



AGENDA ITEM: 8

SUMMARY

Report for:	Housing and Community Overview & Scrutiny
Date of meeting:	21 March 2012
PART:	1
If Part II, reason:	

Title of report:	Old Town Hall – Capital Improvements
Contact:	Cllr Neil Harden, Portfolio Holder for Resident and Regulatory Services David Austin, Assistant Director Neighbourhood Delivery
Purpose of report:	1. To update and seek the views of this Committee with regards proposed capital improvements to the Old Town Hall.
Recommendations	1. That the views of this Committee with regards to the proposed capital improvements are passed to the Portfolio Holder for his consideration.
Corporate objectives:	Regeneration Dacorum Delivers
Implications:	<u>Financial</u> There is £700,000 is the Council's Capital Programme (2012/2013) for this project.
'Value For Money Implications'	<u>Value for Money</u> This investment will improve the 'offer' of the Old Town Hall and contribute towards the wider regeneration of the Hemel Hempstead Old Town.
Risk Implications	A Risk Assessment has been carried out as part of the Project Initiation Document.
Equalities Implications	The proposed works will ensure accessibility is improved to the Old Town Hall.

Health And Safety Implications	These will be considered as part of the tenders of any proposed capital works.
Consultees:	Julie Still , Group Manager – Resident Services Sara Railson , Manager of Old Town Hall Dacorum Cultural Forum
Background papers:	Project Initiation Document (Attached as Appendix 1)

1. Background / Scope of Report

- 1.1 The regeneration of the Old Town Hall (OTH), a facet of the Hemel Hempstead Old Town Renaissance is a priority project for Dacorum Borough Council.
- 1.2 This report focuses on the options for the Capital Improvements to the Old Town Hall so that this Committee's views can be passed to the Portfolio Holder for his consideration.
- 1.3 The report is limited to these capital improvements and will not cover the wider regeneration of Hemel Hempstead Old Town (this is a separate Improving Dacorum Programme (IDP) Project). It will also not cover the OTH Marketing Strategy (on which other reports have and will continue to be presented to this Committee) although clearly this Strategy will be dovetailed and altered as necessary to run alongside these capital improvements.
- 1.4 The objectives of this project are to make internal alterations to the Old Town Hall (Phase 1) and to consider redeveloping the colonnade area (Phase 2). The successful achievement of these objectives will lead to increased footfall to the Old Town Hall and the wider Hemel Hempstead Old Town.

2. Phase 1 – Internal Alterations

- 2.1 The proposed internal alterations focus on the Cellar and the Gallery Bar area.
- 2.2 The access to the cellar is not DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant and therefore requires a lift to be installed. An architect has therefore been commissioned to produce drawings of how this would best work as it is likely to lead to a reconfiguration of the staircase / reception area. The cellar area itself also needs to be refurbished.
- 2.3 The drawings when finalised will need to be approved by English Heritage since the Old Town Hall is a Listed Building.
- 2.4 The Gallery Bar is extremely small with limited chilled storage and service space and struggles to cope at intervals on busy nights. This results in many of the audience leaving the building to use the nearby pubs.

- 2.5 This can be overcome by some light building work which utilises part of the kitchen space to create a larger bar service area.
- 2.6 The total costs of the Phase 1 works will be in the region of £90,000 to £100,000 subject to tendering.
- 2.7 Given the need for approvals from English Heritage and tendering requirements it will not be possible to schedule these works for this summer (2012) so the work programme is aiming for construction to begin in January 2013. The works will take about 8 weeks to complete and as they are internal works are not weather dependent.

3. Phase 2 – ‘Colonnade’ Area

- 3.1 This part of the project is looking at the feasibility of using the redundant space known as the colonnade or ‘Cloisters’ area under the Old Town Hall initially for a quality café / restaurant to serve both the Old Town Hall and the wider Old Town. This would also include the redundant public toilet area but would need to bear in mind access to the Stage Door.
- 3.2 To explore this option further, Officers engaged a Catering Consultant. The consultant prepared a report following extensive analysis of the Old Town Hall offer, tours of the area, meetings with the Old Town Hall Manager, reviewing target markets and competitor landscape.
- 3.3 In summary, the report concludes that a ‘commercial’ catering contractor is extremely unlikely to express any interest in the Old Town Hall. Typically, these ‘commercial’ contractors have a number of in house criteria that any potential offer has to pass before they consider bidding. The main criteria relevant to the Old Town Hall would be turnover and trading history. The current economic climate has increased this minimum level of turnover to around £350,000 per annum.
- 3.4 Clearly therefore, it would be considered by Officers to be a potentially high risk strategy to pursue this option at the current time. Officers therefore recommend therefore that there are two possible approaches and would welcome the views of this Committee on them :
 - a) Continue with the works to enclose the colonnade area to either seek an offer from small business / local restaurant operator or to facilitate an alternative use (e.g. Art/Craft shop / workshop, gallery space , Information Centre etc).
 - b) Defer any works until the further development of wider Economic Regeneration Strategy of the Old Town which is part of the Old Town renaissance project.
- 3.5 The initial view of English Heritage on the ‘infilling’ of this area is not positive in that they have said at a site meeting it would harm the architectural integrity of the building. Dacorum Borough Council would therefore need to make a viability argument to show how a change of use would make a critical difference to the vitality of the Old Town Hall.
- 3.6 Officers have also had initial informal feedback from the Dacorum Cultural Forum and will continue to consult them as the project develops. The initial feedback is as follows :

- It needs to be developed in keeping with the rest of the High Street and provide facilities and services that are available elsewhere on the High Street.
- If the OTH is to continue as a performing arts theatre, then the seats need to be improved.
- Until there is something to replace this intimate and successful venue, then it must continue as a theatre. There is nothing else in the town.
- There may be an opportunity for a franchised restaurant and bar area (along with the theatre), however, we can see the difficulty when there is a performance for customers who want to eat but not see a performance.
- Plus there are a lot of specialist restaurants and bars on the High Street already. It would have to be something special to attract customers.
- The Cloisters area could be made into something, but the view through it to the church would be lost. Also any commercial premises would need to take into account the stage door. Or could that be re-sited? And what about the closed public conveniences? Can they be removed and the space used for something? What is missing in the High Street for a commercial premise? Could it be an art centre and/or gallery for local artists? Or perhaps a Tourist Information Centre - a bit out of the way with limited nearby parking?
- As for the cellar, what can that be used for? A long time ago, I seem to remember going there for jazz sessions, and it was very good. But could something similar compete with the other entertainments available in the High Street and/or town centre?

4. Summary

4.1 This report summarises the issues around capital investment at the Old Town Hall and officers would welcome the views of this Committee so they can be passed to the Portfolio Holder for his consideration.

END