



AGENDA ITEM: 10

SUMMARY

Report for:	Housing and Community Overview & Scrutiny
Date of meeting:	Wednesday 12th November 2014
PART:	1
If Part II, reason:	

Title of report:	Old Town Hall
Contact:	<p>Cllr Neil Harden, Portfolio Holder for Residents and Regulatory Services</p> <p>David Austin, Assistant Director Neighbourhood Delivery Ext:</p> <p>Sara Railson, Arts Team Leader, Resident Services, Old Town Hall Ext 2093</p>
Purpose of report:	1. Old Town Hall Update report
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Members note the report 2. Members agree that officers pursue a mid – term marketing strategy from 1/4/15 to 31/3/18
Corporate objectives:	<p>Regeneration</p> <p>Dacorum Delivers</p>
Implications:	<p><u>Financial</u></p> <p>Within Agreed Budget</p>
‘Value For Money Implications’	The completed refurbishment will improve the ‘offer’ of the Old Town Hall and contribute towards the wider

	regeneration of Hemel Hempstead Old Town.
Risk Implications	Risk Assessment has been carried out as part of the Project Initiation Document for the Old Town Hall. Risk implications for staffing and marketing review have already been carried out. ?
Equalities Implications	The completion of the refurbishment has ensured accessibility throughout The Old Town Hall.
Health And Safety Implications	None
Consultees:	The Old Town Hall customers, staff Andrew Burton, marketing services
Background papers:	None
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	None

1.0 Background

The Old Town Hall is a small scale receiving venue. It comprises of the Main House, The Cellar Club and the Robert Adams Gallery Bar. It provides a professional arts programme of drama, dance, comedy, film, music, children's and family theatre as well as a regular turnover of visual arts exhibitions.

Over the past 15 months, both the Gallery Bar and The Cellar Club have been refurbished to meet not just exacting health, safety and access regulations but also to give customers and visitors to the venue a better overall experience.

Post refurbishment it is anticipated that during our first full year of operation we will host between 230 and 250 events, as compared to the average rate of 130 – 150 events. This increase represents not only programmed professional arts events but also meetings, corporate events as well as celebratory occasions such as birthday parties and wedding / partnership receptions.

1.1 Budgetary Provision

Year	Arts Service Provision	Total Net Expenditure
2011/12	Old Town Hall	£428,200
2012/13	Old Town Hall	£428,200
2013/14	Old Town Hall	£400,000
2014/15	Old Town Hall	£408,000

1.2 Attendance Figures

The Old Town Hall main theatre has a capacity of 120 seats; the newly refurbished Cellar Club has a seating capacity of 65 seat and a standing capacity of 85.

Year	Old Town Hall Attendance (% of capacity)
2011/12	52%
2012/13	54%
2013/14	62%
2014/15 (Apr – Oct)*	63.5%
20104/15 (Nov – Dec)**	50%

*Figures are based on live performances sales / attendance for Main House only April to July and include both main House and Cellar Club for September through October.

** Capacity sales figures for the live programme through to December 2014 (as of 30/10/14) October)

2 The Old Town Hall Refurbishment

2.1 The regeneration of The Old Town Hall (TOTH) represented a key project for Dacorum Borough Council. There were two agreed strands of work:

a) Refurbishment of the Gallery Bar area / kitchen. Work commenced in June 2013 and finished in September 2013, in time for the beginning of the new season. Aside from opening up the service / hatch area, works also included the installation of appropriate work surfaces and kitchen equipment to meet standards expected of a café / bar serving the public.

b) Refurbishment of The Cellar Bar – installation of a new disabled lift and disabled toilet, new bar area and refit of the space to allow for appropriate air extraction/ventilation, new control room and equipment. Works were due to start in January 2014 but were delayed until March. The completion date was originally set for July but actually was September of this year.

The refurbishment threw up a number of challenges due to the age and listed status of The Old Town Hall. These challenges contributed to the delays in both stages of the works.

However the refurbishment is now complete and The Old Town Hall looks and feels like a venue more suited to the 21st century; crucially meeting health and safety requirements and regulations as well as the ability to offer all of our customers the opportunity to enjoy the full programme of events.

3 Updates:

3.1 Programme Development

3.1.1 The Cellar Club

Following on from the completion of works in the building, we have launched our new season both in the Main House and of course in the new Cellar Club. Our fortnightly comedy club, Screaming Blue Murder has once again taken up residence downstairs in the space in which it was so singularly successful during the 1990's. The improved facilities including full disabled access / disabled toilets, improved lighting and technical capability as well as much needed air quality controls have clearly demonstrated the Council's commitment to improving customer experience.

Aside from the Comedy Club, The Old Town Hall is delighted to be working in partnership with Herts Jazz to present a high quality monthly jazz event. The first two events enjoyed nearly 85% capacity and the trend looks likely to continue.

In addition, we are already taking enquiries for private hires in the space for both daytime and evening events. We would anticipate that through either direct programming or through private hires the Cellar club can enjoy up to 100 events per annum.

3.1.2 'Arts Award Discover - Dacorum' - An Arts Award project for local schools

What is Arts Award ? Arts Award is...

- a great way for children and young people to be inspired by and enjoy the arts
- offered at five levels, four accredited and one introductory award
- a framework for learning new skills and sharing them
- an opportunity to develop creativity and leadership skills
- a link between young people and creative arts professionals

Arts Award is a unique national qualification that helps young people to develop as artists and arts leaders. The programme develops their creativity, leadership and communication skills. It is open to anyone up to the age of 25 and embraces all interests and backgrounds. The award is managed by Trinity College London in association with Arts Council England with 10 regional bridge organisations.

The Old Town Hall has submitted an application to run the introductory Arts Award 'Discover'. This is an introductory level designed for ages 5 and above but is open to anyone aged up to 25. Work can be recorded in any format — from drawing to photography, collage to video

If successful in our application it will develop the work already undertaken this year; earlier this year (June and again in October) we programmed and hosted two schools only performances. The additional funding will help us not only programme work which local schools can use as the base of the Discover Arts Award but will assist in giving a greater depth to their theatre experience.

Below are just some of the comments from teachers and pupils who attended the performance of I Believe in Unicorns on 16th October :

"Thanks so much for organising it; it was a fantastic experience for the children, so many of whom haven't had the experience of live theatre before." Year 6 teacher

"It was weird because I normally sit in front of a screen but it was fun because you could get involved."

"It was exciting because when you have never been to the theatre before you don't know what to expect."

"It is better to go to the theatre than actors come to school because it is a whole new experience."

Pupils comments – Chaulden Junior School / Hammond Academy

"This was a really great trip for the children, it was affordable, it was local so meant for our classes we could do it and be back at school without a long coach trip. It is also fantastic to be using and supporting our local theatre. The children really want to go again!" Year 5 Teaching Assistant

3.1.3 Let's Dance

In September this year we launched a dance/movement class for the over 55's. Health and well-being for our older customers in an arts context is as important to us as arts introduction to the 7 and 8 year olds of our Dacorum Discover initiative.

Working in partnership with a professional dance animateur and with Community Action Dacorum, The Old Town Hall hosts a 1.5hr dance workshop specifically aimed at the 55 years and over. Originally, our hope was for a capacity of 12 participants, but numbers are regularly 15 /16 participants and we have achieved this from our very first session. Participants range from 55 to 75 years in age and work on choreographed pieces set by our dance teacher. Aside from the obvious health benefits, the class has developed a strong social bond. Participants are already keen that this be a regular part of The Old Town Hall participatory programme.

3.1.4 Independent Cinema Programme

Following on from recommendations made at a member led Task and Finish group back in 2011 we have re-introduced film into The Old Town Hall programme.

We now have a number of strands of programming to meet differing needs:

Baby Blockbusters – aimed at parents and carers who want to see recent release films at a time that suits them and with their children in tow.

Recent films (within 4 – 6 months of general release) shown in the morning and early afternoon.

Added to this we are now introducing independent and world cinema; art house and foreign language films that have had limited cinema release, but that audiences would enjoy seeing on a big(ger) screen instead of via a DVD on their TV.

Developing audiences for cinema is a priority for The Old Town Hall but does take time. We want to make the experience a social as well as an artistic event. Our aim is to make the film programme cost neutral so that the costs of showing a film and the associated overheads are recouped through ticket income.

3.2 Incentives and Discounts

3.2.1 *Dacorum Card*

The Old Town Hall has been offering Dacorum Card Discounts for over a decade. Whilst uptake is limited, we still believe that it offers equality of access to the arts programme to our residents, especially those more financially challenged than others. We still see the greatest % of take up for our children's theatre programme.

3.2.2 *UpStaged*

At the beginning of the Autumn season 2014, we introduced the UpStaged discount scheme. Specifically aimed at younger audiences (between 16 and 25 yrs), we are attempting to encourage greater use of the facility and the programme by a younger demographic. The initiative is still in its infancy and take up is limited but a more robust marketing of the scheme will form part of our new marketing strategy. Other arts venues offering a similar scheme are Watford Palace, The Roundhouse, Camden, the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Theatre to name but a few.

3.2.3 *Dramatic License*

We are certainly aware that the vast majority of our bookers sit outside of the UpStaged age range. However, they are fiercely loyal to us and for that we have introduced an incentive for them. For the current season, we have created a discount scheme that offers a 10% reduction off the ticket total for customer booking for 3 or more drama shows from the autumn programme. This has been well received and nearly 5% of our total bookings for theatre have taken advantage of this offer.

Our aim is to drive up footfall, not just for The Old Town Hall but for the Old High Street. The recent works have internal and external have had a negative impact on overall visitor numbers in the High Street.

3.3 *New Catering Offer*

Not since 2004 has The Old Town Hall had a full cafe/bar service. Whilst always being able to offer theatre customers a limited refreshment facility pre and post theatre, it was felt that once the refurbishment had been completed we would be a more attractive proposition for a commercial catering company.

Following procurement guidelines, the offer was advertised. We interviewed and appointed. The successful firm is First Catering, part of the First Service group. Even though we faced delays in the completion of the building works, First Service were up and running in time to offer a refreshment service to the journalists / press corp. in attendance for Stage 6 of the Tour of Britain. The following day, the Old Town Hall had its official re-opening and the café / bar was fully open to all our customers.

Dacorum Borough Council receive an annual rent for the service being provided by First Catering but just as importantly, we have a good quality, varied and reliable catering offer for our customers.

3.4 New staffing arrangements to meet the increase in programme

Given that the Old Town Hall will now increase its promotions /private hires by approximately 60% in a full year, we have had to expand our staffing structure (within budget) to meet this additional demand. As a consequence we took on a second technician in October 2014. This means that not only is our professional programme being resourced but we have capacity to offer a more robust technical service to private hirers – whether arts based or requiring back up for parties, receptions etc.

4 Sponsorship

The Old Town Hall is committed to attracting a level of external sponsorship /project funding from outside agencies. Within the 2015/16 financial year we would seek to attract a minimum of 5% of the total arts programme budget as inward investment.

5 Marketing - Current

During our periods of closure (Summer 2013 and again in Spring / Summer 2014), we decided that we should undertake only a short term marketing plan which we hoped would take us through the building works but at least maintain customer momentum until we fully re-opened in September of this year.

Our short term marketing plan was built around four drivers:

- **Accessibility**
To ensure that our promotional material was written clearly and concisely.
Removing barriers to customer visits, more accessible opening times, plain signage, and a welcoming feel to the building
- **Creative communications**
Improving poster displays and expand our areas of print distribution
To have an active and engaging on-line presence through increased use of social media – twitter, facebook etc., the creation of staff blogs
- **Retaining audiences**

To improve the entire customer experience; whether through better on-line service or face to face encounter.

Improve our café/ bar facilities to offer a greater choice of food as well as drinks.

- Increase Old Town Hall presence
Promoting and supporting community arts – Dashfest, Adventure Playgrounds - National Playdays
Offer support in kind (through box office resource/ equipment) to local events

These were perceived as ‘quick wins’ for us, as they all helped to establish a new energy for the service as well as raising our profile with customers and residents of the borough. We had anticipated being a reduced service for two blocks of three months within an 8 month period. As it transpired we were a greatly reduced service for the better part of 14 months.

5.1 Future Marketing Plans

Moving forward we are currently looking to develop our mid –term marketing priorities for April 2015 through to March 2018. Once completed we believe we will have the ‘road-map’ to capitalise on past successes, develop our future audiences and strengthen the offer of The Old Town Hall to the community.

Our vision is simple but ambitious – reflecting the trust and importance placed on us through the recent investment in our refurbishment.

“The Old Town Hall’s mission is to be a beacon of excellence for the arts in Dacorum”

Our broad objectives are three-fold:

- i) To present a dynamic and diverse professional programme of work that reflects and represents local, regional, national and international artists and art forms.
- ii) To attract and retain new audiences and participants whilst maintaining the venue’s core audience
- iii) To attract increased levels of inward investment.

As part of the Adopted Core Strategy 2006 – 2031, Dacorum Borough Council aims:

- i) To promote healthy and sustainable communities and high quality of life
- ii) To promote social inclusion and cohesiveness, embrace diversity and reduce inequalities
- iii) To provide a full range of social, leisure and community facilities and services

The Old Town Hall strives to support each of these key priorities.

We have recently worked with an independent marketing service to help us determine our current position and to therefore highlight the areas that need development and

improvement so that we can attain our future ambitions. The conclusion of this 'marketing audit' has highlighted the following:

5.2 Strengths

The Old Town Hall's product is strong. Its eclectic programme reflects the organisations ambition to attract new audiences while retaining its core audience. The artistic and participatory products it provides (alongside the facilities it provides for commercial hirers) offer a suitable product proposition from which to build new audiences and users.

The Old Town Hall's pricing policy is effective. It is both inclusive (having a very accessible entry level of £2.50 for film and a number of sales promotions such as the £5 UpStaged offer for 16 – 25 year old drama bookers) while at the higher end, customers appear to show little resistance to paying a top price of £16 for events with sufficient market appeal.

Press updates are sent out regularly and efficiently and the current Marketing Officer has developed effective on-going working relationships with some local journalists and press outlets.

Despite having limited aesthetic appeal, The Old Town Hall's web-site is easy to navigate and the 'select-a-seat' facility offers customers freedom and clarity in the booking process.

The venue appears warm, friendly and inviting, offering a personalised audience to its predominantly loyal audience base. The recently completed refurbishments (and facilities such as the new Cellar Club bar, the opening of the Gallery Bar under new management) augment the quality of the customer experience once people have crossed the venue's threshold.

However there are areas in which we can improve:

5.3 Challenges (areas for development / improvement)

The marketing activities currently in place are mainly geared to engage the already converted. Not enough resources or strategic marketing planning is in place to develop and retain new audiences.

There is a clear and pressing need for The Old Town Hall's marketing and audience development to become as effective and ambitious as its programming.

Despite a hard working staff and evidence of good team working, the vast majority of the marketing and press work carried out at The Old Town Hall appears to be tactical and reactive, resulting in a focus on short term fixes and trouble-shooting at the expense of a more strategic and longer term approach to marketing and audience development.

Audience numbers have declined slightly in the light of the recent refurbishments both internally at the Old Town Hall and externally to the High Street. No doubt these activities have had an adverse impact. Therefore the need to focus on future marketing and audience development activities are all the more pressing.

Print distribution outlets are limited and need to be significantly expanded as a part of a Strategic Marketing Plan and on-going audience development drive.

There should be a co-ordinated and concerted effort to increase the number of people who engage with The Old Town Hall via social media channels so that thousands rather than hundreds of people are actively engaged with the organisation in this way.

The Old Town Hall's web site offers little aesthetic or artistic appeal based as it is around a clunky and old fashioned 'frame' template. Whilst easy to navigate and the content of the web pages is interesting and informative, the graphic design of the web site itself is in urgent need of development if it is to help the organisation and retain new audiences.

There is significant scope to develop the press function at the venue, develop stronger contacts with local, regional and even national journalists, publications, web sites and using social media more (especially Twitter) to engage with journalists in this way.

The conclusion drawn is that now that we have completed the physical works to the building, we must decide upon the best course of action to further develop a constant and consistent interaction with our customers and stakeholders. To improve audience attendance, and to maximise ticket income.

5.4 Recommendation from the audit

Commission and complete a Strategic Marketing Plan to cover the period April 2015 to March 2018, setting out a series of SMART (Strategic, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic and Timetabled) Marketing Objectives which would act as Key Performance Indicators against which progress can be measured over time. This plan would demonstrate how The Old Town Hall's marketing operation will contribute to the organisation's strategic aims over this period

Areas of consideration include the development of our web-site, improving our visual and aesthetic appeal. The Old Town Hall website has been an on-going area of development for us. Not just ensuring up to date information on the Old Town Hall, but also how our customers interact with us (joining our database, buying tickets, giving online feedback, etc.) We work with our colleagues in web improvement services to continually develop our 'front face' to the public. To ensure that the online experience is a positive one and that they continue to return. But one look at other arts venue websites shows that we have to continually evolve and adapt to keep pace with new trends and social media fashions.

A review of our brand identity to ensure that it reflects the personality and brand values of the organisation and speaks more effectively to the new audiences it seeks to attract and retain

A review of pricing policy to explore whether ticketing income might be optimised in some areas whilst maintaining accessible and low priced entry level tickets

Explore the feasibility a developing a new programming strand of live and 'encore' satellite screenings (eg National Theatre Live) as this has proven to be extremely successful in other regional arts centres such as the 210 seat Haverhill Arts Centre and the 166 seat Stamford Arts Centre.

6 Conclusion

Following on from the completion of the refurbishment work, The Old Town Hall has a clear view of its aims and objectives going forward:

- Increase audiences and other users of the building
- Attract Sponsorship
- Present a dynamic arts programme

The mid-term marketing plan will be our roadmap to achieving these ambitions. The improvements to the building coupled with a fresh and vigorous approach to our cultural offer, will I am sure bring an increase in visitors / customers to the Old Town and will go some way to ensure that local people continue to enjoy their Old Town Hall for generations to come