



Report for:	Housing and Community Overview & Scrutiny
Date of meeting:	Wednesday 19th June 2013
PART:	1
If Part II, reason:	

Title of report:	
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 progress report
Recommendations	1. That members note the report
Corporate objectives:	<p>Regeneration</p> <p>Dacorum Delivers</p>

Implications:	<u>Financial</u>
'Value For Money Implications'	Within Agreed Budget This overall investment 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. March 2012 and January 2013
Equalities Implications	This is currently being completed and the proposed works will ensure accessibility is improved to the Old Town Hall. Equality Impact Assessment carried out at the commencement of the short term plan January 2011 and following its completion June 2012.
Health And Safety Implications	These will be considered as part of tenders of any proposed capital works
Consultees:	Old Town Hall customers, users DBC Senior Management
Background papers:	Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee paper 21 March 2012.
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	None

1.0 Background

The Old Town Hall is a 120 seat small scale professional receiving house. It provides a professional arts programme covering drama, dance, comedy, music, children's and family theatre. It is home to the Robert Adams Gallery bar, which hosts over a dozen separate visual art exhibitions per annum.

The professional theatre programme runs from September to June and is made up of approximately 100 productions. In addition the venue is host to over 200 private hires –

incorporating events and meetings 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

Subsidy per head of the population for the Old Town Hall arts programme = £0.41.5p

1.2 Attendance Figures

The Old Town Hall has 120 seats available for each performance (except the Screaming Blue Murder Comedy Club hosted in the Robert Adams Gallery Bar, which has a capacity of 55 seats)

Year	Old Town Hall Attendance (% of capacity)
2011/12	52%
2012/13	54%
2013/14 (Apr – Aug)*	62%

*Figures include ticket sales for the LookOut / PopUp Festival this summer

1.3 Old Town Hall Customer Satisfaction

2012/13 figures

(Source: Old Town Hall Encore questionnaires – handed out to customers at theatre performances between April 2012 and March 2013, and compiled from customer responses

Satisfaction ratings are taken across the following areas:

- ❖ Quality of production
- ❖ Availability of information
- ❖ Ease of booking
- ❖ Helpfulness of staff
- ❖ Value for money

- ❖ Bar service
- ❖ Overall satisfaction

Customers are asked to score the Old Town Hall between 1 – 5: with 1 being not at all satisfied and 5 being very satisfied

Results for April 2010 to March 2011.

Criteria	Customer Satisfaction - satisfied / very satisfied customers (%)
Overall satisfaction 2012 / 2013	86%
Overall satisfaction 2013/14 (Apr-May - current)	94%

The Old Town Hall is owned, managed and funded by Dacorum Borough Council.

2 The Old Town Hall Refurbishment

2.1 The regeneration of the Old Town Hall (OTH), a facet of the Hemel Hempstead Old Town Renaissance is a critical project for Dacorum Borough Council.

2.2 The objectives of this project are to make internal alterations to the Old Town Hall - Redevelopment of Gallery Bar and Reopening of The Cellar - including installation of lift to allow for disabled access. There is currently £700,000 allocated in the Capital Programme for this project.

2.3 The proposed works were referred to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in February 2013 as the Old Town Hall is a Listed Building. We received a response with Listed Building Consent at the end of March 2013 with 13 conditions to adhere to. These conditions include for example the submission of photos for approval prior to works commencing.

2.4 Given the above, Officers propose to commence works to the Cellar Club in January 2014 with a relaunch in April 2014. In the meantime the Officers will :

- Proceed with external works (such as drainage / utilities) so they are completed prior to the works to the Old Town.
- Seek to complete the works to the Gallery Bar this summer (2013) if possible.

2.5 There have been several design team meetings over recent weeks to value engineer the project as far as possible. The expected costs of the project are £858,921. Clearly, this is over the budget allocation of £700,000. That said there is £55,000 contingency in the construction costs and also £13,000 project contingency. The reduced works to the kitchen area will also save a significant amount, in the region of £60,000. In addition a competitive tendering process is expected as this is a prestigious piece of work for suitable companies.

3 The Old Town Hall – Phase II Realignment

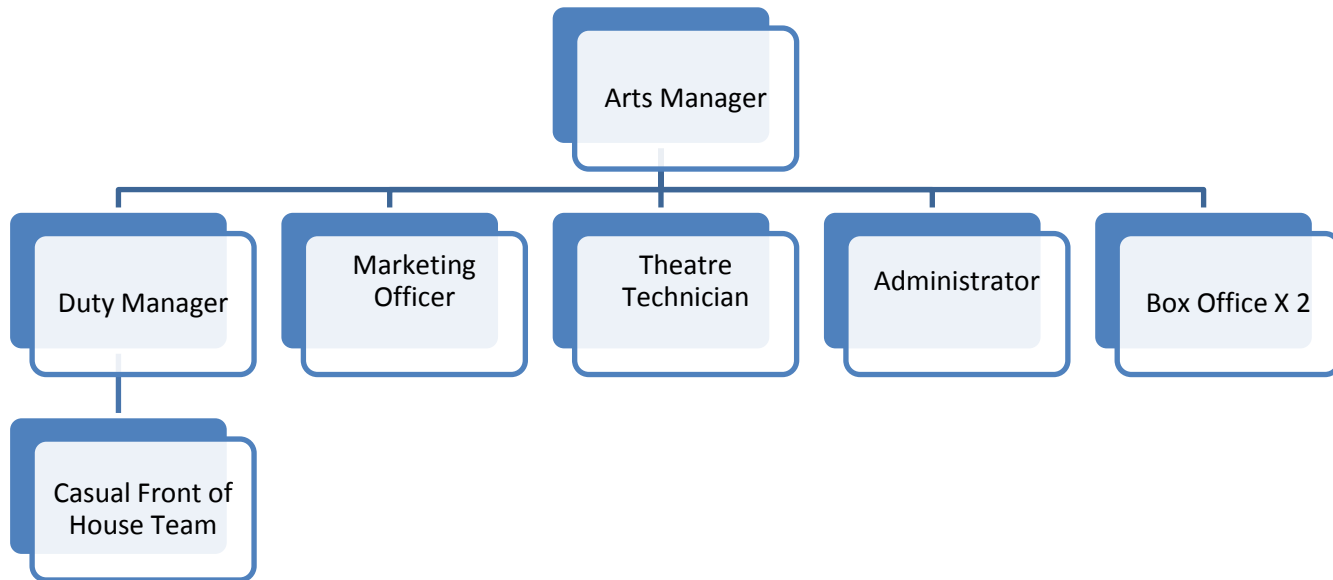
3.1 Given the impact that the proposed refurbishment would have on the OTH, and the weight of expectation to deliver a more robust and vibrant programme of activities It was decided that a re-think of the staffing structure at the Old Town Hall was a positive step.

The restructure was mainly concerned with two areas:

- Reshaping the administrative / sales functions of the Old Town Hall
- Developing a creative and financial resource officer at the Old Town Hall

It was felt that for the service to move forward it needed to reduce the administrative / box office team and rationalise their hours. We needed to spend less time on process driven activities and more time exploring and diversifying our income streams. We needed to encourage greater use of the building and all its facilities by all sections of the community and for it to be used day and night. And we needed to fully embrace the modern technology at our disposal and exploit it to the fullest extent.

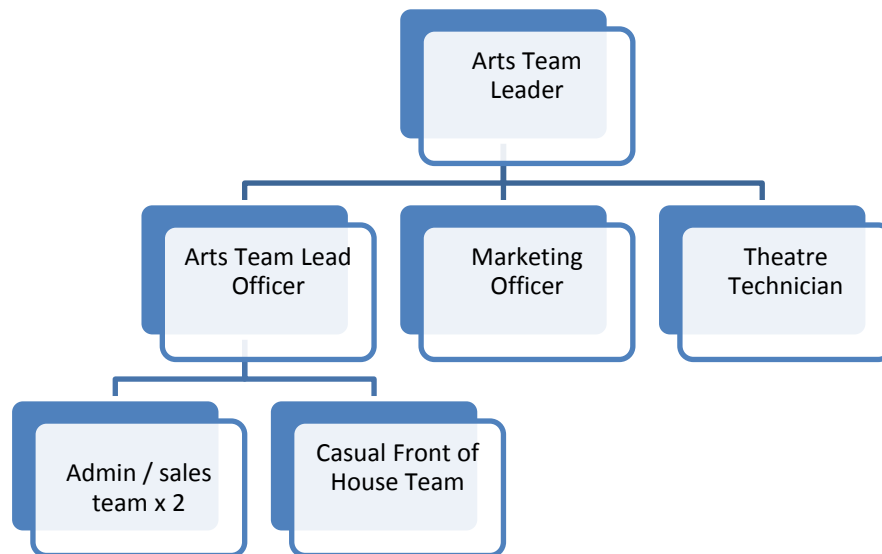
Old Town Hall Staff Structure – Before Phase II Realignment



- 3.1.1 Whilst this structure ensured that administration and facility management was prioritised, it didn't leave capacity for the development of the creative vision for the Old Town Hall – simply put, too much emphasis on administration; no time or personnel resources left to expend on the creative development of the venue and the sourcing of external funding streams. This had over time, limited our ambition and ability to have a higher profile both a locally and regionally.
- 3.1.2 This model placed an over-reliance on paper based methods of working instead of making better use of modern technologies; of faster more efficient processes.
- 3.1.3 This structure had permanent staff working evening and week-end box office shifts, it was felt that the service would be better served with permanent staff working regular core hours and the evening and week end hours covered by casual staff.
- 3.1.4 This staffing model proved challenging in ensuring effective line management when most staff reported to one person - the Arts Manager.

A new structure was proposed and accepted:

Old Town Hall Staff Structure following Phase II Realignment



- 3.2 The new structure, effective as of 1st February 2013 , has at its heart a practical rationalisation of our main resource – OTH staff.
- 3.2.1 The new structure enables us to put greater emphasis on the creative and financial aspects of the Old Town Hall, areas of increasing significance given the level of investment at the Old Town Hall and the ambitions for its future.
- 3.2.2 The new Arts Team Lead Officer role is a complement to the Arts Team Leader, the post holder is charged with helping to develop the sponsorship and fundraising strategy for the Old Town Hall, as well as take on some of the programming responsibilities.
- 3.2.4 One of the strengths of this new structure and an outcome of the change of working hours is the ability to gather the whole team together on a regular basis to meet and discuss operational issues alongside broader more long term plans. A simple, but hugely effective change.

- 3.2.5 Through the new structure and the changes in personnel, we have been able to make better use of and seen a huge improvement in, the exploitation of new technology, specifically in our box office system and on-line profile. At our last Overview and Scrutiny update we weren't making the most of this opportunity. Now a little over a year later, the difference in this part of the customer experience is significant. Our box office system is simple, intuitive and responsive. In the past it had taken days to set up a season worth of events for sale – now it takes a few hours. Previous box office training had been a complicated and convoluted affair, now it takes two hours to master simple sale and reservations transactions. And for the customer, it couldn't be easier – we have worked closely with our colleagues within the web development team at DBC to produce stylish and informative web pages coupled with a customer friendly and secure on-line booking system. And it works:
- In 2011/12 – 23% of our total sales were made via the old online booking system
 - In 2012/13 – 42% of our total sales were made via the new online booking system

This remarkable uplift in on-line sales has allowed us to re-allocate officer time away from the box office and toward supporting other areas of income generation – private hires and events etc.

The overall saving to the Council through the service re-structure and other efficiency savings has been £28,000 per annum.

4 The Old Town Hall - Marketing Update

There have been some changes to our marketing operation since the last Overview and Scrutiny report, including but not limited to staff changes. Our new marketing officer took up position at the end of January 2013, as is to be expected, there is a change of emphasis and energy that sits with the change of personnel. .

The last 6 months have seen a new focus in how we market our shows and of increasing importance how we market the DBC/Old Town Hall brand.

Integral to this new 'branding' has been an overhaul of how we interact with our customers, by phone, by email and in person; whether they are visiting the building or seeing a show.

4.1 Staff Charter

Having consulted with our staff, we have agreed a charter, which combines positive attitude with promotional opportunities, it is:

To provide the highest level of customer service, personal and professional, and to maximise customers awareness of all services available within the Old Town Hall by:

Answering the phone promptly, giving your name, identifying The Old Town Hall and asking if you can help.

Greeting everyone entering the building with a smile and asking if you can help with anything.

Informing everyone about either the show taking place or the exhibition in the gallery.

At every point of sale offer another product, eg. Suggest interval and post-show orders at bar, suggest another show at the box office, suggest a pre-show drink to customers collecting tickets, suggest a post-show drink and another show as customers leave the venue.

Ensuring all publicity material within and outside the building is up to date and well presented.

4.2 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.

- 4.3 During our periods of closure (Summer 2013 and again in Winter / Spring 2014), we have decided on a short term marketing plan which we are hopeful will build and maintain momentum until we can fully re-open in the late Spring of next year.

For the short term our marketing plan is built around the following four drivers:

- **Accessibility**
Our promotional material will be written clearly and concisely.
We are committed to removing barriers to customer visits, more accessible opening times, plain signage, and a welcoming feel to the building
- **Creative communications**
Improve poster displays and expand areas of print distribution
An active and engaging on-line presence through increased use of social media – twitter, facebook etc., the creation of staff blogs
Targeted marketing campaigns to particular postcodes: We know from recent analysis that 65% of our audience are coming from HP1, HP2,HP3, HP4, HP23 (with some from HP5 – Chesham) But interestingly we are drawing increasing numbers from St Albans, Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard.
- **Retaining audiences**
Improve the entire customer experience; whether through better on-line service or face to face encounter.
New Wonder Kids Club loyalty scheme complete with ‘passport’ rewards scheme.
Develop a friends / loyalty scheme for Old Town Hall customers
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, Mela events, Adventure Playgrounds - National Playdays
Offer support in kind (through box office resource/ equipment) to local events

These are perceived as ‘quick wins’ for us, as they all help to establish a new energy for the service as well as in raising our profile with customers and residents of the borough. As we will be closing twice within a 6 month period we need to maintain a strong profile.

5. The Old Town Hall – Future Plans

We are hopeful of a timely conclusion to the building works. In the meantime, we will be putting our finishing touches to our priorities for the next 12-18 months:

- Sponsorship / external funding
- Programme – Cellar Club
- Community Use
- Popup events

5.1 Sponsorship and external project funding

The senior arts team are committed to attracting sources of external funding for specific programme streams as well as one off projects. We feel we now have the resources to actively pursue avenues of sponsorship and project funding.

Areas of work such as the Children's Theatre Programme, The Cellar Comedy Club, or Cellar Music Club are all examples of the Old Town Hall programme which have the potential to be sponsored or funded by external agencies.

5.2 Programming for Theatre and Cellar Club

Following the completion of refurbishment works in early 2014, The Old Town Hall will be a much busier venue with two performance spaces to programme and manage.

The Old Town Hall theatre has a long and distinguished history of drama, dance, music and comedy. We want to build further on this reputation with an eclectic mix of art forms that would rival any and all small theatre spaces in the south east region.

We are looking to programme an average of 10 theatre performances complimented by a further 8 Cellar Club performances each month January to May and September to December. During July and August, we are committed to our 'LookOut Popup Festival' with an additional 6 performances. In total a minimum of 186 events per annum. This does not account for private hires (photo society meetings, band rehearsals and

private parties, theatre hires and other events) all of which bring the total of managed events to approximately 400 per annum.

The newly refurbished Cellar Club offers a huge opportunity in terms of programming:

- Comedy Club
- Music events including - jazz, folk, rock and blues, indy music nights.
- An ideal venue for local young musicians looking perform.
- Cabaret evenings
- Open Mic nights
- Poetry club

The is not an exhaustive list but a taste of the type of entertainment the venue could host.

In addition, with it's own entrance and separate bar, the Cellar Club will be ideally suited to private parties and celebrations; corporate events and meetings.

5.3 Encourage greater community use

As far as the Old Town Hall itself is concerned, we are, as we have always been actively seeking greater use of the building by members of our community. To this end we wish to repeat such successes as 'Around the world in a dozen dances' performed by Cultural Learning, part of Community Action Dacorum. We are currently discussing the possibility of Mela event to be held in and around the Old Town Hall this coming autumn.

Once our café is up and running we see the Gallery Bar as an ideal meeting space for a wide range of groups. We are looking to introduce day time films for carers of young children and senior citizens, as well as planning a series of holiday workshops for kids. And to stimulate local talent, the re-introduction of 'open mic' nights in the cellar following refurbishment.

5.4 Popup Festivals and events

Early reaction to the Old Town Hall 'on the road' programme of events, now known as the Lookout Popup Festival has been overwhelmingly

positive. There is scope for us in terms of our resources to continue to provide an external programme of work over the summer months, as this is a time when the Old Town Hall is traditionally closed for performances. In the meantime however, we want to push forward on a seasonal event in December – a Christmas grotto under the arches, as well as a programme of events out and about in the Marlowes as well as the Old High Street – this will be a complement to our event programme at the OTH..

During our closure period in January – March 2014, we will once again be looking at delivering a short programme of events in other venues across the borough.

6.0 These are exciting times for the Old Town in Hemel. There are ambitions to develop a '*Creative Hub*' in the Old Town High Street – an area subject to further improvement and enhancement within the next few months. The Old Town Hall sits at the centre of this new investment, it occupies the greatest physical footprint, and it is without one, if not the most imposing building on the street.

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