

Agenda item 8

For information: What's been going on at the Town Hall?

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Summary

The purpose of this report is look at the occupancy of the Town Hall and update on facilities management.

Occupancy of the building

Tenants

After a few teething problems earlier in the year the report from this month's tenants meeting is that tenants are largely happy and have settled in.

Fair Frome's tenancy agreement remains outstanding as there are few final things to discuss.

Data on bookings

Bookings and occupancy rates are quickly improving with around £4000 of advance bookings at the time of writing. The meeting rooms are currently at 19% capacity, which is nearly double they were when we updated Cllrs in June. Bookings are averaging 2-3 meetings a day during the week and to 1-2 a day at the weekend although the council chamber has seen an increase in bookings of late.

FTC are currently also making really good use of the meeting room with over 160 bookings over the last 6 months – and these are just the formal meetings. This represent a significant saving as historically we have had to book and pay for meeting rooms.

Planned changes

The ground floor meeting room (aka The Parlour) at the back of the building has not proved very popular as a community space. It is an awkward room and community groups can only access it via FTC's offices. Therefore, we are changing room use around. The Parlour will become a shared office and will house Active & Intouch and Volunteer Frome and any subsequent Frome Town Council initiatives that we have an obligation to house.

The shared office next to the reception will now also be available to hire. It will become the room that will be available free of charge to community groups up to a maximum of 2 hours between 10am and 4pm. We believe this is an important service to particularly small groups who have no budget to pay for room hire. This arrangement will also give us the versatility in future to let it out to a tenant if demand from local groups is low.

The café will become the hotdesk space during the day and we have installed additional electric points to facilitate this. Whilst the café is rarely booked at the moment we want to keep our options open for now as we expect it to be popular when we receive our alcohol licence for evening use for supper clubs and in-house events. It will also be a welcome addition to the wedding offer as a bar.

These minor changes will allow more hire space and a more attractive proposition for community groups. They are due to be implemented early in November.

Licensing

Since our last Town Hall report to Council Matters we learnt that we require Change of Use Planning Consent in order to hold weddings or other events that are not part of our day-to-day business. The advice we received in the restoration project was that this was unlikely but following discussion with Mendip it appears we do.

Conversations with Mendip's Environmental Health Officer and with an Acoustic Consultant have also indicated that we will need to keep the windows and the fire escape door in the Council Chamber shut for events. As a result, we will require air conditioning. We have received conflicting advice and following discussion with Cllr Cobb as the project sponsor we decided to employ the services of E3 who were the restoration project electrical and heating consultant to specify what is needed.

The specification for the air conditioning and extraction units will need to form part of the Change of Use application. It is expected that we will have the specification very shortly. The approval process will take 8 weeks from the date of application.

Everything is in place to submit the Licenses to serve Alcohol and for Weddings although this is on hold until we receive our Change of Use planning consent. We have taken the decision not to use Temporary Events Notices until we have Change of Use to ensure that we don't jeopardise our case.

Marketing the Building

The current lack of planning consent has limited how we can actively market the Town Hall. However, in the interim, we are able to use the building for meetings and have been using soft marketing techniques to talk to the business sector and community groups. We are currently targeting the training and education sectors.

Once we have the consents and licences in place we will be marketing the rooms with a vigour and our market research continues to confirm that there will be a high demand from sectors such as weddings.

Repairs, Maintenance & Building improvements

Winter works

We're organising and scheduling winter works for the building, including:

- Gutter clearance
- Downpipe clearance
- Stone repairs and pointing works
- A general inspection and report on the exterior of the building
- Annual (anniversary) testing of the building's systems

Recently completed

- The Town Hall's new CCTV system has been ordered and we're expecting it to be installed during November
- We've installed panic alarms in Reception - and Staff have been trained both in the working and the response to them
- Storage shelving has been put up in the Council's offices
- A local carpenter has created bespoke display shelving next to the Reception; this will be used for leaflets and flyers to promote the town and the nearby areas
- The areas to the front of the building have been re-laid with an improved surface

Upcoming

- We're currently scoping options for ventilation and/or air conditioning in the Council Chamber
- Work on the sash windows in the Council Chamber remains subject to discussions with sash specialists
- We're set to add discrete brushes to the internal double doors by Reception to reduce noise and heat-loss from the building
- We'll be adding bike racks around the building for Staff and visitors

Smaller jobs

- Shelves in the stationary cupboard and in the sheds
- Touch-up painting
- New directional and information signs for the building and the car park

Conclusion

The tenants are happy, the building is being well maintained and the bookings are on an upward trajectory. Change of use consent and the licenses need to be resolved before we can market the Town Hall properly. Looking forward we have a number of firm bookings and we anticipate usage and income to increase markedly in the coming months once the marketing campaign gets underway.

The most surprising thing is the amount of rooms that are being booked at no cost by FTC staff for internal as well as external meetings. This represents a significant saving but obviously does not figure in the income budget.