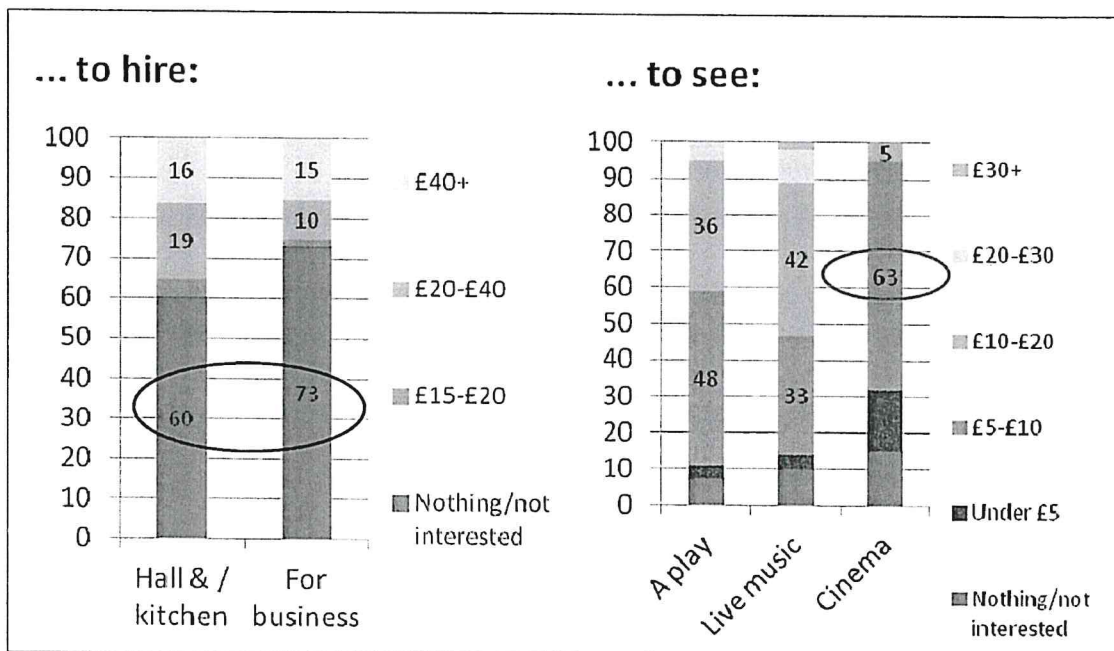
3.7 Potential Income

We asked respondents to indicate how much they would be willing to pay to do various activities at the Corn Exchange. Most (60%) were not interested in **hiring hall/kitchen facilities** – shown in the left hand graph below. For the majority of those who said they would, the price per session – morning, afternoon or evening - would need to fall into the £20-£40 range. While an even higher proportion of respondents (73%) were not interested in **hiring for business meetings/functions**, those who would indicated that they would be willing to pay £40 or more per session.

Moving to the right hand graph below, in terms of **seeing a play**, there were a number of comments indicating that the acceptable price would be very much dependent on the type and standard of performance. In general the suggestion was that there would be a willingness to pay up to £20 for **professional theatre**, possibly more while the acceptable ticket price for amateur theatre £10 or less. There was a

There was a similar picture in terms of what respondents were willing to pay to **see live music**. Again, a number commented that they would pay considerably more to see a well-known ‘headline’ act as opposed to a local band or artist.

Acceptable prices for going to see an independent cinema or art house film were notably lower with the clear majority (63%) expecting to pay between £5 and £10. Some commented that this would be in line with other places (e.g. Phoenix in Oxford).



In terms of **exclusive hire** (all day and evening) for weddings or other functions, 58% did not see themselves needing this facility. Of those who did consider this a possibility, the majority (55%) expected to pay under £500.

3.8 Funding Initial Building Work

We asked respondents how they thought the initial building work, needed for the upgrade of the Corn Exchange, should be funded. Of the two choices:

The majority (53%) supported the option of a **funding partnership** of grants and/or private sponsorship and a **one-off increase in Council Tax for Witney residents**. However, it should be noted that the younger age group, 16-39, were less supportive of this option (44%) than those aged 40 and over (56%). Males were also slightly stronger supporters of this option (57%) than women (51%).

59% of respondents said they would be willing to pay a one-off additional cost in their Council Tax with most (72%) preferring the lowest £50 option.

Some commented that they would be willing to pay an amount lower than £50, for example £25 or £30 maximum.

It was this part of the survey that generated a considerable number of comments about the management of public money and concerns over the Town Council's track record in this area. For example:

"One-off is fine, to show interest and part ownership but we'd have to trust the council not to do it again"

"An increase in Council Tax would not be popular politically but I think that if Witney residents know the money is being used SPECIFICALLY on the Corn Exchange then it would be worthwhile."

"Normally I would support the Council Tax increase but, given the history of Witney Town Council (incompetence), I don't trust them to use the money properly. They should be indentifying savings already such as moving out of the Town Hall and using the Langdale more efficiently. I have yet to see a call for volunteers to assist Witney Town Council."

"The Corn Exchange is a community facility and the community should be provided with the facility. Costs should be kept minimal with the project not running, as always with Council projects, late and over budget. To avoid a 'one-off payment' the Corn Exchange has been neglected for many years and now the Council must finally open their pockets!!!"

"If the Council can afford to waste such a lot of money on Cogges Link Road it should be able to fund this iconic, pivotal local building."

Additionally, there were some views expressed about ensuring the investment represents good value for money:

"Whatever is decided about the function of the Corn Exchange I feel very strongly that the work should be of a high quality/finish and last for generations to come – not date in 10 years time".

Some additional and alternative ideas were put forward regarding initial and on-going funding:

"Fundraising by local residents"

"Social Enterprise/ not for profit arrangement".

"Opportunity for residents to buy shares"

"Voluntary donations and fundraising activities would be appropriate and maintain interest/support. Public might be offended by the 'high' rate of the lowest suggested [one-off] suggested [increase in Council Tax] - £50."

"Offer annual membership/subscription charge [like the Phoenix and other Art Houses]"

"Pointless having two halls so should sell the Langdale"

"There is sufficient funds held in reserve by WODC and that money should be utilised for projects such as this."

Some people were also keen to have their say about the approach to the building design itself:

"Appropriate To retain historic style and decor. Might be a market hall, glass roof in situ be utilised, e.g. roof garden/ conservatory. E.g. Saturday morning coffee concerts with young local budding musicians"

4. CONCLUSIONS

There appears to be a strong interest in, and concern about, the future of the Witney Corn Exchange amongst residents. There is a desire to maintain the building from both a historical and community perspective.

There is little appetite for making the building available to commercial businesses either in terms of usage or ownership. However, there is support for inviting some financial sponsorship, to help fund the initial building work, from the local business community.

4.1 Previous Usage

There had been quite strong engagement with the Corn Exchange by respondents with almost all having previously visited the Corn Exchange and the majority in the last 12 months. Cinema was by far the most popular activity followed by amateur theatre. Sales of various kinds had also been reasonably popular.

It was not always necessary to pay for entry with almost a third of respondents entering the Corn Exchange free of charge. Most who paid had gone to see a film, paying less than £5 or certainly no more than £10.

4.2 Awareness and Engagement

There were very high levels of awareness of the Corn Exchange and interest in its future. The vast majority also saw it being very important to Witney's local community.

4.3 Main Functions

Space to rent for social and community events

There is very strong support for including space to rent for social and community events as a main function of the building. However, in contrast, the potential demand for hire of hall and kitchen facilities appears very limited. In terms of income, the acceptable fee level is £20-£40 per session.

Amateur and professional theatre and music performances

There is a strong level of support for, and interest in, the provision of **amateur and professional theatre**. For this reason there may be value in considering these as linked functions, from a building plan perspective. That said the ongoing financial landscape, in respect of income and expenditure, will be quite different for these two types of theatre. That is, acceptable ticket prices will be lower for amateur theatre and considerably higher for professional shows.

Not only is the support high for both types of theatre function, but the demand for 'going to see a play' also appears strong. Current and estimated participation in terms of going to see a play demonstrates that there is a reasonable amount of potential uptake for this service offering if provided at the Corn Exchange.

However, given the comments suggesting price sensitivity around standard and type of production, it may be advisable to conduct further research to gain a more detailed understanding of the types of theatre productions that would be popular and cost-effective. Further, to identify a pricing structure that fits with the on-going financial strategy for the building.

Going to see **live music**, especially rock/pop and classical, is clearly a popular pastime of current Witney residents and something that many think they would do more often if available at the Corn Exchange. Accommodating live music performances would cater for a diverse age range from under 21s to the more mature residents.

Independent Cinema or Art House

The inclusion of an independent cinema or art house, as a main function of the Corn Exchange, is supported strongly. This appears to stem from the considerable enthusiasm for the cinema facility previously provided in the building and, for some, the major disappointment that this had moved elsewhere.

Current and estimated future engagement with independent cinema/art house provision shows that there is a reasonable amount of potential uptake for this service offering. This would rely on tickets being priced between £5 and £10. Consideration also needs to be given the local competition in the shape of the multiplex cinema at Marriot's Walk.

Identifying the most appropriate types of films to show was outside the scope of this research but this would, of course, have a bearing on uptake and occupancy levels.

Other Main Functions

- One stop shop for Town Hall services and public meetings
- Facilities for under 21s
- Space to rent for business functions
- Small retail units

The options of having a **one stop shop for Town Hall services and public meetings** at the Corn Exchange and **providing facilities for the under 21s** both appear to command a reasonable level of support. However, some were concerned that they did not fully understand the implications of these options and more detailed information may need to be provided to accurately gauge public opinion.

A slim majority support the idea of providing **space to rent for business functions** but there appears to be a very low level of future demand for this.

The vast majority of respondents gave very limited support to the idea of accommodating **small retail units** within the Corn Exchange.

4.4 Specific Facilities

Strong to reasonable levels of importance are attached to all six facilities identified via Phase One of the consultation. The **performance area** and **large floor space** are the most strongly supported although there are some questions outstanding about whether the latter could be provided via the **Langdale Hall**. There is some confusion about the future of this other public hall making it difficult for people to provide an informed choice. On this note it is evident that some are keen for the Corn Exchange and Langdale Hall to work 'in tandem' to provide all facilities that are needed.

Exhibition and gallery space is seen by many as an important part of what could be multi-functional arts and community venue. Indeed, some have an interest in exhibiting their own artwork in the building.

Kitchen facilities for hire are seen, by many, as going 'hand in hand' with the well-supported main function of providing space to rent for social and community events. However, the potential uptake in terms of bookings appears to be very limited and this should be taken into consideration in respect of return on investment.

The **cafe, restaurant and bar** facilities appear to be a more complex area to 'unpick' in terms of quantifying support and demand. While some feel strongly that these would be unnecessary and impact on the survival of other such facilities in the town, others see that these are necessary to providing an 'all round' experience when visiting to see theatre, cinema or a live music performance. Some were keen to see a cafe with tables and chairs on the market square.

Exclusive hire of the Corn Exchange building (for a wedding or private function) met with interest from over half the respondents. However, the opportunity to charge more than £500 for this type of hire would be fairly limited. That said, some people were keen to point out that this would depend on the overall quality, standard of refurbishment and layout of the building.

Parents and guardians are of the opinion that their **children and teenagers** would enjoy a range of activities that, to a large extent, could be provided using the same functions and facilities favoured by adult residents. These include live music, drama, plays, dance and cinema. Facilities for toddlers and youth events are also ideas to be noted but had fewer mentions.

4.5 Funding

While a slim majority of those who 'had their say' support the option of a partnership approach to funding the initial building work (i.e. grants, private sponsorship and a one-off increased Council Tax payment) it is important to note that this may not be representative of the Witney population as a whole. Given that most of the respondents will have chosen to complete the survey because they are actively interested in the future of the Corn Exchange, it is advisable to assume that they are more willing to pay towards its upgrade than those who chose not to 'have their say'.

There was a contrast between the views of younger and older age groups in relation to the initial funding. While the majority of older (40+) residents are comfortable paying £50 as a one-off additional payment in their Council Tax, this is a less popular idea with those aged 39 and under. This is likely to be linked, broadly, to levels of disposable income. Of those who were willing to pay, some were concerned that other may not be able to afford to. Some suggested that this could be an optional rather than obligatory payment with further options to pay more if desired. Of those willing to pay additional Council Tax there is a fairly pronounced ceiling of £50 across the board.

There is clearly an issue around trust for some residents, particularly in the 40+ age range with strong views that financial matters have not been managed well by the Town Council in the past. While some appear to be wholly disillusioned others are looking for positive evidence that key aspects of their community, such as the Corn Exchange, are in 'in safe hands'.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is suggested that provision of small retail units be removed from the short-list of main functions due to the very low levels of support indicated through this research.

Using the findings from this survey along with any other relevant data, we suggest conducting an objective analysis, such as SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) for each of the main functions that are short-listed. It will be critical to include as detailed financial information as possible in order to compare the cost of provision versus potential income. Ideally, this will be considered in conjunction with the overall financial strategy for the Corn Exchange and other public halls.

Given that Witney is currently undergoing a period of rapid change it is recommended that decisions and forecasting, relating to the Corn Exchange, be informed by the most up to date demographic information as possible. It should be noted that the 2011 census information will soon be available and this could provide valuable data to inform relevant strategies.

During the research process some residents mentioned a number of other buildings, like the Corn Exchange, situated in other communities that appeared to be run successfully, these included Chipping Norton Theatre and the Newbury Corn Exchange. There may be value in researching such venues in order to learn and share ideas to inform the plans for the upgrading and management of the Corn Exchange. Particular focus could be placed on those venues situated in communities with a similar demographic profile to Witney.

To address the issues around residents' low levels of trust in the Town Council, there is a case for committing to a high level of transparency around the financial aspect of upgrading the Corn Exchange and especially in relation to 'ring fencing' any monies generated for this purpose directly from residents. The Corn Exchange project provides a valuable opportunity for the Town Council to rebuild the trust of Witney residents. As a starting point the topline findings from this research could be communicated directly to Witney residents, if deemed appropriate.

There is potential to research and appraise the feasibility of alternative and additional sources of income to help with the initial building costs of the Corn Exchange as follows:

- Private sponsorship
- Grants
- Lottery funding
- Optional council tax increase(s)
- Give residents opportunity to purchase shares
- Local fundraising activities

In addition to the above ideas, in terms of securing income streams to help the on-going financial sustainability of the building, the following are suggested for consideration and further exploration:

- Give members of the public the opportunity to purchase annual membership (possibly leading to discounts)
- Potential to include a social enterprise model for cafe, bar and/or restaurant function to generate income and contribute to the local community

These research findings highlight the fact that Witney residents have diverse and sometimes contrasting interests and take part in a variety of leisure and community activities. The general consensus is that the Corn Exchange should serve the community through the provision of a range of functions and a number of specific facilities. In terms of the financial sustainability of the building the research findings provide a starting point to understand residents' pricing thresholds and expectations. Further research and analysis may be necessary to help build a fully informed, pragmatic financial strategy for the Corn Exchange.

Once the final building plans have been agreed it will be critically important to identify, specifically, a workable range of service offerings (e.g. categories of film, types of play and genres of live music) to give the best chance of maximum uptake by as many groups and ages of the community as possible. Additionally it will be important to develop an effective marketing and communications strategy to ensure all residents know what activities are on offer, thereby maximising occupancy. This research provides a starting point for both these activities but further research may be necessary to help inform the service provision and marketing plans.

6. CONTACT DETAILS

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CORN EXCHANGE VISION STATEMENT

Summary

Witney is the largest town in West Oxfordshire with a population of 27,500 representing a quarter of the districts total population. It is growing in importance as a destination shopping and entertainment centre not just for West Oxfordshire but also for adjacent districts following recent large retail developments in the town.

The Corn Exchange is an important historical building in a prominent site on the market square. The Town Council wants to re develop the building as modern community arts centre for the benefit of the residents of Witney and West Oxfordshire as well as an attraction for visitors to the town and surrounding area.

A community arts centre would be a welcome addition to the night life of Witney which already has a new multi screen cinema. It would encourage shoppers to stay longer in the town in the evening and be a positive factor in encouraging new companies and their staff to locate to Witney and its environs.

History

The Corn Exchange was built in 1863 for the sale of corn at the weekly market. From the outset it was used for social events and meetings as well as corn-dealing and housed several clubs and societies. It was bought in 1911 by the urban district council and used as offices until 1936. In 1970 it became a grade II building by which time it is in a very bad state of repair.

Under local government reorganisation in 1974 the Corn Exchange controversially became the property of the new West Oxfordshire District Council for use as offices. But a local petition to get the Corn Exchange returned to public use resulted in it being sold to the Town Council in 1976 to be used as a public hall. It was opened in 1979 with rooms for hire and folding seats were installed in the old corn dealing floor in 1992.

Vision

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

To be an exciting and inspirational arts and community centre that helps maintain the vitality of the south end of the High Street as a counter weight to the new shopping development at Marriots Close.

To encourage and foster activities of all types such as amateur and professional theatre, music making and entertainment, specialist cinema, exhibitions, social and commercial functions. The Council is keen to foster specialist cinema as a complement to the commercial cinema in town

To have an open and welcoming appearance onto the market square, to encourage people to walk in, to visit and participate in events and exhibitions in the day time as well as entertainment in the evenings.

To foster annual arts events to help promote tourism and the profile of Witney as an important town in the region. An example is the recently established Witney Film Festival which screens independent films by local and international film makers.

To contribute to community development by working with local organisations such as schools, Witney & Abingdon College and local charities particularly for the young people.

To establish a charitable trust to develop and operate the Corn Exchange and to complete the redevelopment by 2015.

Main Hall

The key to the vision is a large and flexible space able to cater for a range of types of events.

The hall must be easily transformed from an auditorium into a flat open space suitable for charitable fund raising events, commercial conferences and exhibitions, social events such as dinners and dances as well as instructional classes and public service activities.

The theatrical facilities should be of a sufficiently high standard to attract professional theatre and entertainment companies to the Town. There must be provision for theatrical lighting, sound systems and cinema projection.

To enable maximum use of the facilities it will be important to be able to convert the main hall from an amphitheatre to a flat floor quickly with easy access for equipment and furniture to be moved in and out of the hall and stored if necessary.

Exhibition Area, Café, Bar and Gallery Room

The Council visualises an area that would host changing exhibitions throughout the year.

To encourage local clubs, societies, voluntary groups and museums to exhibit their work as a shop window onto their activities. Local firms might also be encouraged to promote themselves through exhibitions of their work and skills.

This area should be easily accessible from the street to encourage people to just “drop in” and could incorporate a café bar. A full catering kitchen is not envisaged as necessary.

The upstairs stairs gallery room is an important feature that the Council would want to remain as a room suitable for civic receptions, town council meetings and other similar events. Other smaller rooms would be useful for meetings and for voluntary groups, charities and others to use on a temporary basis when running events at the centre.

15th Dec 2012
(amended 17 Dec 2012)