

Agenda item 3

For decision: Update on the launch and marketing of Frome Town Hall

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Summary

This report updates Cllrs on the launch of Frome Town Hall on 1 April, that the restoration project came in on time and on budget and recommends that a refined pricing structure for hiring rooms and the Council Chamber is ratified.

Launch of Frome Town Hall on 1 April

On 1 April, the open day and launch event were successful. 300 people visited us for the open day and the evening event hosted 160. Mr and Mrs Wheeler who were married in the Council Chamber 52 years ago and were photographed in the same place – on the Town Hall steps – as they formally opened the building. We have had positive feedback from all who attended.

Tenants

All tenants are now in situ. Fair Frome have moved into the Elliot Building, Frome FM and We Hear You have moved into the offices on the first floor to the right and left, respectively, of the main staircase. Active and In Touch and one private user are occupying the shared office between the café area and reception. The income budgets for hiring office space and the Elliot Building should, therefore, remain robust - assuming no one moves out.

Hire of meeting rooms and the Council Chamber

We are receiving a lot of interest from local organisations who wish to rent the Council Chamber and the meeting rooms, despite limited marketing. To date, bookings of the desk spaces are most advanced. Desks two and three are fully booked until 31/3/18. Desk space one is 50% booked for the same period.

Undoubtedly, a major source of income in future will come from private hire of the Council Chamber. Rachel Griffin (interim Marketing and Communications Manager) is drafting a Venue Business Plan. Once we have the plan in place we will market the venue in earnest. We have also submitted a wedding licence application and a venue licence application so that we can serve alcohol. We are also in discussion with the Registry Office about hosting Registry office weddings for people wanting just a short ceremony because at present they have to travel to Bath or Shepton Mallet.

We expect bookings to increase significantly over the year ahead and so we will be reviewing our income targets for the Town Hall and report back to this meeting on 6 September.

Room hire charges

Following the last Council meeting, some Cllrs felt that the agreed hourly room charges (including those for the Council Chamber) might be too expensive for some community groups. I discussed this with various Cllrs and I decided to retain the hourly rates as agreed

by Council but to offer a discounted rate for booking, for example, a morning, afternoon or evening session or a whole day or weekend.

We don't foresee that this will impact negatively on the income forecast. Indeed, it is intended that by offering a discount for booking a session rather than an hour, usage and income will increase (all charges are at Appendix 1). The proposal, therefore, is that Cllrs ratify this decision.

Café

It has so far proved difficult to secure a café business. This is primarily because potential tenants are concerned that the footfall may be low and, combined with very few firm catering bookings resulting from room hire, the risk for a private individual may be too great. As a result, in addition to talking to potential café tenants, we are also exploring how the room could be used for workshops and training, as well as meetings.

It is important not to forget that the extensive consultation we carried out, prior to drafting the brief for the restoration, was extremely clear that a community café was required and to create a community café remains our objective. At the moment though, our priority is to secure the tenants and put in place a plan to generate income from the Council Chamber.

Consistent communications

Last April, Cllrs agreed that FTC's communications needed to look more consistent, that some guidelines were required. I was instructed to do this in consultation with Cllr Kate Bielby (project sponsor). Since April we have been working closely with a local graphic designer and the new guidelines have been produced and agreed. In the run up to the opening of Frome Town Hall we wanted to make sure that signage both outside and inside was consistent with the new guidelines and, working with Cllr Colin Cobb (Frome Town Hall project sponsor) the signage was commissioned and installed on 30 March. We have had positive responses from those who have been using the Town Hall and from visitors to the launch on 1 April. In future, all forms of communication will look similar and adhere to the guidelines. These agenda papers follow the new guidelines, for example.

High level budget update

Originally, FTC drew down £750k in loan capital to restore Frome Town Hall. As at 28 February, all of the work on the project (the design, building, all telecoms, audio visual equipment, furniture and signage) had costed £443k. While there are still amounts outstanding, the RFO and the Town Clerk are pleased to be able to report that the restoration project came in on time and on budget.

The sale of the offices at Palmer Street (£340k) compared with the purchase of the Town Hall (£275k) created a surplus of £65k. We have had the property valued for market valuation purposes. Currently, the property is valued in the region of £2.3m. There is no suggestion that the Town Hall should be sold. Indeed, we are exploring setting up a trust that can hold the property in perpetuity as a community asset. However, it was felt Cllrs should know the enhanced value of the Town Hall as an asset to the town.

Recommendations

1. Note the report
2. Ratify the additional hire rates of the Council Chamber and meeting rooms at Appendix 1