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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 – Activity Update
Date:	13 th March 2024
Report on behalf of:	Councillor Sheron Wilkie, Portfolio Holder for Place
Part:	I
If Part II, reason:	N/A
Appendices:	N/A
Background papers:	None
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	OTH: Old Town Hall

Report Author / Responsible Officer

Diane Southam – Assistant Director Place Community and Enterprise



Corporate Priorities	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:	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 (OTH) programme for 2023/24 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 last financial year 2022/23 saw a significant increase in ticket sales and gross income compared to all previous years going back to 2014/15. The current year to date sales (11 months) shows a continued upward trend and a forecast significantly exceeding 2022/23 numbers.

Year	Ticket Sales	Gross Income
2014-15	9,717	£67,274.75
2015-16	10,382	£76,744.34

2016-17	9,627	£74,125.80
2017-18	8,847	£75,774.26
2018-19	7,223	£64,714.58
2019-20 (COVID)	5,704	£49,928.60
2020-21 (COVID)	(73)	-£948.00
2021-22	3,648	£39,838.00
2022-23	8,381	£84,257.00
2023-24 to date (February 2024)	10,747	£140,187.20
2024-25 to date (February 2024)	1,252	£21,569

4. Target Clients and approach:

- 4.1 The OTH hosts a range of events from comedy, theatre, music, family theatre and film screenings and as a resource for the local community.
- 4.2 The OTH email marketing list currently stands at over 6,974 individuals. This has increased from 4,679 in February 2023 and are active subscribers who 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 3,018 followers and Instagram with 1,566 followers. So far this year we have reached 137,000 people on Facebook with a 433% increase in page visits compared with the same period last year and 12,500 people on Instagram with a 56% increase in page visits.
- 4.4 The website has had 992,000 views with 2.1m interactions of some kind since the beginning of 2023. On average the website is visited 5,000 times in a month. 78% of transaction during 2023 to date have been through the website. The remaining sales are split equally between phone and counter sales.
- 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 Return on Investment. During September 2023, 37,500 mail drops took place across Hemel Hempstead and Berkhamsted. A further 1,000 was delivered directly to customers homes.
- 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 which started again in September and a programme of film and events across the year. A new project with Supported Housing was trailed with hopes it can be expanded in 2024. Customers with disabilities can also access and benefit from 'relaxed' cinema or theatre performances when possible. We continue to work with theatre companies to expand our access offerings with a view of providing more deaf and sight impaired audience member's choice.

5 Events in 2023

- 5.1 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 which took place at the end of 2023 are set out below.
- **September 2023** – We had a jam packed month of top named comedy, most of which played to sold out audiences. Including Jon Richardson, Fiona Allen, Ria Lina, Marcus Birdman and Justin Moorhouse. We also welcomed Dr Ben Garrod, BBC Palaeontologist with his family show Ultimate Dinosaurs! Alongside our regular film screening every Tuesday we also had Juicebox Live, our local band night and our comedy club, Screaming Blue Murder.
 - **October 2023** – It was a busy time of the year for The Old Town Hall as we worked our way towards the big Halloween event in the high street and Gadebridge Park. We had programmed 4 spooky shows in the run up to the event and then a further two events on the Sunday itself. We also welcomed TV Star and top comedian Chris McCausland for his two night sell out show. Alongside our regular film screening every Tuesday we also had Juicebox Live, our local band night and our comedy club, Screaming Blue Murder.
 - **November 2023** – We kicked off November with the Chas & Dave tribute starring the original drummer from the band. Quickly followed by award winning Little Angel Theatres, Miniature Travelling Circus. Little Angel Theatre is the premiere venue for Children's theatre in the UK and we have been working closely with them to bring more to The Old Town Hall in 2024. Stand up comedians Paul Sinha (The Chase) and Tom Stade joined us alongside the highly interactive show Solve-Along-A-Murder-She-Wrote. We rounded off the month with a first for The Old Town Hall, the world premiere of Dyad Productions, A Christmas Carol. This show has been produced in collaboration with the venue and was the first of many to come, providing the venue with national recognition.
 - **December 2023** – Another first for The Old Town Hall in December was The Ballard of Rudy, a Jazz infused Christmas show full of interaction for all the family. This is the first time the venue will present a show over three weeks from the 5-24 Dec. Schools and group bookings provided the majority of the audience for this Christmas extravaganza.
- 5.2 The start of 2024 –Big Named comedians returned in January, including Punt & Dennis and Russell Kane. We also saw the beginnings of rehearsals with Dacorum Community Dance who are working on a project called Dance Re-Ignite. The project involves members of the local community over the age of 55 being able to train alongside professional dancers with a performance at the end of the project. We expect to see this come to an end in March 2024.
- 5.3 The Old Town Hall continued producing theatre as rehearsals began for Lady Suzan in January, a collaboration between The Old Town Hall and Dyad Productions, followed by its world premiere at the end of February.
- 5.4 The Gallery space has continued to be occupied with a variety of artists and for the first time The Old Town Hall is part of the Herts Open Studio project in September. 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 2024.
- 5.5 As we look to the end of the financial year for The Old Town Hall we continue to offer even more top named comedians, including Rob Beckett and Adam Hills during March. We are also excited to welcome a music act, "James Kirby" who was requested by our audience.
- 5.6 Overall the year 2023/24 has been the best year on record for The Old Town Hall. Both in the number of shows presented and the gross ticket sales taken. As we move in to 2024/25 we are looking to an even more successful future. We have new technology coming on board to help with the operation of the venue and the

interaction with our customers, not to mention a whole programme of new and exciting shows for the people of Dacorum and beyond to enjoy.

6 Satisfaction

6.1 The Old Town Hall Satisfaction Survey is sent out to customers a few days 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;

- The Old Town Hall Front of House stewarding staff received a 100% excellent/good rating from our customers over the last quarter
- Customer rating on the range of events on offer was a combined 92% for very good or excellent.
- Value for money was rated at 89% very good or excellent
- Overall customer satisfaction for the events staged last quarter was a 97% excellent and good rating.

6.2 All of these represent increases in satisfaction feedback from those reported in September 2023.

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.