

Agenda item 4

For decision – Budget approval for COVID-related improvements at Cheese & Grain

Author: Peter Wheelhouse, Economic Development & Regeneration Manager & Deputy Town Clerk

Summary

All necessary steps are being taken to ensure that the Cheese & Grain is ready to re-open safely for events as soon as the Government gives the go ahead to do so. As part of these preparations, the plan is to install a ventilation system in the main hall. Early investigations with prospective suppliers suggest that a budget of £20k is required for this purpose.

As Frome Town Council (FTC) has the long lease on this asset and to minimise the Cheese & Grain's debt burden at this time, it is proposed that the investment is made by the Council. The recommendation is that Cllrs agree to a budget of £20k for these works with authority delegated to the Deputy Town Clerk to work with the Cheese & Grain to finalise the technical details.

Background

Councillors will be aware that a loan of £16k was provided to the Cheese & Grain last year to support the organisation through a difficult trading period; this loan is expected to be repaid in March.

The Cheese & Grain's strategy is to ensure that the organisation can emerge post COVID to provide a premier music venue and social facility to Frome, without being burdened with excessive levels of debt. Improvements to the café and bar have already been completed at the Cheese & Grain's expense as part of these preparations.

Improving ventilation in the hall will be a critical requirement before events can resume both for customer confidence and obtaining permissions from authorities. The support of FTC, as the long lessee and effective owner of the building, to install a fresh air transmission system will be key to facilitating this.

Proposal

Professional advice has already been sought on a pro bono basis and quotations sought from suitable suppliers. A specialist and bespoke solution is proposed. However, in essence, the concept is that fresh air would be drawn into the hall and stale air expelled, which makes the system being considered the best for COVID virus protection and reassuring audiences. It is more environmentally friendly and less expensive - less than a third of the cost of a traditional air-conditioning system and is much less likely to spread any airborne virus.

The advice is that up to £20k will be required to enable these works to be completed. Some technical details are still to be finalised but there is sufficient confidence in this figure to recommend that a budget of £20k is set for this investment with a view to FTC placing the order before the end of the current financial year. It is proposed that this is financed from the Covid-19 expenditure code, underwritten by reserves.

Delegated authority is sought to enable the Deputy Town Clerk to finalise the technical details in consultation with the Cheese & Grain and place the order with a suitable supplier.

Recommendations

1. Allocate a budget of £20k for the installation of a ventilation system in the main hall of the Cheese & Grain to be financed from the Covid-19 expenditure code and underwritten by reserves
2. Delegate to the Deputy Town Clerk to finalise the technical details with the Cheese & Grain and place an order with a suitable supplier by 31 March 2021