
Agenda Item: Public Halls Report

Meeting Date: Monday, 8th June 2026

Contact Officer: Venue & Events Officer

The purpose of this report is to provide operational updates regarding the management of Witney Town Council's venues and seek recommendations for operational actions.

Background

Current Situation

Corn Exchange Light Up Request – Long Covid Awareness

A request has been received from a resident, to light up the Corn Exchange in Teal on 15th March 2027 for Long Covid Awareness Day. The resident noted that both they and their daughter experience Long Covid symptoms which meet the criteria for ME/CFS and requested that the Council consider supporting the awareness campaign in a similar way to National ME/CFS Week.

Lighting the Corn Exchange involves minimal additional staffing workload, as the venue lighting equipment is straightforward to operate. As there is currently a HCA Committee meeting scheduled in the Gallery Room on 15th March, the building could be lit by a caretaker following the close of the meeting, should Members approve the request.

Members may also wish to consider whether approving this request would be consistent with the Council's existing approach to commemorative lighting requests.

Project Update: 1 in 200 Local Author Scheme

Officers are pleased to have rolled out the 1 in 200 Local Author Scheme within the 1863 Café at The Corn Exchange, as agreed at the previous committee meeting in March.

A selection of books was chosen from their catalogue and are prominently displayed and advertised within the café.

Sales begun within the first few days of the display and will be reviewed quarterly with 1 in 200, so stock can be adjusted strategically to maximise sales.



Project Update: 1863 Local Art Display

The 1863 Local Art Display initiative is now underway, with information and application details available via the Corn Exchange website. Officers are actively promoting the scheme to local art groups and organisations in order to encourage interest and increase applications.

Corn Exchange Wedding Packages Proposal

Officers propose the creation of a tiered wedding package system to be applied at The Corn Exchange, to greater reflect the current position of the venue and support the promotion of the Corn Exchange as a wedding venue.

The public halls hire charges contains a Weddings section. These charges only reflect use of the room(s), and don't outline the extra services often required to deliver a successful wedding at the venue. Currently, the venue is available to hire on a room only basis, exclusive basis for 2 hours, or exclusively for a full day.

Each wedding is unique and the demand and cost on the venue to deliver them varies greatly on a case-by case basis. Officers propose a re-structure of the "Exclusive Hire" basis to reflect the variation in requirements for each individual wedding and allowing couples to structure their hire to suit their needs. The room only hire for a ceremony could remain in place as an affordable solution for couples who are just looking for a licensed room to have their ceremony – it's low impact on the venues operations and requires minimal additional staffing.

Exclusive Hire Re-Structure

The potential impact on trading at the 1863 Café must be carefully considered when assessing the viability of a **two-hour exclusive-use** wedding ceremony hire. In practice, a two-hour

exclusive booking around midday would require the café to cease trading for at least half a day.

As Saturdays are both the most popular day for weddings and the busiest trading day for the café, it is important that the venue does not experience a significant loss of revenue as a result of accepting exclusive-use bookings. Analysis of average Saturday takings since April 2026 shows that income generated between 8:30am and 1:00pm is £518, compared with £275 between 1:00pm and 5:00pm. Furthermore, when comparing trading periods of 8:30am–12:00pm and 12:00pm–5:00pm, the difference in average revenue narrows to only £7, highlighting the importance of the 12:00pm–1:00pm trading period in determining the most appropriate time to close the café for exclusive venue hire.

Considering the 2-hour exclusive rate is set at £530.50, that figure should be broken down into three sections when determining potential revenue loss – Gallery Room hire, Main Hall Hire, Cafe trade. The combined cost of group 2 bookings for 2 hours in both the main hall and gallery room on a Saturday is £234.25, leaving £296.25 to cover loss of cafe trade. While average café takings during the affected period may exceed this figure, it is important to recognise that café operations incur associated staffing and stock costs that are not applicable to a ceremony-only booking. Taking these factors into account, officers consider the proposed hire fee to provide a reasonable level of compensation for lost trading income, provided the café can continue operating until 1:00pm.

To mitigate the financial impact on the venue, officers propose that exclusive-use ceremony bookings are only made available from 1:30pm onwards as standard. This would enable the café to operate as normal until 1:00pm and retain its most valuable trading period.

Officers also propose that a “by negotiation” clause be available for additional or amended hours, allowing officers to calculate an appropriate fee, based on the above rate and cafe revenue considerations, to allow the hirer to adjust these timings to suit them whilst making sure the venue’s revenue is accounted for. Having this clause will also mitigate the risk of losing potential hirers based on an inability to cater to their timings.

Licensing Note: Additionally, The Main Hall ceremony hire needs to be removed from the options, as this is not under the current licence (and wasn’t under the previous license either). Officers have noted this oversight; however, ceremonies have not taken place in the main hall keeping us in line with our licence.

The **Full Proposal of Wedding Packages** is outlined below:

Ceremony Only Options:

The Gallery Room- 2-hours (not-exclusive hire): £310.00 (no change)

The Gallery Room – 2-hours exclusive use of venue from 1:30pm onwards: £530.50

Ceremony & Reception Options

Package 1: £1318 (Basic)

Reflects **current charge for “Exclusive Hire”** and includes the basics required to deliver the booking.

- Use of the venue for one day (09:00am earliest access – 00:00 latest exit)
- Set up and pack down to be completed by the hirer on same day
- Supervisor to co-ordinate with registrars for ceremony
- Furniture set up upon arrival
- PA system for ceremony music
- 2 consultations (not including viewing) 6 months before, 1 month before (guidance)
- Bar included on minimum spend policy (custom quote per event)

Package 2: £2300 (Elevated)

- The above PLUS:
- PA set up including mics
- Use of stage (if desired)
- X1 Additional consultation (3 total)
- Included set up & pack down time (4 hrs either side)
 - 4pm – 8pm day before
 - 9am - 1pm day after

Package 3: £3000 (Premium)

All the above PLUS

- Venue co-ordinator throughout the day (pre-ceremony – reception in swing). This role will:
 - Organise and manage wedding day timeline (based on consultations)
 - Co-ordinate with suppliers' arrival, set up etc.
 - Co-ordinate guest arrivals and seating
 - Keep the day running on schedule
 - Cue music, speeches, cake cutting and first dance
 - Hand over the remainder of the evening to bar shift leader
 - Additional Staff to perform turn venue turn around (meal to reception)
 - Additional consultation (4 total) - The 4th consultation will finalise wedding day timeline for co-ordinator to manage.
- Full Decor Hire Included and Set Up

Tailored Approach

Couples can opt for the basic package with optional extras priced below for a “tailored package”.

Equipment and Services:

- Stage Built: £100.00
- 2x Wireless Mic: (includes set up) £30.00
- Extra Consultation: £50.00
- Venue Co-ordinator (includes one extra consultation): £350.00
- Set up / Pack Down Time (must be evening before / morning after): Group 2 4-hour Session Fee
 - Main Hall £325.50 per session
 - Gallery Room £108.50 per session
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Decor:

- White/off white chair covers
 - £3 per chair cover with sash orders over 30
 - Just covers £2.5
- Tablecloths
 - Rounds £8 each
 - Square £8 each
 - Long £9 each
 - Stretch £7 each
 - + £1 per table for satin table runner
- Red Carpet £10

Hearing Loop Project Update

A budget of £6,000 was allocated to provide hearing assistance systems across the Corn Exchange Main Hall, Gallery Room and a third identified venue area. This budget was based on the assumption that traditional perimeter induction loop systems would be suitable for all locations, and an estimated quote that officers received.

Subsequent research and site investigations have identified that perimeter loop systems are not suitable for the Council's venues for several reasons. As a result, alternative assistive listening technologies have been investigated. These solutions are significantly more expensive than originally anticipated, resulting in the need for members to consider an increased project budget.

Corn Exchange Main Hall

The perimeter loop system installed in the Main Hall in 2016 has not been in use. Officers explored the possibility of recommissioning the existing system; however, this has been found to be impractical and unsuitable for the following reasons:

- Interference caused by the metal structure associated with the recently installed tiered seating.
- The distance between the loop and users seated in the upper tiers would result in inconsistent audio quality across the venue.
- Increasing signal strength to improve coverage in upper seating areas would adversely affect users seated closer to the loop.
- The flexible nature of the hall's layout and seating arrangements means a fixed perimeter loop would not provide suitable coverage for all event configurations.

Gallery Room

A perimeter loop system is also considered unsuitable for the Gallery Room. The room is frequently used for confidential meetings and discussions, and perimeter loop systems can create audio spill beyond the intended listening area, presenting potential confidentiality concerns.

Alternative Solutions

Officers have summarised findings relating to three alternative solutions and are in contact with several new audio-visual suppliers for quotations.

Criteria	System 1	System 2	System 3
Indicative Cost	Approximately £23,000 for all three areas, based on one quotation received, others pending	Lower than Supplier 1, subject to detailed quotations and potential additional transmitter requirements. Quotations pending.	Approximately £17,000 for all three areas. Based on one quotation received, others pending
Confidentiality	Good. Audio is only accessible to users who connect to the broadcast.	Excellent. Signals remain within the room and do not pass through walls.	Moderate. Radio signals can extend beyond the room or building unless managed carefully.
Flexibility	Excellent. Suitable for multiple room layouts, seating arrangements and venue uses.	Good. Suitable for most spaces but requires clear line of sight between transmitter and receiver.	Excellent. Works effectively across different room layouts and seating configurations.
User Experience	Excellent. Users can connect directly through compatible hearing aids, earbuds or smartphones. Receivers can be provided where required.	Good. Users require a dedicated receiver and neck loop or headset.	Good. Users require a dedicated receiver and neck loop or headset.
Future-Proofing	Excellent. Emerging industry standard and increasingly supported by hearing aid and consumer device manufacturers.	Moderate. Established technology but with limited development compared to newer solutions.	Moderate. Established technology with proven reliability but less likely to become the long-term industry standard.
Ongoing Maintenance	Low. Limited equipment to manage once installed, aside from any loan receivers.	Moderate. Requires management, charging, cleaning and replacement of receiver units.	Moderate to High. Requires management, charging, cleaning, storage and replacement of receiver units.
Suitability for Corn Exchange Main Hall	Excellent. Supports large audiences and flexible seating	Good, although additional transmitters may be required to avoid	Excellent. Provides reliable coverage throughout the venue

	arrangements without coverage issues.	blind spots caused by room layout and seating.	regardless of seating configuration.
Suitability for Gallery Room	Good. Suitable for meeting spaces while maintaining controlled access to audio.	Excellent. Particularly suitable for confidential meetings due to contained signal transmission.	Moderate. Potential signal overspill may present confidentiality concerns.

Funding and Next Steps

Officers are exploring external funding opportunities to support the project and have commenced work on an application to the Arts Council England Project Grant programme. However, external funding cannot be guaranteed.

Members are therefore asked to consider whether an increased capital budget should be allocated to enable the Council to proceed with the procurement of an appropriate assistive listening solution and improve accessibility across its venues. Alternatively, the Council may be able to consider purchasing for areas at different times.

A further report will be brought forward once funding opportunities have been fully explored and detailed quotations have been received for all viable options.

Additional Point: To be compliant with the 2010 equality legislation, the council should also consider an assistive listening solution in the admin office to ensure that members of the public with hearing loss are able to access the office for enquires. A similar solution should also be arranged for 1863 Café and Bar counter, allowing customers with hearing loss to order with greater confidence.

A portable Induction loop would be suitable for both above, costing around £210 each. This should be considered when reviewing the budget for the overall project.

Fire Safety Audit

The Corn Exchange received a Fire Safety Audit on Friday 22nd May. Officers are pleased that the outcome of the audit is that the venue is of adequate safety, with a couple of suggested improvements which are being actioned.

Off the back of useful discussions with the fire safety inspector, officers have reviewed the hiring conditions and made the below [additions/amendments \(in red\)](#) relating to fire safety.

1. *Any electrical equipment used within the hall by hirers must have proof of Portable Appliance Testing (PAT) in the last 12 months and be used in an appropriate and safe manner. Extension leads and adapters are not permitted. **Untested electrical equipment (without valid PAT labels) is not permitted.***
2. *You must always keep every designated exit route free from any other obstruction. You must not conceal viewing, or obstructing access to, any fire-fighting equipment.*
3. *Disabled persons should, where required, have a designated carer, support person, or responsible adult available to assist them to evacuate the building in the event of fire alarm activation or other emergency. Hirers must ensure that appropriate*

arrangements are considered in advance for any attendee who may require assistance to evacuate safely, including the implementation of a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) where appropriate. A PEEP template can be provided if required. An evacuation chair is available at the Corn Exchange venue for use by trained personnel where necessary.

4. *Be aware of the fire assembly points.*
5. *The lift at the Corn Exchange must not be used in the event of a fire.*
6. *A member of the halls team will liaise with the lead hirer, prior to their booking commencing, to explain any evacuation procedure.*

E-Scooters, E-Bikes and Lithium Battery Powered Devices

7. *In the interests of fire safety, hirers and all persons attending the premises must not bring into, use, store, or charge within the building any electric scooter (e-scooter), electric bicycle (e-bike) or any other electrically powered personal transport device using lithium-ion batteries, unless expressly authorised in writing by the Council.*
8. *This restriction does not apply to mobility scooters or other mobility aids used by disabled persons or those with mobility impairments. However, such equipment must not obstruct corridors, doorways, circulation areas, or designated fire escape routes at any time.*
9. *The Council reserves the right to require the immediate removal or repositioning of any device where it is considered to present a fire or safety risk. Failure to comply with this condition may result in the termination of the hire agreement without refund and may affect future bookings.*
Hirers are responsible for ensuring that all performers and attendees comply with this condition at all times.

Health and Safety

10. **No naked flames**, including but not limited to; candles, tea lights, fireworks, pyrotechnics, flammable liquids/gases, aerosols, portable gas cookers, portable heaters, or paraffin burners are not permitted. If any of the above are found to be in use the damage deposit may be retained in full to cover increase liability.
11. *The use of smoke machines or haze machines is not permitted.*
12. **Avoid bringing combustible decorations that spread fire rapidly, such as polystyrene or untreated fabric bunting.**

Corporate Strategy

The Council's Strategic Plan 2025–29 sets out the Council's long-term priorities and direction, supporting its mission to 'make Witney a great place to live, work and visit.' This report contributes to the delivery of the following strategic pillar of the plan:

1. A Forward Looking Town Council

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 – covered in the report above re: hearing loops
- b) Biodiversity – no direct impact
- c) Crime & Disorder – no direct impact
- d) Environment & Climate Emergency – no direct impact.

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.

By approving the actions on health and safety, it meets and ensures compliance and best practice.

Social Value

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

Financial implications

- Can be seen in the report above.
 - Income generation from wedding packages
 - Additional funding for hearing loops at the Council's Public Halls. Approx. £11,000 and £18,000 above the allocated budget. Grant funding being sought.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and

1. Consider the light up request relating to Long Covid Awareness in 2027 (and beyond).
2. Consider the proposed re-structure of wedding charges and introduction of tiered packages.
3. Consider the funding requirements for the installation of Hearing Loops at Corn Exchange and Burwell Hall as well as the additional requirement in the Admin Office and 1863 Café.
4. Consider the updated hiring conditions, as a result of findings from the recent Fire Safety Audit.