



Report for:	Housing and Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting:	9 September 2020
PART:	1
If Part II, reason:	

Title of report:	Old Town Hall – Status Report
Contact:	Julie Banks, Portfolio Holder Community & Regulatory Services Author/Responsible Officer: Linda Roberts (Assistant Director – Performance , People and Innovation), Matt Rawdon (Group Manager – People and Communities) and Sara Railson (Arts Team Leader)
Purpose of report:	To provide the Committee with a status report on the Old Town Hall
Recommendations	That the Committee notes the contents of the report.
Corporate objectives:	Building strong and vibrant communities
Implications: 'Value For Money Implications'	<u>Financial –</u> There are financial implications on the Council the longer the OTH remains closed to the public as it is not receiving any income <u>Value for Money</u> Whilst the OTH is closed we are unable to offer an arts and culture programme to our community. We are still liable for overhead costs during this closed period.
Risk Implications	There could be reputational risks if the Council does not re-open the OTH to the public.
Equalities Implications	There are no equalities implications arising from this report.
Health And Safety	There are no health and safety implications arising from this

Implications	report.
Consultees:	Corporate Health and Safety team, Building Services team,
Background papers:	
Historical background <i>(please give a brief background to this report to enable it to be considered in the right context).</i>	This report was requested at the June OSC meeting as the committee wished to better understand the impact of the Coronavirus on the Old Town Hall.
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OTH – Old Town Hall

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report is to update members of the current status of the Old Town Hall in relation to the building, the service and its staff as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. It also sets out a re-opening plan and a future direction of the arts/entertainment programme.

2. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the OTH

- 2.1. The Old Town Hall, as with every other theatre / entertainment venue in England, closed its doors to the public on Tuesday 17th March 2020. This was in response to HM Government advice in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2.2. As a direct result of closure and with immediate effect the entire Old Town Hall spring/summer 2020 programme was cancelled, along with all private hires. Further announcements regarding the hospitality and entertainments sector saw the cancelling and / or re-scheduling of our autumn performances. An announcement by the Government in July stated that venues would be allowed to re-open under social distance guidelines. An initial re-opening date of 1st August was then pushed back to 15th August.
- 2.3. In the first few weeks of lockdown all Old Town Hall staff were asked to work from home. In early May, following Government guidance, staff went back into the building for the first time in over 8 weeks. This allowed for essential checks and maintenance to be carried out to ensure that the building met our normal safety and security standards. It also allowed for the installation of the new seating that had been agreed earlier this year.

3. Current Position

Re-opening the building

Maintenance

- 3.1. Operational staff have been back in the building for nearly 4 months and have been and continue to work to a robust cleaning / maintenance schedule. In addition they have worked with a variety of contractors to ensure access to the building for essential and on-going upkeep of the building and its services. This included:
 - Completion of an essential water quality test following the re-opening of the building (which by this point had been closed for 2 months was to have the mains water tank disinfected and water samples taken for legionella and other water borne diseases. The water in the building tested negative.
 - The delayed installation of the new theatre seating went ahead. The works were agreed in February 2020
 - The Old Town Hall roof (above the auditorium) -water ingress issue. Scaffolding has gone up front and back of the building to get urgent roofing works done.
 - Monthly water temperature checks and Legionella testing. Old Town Hall technician conducts weekly tests – Orion water engineers conduct monthly checks

- Replacement of water heater in the Cellar – Orion engineers / Building Services – job raised as urgent (works pending)
- Installation of new dosing point on second main water tap. Completed, though remedial works pending
- Removal of theatre tabs (curtains) for cleaning and application of Fire Retardant – in line with HSE regulations. Completed
- Removal of pigeons and guava from roof void above the Gallery bar / café
- Replacement of broken radiator
- Replacement of broken window that looks out onto the High Street
- In addition our cleaning staff are engaged in full and robust programme of 'deep cleans' in all areas of the building.

Unfortunately due to bad weather during August, the Old Town Hall suffered quite serious flooding which led to power outages. This has caused some immediate and on-going issues with regard to water damage to the building

4. Re-opening the building to the staff

- 4.1. As with all theatres, the Old Town Hall team is committed to a safe and speedy re-opening of its services as soon as we are allowed. In line with making the Old Town Hall COVID-19 secure for staff, we created risk assessment in respect of OTH staff working practices which was reviewed by Corporate Health and Safety Team.
- 4.2. In regard to other changes we have implemented, as would be expected, we have purchased and fitted additional hand sanitising 'stations' at building entrances / exits. We have purchased comprehensive signage for the staff (and in due course the public) to maintain social distancing and to encourage regular hand washing and the use of face coverings.
- 4.3. Casual front of House staff training has been undertaken to also ensure all staff fully understand future operations.

5. Options for re-opening the building to customers

- 5.1. Current government advice regarding theatre performances is that as of 15th August 2020, live indoor performances are allowed but only under social distancing circumstances. For the Old Town Hall this means that of the 110 seats available for sale, 45 seats can be occupied - using the 1m+ social distance with mitigation (i.e. face coverings).
- 5.2. In response the Old Town Hall team have created a workable and safe plan to allow customers back into the building. The OTH could offer the following service options taking into account the current Covid-19 restrictions:

Exhibition Viewings

- 5.3. Customers wishing to view exhibitions would purchase (free of charge) a timed entry ticket for the gallery. This would allow time enough to view the exhibition but also enjoy a light refreshment of drinks and snacks. Our café /bar has been re-modelled with less seating, to allow for social distancing, a one way system, transparent screens and an on-line or table service ordering system. By allowing each customer an allocated slot to view the exhibitions, we are

maintaining safe numbers of people in the space. Initially exhibitions would only be available to view Monday to Friday, 11am and 3pm.

Film Screenings

- 5.4. Film screenings have already opened up at cinemas across the country. By maintaining at 1m+ social distance and the now mandatory use of face coverings – the model appears to be working well. The OTH subject to feedback from the Corporate Health and safety team on our – film screening risk assessment feel this could be offered to the community.
- 5.5. The OTH guidance is similar to that of other venues showing film; a restricted number of tickets are available (to allow for social distancing), in our case 45 seats are available for sale (of the 110 seat capacity). Seating configurations allow for couples, groups of four and one set of seats for up to 5 persons. All tickets must be purchased on-line and customers have the option of pre-ordering refreshments at the same time. Customer entry is timed to stop people gathering in larger groups. Customers are admitted, their temperature is checked, their tickets are checked and they are seated at tables for refreshment / to wait for admittance to the theatre. At an appointed time, customers are seated by row to limit any criss-crossing. Customers must wear their face covering throughout the film unless eating or drinking. After the film, customers are asked to leave by row.

We understand that this is incredibly prescriptive but the Old Town Hall is small building with narrow pinch-points in the corridors and waiting spaces – so we are acting under the additional restrictions of the building itself.

- 5.6. We are currently making our ‘welcome back video’ which when produced will be a visual walk through guide for customers; from booking a ticket to buying a drink. Every element of their experience at the Old Town Hall, whether viewing an exhibition or seeing a film will be clearly mapped out. We hope that this will re-kindle customer confidence for those who may need that extra assurance, but more importantly it will ensure that both staff and customers are kept safe.

6. Live performances at the Old Town Hall.

- 6.1. In terms of how audiences purchase tickets, arrive at the venue and the wearing of masks - there is very little difference to the model of attending a film screening. However, for the Old Town Hall staff and the performers, there are different risk assessments that need to be drawn up and worked through in regard to maintaining social distance between performers and staff, performers and audience and general use of backstage facilities by performers.
- 6.2. There has been much discussion in the theatre community about the financial viability and sustainability of socially distanced performances. The result of reducing seating capacity has an instantaneous effect on box office income. In terms of the Old Town Hall, our seating capacity has always been small; and there was a time when the arts programme was subsidised because of it – but in recent years we have achieved or exceeded our income target for the shows in our season. But due to building maintenance, staffing costs, overheads, fuel charges etc. The service as a whole remains subsidised.

- 6.3. Under the current social distancing regulations, the Old Town Hall capacity is now 45 seats, as an example on how this affects our income – a show that cost £700 last year, that sold 70% capacity (77 seats) would have returned a gross box office income of £1,001 (based on a £13 ticket yield). That same show today, allowing for no increase in company fee or ticket price would give us £598 gross (if it sold out) at a £13 ticket yield. If the show did not sell out, then clearly the gross income is reduced and the show runs at a loss. Balancing inflated ticket price against customer confidence and willingness to come out to the theatre is always a challenge.
- 6.4. Customer confidence is key in ensuring that audiences return to the Old Town Hall and to the live arts in general. A recent national audience survey that polled over 103,000 respondents found that 66% of respondents would return to socially distanced performances although only 18% are actively booking for live performances from November 2020 onwards. In terms of what audiences are looking for to feel confident when at the theatre - it is the COVID-safe 'kite mark' – assurances from the venue of the additional cleaning, training and safety plans in place, the ability for households to be seated together, a limit on the numbers in the theatre and that there is adequate space between seats.

7. Staffing update

- 7.1. We currently have 3 FTE vacancies in the service including key roles such as operations team leader and a support / duty manager. These post holders would be key in ensuring our health and safety responsibilities are maintained and due to the pandemic are enhanced.
- 7.2. Our casual front of house team will need to have covid-19 secure training before re-introducing them to the new ways of working. A result of the pandemic have seen some of our staff leaving the casual front of house role – so recruitment will need to be a priority for us in the coming weeks.

8. Post Covid-19 OTH programme

- 8.1. Whilst our main priority is to safely re-open the Old Town Hall to our customers and visitors, there has been discussion surrounding what our programme may look like post COVID. Our belief is that the Old Town Hall may need to offer a more balanced offer, between:
- a workable, financially viable professional arts programme,
 - a venue for hire - meetings, conferences, workshops as well as celebratory events
 - a youth and community creative hub – concentrating on a learning and participation programme for a wide range of groups and users from across the borough.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. This paper highlights the challenges that Covid-19 has had on the OTH and provides details of our response so far. The OTH service has demonstrated

what the arts and entertainment programme could look like if we are to open under existing Covid-19 guidance. Clearly there is a lot of work still to do and the income will be lower if we are to re-open, but we would still be able to offer a limited programme which could be welcomed by our residents in these troubled times.

- 9.2. Views from the committee are welcomed on our possible re-opening plan and the future arts/entertainment programme.