

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

Minutes of the Guildhall Committee held on Wednesday 14th November 2012 at 5.30pm in the Committee Room at the Old Abbey House, Abingdon-on-Thames

Present:

Cllr Iain Littlejohn	Chairman
Cllr Marilyn Badcock	Vice-Chairman
Cllr Lesley Legge	
Cllr Sandy Lovatt	Chairman Finance and General Purposes Committee / Leader of the Council
Ms Heather Brown	Co-opted Member

In attendance:

Cllr Julie Mayhew-Archer	
Ms Johanna Aynsley	Guildhall Manager
Mr Mike Habermehl	Landscape architect (for item at minute G69)
Mr Steve Rich	Head of Service Delivery
Mr Nigel Warner	Town Clerk (Clerk to the meeting)

65. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Monica Lovatt (Mayor), Katie Nobes and Alison Rooke.

66. **Declarations of Interest**

Cllr Marilyn Badcock declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to the item at Minute G75 as her husband is a member of one of the Abingdon Masonic Lodges.

Cllr Lesley Legge declared a non-pecuniary interest in the item at Minute G75 as she sings in a group which practises at the Old Magistrates' Court

67. **Minutes**

Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee held on the 4th October 2012 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

68. **Matters Arising**

A Member stated that she was aware that the Council had spent and committed funds towards the various projects at the Guildhall and asked that an update of the status in relation to the various projects be presented to the Committee on a regular basis.

69. **Royse Court Garden**

The Chairman of the Committee, Cllr Iain Littlejohn, introduced Mr Mike Habermehl of Adams Habermehl. Mr Habermehl had been commissioned by the Council to produce an outline

design for landscaping the Roysse Court Gardens in accordance to the brief agreed by the Committee.

Mr Habermehl circulated a paper in relation to the Roysse Court Gardens and presented this to the Committee. This paper is attached to these minutes. The paper outlined the background to the commission and detailed the physical landscape matters which needed to be addressed. The paper also detailed the wider issues in relation to the use and function of the Roysse Court Gardens before setting out the proposals. Mr Habermehl also presented to the Committee a landscape framework plan, referenced as drawing 0466.1.2, together with a sketch plan section for the area of the gardens adjacent to the Crown and Thistle Hotel. As Mr Habermehl's report is attached to these minutes, these details are not repeated in this document.

Mr Habermehl stated that in many respects the Roysse Court Gardens were not really a garden; it was an urban courtyard which was framed by planting to soften the space and his proposals included a low hedge between the Court and Bridge Street.

Members welcomed the proposals for the Roysse Court Gardens which they felt represented a significant improvement of the area.

In discussing this matter a number of points were raised. A Member stated that when the Old Gaol development took place a number of properties who had been informally using that site to store their wheelie bins, lost that facility and she wondered whether provision for the storage of these bins could be built into the design. However, the consensus of the meeting was that whilst the bin storage problem was an unfortunate one, the Roysse Court Gardens was not a suitable space for storing wheelie bins. The Council was attempting to create a pleasant environment for the enjoyment of those visiting the town centre as well as those using the Guildhall. It was also noted that the gardens were in a key location which linked the town centre with the riverside.

Members noted that the purple plum and crab apple trees were in significant decline, with rot and fungal growth, and would need to be felled. Unfortunately the other crab apple tree was also in decline, carrying deadwood; it had a limited lifespan and if the area was developed, it would make sense for this tree to be replaced along with the others. A Member asked Mr Habermehl what species of tree he would be recommending for Roysse Court. He stated that the species would be a medium sized tree which displayed seasonal interest, such as white beam, rowan, ornamental crab apple, bird cherry, hawthorn or cut leaf elder. A member wondered whether these trees would be robust enough to support Christmas lights. Mr Habermehl responded that they would be but care would need to be taken when the trees were young.

Members noted that the design included steps into the gardens adjacent to the Crown and Thistle Hotel and asked whether it would be possible to put in a slope in order to make wheelchair access easier. Mr Habermehl stated that he would take a look at the feasibility of this but suspected that the gradient of the slope, which would be facing onto a road, would be steeper than the relevant standards required.

Members noted that the Crown and Thistle Hotel were undertaking a refurbishment and there was a significant area of garden / open space owned by the Crown and Thistle adjacent to the site. Members asked that the Town Clerk contact the owners to see what their plans were and whether there would be the opportunity for Mr Habermehl to integrate these with the Council's improvements. A number of other points were made, including the need for

more litter bins in the area, the idea of planting the central grassed area with bulbs and including an outside electric point. The provision of a tap was considered but felt not to be appropriate. Members considered that the area would provide a good open space to allow organisations such as bands and Morris dancers to perform.

A Member stressed the need for good signage as people sometimes had difficulty finding the Registry Office and whilst she liked the concept of the hedge, she stressed the need that this be well-kept and well-maintained. It was suggested that Mr Habermehl consult with a couple of the local wedding photographers as it was one of the aims of the improvement scheme to provide an attractive environment such photographs.

Mr Habermehl outlined the projected costs of the proposed scheme and these are included in the confidential appendix as this may be subject to procurement. He stated that the work would take between four to six weeks on site and it would be preferable but not essential for this to take place during the winter. A Member stated that the blank wall on the Crown and Thistle Hotel facing the Roysse Court Garden was quite bland and whilst it probably would not be possible, enquiries should also be made as to whether a window or other feature could be put into the wall.

The Chairman, Cllr Iain Littlejohn, thanked Mr Habermehl for his presentation and his proposals which were well received by the Committee.

RESOLVED:

1. that Mr Habermehl be thanked for the assessment, analysis and design study in relation to the Roysse Court gardens and that the study be approved for the basis of further work to take place, this to include detailed cost estimates, investigation of the specific points raised by Members and the opening of dialogue with the Crown and thistle Hotel regarding the adjacent garden area.
2. That following the above work, a report be made back to this Committee.

(Mr Habermehl left the meeting at this point.)

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

Members **noted** that the date of the next meeting had been agreed as Tuesday 18th December; at 5.30pm.

Subsequent meetings had been arranged for:

Friday 11th January 2013;
Wednesday 6th February;
Thursday 7th March;
Wednesday 3rd April;
Tuesday 30th April.

71. **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.

72. **Confidential Appendix**

It was **resolved** that the confidential appendix to the minutes of the meeting held on 4th October 2012 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

73. **Report of Guildhall Manager**

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Guildhall Manager in relation to the above.

The Guildhall Manager took the Committee through her report which covered a number of areas of the operation.

She had been working on a comprehensive budget, revising the current year projections and proposing estimates for 2013/14 and intended to present these at the next Committee meeting on 18th December 2012.

In terms of facility hire she reminded Members that room utilisation was running at a low level; however she considered that there was clear potential for growth over the coming year. November and December were showing a good number of bookings because of the various Christmas events which were being staged as well as the Christmas charity card bookings. One specific room which she considered was particularly underutilised was the Council Chamber which was showing as the fourth most popular room out of five, despite it being the “Jewel in the Guildhall Crown”. It was her intention to promote this particular room by inviting people to enjoy some in-house events in the Chamber in December.

In terms of weddings, during 2011/12 there had been 38 wedding ceremonies booked in the Guildhall and the number booked for the financial year to date amounted to 30 weddings, so there was a five month window to increase the figure before the close of the financial year. It was noted that the Guildhall currently operated at a 16.5% conversion rate from ceremony bookings to fully catered wedding receptions. Efforts were being made to increase this and this would be assisted through the purchase of the new lightweight durable circular conference tables which could now be used in the Council Chamber.

Wedding packages were being developed so that customers would have a number of options for catering and dressing weddings within a single package. However, in response to a question from a Member, the Manager confirmed that the hirers would still be able to use a caterer of their choice for weddings.

The Manager highlighted a number of building and operational matters within her report and stated that whilst the Phase Two improvement work to the atrium and the Abbey Hall were pending, it would still be over a year before this part of the project commenced “on the ground.” She stated that during this time it would necessary to develop the business at the Guildhall and increase revenues and it was very difficult to do this as some of the newer parts of the Guildhall now looked tired and tatty compared with the historic rooms. Consequently, she tabled a paper, which is included as part of the confidential appendix and which detailed a number of works which she considered to be necessary in the newer part of

the Guildhall. This list is included in the confidential appendix as it includes prices from a number of builders. The works included decoration to the entrance hall, foyer, common areas, and toilets; improvements to the bar area; and carpeting of the lobby outside the toilets.

Members were sympathetic to the proposed improvements, which would increase the attractiveness of the newer part of the Guildhall. However, the issue was summed up by the Chairman, Cllr Iain Littlejohn, who stated that the Guildhall would need to look to recover these costs through improved business during the 14 months prior to the Phase Two works starting. Members asked the Town Clerk as to how much he considered was available in the Guildhall's maintenance budgets for such work to take place. The Town Clerk responded that it was quite difficult to make this estimate as there was still over four months of the financial year left, during which there could be unexpected costs. However, he considered that a sum of £6,000 could be accommodated.

The Committee **resolved** to allocate a sum of £6,000 towards some of the works detailed in the proposal put forward by the Manager. It was noted that this would mean that the proposed improvements would need to be scaled back and authority was delegated to the Town Clerk (as advised by the Guildhall Manager) to review the projects and to undertake such works as could be achieved within the £6,000 budget set down. Members asked that a report be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee regarding the works which were undertaken.

The report detailed a number of staffing matters.

The Manager reported on some work which she had undertaken in relation to funding of improvement works at the Guildhall. Further to her report she regretted that the grant that had been awarded in relation to digital marketing was now believed to be a "scam". Apart from a modest amount of her time that had been spent making the application, the Guildhall had not lost any money in relation to this, but the matter had been reported to Trading Standards who were now pursuing this matter. The Manager reported that she was pursuing the possibility of a grant of up to £5,000 towards the Roysse Court Garden works and she was also investigating the potential for grants towards solar panels on the large flat roof of the Abbey Hall.

The Manager reported on the progress in relation to marketing with publicity in a number of publications as well as websites and the social media. She distributed posters and flyers in relation to the Christmas events.

Finally, the Manager mentioned the potential for dressing the Abbey Hall with ceiling drapes, wall drapes, etc and a number of other ideas to brighten up the Abbey Hall. A Member stated that ceiling drapes which had been installed for the Mayor's Ball had transformed the hall earlier in the year.

The Chairman thanked the Manager for her report and it was **resolved** that the report be approved.

74. **Guildhall Improvements Update**

The Town Clerk reported that procurement for architectural and other services in relation to Stage Two of the Guildhall Improvement Project was ongoing. Following receipt and analysis of the pre-qualification questionnaire from interested parties, a shortlist of six

architects, four mechanical and electrical engineers and four structural engineers had been selected for the invitation to tender. The invitation to tender was due to be issued imminently with the closing date being Thursday 29th November 2012. Shortly afterwards the appointed panel would shortlist a maximum of three professional partners within each discipline and these would be invited to interview by the panel on 13th December 2012.

The panel previously appointed consisted of the Committee Chairman, Cllr Iain Littlejohn; the Committee Vice-Chairman, Cllr Marilyn Badcock; and Cllr Alison Rooke, although Cllr Julie Mayhew-Archer had substituted for Cllr Rooke during the recent shortlisting process. The panel had discussed the original idea that the architects be invited to make a presentation to the whole Council on the Saturday following the interviews. This matter had been discussed by the panel at some length and they considered that this was unlikely to add substantial value to the process. The panel would have the detailed knowledge, having read the tenders and interviewed the different professionals, to make the decision on who should be appointed. It was anticipated at this stage that the “creative input” from the architects would be limited and therefore the presentations themselves would focus on their skills and experience. Following the recommendation of the panel, the Committee **resolved** that the architects should not be asked to make a presentation to the Council.

The verbal report of the Town Clerk was noted.

75. **Property Matters – Roysse Court / Old Magistrates’ Court**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Town Clerk in relation to property matters at Roysse Court and the Old Magistrates’ Court.

Due to the commercial sensitivity of all these matters, the discussion and recommendations are at this time contained within the confidential appendix.

76. **Charitable Status**

The Committee deferred its consideration of the confidential report of the Town Clerk to the next meeting.

The meeting rose at 7.52pm