
Agenda Item: Public Halls Report

Meeting Date: Monday 20 January 2025

Contact Officer: Venue & Events Officer

Background

The Corn Exchange is a unique public building in the centre of Witney providing vital facilities for the community that includes arts and theatre, the 1863 Café, and halls for weddings, music events, and more offering charitable concessions. The building also acts as a point for refuge in the event of local disasters.

Current Situation

Local Film & Media Student – Los Banditos of Ducklington Lake

The Venue & Events Officer has been approached by a local student who has produced a film set in Witney, it's a full-length feature and the request is to support with a premiere on Friday 13th June. The request is for free use of the Main Hall to screen the film, with Witney & Abingdon College being invited to come and watch, as well as reaching out to the school's media students to see if they would like students to attend.

This could be a great opportunity for the Council to support local artists and promote local creativity with the recommendation being to host the event as a free entry event to encourage as many people as possible to attend with WTC taking money from any bar revenue on the night. The cost of a full subsidised let would be £160 Hall Hire and £120 for bar staff, the duty manager would accrue TOIL.

Link to Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxCdkRrGIY>

Corn Exchange Gallery Room Conferencing Equipment

Officers have worked with Cloudy IT to finalise the setup of the recently installed conferencing equipment in the Gallery Room. With their support the Officers will produce a user guide which will be available to all groups looking to hire the space for video conference meetings, or to simply use the projector and screen.

The project will be finished to a high standard and will be completed by the end of January, this will then allow all future WTC meetings to have the option to utilise the new equipment.

Corn Exchange Website

Officers held discussions with the current website provider, Rumbi Ltd, to understand the full potential of the website. The feedback from Rumbi is that the website can be refreshed and tailored to suit our needs. The current platform works well on the 'What's On' page but otherwise the site needs overhauling to get the most benefit for the Council.

Officers have made suggestions to improve the current set up, with The Old Fire Station in Oxford being discussed as a good base model to look to replicate on our platform. It uses the same website engine (WordPress) but looks a lot slicker than ours. The designer has taken this on board and will look to implement some visual changes to the site for approval before going live.

There are two additional key areas that were identified which would maximise the use the website and which have been identified to make a difference for staff. Firstly, the implementation of a digital Box Office where the key difference would be to do away with the need for Event Brite, enabling Officers to set up payment details, input performer account details and set the ticket split if that's what's agreed. There would be no real difference for a customer looking to book tickets, just a visual difference. The benefit for the Council is a saving on each event ticket purchased of 6.95% of the ticket value plus £0.59 per ticket.

Secondly, Officers have asked Rumbi to explore the options available with an integrated calendar on the website, the thinking is that this would allow people browsing at home the option to book a room at either hall without having to call and confirm.

This could potentially provide more hiring opportunity as these could be booked at any time if people had access to the website. It might be that full autonomy might not be an option, instead there could be an option to hold a date online, that information would come through to bookings staff and we can then contact the person who has made the enquiry to support with their request. This would need to align with the new overall booking system currently being researched.

By utilising and maximising the existing website it is the opinion of Officers that the current provider will be suitable and provide a good level of continuity for the Corn Exchange brand. Officers have a good working relationship so this could be a factor in continuing to use Rumbi. Any additional costs will be evaluated and presented to the Council before any decision is made and implemented.

Flags

The four flags and flagpoles which would be located down the side on the Corn Exchange have been researched and specifications have been sent to local printing companies to see if they can be competitive against online prices. Once purchased and installed they will be photographed and added to all visual marketing.

It is the hope of the Officers that by having this visual brand identity permanently on show, that this will increase both visibility of the hall as well as allowing hirers to promote their own events if they purchased their own flags which could be interchanged when required. All third-party flags would only be permitted under permission from Officers. Strict criteria will be provided as to the content and colours of the flags, as well as the restrictions surrounding timings, content etc.

Digital Notice Boards

The Venue & Events Officer has contacted the planning and conservation officer at WODC and has had initial feedback that this might not be permitted. Additional research and discussions are currently underway. At this point it has been indicated the most likely outcome would be to continue with the current set up, an idea was discussed for additional signage in the form of a digital noticeboard installed in one of the front windows of the hall, having spoken to users of the café and café staff, the Officers feels that this is not viable option as any display in the windows would restrict visibility both into and out of the hall.

Internal Notice Board

A new internal noticeboard has been purchased to be located at the bottom of the stairs in the Corn Exchange. This will be to replace the existing glass fronted notice board which looks dated and out of place in situ with the recent redecoration.

The old notice board may be able to be repurposed at a future date, potentially in the works team depot. Alternatively, it could either be sold or gifted to a local school or organisation which might require it.

The backboard colour has been chosen as lead grey to compliment the carpet on the stairs and in the Gallery Room.

Corn Exchange 1863 kitchen Facilities

It has been decided that the current facilities in the Main Kitchen of the Corn Exchange are continued to be used, the cost vs reward of a complete refurbishment doesn't adhere to current budgetary restrictions. All current kitchen equipment will be maintained to the highest standard, and when any item becomes unsuitable this will be replaced with upgraded and commercial specification items.

The first items that will need to be considered in due time are the glasswasher in the small kitchen and the oven in the larger kitchen.

There is an underlying issue with the current kitchen set up as the it was originally developed without the café in mind. When the kitchen was refurbished, the plan was to leave it as a blank slate for any hiring group to use as they see fit. The ideal scenario was to utilise induction hobs which could be brought in for an event then removed once it had finished. With the introduction of the café the kitchen use changed significantly with most of the usage coming from 1863 with only a couple of groups looking to use it. These groups usually use it

for drinks but there is still a cross over with the café and hirers. If the FSA were to inspect, it is difficult for the café staff to guarantee that the cleanliness is at the level where it needs to be if there are factors out of their control.

If the café is to continue as it is, and more importantly, to grow turnover, the preferred option would be to restrict third parties from using the kitchen, and develop the facilities. WTC staff would then be responsible for any kitchen requests made by any hiring group. Any increase in costs to provide this arrangement will be monitored.

It is recommended that any future kitchen development keeps this in mind as the initial reason for having the café and bar was for it to work as an ancillary function of the Corn Exchange, not to be the dominant business in the hall.

If WTC want to change the direction of the café, it is important to get the right decision made for both the customer and the future growth of the business.

Impact Assessments

The Town Council has a duty to consider the effects of its decisions, functions and activities on equality, biodiversity, and crime & disorder. Consideration should also be given to effects on the environment, given the Council's Climate Emergency declaration in 2019.

- a) Equality – Providing a supportive environment for people to express themselves through creativity.
- b) Environment & Climate Emergency – The continued running of the hall with additional winter running costs

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.

No risks identified for this report.

Social Value

Social value is the positive change the Council creates in the local community within which it operates.

The social value of supporting a local enterprise (film) when considering subsidised hall hire for local film premiere

Financial implications

- The cost to WTC of hosting and staffing for screening of Los Banditos. 2 x bar staff plus duty manager. The cost of a subsidised let would be £160 for Hall Hire and additionally £120 for bar staff (4 hours).
- Purchase of new kitchen equipment as and when necessary, to be fully costed before purchasing.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and

1. That subsidised use of the Main Hall is granted for a local media student to premiere his film, to be advertised free entry to generate support. At a cost of £160 (Hall Hire) and £120 (Staffing).
2. Approve recommendation for third parties to be excluded from using the kitchen to enable hygiene standards and safe working practice to be maintained.