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Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Report for:	Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Title of report:	The Old Town Hall
Date:	1 st February 2023
Report on behalf of:	Councillor Julie Banks, Portfolio Holder for Community and Regulatory Services
Part:	I
If Part II, reason:	N/A
Appendices:	N/A
Background papers:	
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	

Report Author / Responsible Officer

Diane Southam – Assistant Director Place Community and Enterprise



Corporate Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A clean, safe and enjoyable environment Building strong and vibrant communities Ensuring economic growth and prosperity Ensuring efficient, effective and modern service delivery Climate and ecological emergency
Wards affected	All wards
Purpose of the report:	1. To provide an update on activity at the Old Town Hall
Recommendation (s) to the decision maker (s):	1. That Members note the report and identify any areas

	where they require additional information
Period for post policy/project review:	N/A

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This paper provides an update on the Old Town Hall programme for 2023 as well as performance to date. The paper also provides an overview of the considerations for future expanded activity and next steps towards those.

2. The Old Town Hall

- 2.1 Situated in the heart of Hemel Hempstead's Old Town High Street since 1852, The Old Town Hall has been an important local arts space since 1978. From hosting famous faces from the world of comedy, to showcasing the work of emerging and critically acclaimed performers, The Old Town Hall boasts a varied programme for audiences of all ages.

- 2.2 The theatre has a vision to encourage and promote a life-long interest in the arts and to support the development of creativity within our community that is accessible, inclusive and affordable; and to celebrate the power of theatre to help inform, challenge, entertain and inspire people regardless of background or circumstance. The theatre has the following missions:

- **Programming** – providing excellent choice across a broad range of art forms
- **Developing Creative partnerships** - Creativity through developing and supporting artists
- **Social Responsibility** - respect for diversity and community cohesion
- **Inclusion** – bringing down barriers to engagement
- **Sustainability** – we are actively working on reducing our environmental impact.

- 2.3 The most recent policy objectives for The Old Town Hall include the following:

- Increase income and reduce subsidy
- Utilise technology to improve customer booking experience, allow greater participation and inclusivity and reduce cumbersome data processes
- Ensuring greater use of the venue as a base, as a performance space and as an integral part of the High Street vision.

- 2.4 In addition, there is an objective of concluding a full service and building review, to inform the basis for future activity, and to help meet the related objectives of increasing income and reducing subsidy.

3 2014 – 2023 - Activity

3.1 The table below shows that the current financial year to date 2022/3 has shown a significant increase in ticket sales compared to the full financial year 2021/22 and no sales during COVID 2020/21.

Year	Ticket Sales
2014-15	9,717
2015-16	10,382
2016-17	9,627
2017-18	8,847
2018-19	7,223
2019-20 (COVID)	5,704
2020-21 (COVID)	(73)
2021-22	3,648
2022-23 to date	5,835
	60,910

Location	Quantity
Theatre	49,023
The Cellar Club	5,597
Other*	6,078
The Olde Kings Arms 2021	107
Gadebridge Park 2021	105
	60,910

* Events held in other locations including the Gallery, External venues, Workshops, Festivals and Refreshments which have no location

4. Target Clients and approach:

4.1 The OTH hosts a range of events from comedy, theatre and film screenings as well as music nights and family theatre as well as being a resource for the local community.

4.2 The OTH email marketing list currently stands at over 4,679 individuals. This is an increase of 105% since 1st January 2023. These are active subscribers who have indicated (in line with GDPR) their event type preferences. They are contacted via email with information on upcoming OTH events and activities that align with their preferences and purchase history.

- 4.3 The OTH is active on a variety of social media platforms including Facebook with 2,300 followers and Instagram with 1,300 followers. So far during January we have seen a 264% increase (44k people) in reach on Facebook and a 386% increase (4k people) on Instagram.
- 4.4 The brand new website created in collaboration with leading theatre website developers Supercool went online in March 2022. The new website has seen an increase of 187% in average session duration, meaning more customers are spending longer browsing and using the website compared with the full year of 2019 (before COVID). The increased website functionality allows for future development in online video content and other industry innovations without the need for a complete redevelopment of the underlining software the website uses.
- 4.5 To supplement the online presence, The Old Town Hall produces a What's On Guide and other paper based literature which is posted or distributed to customer across Dacorum. Our paper based marketing now includes QR codes to help us track engagement and report on ROI.
- 4.6 The OTH offers Dacorum Card discount to those members of the community on means tested benefit. Specific activities are programmed with and for older clients such as the Let's Dance project 2014 – 2019 and a programme of Children's Theatre and films. Vulnerable customers can also access and benefit from 'relaxed' cinema or theatre performances. We continue to work with theatre companies to expand our access offerings with a view of providing more deaf and sight impaired audience members choice.

5 Events in 2023

- 5.1 Shows, workshops, film screening and festivals have been arranged and confirmed for the first quarter of 2023. Following resource changes, there is a move to programme with a longer lead time towards 2024, in line with industry expectations. As is the nature of live events, everything listed has the potential of cancellation or delays due to issues beyond our control. An overview of events in 2023 is set out below.
- **January 2023** – Traditionally, The Old Town Hall does not start its season until the end of the month, however a different approach has been taken this year and the first event took place on 10th January. There are two important highlights this month from the world of comedy, Michael McIntyre and Andy Parsons. Alongside our regular film screening every Tuesday we also see the return of Juicebox Live, our local band night and our comedy club, Screaming Blue Murder.
 - **February 2023** - February this year centres around family theatre and activities, mostly focused on the February Half Term (12-19 Feb). The month also has our regular film screenings, Juicebox local band night and the comedy club SBM. Outside of family entertainment, the biggest highlight for the month is the comedian Mark Watson.
 - **March 2023** - March is International Women's Month and we have a play every week written and performed by women about women. The Unicorn, A Room of Ones Own, Little Women and Nothing on Earth. The month also has our regular film screenings, Juicebox local band night and our comedy club SBM. We have a couple of workshops this month, one based around the play Nothing on Earth produced by a local company who have been working with DBC over the years. The other is a comedy writing workshop hosted by a BAFTA Shortlisted comedian and writer. Many participants have gone on to create work for television around the world. We also have a number of community events, including a Cockney Sing-a-Long, Herts Inclusive Theatre and Astley Cooper School.
 - **April 2023** - To kick off the Easter Holidays we have 'Animals'; a show is packed full of interactive fun and educational information about the wildlife around us. We plan to run workshops with local wildlife trusts to engage with the local community about environmental matters. The main event during Easter half term will be a Mini Film Festival which will allow young people to write and shoot their own films and then show them at the end of the week. This is a test run ready for a much larger

film festival in collaboration with The Elgiva, West Herts College and DBC Film later in the year. The month also has our regular film screenings, Juicebox local band night and our comedy club SBM. We have two important highlights this month from the world of comedy, Emmanuel Sonubi and Eshaan Akbar.

5.2 **The rest of 2023** – the rest of programming for 2023 is in progress, with the core of acts confirmed for the year. In addition, the venue will continue to serve the community by being available for any events associated with public meetings to support the Hemel Old Town Place initiative, any events associated with election hustings.

5.3 In 2023, The Old Town Hall officially becomes a producing theatre as rehearsals begin for Lady Suzan as part of the Old Town Hall and Dyad Productions collaboration, followed by its premiere in July. Later in 2023 The Old Town Hall will again host the Halloween Event, prior to rehearsals by Dyad productions for a Christmas Carol commencing.

5.4 The Gallery space has continued to be occupied with a variety of artists. All exhibitions continued to enjoy an array of visitors from the local community and has helped to inspire artists to enquire about future dates to exhibit with us, and this will remain a feature for 2023.

6 Satisfaction

6.1 The Old Town Hall Satisfaction Survey is sent out to customers a day after they have attended an event at the venue. These surveys are made up of twenty-five questions in total covering topics ranging from customer service to venue satisfaction. Events covered by this survey would have taken place in the Main Theatre or The Cellar Club. Current feedback and performance is outlined below;

- Old Town Hall Front of House stewarding staff received a 96% excellent/good rating from our customers over the quarter
- Customer rating on the range of events on offer was a combined 89% for very good or excellent.
- Value for money was rated at 89% very good or excellent
- Overall customer satisfaction for the events staged this quarter was 81% excellent rating and 13% good rating.

7 Opportunities for the Future

7.1 As set out, an objective for The Old Town Hall is to increase income and reduce subsidy. Various potential activities are being explored in order to encourage activity and increase viability:

- **Wedding hire** – as a listed building, with a prominent position within Old Hemel, there is potential for the venue to be used for weddings;
- **Fairs and markets** – accompanied by an appropriate booking policy, The Old Town Hall could be a venue for local fairs and markets, for example record fair or craft fairs.
- **Pop up restaurants and pre-show meals** – The Old Town Hall is equipped with a catering standard kitchen facilities. There is an opportunity to explore pop-up restaurants or pre-show meals in partnership with local caterers / restaurants to encourage further secondary spend.
- **Rehearsal Space** – The Old Town Hall provides a suitable space for rehearsals, and this would encourage activity and footfall in daytime hours.
- **Corporate events and conferences** – there is an opportunity to offer the venue for corporate events and conferences.

7.2 In addition, the physicality of the building and parameters for potential improvements are being explored through a building review. Due to the listed nature of the building, there are various limitations, however, any improvements will be considered alongside potential revenue generating activities.