

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

Minutes of the Guildhall Committee held on Tuesday 15th December 2015 in the Roysse Room, Guildhall, Abingdon-on-Thames.

Present:

Cllr Dennis Garrett	Chairman of Guildhall Committee
Cllr Mike Badcock	Vice-Chairman of Guildhall Committee
Cllr Samantha Bowring	
Cllr Neil Fawcett	
Cllr Brian Hedley	
Cllr Jan Morter	
Cllr Robert Hall	
Cllr Sandy Lovatt	Ex-Officio Chairman of Finance and General Purposes Committee
Cllr Helen Pighills	Ex Officio, The Mayor of Abingdon-on-Thames

In Attendance

Cllr Margaret Crick	
Cllr Jeanette Halliday	
Cllr Vicky Jenkins	
Cllr Angela Lawrence	
Cllr Pat Lonergan	
Cllr Monica Lovatt	
Cllr Lorraine Oates	
Cllr David Pope	
Cllr Andy Todd	
David Boyd	Lewandowski Architects
Dan Lewandowski	Lewandowski Architects
Peter Turvey	Quantity Surveyor, PT Projects

8 Members of the public

Ms Heather Brown	Community Services Officer (Clerk to the meeting)
Mr Steve Rich	Assistant Town Clerk/ Head of Services
Mr Nigel Warner	Town Clerk
Mrs Susan Whipp	Treasurer

G23 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence from Committee Members. There were apologies for absence from Cllr Alice Badcock (Non-Committee Member).

G24 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received at the meeting.

G25 Minutes

The Committee received and considered the minutes of the meeting of the Guildhall Committee held on 30th July 2015.

Resolved: that the minutes of the meetings of the Guildhall Committee held on 30th July 2015 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

G26 Matters arising

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

G27 Public Participation

Mrs Lesley Legge made a statement which included the following points:

- that she was pleased to see that an affordable scheme was under consideration;
- that she hoped the needs of those with mobility problems and those with pushchairs for children were being given good consideration as it was important to make the building as accessible as possible if it was to be used by the community;
- that she hoped that the option of a loan would be taken up rather than increasing the precept;
- and that she hoped due consideration would also be given to the matter of moving through the main building from one end to the other so that there is level access and so that the kitchen can be used to serve from.

The Chairman of the Committee, Cllr Dennis Garrett, thanked Mrs Legge for the points she had made and assured her that the Committee were taking some care with all the points she had raised. Further work on improving access and flow through the building from the Roysse Room to the modern area was still being undertaken by the architects.

Dr Jim Halliday asked the following questions:

- a) *When the Town Council moved to Stratton Lodge in Bath Street it constructed a purpose-built muniment room so that it could store its historic records in a temperature and humidity controlled secure room. It built a similar facility when it moved to Old Abbey House, and upon its latest move to Roysse Court used the strong room in the Guildhall. However, it seems that the strong room is to be demolished in the planned development. Could the Chairman confirm that the Town Council intends to provide a purpose-built temperature and humidity controlled store for its unique collection of records, and if so where? Or is it intended to pass the records to either the Berkshire or Oxfordshire County Records office for future permanent safe-keeping?*

Response: The Town Clerk noted that there would be more on this subject later in the meeting but that Dr Halliday could be assured that the long term plan was to look after the archives within the Guildhall suite of buildings.

- b) *Given that the recently-constructed disabled access ramp at the front of the Guildhall is to be demolished, please could the Chairman advise how the physically disabled will be able to access the Foyer, Bear Room and Mayor's Parlour in the future?*

Response: Cllr Dennis Garrett agreed that disabled access to some of the historic rooms was always likely to be problematic due to the constraints of the existing historic building itself, but that the architects had been instructed to undertake further work on improving disabled and buggy access and this may involve a platform or chair lift.

- c) *Will the opening hours of the new cafe/bar be limited to periods when rooms in the Guildhall complex are being rented out? If not, what are the proposed opening hours?*

Response: Cllr Dennis Garrett replied that there will be no direct link between room hires and the opening hours of either the Information Desk or the Café. These are intended to be open seven days a week although exact opening and closing times would not be determined at this stage. It is felt that this will give an improved visitor information service and a reliable café service that will help build custom.

d) *What is the intended publication date of the revised Guildhall business plan?*

Response: Cllr Dennis Garrett replied that the plan was under way and would be written up in time for the Full Council meeting on 27th January, and published immediately following that meeting.

G28 Guildhall Development Project - Report of the Town Clerk

The Committee received and considered the report of the Town Clerk as circulated with the agenda.

The Town Clerk presented his report and stated that as much of the meeting as possible would be held in public but there would be commercially sensitive and staffing items that would make a certain amount of discussion of items in confidential session inevitable. The public and press were welcome to adjourn to the Bear Room during confidential items.

The Town Clerk noted that the previous proposals for the Guildhall had been subject to a rescoping exercise by the Guildhall Development Working Group. The previous meeting of the Guildhall Committee had given approval for the group to continue the work they were doing and take the exercise up to RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) Stage D (design development and application for detailed planning permission) alongside developing the Business Plan.

Lewandowski Architects presented the revised plans for the refurbishment of the Guildhall buildings. These included:

- a. Main public entrance being from outside street level in Abbey Close directly into the lower floor level, doing away with any need for a ramp or stairs to enter the building. The new lower frontage would be partially glazed to provide a visual connection with the outside and encourage people to enter. On entering, the public would find themselves in a public shared space mainly devoted to café tables, with a café service area and an Information Desk.
- b. The rear existing lift core would be upgraded and connected to the interior of the building and would be one of several ways to move up to the upper floor. The existing internal stairs located either end of the stage area would be modified as necessary to serve the proposed alterations. A new external fire escape stair would be constructed on the south (car park) side providing escape directly from the Abbey Hall.
- c. There would possibly be a link through at the same level from the catering kitchen, with no change to the dimensions or position of the kitchen.

- d. On the next floor up, the Abbey Hall would remain roughly the same shape and the window bays would remain, providing places to put mobile bar units at events, although they would be fitted with triple glazing to reduce leakage of sound out of the building. Other areas that leak sound would also be sealed up according to the advice given by the acoustic consultant who had reviewed the building.
- e. The existing stage would be sealed off by the building of a wall across the front of the present stage opening as this area had been identified as a large and very under-utilised space. The former stage area would then provide a significant amount of storage space and would also include a platform lift for moving furniture from one level to another. This would mean that rooms were presented clear of furniture and equipment, which could be brought out as needed.
- f. Retractable seating in the Abbey Hall would be installed against the new wall sealing off the former stage area.
- g. A new stage area would be built at the south-west end of the hall standing roughly where the existing sliding wooden doors were. This would also have a projection screen above. The existing gallery area above this would be sealed off so that it did not open into the main hall as a gallery.
- h. Either side of the new stage there would be ante-rooms connected to the main hall with the one on the South corner being fitted as a hireable kitchen with domestic equipment, suitable for volunteers to use for light catering work. The other could be used as a bar, a coat store, or as the “wings” of the stage area.
- i. Behind the stage area the existing stairs would remain going onto an open area which could be used for performers to gather prior to going on stage or for other general circulation use. This was the area which was currently the main foyer of the building. The areas above this would also remain much as they were now although it was not expected that the bar area would be used as much as mobile bars would be sited in the hired rooms more often than they have been in the past.

Cllr Angela Lawrence asked for clarification about the stage arrangements and these were given.

The Town Clerk continued by presenting the costings in the report and reminded the Committee that the total project cost was £2,105,000 for works on both the historic and modern parts of the Guildhall, with an additional option to undertake additional works on the historic part of the building which would add £79,000 to costs. A separate decision about funding any work on the Roysse Court Garden would need to be taken by Finance and General Purposes Committee and might be funded out of earmarked reserves.

Peter Turvey, the Quantity Surveyor, was asked to comment on the reduction in costs that had been achieved since the rescoping was first undertaken and he was able to confirm that this had been achieved through a paring back of the ambitions for the building in some areas, such as the previously proposed new staircases and community rooms. However many options would remain open in the future as the plans had been drawn up so as to leave flexibility to realise some of these ambitions at a later date.

The Town Clerk then continued to present his report noting that the Town Council could apply for Planning Permission in February 2016 if the plans were approved by the committees and the Council in this cycle.

The options for financing the project were outlined by the Town Clerk and included:

- a. The use of grant funds including drawing from the District Council grant of £1,200,000 which was originally made at the time of the transfer of the building to the Town Council, there being £1,019,000 remaining of this grant. Other grant sources were limited as often funders take the view that town and parish councils can raise funds through precept and loan. However Heritage Lottery funds were a possibility in relation to work required to conserve and display the archives and collections in the building, could be submitted once the new plans had been approved.
- b. Raising the precept. The Town Council was not subject to capping or the provisions of local referenda in relation to Council Tax increases at the present time although this is subject to review each December when the local government settlement is announced.
- c. Drawing on general reserves. This option was not recommended by officers as they felt the present general reserve of £265,027 was appropriate for the size of the council and should not be reduced.
- d. Drawing on other earmarked reserves. The report of the Town Clerk addressed the Town Council's ability to make decisions about funding priorities and use funds previously earmarked for other projects.
- e. Transfer of revenue savings due to closure period. The Town Clerk indicated that the amount that could be utilised would depend on whether the historic rooms were opened in advance of the refurbishment being completed.
- f. Raising a loan. The Town Clerk gave two illustrations of the loan financing available from the Public Works Loans Board, over a 30 year or 40 year period, and noted that loan sanction from the Department for Communities and Local Government approval would have to be applied for. Loan sanctions of £500,000 per year could allow the Town Council to borrow a total of £1,000,000 over a build period spanning two financial years.

The Chairman noted that the Business Plan was progressing well. Various details were being modelled and checked through. He said that assumptions used had been prudent rather than over-optimistic. The building has, since the transfer from the District Council, continued to require a subsidy of approximately £180,000 per year or more. The Chairman felt that the emerging Business Plan will show that this subsidy could be reduced significantly and therefore could cover the cost of the loan and obviate the need to increase the precept.

The Chairman said that details of the plans would be published including proposals for loan financing and stated that this was a matter of council policy.

Cllr Neil Fawcett reminded the Committee that the rescoping exercise had aimed to reduce the project cost so that there should be no need to increase the precept and that this had been achieved. The public should be aware that the focus would be on running the building for the community which necessarily involved accepting some ongoing subsidy but that an improved building with less operational issues and a more attractive offer for hirers and users should be able to improve income generation and thereby reduce the subsidy, which in turn covers the cost of the loan.

The following **recommendations to the Finance and General Purposes Committee** were moved by the Chairman, Cllr Dennis Garrett seconded by the Vice Chairman, Cllr Michael Badcock:

- (a) To approve the Plans as detailed below and to delegate authority to the Town Clerk in consultation with the Development Working Group, to apply for planning permission in relation to these plans, the plans being as follows:
 - (i) Ground floor plan – proposed core scheme Lewandowski Architects: Drawing No 200, November 2015;
 - (ii) First floor Plan - proposed core scheme Lewandowski Architects: Drawing No 201, November 2015;
 - (iii) Second floor plan- proposed core scheme Lewandowski Architects: Drawing No 202, November 2015.

- (b) To delegate authority to the Guildhall Development Working Group to commission professional support for the Project, through to its completion and as set out in the report of the Town Clerk, with further reports to the Guildhall Committee at the following stages:
 - (i) Following detailed design and ahead of building tenders being required (this to ensure proper approval of any material changes to design or costings);

 - (ii) Following receipt of building tenders, the requirement being that matters are considered by the Guildhall Committee following which the intention would be to seek approval by the Finance

and General Purposes Committee and then Full Council for the commitment of funds.

- (c) To approve the cost plan for the Project in two parts as follows:
 - (i) Works to 1960s building - £1,953,000;
 - (ii) Works to historic building - £231,000;
 - (iii) Total £2,184,000.

- (d) To agree, in principle, the funding for the Project as follows:
 - (i) Deferred grants: Use of the remaining amount of the deferred grant (capital improvement sum) from the District Council, amounting to £1,019,000. In pursuance of this, that the Town Clerk be authorised to write to the Vale of White Horse District Council to inform it of this Council's intention to undertake the works set out in paragraphs (a) and (c) (above) and to seek its confirmation that it views those works as being within the definition of Capital Improvement Works, as set out in the contract for the sale of the Guildhall and transfer of management functions, dated 1st April 2011.
 - (ii) Loan. Raising a loan to cover the remaining sum in relation to the 1960s building, estimated to be £934,000 but in principle up to £1,000,000. The Council to note that a formal resolution to apply for loan sanction would be required at a later date when the Council has all information in place to make a final decision. That authority be delegated to the Guildhall Development Working Group to undertake any necessary public consultation in this regard.
 - (iii) Revenue budget. To utilise the Council's revenue budget to fund the works to the historic building, this being funded from the Council's revenue funds, a combination of earmarked reserves, the pooled property fund and the Guildhall revenue budget.

G29 Financial Report and Budget Estimates 2016-17

The Committee received and considered the report of the Treasurer/ Responsible Financial Officer (RFO), which contained both management accounts and budget plans.

It was moved by the Vice Chairman, Cllr Michael Badcock and seconded by Cllr Jan Morter that the management accounts be approved. This was **resolved** unanimously.

In relation to the budget estimates for 2016-17 the reported of the Treasurer/RFO had stated that given the level of uncertainty around part opening of the Guildhall, staffing requirements and opening dates, she recommended that a prudent approach be taken. Officers suggested that a net budget of £158,539 be set. This was the same as the current year net budget. It may be possible that a certain level of savings could be made during the next year and these could potentially be deployed to the capital project.

It was moved by the Vice Chairman, Cllr Michael Badcock and seconded by Cllr Neil Fawcett that the budget estimates for 2016-17 be approved, this being a net budget of £158,539 based on this year's budget. This was **recommended** (unanimously) **to the Finance and General Purposes Committee** for their consideration at its meeting of 12th January 2016.

G30 **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.

Note on confidentiality: it should be appreciated that it is challenging, when considering the potential building works going forward, to retain a balance between what should be included in the open minutes and what needs to be recorded in confidential session. Rather than retain the record of all discussions in confidential session, a view has been taken, in the interests of transparency, to include as much as possible in the public domain and where possible minutes will be published which contain detail of the confidential discussions.

(Members of the public and press left the meeting at this point).

G31 **Confidential appendix of previous meeting**

The Committee received and considered the confidential appendix of the meeting of 30th July 2015.

Resolved: that the confidential appendix of the meetings of the Guildhall Committee held on 30th July 2015 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

G32 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising from the reading of the confidential appendix to the minutes.

G33 Guildhall Development Project

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk in relation to the above.

The detailed costings for the Guildhall Development Project had been circulated (the overall figure having been included in the public report) and the Town Clerk wished to highlight those areas were not included in the estimates so that it was clear where further costing work had to be done and where there was cost risk. The detailed costings had to be treated in confidence as their disclosure could be seriously compromise any later procurement process.

The Town Clerk had noted potential roof works, installation of a suitable projector in the Abbey Hall, possible changes to the requirements for new boilers (which may yield a cost saving), and general furniture and equipment needs as areas which required consideration as part of the project. He also felt that a general review should be undertaken by the professional team so that a comprehensive check-through of what has been included in the costs is completed and Members informed of the detail of this. At this stage it was hoped that any additional expenditure required could be covered either from value engineering against the project or from savings in revenue. Consequently Members noted this matter at this point, for report back at a later date when further work had taken place.

With specific regard to the boilers the Town Clerk explained that, since the rescoping of the project so that there is no longer a plan to relocate the plant room, the assumption that the boilers should be replaced may not be the best course of action. There would need to be an evaluation of the remaining life span of the boilers, the capital costs of replacement and the revenue savings of more efficient newer boilers. He emphasized that the boilers were a separate issue to the control mechanism, which could be replaced independently. For this reason the Town Clerk suggested that the mechanical and electrical engineer who had previously reported on the boilers, Waterfox, should advise on this matter.

The Vice-Chairman Cllr Michael Badcock moved, and the Chairman Cllr Dennis Garret seconded, that an engineer's report on the boilers be commissioned for the sum detailed in the confidential report of the Town Clerk. This was **resolved** unanimously.

Further to the above points Mr Peter Turvey, the Quantity Surveyor, also noted that the architects were still looking at disabled access to the historic rooms and considering how this might be improved and that this could have cost implications.

There was a general discussion about the points that had been made by the Town Clerk. Cllr Sandy Lovatt requested that care be taken to make sure that the technology associated with IT, audio and visual and the stage not be left as an afterthought with an inadequate budget, as this would be crucial to the new offer that would be made to user groups and potential business hirers. The Quantity Surveyor Mr Peter Turvey advised that the cabling and stage lighting costs were already

factored in but the cost of a projector and sound system was not. A Member noted that technology changed so quickly that it may be premature to try to specify this at this stage. It was **agreed** that the working group should provide more detail on this when the project is defined in more detail.

The Town Clerk noted that the Business Plan was now being completed by officers, receiving guidance from the Working Group, and the Chairman Cllr Dennis Garrett asked members to note the size of the current subsidy and stated that significant savings on this subsidy could be achieved during the post-refurbishment period.

Cllr Patrick Lonergan suggested that savings could be made by not providing staff on all occasions when rooms are hired but the Town Clerk advised that this kind of hiring would be difficult as a business model for the Guildhall, although it may work well for a community hall. The security of town treasures and archives, the movement of furniture round the building and the multiple entry points were all factors which made this kind of hiring problematic. However the need to reduce staff costs was being fully taken on board as part of the business planning process and officers were looking at models that included the café and other staff having flexible roles that allowed them to multi-task and respond to different customer needs at all times of the day.

Cllr Jan Morter proposed, Cllr Sandy Lovatt seconded and it was **recommended to the Finance and General Purposes Committee** (unanimously)

(i) that work continue on the Business Plan, that the Development Working Group be tasked with completing the Business Plan and that authority be delegated to the Working Group so that the Plan is ready for publication by 27th January 2016.

The report also noted that a service review had been undertaken by Chris Rolley Associates and that this had implications for the business plan. It was proposed by the Vice-Chairman Cllr Michael Badcock and seconded by Cllr Sandy Lovatt, that the working group should review this report again as part of the business planning process. **This was resolved unanimously.**

The confidential report of the Town Clerk also provided further information about the relative merits of opening the historic rooms during the period of the refurbishment of the modern part of the building, but the key consideration here would be the judgement of the contractor selected for the improvement project as to their ability to facilitate this and the cost involved.

Cllr Samantha Bowring asked for clarification about the potential to save on rates costs whilst the building was not open to the public. The Town Clerk advised that he understood that the default position was that rates would be due unless the building was completely empty of furniture and unusable. The report further detailed the issues in relation to this matter. At the point that the modern section was empty ahead of redevelopment an application could be made to the Valuation Office to split

the hereditament between the historic and modern sections with a view to the modern part of the building qualifying for rate relief whilst building work is going on even if the historic part retains furniture or is actually in use. However it was not possible to make such an application or even an “in principle” enquiry until the modern part was empty.

The Town Clerk reverted to the earlier point about the safety and cost considerations of keeping one part of the building open during the build period and it was noted by a Member that fire strategies would have to be altered and access to toilets may also be a problem.

The Vice-Chairman Cllr Michael Badcock proposed, the Chairman Cllr Dennis Garrett seconded and it was **recommended to the Finance and General Purposes Committee**

(ii) That the decision regarding whether the part opening of the historic rooms ahead of completion of works in the 1960s building be made following the building tender exercise, programmed to take place in June 2016.

In his report, the Town Clerk had evaluated various arrangements with regard to the archives stored in the muniment room at the Guildhall. The option to temporarily use the services of the Berkshire County Archive, as detailed in the report, was considered and it was proposed by the Vice-Chairman Cllr Michael Badcock, seconded by the Chairman Cllr Dennis Garratt and **recommended to the Finance and General Purposes Committee:**

(iii) That authority be delegated to the Town Clerk to enter in to an agreement to allow for the temporary relocation of the town’s archives during the Guildhall development works, the costs of which would be funded from savings against the revenue budget during this period.

The Vice-Chairman proposed, and Cllr Jan Morter seconded, a proposal that the Town Council record a very clear public statement about the temporary nature of the relocation of the archives from Abingdon-on-Thames and the commitment to provide a suitable muniment room as part of the development project. Consequently it was **recommended to the Finance and General Purposes Committee:**

(iv) That the Council temporarily relocates its archives assisted by its close working partners at the Berkshire County Archive. That the Council reiterate that a new muniment room will be created as part of the Guildhall development and that the Town Council remains committed to retaining its archives for the benefit of the people of Abingdon.

Further it was proposed by the Vice-Chairman Cllr Michael Badcock, seconded by the Chairman Cllr Dennis Garratt and **recommended to the Finance and General Purposes Committee:**

(v) That the Council invest in sturdy fireproof cabinets which would enable some archival material to be retained for use in Abingdon during the period of temporary relocation.

Cllr Margaret Crick proposed, and Cllr Jan Morter seconded, a vote of thanks to the architects and Quantity Surveyor. **This was resolved unanimously.**

At this point in the meeting the Council's professional advisors Mr David Boyd, Mr Dan Lewandowski and Mr Peter Turvey left the meeting.

There was then a discussion of other matters detailed in the confidential appendix relating to contractual and staffing matters.

The meeting rose at 7:40pm.