

Portobello Town Hall Meeting - 24.8.19

Background to the situation from Peter Watton, Council Officer, Head of Facilities Management

The council previously focussed on investing in new buildings rather than maintenance of existing buildings. After the tragic death at Liberton, all buildings in the council estate were assessed to see what was needed to bring them up to a safe and maintained standard.

The current council agreed to spend £153.5m over the next 5 years, to address the maintenance backlog. However, costs have been higher than predicted, due to a variety of factors. It was agreed to prioritise the programme, with schools first, and then community centres. The Town Hall, at the time of first assessment in March 2016 was thought to need £735,712 worth of investment, and work was programmed for 2023/24.

The condition of the Town Hall was assessed again as part of a rolling programme, and was found to need £1,001,385 worth of work, due to further deterioration of the building and increased construction work costs.

The Town Hall brought in £71,356 worth of income in 2018/19, and the council spent £107,810.22 on running the building, so the building is being subsidised to continue as a hall for hire.

The building was closed on July 1st to fully inspect the ceiling after visible cracks were seen about the stage and seating areas - results should be coming in the next few weeks.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Town Hall

Strengths identified by those at the meeting -

Strong history and memories, central location in Portobello, a key civic building, great for big events, easy access by public transport, strong identity, is hired by people across the city, community garden space at the back, listed building, car parking, good working building, opportunity, distinct frontage, has kitchen facilities, brings diverse groups to Party, good venue for large events, in a strong community, large capacity for people, potential room space on the balcony, potential for Festival use, only building in Portobello for large numbers of people, toilets re-done recently, secular venue for weddings, shell that could be refitted, flexible space, theatre layout.

People felt the key strengths were - Central location, strong identity, large size, the potential for complete refunctioning, no noise complaints, important for local business, close to accommodation.

Weaknesses identified by those at the meeting -

Old fashioned style, inflexible, no modern facilities, toilets not nice, not safe, listed, not promoted, only one space for hire, poor kitchen facilities, no diversity in lets, lots of competition in other spaces, hall too big for many events, upstairs hall wrong shape for meetings, poor disabled access, expensive to run, under used, looming, imposing, inaccessible, needs to be brought into the 21st century, poor insulation, amount of investment needed.

People felt the key weaknesses were -

The fabric deterioration, running costs, old fashioned, inflexible, poor access, poor facilities, competition from other spaces, not internet ready, old fashioned, not meeting today's needs, remote management.

Opportunities and Needs - the Town Hall of the Future

Opportunities identified -

Fringe use, proactive management, build library in town hall, but library needed as well, bar and cafe at the front of house, partitioning space, open every day for access, made more sustainable (green energy/insulation), rich person to invest and leave a legacy, reinvent like Brunton and hold other services, venue for touring performance, increased flexibility, artist space, shared office space, different use for mezzanine, temporary partitions, bleacher seating.

Needs identified -

Inclusive space, youth space, concerts, big events, childcare, co-working space, large capacity hall space, space for public meetings and local democracy, different groups - older people and young people, daytime use - pre and after school care, better kitchen to allow lunches and tea dances, space for indoor stalls and market events, housing, hotel, school space (PE, full school gathering, performance, after school club), wedding venue, cultural venue, festive venue.

Then options for the future were discussed, with people speaking to their experience different options. Then voting identified most popular options for next steps -

Social Enterprise, Community Run and a hybrid option where council leases out the building to private/social enterprise with community stating uses.

Discussion -

Community Run

Who - local people, volunteers with the right skills and expertise, enough staff (paid)

How - look at other community run buildings, feasibility study of building, get information out and people involved, survey of users, survey of community needs and opportunities.

Risks - Losing momentum, burnout, people not paid, relying on volunteers, will someone do it?

Will you get the skills and expertise needed?

Next steps - Council agreement to refurb, consult community/past users, create a business plan, identify new volunteers/users, will take a long time.

Social Enterprise

How - How to fund capital works - tender goes out - look at building and ideas.

Who - New or existing social enterprise - with business case - goes city and Lothian wide.

Next Steps - Needs drivers to push - feasibility study

Hybrid - out to market with community input and decisions

Who - Council owned - community input - put out to the market

Council and community in control.

How - Clear proposition to the community - firm up agreed process and brief - conversation with the private market (inc social enterprises/charities) - agree operation and business plan.

Needs clarity on uses and a clear lease with get out clauses.

Next Steps - Message to community - report to elected members/finance and resources committee - group in community to lead - discussions to agree the way forward.

Agreed Peter Watton would draft a proposal to put to the community.