

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

Draft minutes of the Guildhall Committee held on
Monday 19th March 2018 at 7.00pm
in the Roysse Room, the Guildhall, Abingdon-on-Thames

Present:

Cllr Dennis Garrett	Chairman
Cllr Mike Badcock	Vice-Chairman
Cllr Margaret Crick	
Cllr Neil Fawcett	
Cllr Robert Hall	
Cllr Brian Hedley	
Cllr Jan Morter	Mayor, ex-officio

In Attendance:

Cllr Angela Lawrence	
Mrs Jo Blackmore	Administrative Assistant (Clerk to the meeting)
Mr Huw Edmunds	Huw Edmunds Associates
Mr Nigel Warner	Town Clerk
Mrs Susan Whipp	Treasurer/ Responsible Finance Officer
Two members of the public	

G37 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Samantha Bowring.

G38 Declarations of interest

None.

G39 Minutes

Members received and considered the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee of 7th December 2017, as circulated with the agenda.

Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee of 7th December be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

G40 Matters arising

None

G41 **Public participation**

A statement was read by Mrs Bobbie Nichols:

“The Friends of Abingdon welcome the Town Clerk’s summary of the Asset Heritage Consulting report on Guildhall Access and the Historic Staircase. We are in full agreement with the highlighting of the difficulties involved in weighing up the benefits of fully inclusive access against the harm that would arise from replacing the historic staircase with a lift and a replica staircase. The Friends are particularly pleased that Asset Heritage Consulting recommended obtaining an access audit from a suitably qualified person, and that Ridge & Partners suggested introducing an independent handrail at regulation height. In his report the Town Clerk notes that both of these recommendations are being followed up. We believe that, on the basis of these recommendations, it should be possible to obtain a solution to the problem of access to the Historic Rooms, although it may not necessarily allow fully inclusive access to all the rooms.

“We would like to express our thanks to the Town Council for publishing the full reports on their website so that they are accessible to all. We look forward to the publication of the access audit when it is obtained. When is this likely to be, and how soon will a decision be taken?”

The Chairman, Cllr Dennis Garrett, confirmed that subject to the decision of this meeting, the access audit would be procured and its findings considered by the Committee at the following meeting.

G42 **Notes of the Guildhall Development Working Group**

Members received and considered the notes of the meetings of the Guildhall Working Group of 9th February and 2nd March 2018.

Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee of 9th February and 2nd March 2018 be approved.

G43 **Finance Report**

Members received and considered the Report of the Treasurer / Responsible Financial Officer, as circulated with the agenda.

Resolved: that the Report of the Treasurer / Responsible Financial Officer, be approved.

G44 **Special Parish Meeting of 15th January 2018 and Public Meeting of 22nd January 2018**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Town Clerk which contained draft responses to the questions asked by local residents at the two meetings held on 15th January 2018 and 22nd January 2018. In relation to the minutes/ notes of the

meetings of 15th and 22nd January 2018 it was noted that the matters raised under section 2 (a), the Abbey Hall, together with the Council's responses, had been considered by the special meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee of 26th February 2018.

It was **resolved that:**

The matters raised under section 2(b), access and protection of historic fabric of the Guildhall complex of buildings be noted and the draft responses to the questions asked at the special parish meeting of 15th January 2018 and at the public meeting held on 22nd January 2018 be approved.

G45 **Guildhall Access & Historic Staircase**

Members received and considered the report of the Town Clerk relating to Guildhall Access and Historic Staircase.

The report had been circulated with the agenda. The report stated that "the Guildhall the Abbey Room, Bear Room and Council Chamber do not have level access and are inaccessible for those in wheelchairs, buggies, etc. It is the Council's policy that all of its facilities and services are as inclusive as possible and in relation to the Guildhall the preferred solution is to install a lift to serve the inaccessible rooms, accommodating this lift by removing the historic staircase and building a new staircase in a similar and sympathetic style. This proposal has received support from the Vale Access Group but on seeking pre-planning advice it was opposed by Historic England and Vale of White Horse Conservation Officer. In December 2017 the Guildhall Working Group, endorsed by the Committee, commissioned two reports; one in relation to the significance of the staircase and the other in relation to required remedial works should it continue to be used and improvements to overcome safety concerns."

- (i) In relation to the report received from Asset Heritage Consulting this questioned the quality of the craftsmanship, stating "certainly, when examined in any detail, the staircase does not really add up to being the 'high quality piece of joinery' referred to in the Historic England pre-application advice provided on 27th April 2017." Nonetheless in terms of the age of the staircase, she considers that the ground to first floor sections of the staircase appear to be first half of the 18th century whilst the second floor element is probably an early 19th century addition to the staircase.

At paragraph 4.15 Sarah Watt suggested that "in considering the way forward, Council may wish to take a step back and review matters by appointing a suitably qualified person to undertake an access audit of the Guildhall with a view to appraising and reappraising all options including the Council's proposals in relation to the staircase and the proposals from Historic England and the District Council Conservation Officer outlined in the pre-planning application advice. The Council can then further consider the options and their implications on matters

including accessibility, conservation, future use and viability of the Guildhall so that it can then make a decision on how it wishes to proceed. At this point it would then ask for further detailed consideration of its proposals to be made to Historic England and the District Council”.

- (ii) The report from Ridge and Partners considered the condition of the staircase and also its safety. A number of recommendations were made and it was suggested that the Council may need to set aside a sum in the region of £10,000 for repair / remedial works to the staircase and potential safety improvements.

The following points were made:

- Subject to the decision of this meeting an Access audit will be commissioned.
- The Council is investigating and considering all options in the context of the balance between access and conservation of the building.
- Once this process has been completed and if full access is not possible the Council will have made all efforts to try to make the building fully accessible.
- If it is not possible to remove the staircase and it is to be used in the future then it would require maintenance work to enable continued safe usage of it.
- The Conservation Officer would also need to be contacted to see if we can get permission to install a handrail at the correct height. Followed by a quote for the work.

Resolved:

- (i) that the Committee approve the report.
- (ii) that the Committee sets aside a sum of up to £4,000 towards the proposed access audit, this to be funded from the current year Guildhall revenue budget.

G46 Old Magistrates Court

Members received and considered the report of the Town Clerk regarding proposals for “Space to Change” toilet. The area either side of the external doors to the old cells and the Old Magistrates’ Court were identified as having enough space and the potential to be converted into this facility. It was noted that at present there were no such toilets in Abingdon and that there was a strong drive for communities to install these facilities.

For clarity the Town Clerk stated that due to the area available this was a “Space to Change” toilet rather than a “Changing Spaces” toilet.

It was reported that the proposal would be for the Town Council will fund the building/conversion work and the Vale will perform the daily cleaning and ongoing maintenance.

The Committee agreed that as final proposals were not ready yet, funding was proposed from the pooled property fund and the facility would provide a service which went beyond the services provided by the Guildhall Committee, this matter would now be referred to the Finance and General Purposes Committee.

Referred and recommended to the Finance and General Purposes Committee: that the draft plans for the “Changing Places” toilet be approved and that the matter be presented for further consideration at the Finance and General Purposes Committee.

G47 **Publication of previously confidential appendices to minutes**

Members received a report of the Town Clerk regarding the Publication of previously confidential Appendices to Minutes.

It was proposed by Cllr. Mike Badcock, seconded by Cllr. Jan Morter and **resolved** that the Committee instruct the Town Clerk to review the confidential appendices to the minutes of the Committee from 1st April 2012 onwards and delegate to the Town Clerk authority to release into the public domain all those confidential appendices of parts thereof which following detailed review, he considers no longer require to be treated as confidential.

G48 **Confidential Appendix**

Members received and considered the confidential appendix to the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee of 7th December 2017, as previously circulated and approved by the Town Council as a report of the meeting.

Resolved: that the confidential appendix to the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee of 7th December 2017, be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

G49 **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.

G50 **Access audit**

Members received a report of the Town Clerk regarding the commissioning of the Access Audit subject to the approval of this proposal detailed at paragraph 4.15 of the statement of significance of the staircase prepared by Asset Heritage Consulting.

Resolved: that the Access Audit be commissioned and that Lord Consultants be commissioned to perform this Access Audit.

G51 **Arrangements for the re-opening of the Guildhall**

Previously included on agenda as “Presentation on Service Proposals.” It was noted that Members had previously received, with the agenda for postponed meeting of 1st March 2018, a paper titled “Reactivation of the Guildhall Rooms.” Members had also received with this meeting’s agenda a paper “Guildhall Reactivation Considerations & Schedule Indications” and a confidential report of the Town Clerk. The Committee considered all these papers.

It was noted that at the meeting of the Guildhall Development Working Group of 9th February 2018 members received a presentation from Huw Edmunds Associates regarding services which could be provided in relation to the Guildhall. This resulted in the production of the document “reactivation of the Guildhall rooms” which was sent to Members ahead of the meeting which was scheduled for 1st March 2018. Following a further meeting with Officers Hugh Edmunds has produced a further document “Guildhall Reactivation Considerations and Schedule Indications”.

The reports “Reactivation of the Guildhall Rooms” and “Guildhall Reactivation Considerations & Schedule Indications” had been drafted by Huw Edmunds Associates Event Partners. The Chairman, Cllr Dennis Garrett, introduced Huw Edmunds to the committee.

- Huw Edmunds attended one of the 2017 Heritage Open Day tours of the Guildhall and was so impressed by the facility that he contacted Cllr Dennis Garrett about the potential of using the Guildhall to run some of his events.
- Huw Edmunds is an event specialist with 25 years’ experience, having previously worked for Pembroke College establishing their conference business. In Pembroke College they had sold 60% of their space before the rooms had opened.
- Pembroke College is in many ways similar to the Guildhall. Pembroke College is run by a governing body and the rooms for hire must be available to the college for their events.
- Due to his previous contact, although non-pecuniary, Cllr Dennis Garrett stated that he would abstain from any vote in relation to the commissioning of Huw Edmunds Associates.

The Committee considered a proposal from Huw Edmunds Associates to assist the Council in preparing for the relaunch of the Guildhall through assistance in matters such as marketing, website, procuring the right equipment and detailed design for the kitchen.

Huw Edmunds made a number of points including the following:

- The Roysse Room and Council Chamber complement each other.

- The rooms need promoting to the right type of customers holding the right type of event.
- The reports outline what needs to be done before opening.
- A number of the tasks can be actioned alongside each other.
- Staffing, marketing and equipment must be suitable for the customers' event requirements.
- All equipment including audio visual and catering equipment must be carefully evaluated before being selected and installed so it is right first time. This will mean getting in experts such as experienced chefs to check before purchasing and installing equipment.
- It was proposed that an in-depth audit take place over the next few weeks before any purchasing of equipment.
- Operation of the Guildhall. There are two options:
 - Council operation. This involves the hiring and managing of staff including a manager, marketing the business, providing the facilities and managing. This could be very expensive.
 - This option didn't run very well previously.
 - Have to commit to employ staff with no guarantee over the amount of bookings.
 - Externalise/ hire an event organiser. An event organiser would have staff and the right organiser would have better knowledge of where to and who to target for marketing. This option will not expose the Town Council to staffing etc. costs in advance of opening.

In discussion a number of points were made.

- Acknowledging the potential for more commercial events to subsidise the facility, the Town Council and residents of Abingdon access to the Guildhall.
- There was some concern that community use could be compromised in favour of weddings and conferences that can be booked years in advance. However these latter events are also likely to be organised on behalf of locals. It was suggested that this may be resolved by having a priority system in place and a mechanism to establish which bookings to prioritise where there are clashes and the possibility of changing bookings. The Town Council should have the final decision over booking clashes.
- The booking system and booking priority/clashes resolution must be referred to the Full Council.
- The smaller rooms - Abbey Room, Bear Room and Mayor's Parlour are less important as far as Huw Edmunds is concerned for events.
- The Old Magistrates Court may be accessible as there is no definite use set for this area yet so could potentially be used.
- The Foyer (Roissey Room Annexe) needs careful thought as first impressions are very important. There are concerns about whether this is the right place for the Information Centre.

- Huw Edmunds recommended having two or three soft openings. Perhaps a free event to showcase what the Guildhall can offer.
- Huw Edmunds sees potential in the building.

Cllr Angela Lawrence left the meeting at 8:00pm

Further points were made as follows:

- Suggestion that Huw Edmunds manages the calendar, staffing business proposals, costings and marketing.
- Huw Edmunds to manage the proposal and standardise so it can be set out by any member of staff.
- The service provided must be good for the town and for the building.
- In the report Guildhall Reactivation Considerations & Schedule Indications Huw Edmunds outlines what must be done to reopen the building.
 - The timeline for the first two sections (red and amber) would take approximately 20 days of work (four days a week for the next five weeks).
 - It was noted that there was a weekly plan is on page 17 which is readable online.

Huw Edmunds left the meeting at 8:10pm.

Members discussed the commissioning of work from Huw Edmunds. The following points were made:

- Huw Edmunds has put forward very detailed and well planned out suggestions as to what is required before the building reopens.
- Suggested that Huw Edmunds is hired to do the first part of the work as it is required immediately and see how he works and if the Town Council feels it can continue to work with him in the future.

Cllr Margaret Crick left the meeting at this point, it being 8:15 pm.

In further discussion to the following points were made:

- Council officers are looking into a booking system that links in with the Town Councils finance system.
- The Town Council should have the final say on logos etc.
- Will the photography costs be included? Note the rooms have already been photographed so do we require this to be repeated.
- If appointed Huw Edmunds will be asked to regularly report back on progress.
- If outsourcing is considered to be the way forward this should be for the whole of the Guildhall, including cleaning, and not just for certain events.

It was proposed by Cllr Mike Badcock, seconded by Cllr Neil Fawcett and **resolved:**

- (i) That Huw Edmunds Associates be employed to complete the first stage of works ahead of re-opening the Guildhall for hire this being the work outlined in the first two sections (red and amber) on page 18 of the Huw Edmunds report "Guildhall Reactivation Considerations & Schedule Indications," this being estimated to be 20 days work over a five-week period.
- (ii) That the above be subject to receipt of satisfactory references.

It was intended that the sourcing of further work in relation to the Guildhall be reviewed by the Guildhall Development Working Group during this period so a decision can be made regarding how to take matters forward whilst avoiding delay.

The meeting rose at 8:45pm