

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

Minutes of the Guildhall Committee held on Tuesday 3rd July 2012 at 1.30pm in the Committee Room at the Old Abbey House, Abingdon-on-Thames

Present:

Cllr Iain Littlejohn	Chairman
Cllr Marilyn Badcock	Vice-Chairman
Cllr Sandy Lovatt	
Cllr Lesley Legge	
Cllr Alison Rooke	
Ms Heather Brown	Co-opted member

In attendance:

Mrs Laura Hawkins	Event Organiser Ltd
Mr Mike Habermehl	Landscape Architect, Adams Habermehl (for item at minute 16)
Mr Steve Rich	Head of Service Delivery
Mr Nigel Warner	Town Clerk (Clerk to the meeting)

14. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Katie Nobes and the Mayor of Abingdon-on-Thames, Cllr Monica Lovatt.

15. **Declarations of Interest**

Non-pecuniary interests were declared by Cllr Marilyn Badcock, whose spouse is a Freemason and a member of lodges which use the Guildhall; Cllr Lesley Legge, who has used the Music Practice in the Old Magistrates Court; and Cllr Iain Littlejohn, whose children take examinations at the Music Practice in the Old Magistrates Court.

16. **Royse Court Gardens: Improvement Scheme**

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Head of Service Delivery in relation to the above, as circulated with the agenda. However the matter was discussed in the open session, as the extent of the confidential items consisted solely of proposed contractual matters between the Council and Adams Habermehl.

The Chairman, Cllr Iain Littlejohn, introduced Mr Mike Habermehl of Adams Habermehl Environmental Design Partnership. Mr Habermehl had previously, at the request of the Council, drafted a proposal in relation to the Royse Court Gardens. This was detailed in the letter dated 23rd May 2011. The matter had previously been deferred pending the completion of Phase 1 of the Improvement Project.

Mr Habermehl made some comments in relation to the area. Whilst there was no detailed brief or budget, he believed that the area was in need of improvements. This was an important frontage on to Bridge Street and was an important amenity for those using the Guildhall, for example, it could be an ideal area for wedding photographs. However as a public entrance it was in poor condition, the paths may not be orientated in the best way, access was not level, and the trees were in poor condition. The fountain did not work. He

explained the proposal which he had submitted in relation to a sketch/ framework design proposal.

Mr Habermehl stated that there were three aspects to the area in question: an urban design layer – this was at a key entrance to the town; the functionality of the area and the landscape design. The work which he would be doing would be a layout design, not a detailed design.

A variety of views were expressed by Members:

- Need to get the correct methodology in place. Council needed to set a budget to guide the architect.
- This was a poor entrance to the Guildhall but Council was not ready to do this work. Was it intended to treat this area as public amenity space or was it envisaged that it was a private space for weddings etc.
- There were three aspects to this area: as an area in front of the Roysse Court offices; as gardens in their own right; and as an entrance to the Guildhall.
- The use of Roysse Court will affect pedestrian flows.
- This is a town centre retreat for people to sit quietly e.g. at lunchtime.
- The uses of the area are not mutually exclusive. There is enough knowledge of the use of the area to proceed.
- The main point is to what extent we encourage people to use the area either as a garden or for passing through.
- Need close attention to detail in design e.g. one would not want the waste bins close to the main area for wedding photographs.

Mr Habermehl left the meeting at this point, it being 2.05 pm.

Members then considered the proposal for design work in relation to the Roysse Court Gardens.

Members noted that the Council had worked successfully with Mr Habermehl on a number of projects and considered that the Council should proceed to outline designs.

In terms of a brief, the following were ideas were put forward and found favour:

- Creation of a pleasant open space. As this is an entrance to the town, the landscaping should not block the view.
- There should be a grassed area.
- Design should not be too symmetrical.
- The current fountain is falling apart and its removal should be considered. Its replacement by a water feature should be considered as an option.
- The idea of opening up the Stert, through some viewing feature, should be rejected.
- Would be good to consult with the wedding photographers the Committee had asked to quote for the brochure photographs.
- Flowerbed should be a feature. It could be tiered, for example on three levels, so it had height rather than depth.
- Consider flag poles.
- Some paved areas would allow for dancing etc.
- Some provision for seating.
- The archway entrance to the Roysse Room should be considered in the design.
- Attention needed to be paid to the entrance to the Magistrates Court, which is not especially attractive.
- Clarification would be required regarding any necessary planning consents.

It was **Resolved:**

- (i) that Adams Habermehl be requested to commission of MJA Engineers a topographical survey of the Roysse Court Gardens, as outlined in their letter of 23rd May 2011;
- (ii) that Adams Habermehl be commissioned to produce an outline design in relation to the Roysse Court Gardens, as detailed in their letter of 23rd May 2011.

Recommended to the Council through the Finance and General Purposes Committee:

That a sum of £50,000 be set aside from the Guildhall Capital Improvements sum, as an estimated budget for the above work. It was noted that this would then be reviewed following completion of the work being undertaken by Adams Habermehl.

17. **Minutes**

Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee held on 4th May, the reconvened meeting of 9th May 2012 and the meeting of 22nd May 2012 be approved by the meeting as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

18. **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising which were not covered elsewhere on the agenda.

19. **Council Forward Plan 2012/13**

It was noted that the above Plan had been approved by the Audit and Performance Committee for initial consideration by the relevant Committee. The relevant sections of the Plan were considered.

In relation to key performance indicators, “hirer satisfaction” would be measured by a customer satisfaction questionnaire and a “mystery shopper.” “Occupancy rates” would be in relation to the whole building rather than individual rooms.

In relation to “Ongoing initiatives – the Guildhall” it was agreed to add the clause “to operate the Guildhall on behalf of the community” at the end of the first sentence. At the end of the third paragraph, the following sentence would be added: “The primary driver of this change is expected to be greater utilisation rather than increased prices.”

The paragraphs in relation to the development programme would be altered according to the agreed position on publication of the Plan.

Resolved: that the Committee recommend that the Audit and Performance Sub-Committee approve the Guildhall sections of the Forward Plan, subject to the proposed amendments detailed above

20. **Financial and usage report**

The Committee received and considered the report of Town Clerk/ Responsible Financial Officer in relation to the above, as circulated with the agenda. Members were content with the level of detail and the improvements shown in relation to both revenue and utilisation.

It was noted that In terms of revenue, the position during May and June 2012 showed an improvement compared with the previous year. For both months, total revenue in relation to the Guildhall was 15% higher than it was in the previous year, for May up from £7,354 to £8,496 and for June from £6,121 to £7,061. This is also reflected with an increase in room utilisation. During May 2012, the total number of hours of utilisation of all the Guildhall rooms amounted to 270 hours, an increase of some 25% over the 215 hours for May the previous year. The number of hours of utilisation in June 2012 amounted to 218.5 hours, compared with 197.5 hours for the same month in 2011, an increase of some 10%. Members noted that there was not a direct correlation between revenue and room utilisation because revenue also includes items such as bar income, and the revenue arising from room usage would vary according to which room has been booked. An example of this was given in relation to the May 2012 figures where an important element of the increase in utilisation related to the Bear Room, where the hours booked during the month totalled 72 hours, compared with 13.5 hours the previous year; however, because this was a relatively small room, this did not impact upon the revenue by the same proportion.

The Chairman, Cllr Iain Littlejohn, stated that the next stage was to move to projections in relation to future activity.

Resolved: that the report be adopted.

21. **Guildhall Improvement Scheme, Phase One**

The Committee received and considered the report of Town Clerk in relation to the above, as circulated with the agenda.

Members agreed that the potential for widening the corridor which runs from reception, passed the robing cupboard, to the Mayor's Parlour, should be explored.

Resolved: that the report be adopted.

In relation to the name of the Council Chamber it was noted that the name was an accurate reflection of both the historic and the continuing use of this room and it was **resolved** that this remain the name for this room.

22. **Date of next meeting and calendar of meetings**

Resolved: that the next meeting of the Committee take place on Thursday 2nd August at 5.30 pm. and that the schedule of meetings for the remainder of the year be as follows, with the start time of the meetings being 5.30 pm:

Wednesday 5th September
Thursday 4th October
Wednesday 14th November
Tuesday 18th December
Friday 11th January 2013
Wednesday 6th February
Thursday 7th March

Wednesday 3rd April
Tuesday 30th April

23. **Exclusion of the Public including the Press**

The Chairman moved and it was **resolved**:

That in accordance with section 1 (2) of the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960 (as extended by Section 100 of the Local Government Act 1972), the public (including the press) be excluded from the meeting because of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted.

24. **Confidential Appendix**

Resolved: that the confidential appendix to the minutes of the meeting held on 4th May 2012 and of 22nd May 2012 and Heather Brown's notes of the reconvened meeting of 9th May 2012 be approved by the meeting as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

In relation to the appointment of the Guildhall Manager it was **resolved** that Cllrs Marilyn Badcock, Iain Littlejohn and Alison Rooke be appointed to the interviewing panel.

It was requested that a record be kept in relation to consultancy fees.

25. **Guildhall operational matters**

The Committee received and considered the report confidential reports of the Head of Service Delivery and from Event Organiser relating to the above.

In relation to the equipment report, Members felt that the suggestion that rooms be left in "set up" with tables and chairs in position, was a good idea in principle as it would show the rooms to potential hirers in their best light; however, there needed to be flexibility so as to avoid unnecessary moving of furniture etc.

Members considered that the purchase of seat covers merited further consideration. However they considered that the provision of still and sparkling bottled water within room packages would prove to be too expensive.

In relation to floral arrangements in the reception area, it was suggested that it may be possible to approach a local florist to see if these could be provided free of charge in return for allowing advertising to be displayed.

It was suggested that cloths/ baize be purchased for tables in the Council Chamber and the Roesse Room. Members considered that where an event is catered for, then the caterer should provide table cloths; however, for other events, the Council should supply table cloths.

Members asked that the area under and at the front of the stage and visible from the Abbey Hall, should be tidied and drapes used to hide the chairs. It was **resolved** that the more modern chairs which the officers considered were beyond repair, should be disposed of.

Please also see confidential appendix to these minutes.

26. **Guildhall pricing packages and marketing**

The Committee received and considered the confidential reports from Event Organiser and Heather Brown.

Members debated the principle of including floral displays in the wedding packages. It was considered that in most venues this was something which the couple arranged and that it was a matter of specific taste and therefore, that this should be removed from the packages.

Members requested that proposals for a conferencing microphone system should be brought forward.

In relation to the community use packages, members requested that the term “session” be defined.

It was **resolved** that the Guildhall packages be approved, subject to exclusion of floral displays and provision of water, and that the packages document, as amended, should then be brought forward to the next meeting for approval. It was also **agreed** that the associated fees and charges be referred back to the next meeting.

The Committee **agreed** that the remaining items on the agenda would be held over to the next meeting.

The meeting rose at 3.55 pm.