

HALLS, CEMETERIES & ALLOTMENTS COMMITTEE



Agenda Item: Public Halls Report

Meeting Date: Monday, 8 September 2025

Contact Officer: Venue & Events Officer

The purpose of this report is to provide updates and seek direction for the operation and management of the two public halls under the ownership and management of Witney Town Council. These facilities serve as vital community spaces for events, meetings, and public activities, providing an accessible environment for residents and local organisations. It is important that these halls are maintained to a high standard, both in terms of physical condition and service delivery, to ensure that they meet the needs of the local community and support the Town Council's strategic objectives.

Background

In line with the Witney Town Council's commitment to creating vibrant, inclusive public spaces, the operation of these halls must align with council policies and ensure that they remain accessible, well-maintained, and effectively managed. As part of its overarching mission, the Town Council has set forth several guidelines regarding the management, booking, maintenance, and use of these halls to ensure they are operated in accordance with the highest standards of safety, accessibility, and community engagement.

Current Situation

A Venue and Events Co-ordinator has been recruited and started working at the beginning of August. This role will be integral to the day-to-day operation of the public halls, events planning and marketing. The Venue & Events Officer has been focussing on maintaining the operational services expected across Public Halls and Events and has been onboarding the Venue & Events Co-ordinator, who has started to take the day-day operation responsibility on board. This report outlines some updates on projects and proposals from the last meeting.

Seat Sponsorship

The Venue & Events Officer has researched industry examples of seat sponsorship to guide a proposal for this at the Corn Exchange. The below table has been put together to outline examples of seat sponsorship packages available at other small theatres around the country. The findings show a wide variety of cost and term length and some extra benefits with the package.

Theatre/venue	# of seats	Cost of Sponsorship	Duration	Position on seat	Image of Plaque	Further Notes
Barn Theatre, Cirencester	200	One off £200 donation	1 year	Information not available	Image not available	Donators also get: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular e-news with Barn events and insight The opportunity to book a backstage tour (2 invites) Public thank-you on our dedicated supporter web page Invitation to Barn Theatre Annual Event. Subject to various restrictions that may or may not be in place at the time of your visit.
Oxford Play House, Oxford	350	£600 £6000	5 years Lifetime	Back of the seat		A plaque will be placed on the back of a seat of your choice (subject to availability), and we'll be in touch so you can choose your own wording (up to 50 characters).
Bear Pit Theatre Stratford upon Avon	109	£100 (one seat) £150 (two seats)	Information not available	Information not available	Image not available	Naming a seat is a perfect way to celebrate a special occasion, dedicate to a memory of someone dear to you, or add your own name or your organisation's name to the supporters of this unique 'little' theatre in the heart of Stratford-upon-Avon. Sponsorship funds will go towards paying the cost of the seats.
The Watermill, Newbury	197	£250 – Stalls £150 – Circle	5 years	Underside of the seat		
The Corn Exchange Newbury	40 (cinema room)	£300 donation (or 5 annual instalments of £65)	5 years	On the head rest	Each seat will have a headrest cover, embroidered with your chosen name or message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only available in the Cinema Room You'll be invited to attend annual VIP cinema screenings to see your headrest cover in situ. Your chosen name and/or message can be up to a maximum of 40 characters. Corporate seats to include your business name with or without the company logo are available for £400 plus VAT. VIP screenings take place once per year for 5 years
Hanger Farm Southampton	83 bleachers + 76 flat (chairs?) 159 total	£75 Bleachers £150 Front Row	3 years	Underside of seats	The plaques are gold in colour. The font will be Calibri. Space for 30 words, across 4 lines.	Your seat sponsorship includes: a personalised seat plaque for you or a loved one lasting three years and a certificate to recognise the name and location of your sponsored seat.

Corn Exchange Proposal

Based on the research above, this report outlines a proposed seat sponsorship initiative for The Corn Exchange, aimed at generating additional funding to support maintenance, programming, and community events. Seat sponsorships provide an opportunity for individuals, families, businesses, or organisations to support the theatre by having their name and/or message displayed on a plaque affixed to the rear of a seat.

Package	Cost	Duration	Details of Package
Individual	£100	3 years	Direct printed message onto plaque on back of seat. Voucher for 2x Prosecco Glasses Recognition on "Supporters" section of website.
Corporate	£200	3 years	Direct printed message onto plaque on back of seat. Voucher for 4x Prosecco Glasses Recognition on "Supporters" section of website, listed above individual donors.

Benefits

Officers recommend not to include priority booking as a benefit, due to the number of third-party hirers shows who currently manage their own box office. It is possible to have priority booking for WTC ran shows only, however the number of these shows is un-determined and will likely cause confusion for the sponsors.

It is recommended that the individual doner receives a voucher for 2x glasses of prosecco and the corporate doner receive 4x vouchers, as previously agreed.

An additional benefit to consider is a "Supporters" section of the Corn Exchange website to recognise individual and corporate doners.

The Plaque

Officers recommend that the plaque should be gold coloured aluminium, directly printed with the doners name and message. These would cost £4.50 each in batches of 20, or £3.95 if ordering 50+ using a local supplier. Gold coloured aluminium plaques have a lifespan of 5-10 years, more than covering the proposed term length of the sponsorship.

The plaque will be fixed to the back of the seat, allowing for more visibility than if they were on the bottom of the seat (only visible when the seat is vacant). The plaque will be 50x100mm and can print up to 50 characters.

Marketing Strategy

- Direct mail campaign to previous patrons and local businesses.
- Social media advertising
- Promotional material at events.
- Outreach through local press and radio

Things to Consider

The examples above are all full-time theatres / arts centres, whereas the Corn Exchange is a multi-purpose venue with lots of use without the tiered seating. This makes it a less attractive incentive for doners than full-time theatres who hosts show weekly. Whilst officers are working on increasing the number of events at The Corn Exchange, with the new staffing

structure only just being implemented, perhaps this project should hold off until the events programming has increased. The Venue & Events Officer will also be exploring potential improvements to the Corn Exchange as an event venue, including centralising the box office for all shows, which could also open up the option of priority booking as a benefit.

Members should consider, if the project is approved, whether it should be implemented immediately, or delayed allowing for other developments to the venue to take place, which could make the incentive more attractive to the public.

Hearing Loop System for Corn Exchange and Burwell Hall

Current Situation

The old portable hearing loop at the Corn Exchange is faulty and upon research for a replacement, it has become clear that a portable hearing loop is not suitable for a room the size of the hireable rooms at The Corn Exchange and Burwell Hall and is rather designed for an over the desk conversation (such as at the café counter or in a one-one meeting).

Another common option which cannot be considered for the Gallery Room is a Perimeter Hearing Loop, as the magnetic field could extend beyond the room (including into the Café) where confidential meetings / conversations could be listened to. However, due to the nature of Burwell Hall being privately hired – this could be an option for this hall.

Legal Implications

The Equality Act (2010) requires service providers (including public and community buildings) to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people, including those who are deaf or hard of hearing. A hearing loop is an example of a reasonable adjustment in rooms where speech, performance, or audio presentations take place.

Actions

Officers will obtain an evaluation of needs and specific quotations for a hearing loop system in The Gallery Room and Main Hall of Corn Exchange as well as Burwell Hall. Depending on the available options, officers will explore the possibility of a DIY install dependent on the complexity of the installation.

Pavement License

Officers have applied to renew our pavement license on the Market Square, which has been a very popular feature for the 1863 Café and Bar, in particularly for our Tunes On The Square events.

Burwell Play Day

The OPA Play Day ran at Burwell Recreation Ground was a successful event, well attended by families of Witney. The event was free to attend with free participation activities. Taken from OPA's report on the event: *"Playday is the national day for play, celebrated each year across the UK. The theme for this year's Playday is ... Spaces for Play. This year's theme highlights the vital importance of accessible, inclusive spaces where children and young people have*

opportunities to play freely, spending time, and connecting with friends – and feel valued as part of their community.”

Officers used this event as an opportunity to open the doors to Burwell Hall and show people around to promote it as a hireable space. The Venue & Events Co-ordinator was based at the hall and was able to show some potential hirers around and answer questions. We have received two additional enquiries for private parties off the back of seeing the hall at the play day.

Officers have contacted OPA to enquire about hosting the play day at Burwell again next year and, with more time to plan, we will use it to promote the venue again.

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 hearing loop (or alternative) in all halls meets the Council’s would ensure the buildings remain inclusive for all users.
- b) Biodiversity – All matters relating to Biodiversity will be considered when making decisions for both halls.
- c) Crime & Disorder – The continued use of halls as a safe space
- d) Environment & Climate Emergency – no direct impact

Risk

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

1. The seating sponsorship initiative, if launched prematurely, could result in minimal interest due to a lower quantity of events. Delaying the implementation of the project, to allow for the events program to expand first could make the initiative more appealing to the public.
2. Installing the incorrect type of hearing loop in a room that requires confidentiality, such as the Gallery Room, could break that confidentiality. The council should ensure that the correct loop system is installed to avoid this.
3. The Equality Act (2010) does not specifically require a hearing loop in public venues; however, it does require reasonable adjustment to be made. If a hearing loop system is not feasible, officers will explore alternative ways to promote accessibility in our venue for those who are hard of hearing and will provide details and costs at the next meeting.

Social Value

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

1. The Seat Sponsorship initiative is an opportunity for community engagement with the Corn Exchange.

Financial implications

1. The cost of gold-coloured aluminium plaques for the seats is £3.95 per unit, when ordering more than 50.
2. The cost of a hearing loop is to be determined for each room; however, suitable systems look to be around £2,000 each.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and;

1. Decide whether the seat sponsorship package should be implemented and consider any amendments to the terms
2. If approved, decide whether the seat sponsorship package should be implemented immediately, or delayed allowing further development to the events programming before launching the packages.