

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

Draft Minutes of the Guildhall Committee held on Thursday 18th May 2017 at 7.00pm in Roysse Room, the Guildhall, Abingdon-on-Thames

Present:

Cllr Dennis Garrett	Chairman
Cllr Mike Badcock	Vice-Chairman
Cllr Samantha Bowring	
Cllr Margaret Crick	
Cllr Neil Fawcett	
Cllr Robert Hall	
Cllr Brian Hedley	
Cllr Jan Morter	Mayor of Abingdon-on-Thames (ex-officio)

In Attendance

Cllr Vicky Jenkins	
Mrs Jane Bowen	
Mr Jonathan Longden	Leys Longden
Mr Steve Rich	Assistant Town Clerk/ Head of Services
Mr Nigel Warner	Town Clerk (Clerk to the meeting)
3 Members of the public	

G5 Apologies

None.

G6 Declarations of interest

None.

G7 Minutes

Members received and considered the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee of 10th May 2017.

Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee of 10th May 2017 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

G8 Matters arising

None.

G9 **Public participation**

No statements or questions from those present.

G10 **Guildhall Development Working Group**

The Committee considered the appointment of the above working group for 2017/18.

It was **resolved** that the following members be appointed to the Guildhall Development Working Group for the municipal year 2017/18:

Cllrs Mike Badcock
Cllr Neil Fawcett
Cllr Dennis Garrett
Cllr Margaret Crick

(Cllr Samantha Bowring entered the meeting during discussion of this item, it being 7.06pm)

G11 **Finance Report**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Treasurer/ RFO in relation to the above (attached).

G12 **Guildhall Development Project**

The Committee received and considered a progress report in relation to the Guildhall Project and a presentation was made by Mrs Jane Bowen.

Mrs Bowen stated that following the condition survey and measured drawings completed by Leys Longden in January 2017, a further internal inspection of the Old Magistrates' Court was conducted on 20th April 2017 and a meeting with VWHDC Conservation Officer and a representative from English Heritage was held on 5th April, 2017. This report updated the Committee on developments, listed in more detail work required within the Old Magistrates' Court, and outlined the next steps that require approval.

Old Magistrates Court

The various options for flooring were noted. Level access was possible from the Guildhall reception area to the Court. There would be a need for some electrical work to include re-routing of cables and additional sockets. New lighting would be required for exhibition purposes. A Member stated that he had seen effective LED lighting in the Museum at the Sint Niklaas, one of Abingdon's twin towns.

In relation to windows and ventilation most of the existing windows had secondary glazing, and the large south facing windows also have venetian blinds. Replacement of this secondary glazing with double glazing units that provide more security, UV protection and new blinds would improve the appearance of the Courtroom and Robing Room.

Mrs Bowen would consult the Arts Council England Security Advisor to ensure that the Courtroom and Council Chamber would be appropriate for loans requiring Government Indemnity and additional works may then be suggested. The control of the space in terms of security, heating and humidity were key. She stated that if Government Indemnity loans could be obtained then there was a lead time of some 18 to 24 months in securing the exhibitions.

Doors would need to be secure but also in accordance with fire safety requirements.

Mrs Bowen suggested that if art exhibitions are to be staged in the Courtroom, movable temporary display walls would be required. Mila-Wall by MBA or equivalent – is a system of lightweight honeycomb exhibition walls that can be configured in different layouts to suit exhibitions. She anticipated that the panelling of the Courtroom and the Magistrates' Bench would remain so that the previous use of the room as a Court is still visible. However, repairs would be needed to some areas and if the panelling is to be painted as part of the redecoration, advice may be needed from the Conservation Officer. Cllr Mike Badcock stated that there had been extensive alterations in the Old Magistrates Court over the years and suggested that Mr David Barratt would have good knowledge in this regard.

It was assumed that rehangings the William IV Coat of Arms behind the bench and perhaps hanging other paintings on the walls will be agreeable to the Conservation Officer. A picture hanging system was suggested so that paintings can be moved without repeated damage to the walls.

Mrs Bowen stated that some items would need to be displayed in showcases and some of the cases currently in the County Hall Museum Attic Gallery may be better located in the Courtroom or Council Chamber in the future. However, some new cases would also be required, especially for the display area at the end of the Roysse Room where a bespoke case of the correct dimensions and with side or rear opening will be required.

(Cllr Neil Fawcett entered the meeting at this point, it being 7.26pm).

Mrs Bowen stated that the space under the Mayor's Parlour was converted into three cells for prisoners, probably during the 20th century. The survey had shown that these walls are not load bearing and therefore could be removed to make a larger, more useful, store area. It was suggested that permission be sought to remove the wall between cell 1 and cell 2 to create a larger area for static racking but that the third cell be kept intact as a secure or quarantine store.

The old public gallery had been used as an office area by the Music Practice. It was suggested that desks be retained in this area but the screens be removed so that a member of museum staff or volunteer would be able to work whilst invigilating the space, constant invigilation being a requirement for loans with Government Indemnity.

The robing room was suggested as a storage space but further work in relation to its proximity to the Stert was required.

Work would be required in relation to heating, as set out in the report. At present the heating is shared with the Guildhall and the Abbey Hall although this might change in the future. Mrs Bowen stated that monitoring the current temperature and humidity was difficult at present with tenants in place who had their own requirements in relation to temperature. Consequently a period of monitoring from September 2017 would be required. Dehumidifiers may be required. It was **resolved** that advice be obtained from a mechanical and electrical engineer regarding the controls of the heating system.

A Member suggested that the Council may in due course wish to give some thought to naming the courtroom and suggested a possible name.

Lift and staircase

The Committee discussed the proposals to alter the 1731 staircase to the Bear Room and Council Chamber so that a lift for disabled access could be accommodated with a new narrower staircase. The objections of Historic England and the District Council Conservation Officer were noted and their alternative proposals to achieve disabled access were considered.

In summary these new proposals were:

1. Platform lift 1 within the Bridge Street Foyer area to rise 600mm to the floor level at the bottom of the 1731 staircase such that the Old Courtroom can be accessed. This would also provide access to Lift 2.
2. Lift 2 rising from the old WC off the Bridge Street foyer, at the level of the current hall at the bottom of the 1731 staircase, and then rising through the building to the level of the Abbey Room. This would also stop at the Bear Room level and the Mayor's Parlour.
3. Lift 3 to the west end of the Council Chamber in a new extension.

The Committee did not consider that the proposals made by Historic England and the District Council Conservation Officer represented suitable improvements. Amongst the reasons were the following:

- (i) The external lift to the west of the Council Chamber (lift 3) would mean that persons needing to use it would have to come into the reception area only then to go back out of the building and back track to the lift and then, having used the lift, enter a function/ meeting at the opposite end to everyone else. Their visit to the building would be via a different and more

cumbersome route to everyone else. It would mean delay in entering functions for a disabled person and represented a poor visitor experience.

The staircase itself was old (1731) but the Council's advisors did not believe its value was such as to preclude proposals for proper and effective disabled access which were important for the Council to meet its duties under the Equalities Act 2010.

Mrs Bowen had written two detailed reports on the Guildhall, Old Magistrates Court and Roysse Court offices. In relation to the staircase it was believed that adaptations had been made previously and it had been tampered with over the years. She had also concluded in one of her reports that there was some confusion over this staircase which was not the one which some people thought it was. Nikolaus Pevsner, in the 1966 edition of *The Buildings of England - Berkshire*, Penguin Books pp 56-57 mistakenly described this staircase as having 'turned and twisted balusters'. This mistake also appeared in Victoria County History 1906 - 1924. In fact both appeared to describe the staircase in Cosener's House. The error was corrected in the 2010 edition of *The Buildings of England* by Tyack and others to read 'with candlestick balusters and a swept end'.

A Member suggested that ambiguity over the age of the parts of the staircase might be resolved through carbon dating but Mrs Bowen stated that the problem would be which parts to carbon date.

- (ii) The current staircase in any case required adaptations as the height of the balustrade did not meet current standards as it was too low.
- (iii) Lift 3 would be physically remote from the Foyer area so it would be necessary to include an accessible WC and a fire staircase within the extension needed for this lift. This would require demolition of the external staircase and replacement by a stone building. Members were concerned with the loss of the stone staircase and were concerned with the aesthetic impact of the new building.
- (iv) Lift 2 would totally block the existing corridor between the Bear Room and the Mayor's Parlour and the link to the Abbey Hall.

The Committee noted that there was a balance to be struck between building conservation and the need for access. The Committee considered that it was vital that the Guildhall make proper provision for disabled people and the Council's current proposals did just that. Consequently it was proposed by Cllr Mike Badcock, seconded by Cllr Margaret Crick and **resolved** that the Committee endorse that Council's previous decision to apply for planning permission to alter the 1731 staircase to the Bear Room and Council Chamber so that a lift for disabled access could be accommodated with a new narrower staircase. It was further **resolved** that the Council's officers and advisors undertake the necessary work to make the strongest case for this work to take place.

Extension for Muniment Room and new toilet block

It was noted that a planning application had been submitted for the proposed Muniment Room and the toilets; this included the historic evaluation of the Roysse Room and Roysse Court Offices. Mrs Bowen stated that it may be necessary to have an archaeology watching brief when the foundations are excavated as the position of the building will be along the route of the Abbey Wall and possibly where there were kitchens of St John's Hospital or stables.

The Committee thanked Mrs Bowen for her update and it was **resolved** that her report be approved.

G13 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 1060 (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.

G 14 Confidential appendix

The Committee received and considered the confidential appendix to the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee of 23rd March 2017.

Resolved: that the confidential appendix to the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee of 23rd March 2017 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The meeting rose at 8:08pm.