

**CORN EXCHANGE WORKING PARTY MEETING OF THE
WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL**

Held on Monday, 4 November 2019

At 5.00 pm in the Council Chamber, Town Hall

Present:

Councillor O Collins (Chair)

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| Councillors: | L Ashbourne J Aitman | L Duncan J King |
| Officers: | Adam Clapton John Hickman Tomas Smith | Office Manager Operations & Estates Officer Halls Manager |
| Others: | 9 members of the public. | |

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for his absence was received from Cllr David Harvey.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest in matters to be discussed at the meeting.

3 MINUTES

The Working Party received and considered the minutes of the meeting held on 2 September 2019.

RECOMMENDED: that the minutes of the meeting held on 2 September be agreed and signed by the Chair.

4 PHASE TWO REFURBISHMENT

The Working Party received and considered the report of the Office Manager, which detailed its mission statement and how the Working Party might be able to progress the re-development.

Following introductions, the Chair invited questions while a member of the former Corn Exchange Advisory Committee gave a brief overview of what had been undertaken in the phase one development in 2014. There was concern from the extended group members that there was no speaker system, no stage lighting, poor acoustics and the backstage area was quite different to what it had been and was used for storage. There was agreement that there appeared to be a vast amount of wasted space which could be reutilised with guidance from professionals.

The Working Party discussed what was needed in the building, rather than what it lacked and agreed that the priorities appeared to be lights, sound, acoustics and seating. With these in place a stage might not be needed. The Chair advised that Council members had met with Oxford Art Consultants and undertaken a site visit to the Old Fire Station in Oxford, current thinking was for retractable seating which would come back to the width of one row of seats, a flat stage area and a sprung floor as raised seating and a flat stage worked well at other venues. This would give flexibility for many uses including a seated performing venue which should attract dance, theatre and visual arts across the board.

In response to concerns regarding the backstage area, the Working Party was advised that the Council would potentially be looking at redesigning the back of the hall to work better – this could be relatively radical and could include use of the rooms for other uses when not hired as part of a larger production. The Chair advised that Oxford Art Consultants would produce a plan which would involve extending out the back of the Corn Exchange. Although this land was owned by the District Council, there were plans in its infrastructure delivery plan for an arts centre in Witney so they may look favourably on its re-development.

There were also clear concerns from the former users of the Main Hall that the capacity would need to be increased from 188. 250 would be ideal but 200 would be viable and this was possible by re-working the inner fire doors to comply with fire regulations.

The invited parties all advised on what they would like to see in an improved Corn Exchange. These included: -

- Acoustics
- Increased capacity
- Lighting
- Sound system
- Tiered retractable seating
- Better backstage areas, including dressing rooms
- Famous Artists
- Better marketing for users by the Corn Exchange
- Reasonable hire rates – special rates for such groups
- Flexible space
- Good accessibility, including backstage
- Wings for a stage space.

The Working Party agreed that some items could be done before others, especially lighting which had already been agreed by the former Council but felt that the majority of work should go hand in hand following the advice and plans from professionals. Companies and artistes would also prefer to book a year ahead and would any delay would further prolong the re-development.

The possibility of a bar/café in the foyer was mooted by Council members; this could be a franchise for a local group as a café but would also function as a bar in the evening. It was felt that an audience would go out for a drink in an interval so it would be better to keep them in and go ahead with the plans. It was also felt that ticket sales for any event should be sold from the Corn Exchange.

RECOMMENDED: that lighting, sound and dressing rooms were the priority. It was agreed that this should be fed back to the consultants so that they could work with this.

The meeting closed at: 6.15 pm

Chair