

HALLS & GREEN SPACES COMMITTEE

Date: 13th January 2020
Title: Public Halls Report
Contact Officer: Venue Manager – Tomas Smith

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this report is to provide members with an update on the usage and operational management of the Corn Exchange and Burwell Hall since the last meeting. The usage figures are attached for information.

CURRENT POSITION

It has been an interesting first month in this new position and I have made several minor changes to make the Corn Exchange more welcoming and appealing and to embrace its heritage. This includes adding a wooden A frame to advertise events at the front of the building, showcasing the original Buttercross mechanism in the lobby, purchasing an events letter board to direct guests entering the building and in addition to this we have a new suitably sized clock in reception to add a look of heritage.

The Christmas period was particularly quiet in 2019 at both halls, with the exception of my first event, the MacMillan Charity Quiz Night, Children's pantomime on 28th December and Wrestling on 29th. The pantomime was a sell-out and well received by those who attended. The wrestling organisers sold their own refreshments at the event as we had nothing to offer. At the pantomime there were numerous requests regarding refreshments so this is an absolute must in order to generate additional revenue as well as providing an additional attraction to potential hirers. Not having this facility is literally costing the Council, certainly on the day of the pantomime, I conservatively estimate a profit of £300.00 could have been made in this area.

The Corn Exchange will be closed the week commencing 6th January for annual maintenance and the work programmed for this week by the Council's Works team includes redecorating the changing room areas at the back of the main hall. In addition, we are having curtain rails put up in these rooms to offer privacy for those using the rooms and hopefully this will provide an incentive for groups to use this facility. We are looking at the overall 'first impression' of the Corn Exchange so we are cleaning and repainting where it needs attention in order to look at its best. In addition to this, a new hot water boiler has recently been installed at Burwell Hall to the delight of our regular users.

There are further changes that I would like to see in the future, some of which are outlined later in this report and some which will come under the remit of the Corn Exchange Working Party.

STAFFING

I have met all the cleaners and caretakers and spent time learning how the staff operate and there have been some changes in personnel. I currently have two new caretakers and propose that I take

one further part time caretaker on to provide flexibility and cover for holidays. I will be conducting ongoing training to ensure they are correctly trained in all the relevant areas needed. This will cover fire training, manual handling, first aid in the workplace etc. as well as looking at customer service, guest introductions and checkouts. Hopefully, along with the Bookings Administrator I have the basis of a strong team capable of progression and in developing the Corn Exchange as a venue.

BOOKINGS & HIRERS

The usage figures for the halls for the three months from September – December are in summary disappointing, and there needs to be serious consideration as to why this is, what events the Council wants to hold and the historic agreements in place with existing hirers.

Regarding hirers, we have been too accommodating in the past, several groups seem to believe that by booking the Gallery Room they automatically get free reign over the other rooms in the hall. This may well have been by previous agreement but cannot continue at no extra cost. I have found one group in particular in the changing rooms at the back which constitutes a health and safety risk as well as adding an unnecessary fire risk as I or the other staff must know who is where in the building at any one time.

In terms of storage, rarely used items have been removed from the changing rooms/backstage area so that they are usable to hirers. I am also clamping down on what we can store for groups who visit once a week. We simply don't have the space to facilitate boxes of drums/toys/teas and coffees. I feel that we can either charge for the privilege or simply not allow it. We have plenty of groups using the halls who don't leave boxes of paraphernalia around so it really should be one rule for all, particularly as the Council struggles to store its own equipment.

I understand the previous Council agreed to introduce a two-hour booking slot which has produced a small number of hirers but is offset by the number of caretaker hours required throughout the day to keep turning around halls. I propose we revert to a four-hour booking slot (essentially three hires a day) with a minimum of one hour between bookings which will be a more efficient use of the Council's resources. Income will of course be further investigated through the Corn Exchange Working Party.

In line with other businesses, I believe that the Council should also be making the following commercial sundry charges which go towards the offsetting the cost of community use.

Tea/Coffee/Biscuits	£3.00 per person (to include biscuits)*	Locally generally charged at £2.00 but can be more
Additional hours over booking time	£25.00 per hour, up to a maximum of 3 hours.	After 3 hours a full second session charge will be applied
Flip Chart Stand hire	£5.00 per session	Hirers can bring their own paper and pens or can also hire it from the Corn Exchange for a cost
Projector Hire	£10.00 per session	people inadvertently walk off with leads and maybe an additional cost would be in order to focus the mind in this respect
Staging	Negotiable. £25.00 with more than 1 weeks' notice. £50.00 for short notice	a couple of hours work for the caretakers

*with this in mind, hirers should no longer be able to bring their own tea/coffee in our crockery

OVER 30's DISCO – PRICE REVIEW

The over 30's disco is held in the corn exchange on the first Saturday of each month and is advertised not only as a disco, but on a well-known dating site. The current charge for this booking is £160.00 and I believe this committee agreed to defer a price increase for six months at its meeting on 3rd June 2019 in expectation that improvements to the building (including a bar) may have been completed by that time.

As the new Venue Manager this booking is not making financial sense in its current format and should not be charged at a local group rate. The amount of money we charge for the hall hire (£160) is negated by the fact that we have to have a caretaker on duty from 5pm, when equipment starts to arrive, to 11pm, this works out at £9.00 per hour (**£54.00**) added to the earlier 2 hour hall set up of **£18.00**. This is without factoring in the minimum 2 hours unsociable working which is always needed as the event always goes on past 1am as the disco and bar have to dismantle and clear. Our total cost to set up the disco and tidy for a minimum of 2 hours in the morning is **£117.00**. The clean-up in the morning is always time consuming as the floor really needs a lot of attention as well as moving every item of furniture back to its correct position in the lobby. We are therefore operating on approximately a maximum of £43.00 profit for this event. Therefore, the event should at the very least be charged a fair and correct commercial rate of £380.00.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

The Bookings Administrator was made aware of an alleged incident which took place at the Over 30's Disco on Saturday 7th December 2019 by the organiser a few days afterwards. The Council have assisted Thames Valley Police with their enquiries regarding this and from this has instigated a review of how the larger events at the Corn Exchange and Burwell Hall are run and an audit is currently being undertaken.

EVENTS & PUBLICITY

The fabric of the Corn Exchange may well be changing in the future and due to this I am keeping any events down to a minimum as we all need to understand what direction the redevelopment will go in. I have had various conversations with different groups, watched how they operate and would like to see the introduction of cinema nights, separate website, digital advertising, what's on guide and most importantly the bar/café area in the lobby. Having attended evening events and seeing how the addition of a bar enhances the experience I would recommend this as a vital addition to the Lobby area. If it was dual purpose we could have a coffee shop by day and bar by night increasing revenue and daily footfall through the hall.

Having said this, I would like to hold a maximum of six subsidised events in 2020 and then monthly events from 2021. I have already entered into discussions to hold a Sea Shanty and Pirate Evening, a Kraftwerk tribute gig and others. However, I would request some acceptable parameters to be agreed to work with.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019 – with this in mind Councillors should have due regard to the environmental impact of any decisions they make with regard to its facilities and services it operates.

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.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Income generation from sundry charges listed above cannot be estimated at this time, although it is hoped this will supplement that budgeted for the new financial year.

There is likely to be a cost to putting on some of the events - for that reason the Officers request acceptable parameters to work. Whilst it is hoped most events will break even there may be some which won't however these should be reviewed as opportunities to show case the Corn Exchange and its versatility. Attendance at some of the events may result in other bookings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are invited to note the report, and;

1. Consider a request for six subsidised uses of the Corn Exchange Main Hall for income generating events in 2020 and up to twelve (one each month) in 2021 to be delegated to the Venue Manager and Town Clerk/Office Manager – and setting acceptable parameters to work within;
2. That the sundry charges be agreed if appropriate;
3. That four hourly booking slots for new hirers at Burwell Hall and the Corn Exchange be agreed if appropriate;
4. That the hire charge for the Over 30's Disco be increased to the Commercial charge of £380.00 per session;
5. That groups must stick to one room or pay for additional ones.