

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY 27 FEBRUARY 2007

**EXECUTIVE
13 MARCH 2007**

REFURBISHMENT AND EXTENSION OF THE MATTHEWS HALL

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek Members' views on a proposal by the Topsham Community Association to refurbish and extend the Matthews Hall.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Matthews Hall is the main venue in Topsham for community activity. Topsham Community Association leases it from the Council and manages it for community benefit. The current lease is for 28 years, from 1999.
- 2.2 Matthews Hall is in daily use for preschool playgroup; badminton; line dancing; drama groups; pantomime; art and music groups; meetings of many local clubs and societies; private functions; and - on Saturdays - a traders' market. One room is let to the Police Authority as an office, and the Hall otherwise serves as Town Hall, for example as a polling station. There is a resident caretaker who occupies a flat above the stage area.
- 2.3 The Association has recently undertaken a long process of research and consultation, and now proposes, with the Council's permission, to modernise and refurbish the hall, and to extend it.
- 2.4 The hall was built in 1927 and given to the then council by James Woodrow Matthews. Its principal use at that time was as a cinema, and the hall still retains the projection room. In fact the layout of the hall has changed little since it was built, the main alterations being to the stage and the changing rooms behind it.

3. THE PROPOSALS

- 3.1 The Association proposes now to:
- Open up the front foyer, to create a welcoming and appropriate public area, with catering facilities for events and meetings.
 - Install a lift to the first floor meeting room (originally the Council Chamber)
 - Re-align the backstage area to make more dressing rooms and facilities for children, as well as new toilets, and install a platform lift onto the stage.

- Extend the hall to the side, to make a chair and equipment storage area, a new meeting room and the small police office. The extension would be built of local timber, from local sustainable sources.

3.2 The proposals for the modernisation of the hall are well thought out, and have been extensively discussed throughout the town. They will increase accessibility and flexibility, and improve the functionality of the building so that it meets the needs of the community that are currently not well served and make the building much more attractive to use, without losing any of its unique features. We have no hesitation in recommending to Members that they approve the granting of permission to undertake the scheme, and the necessary changes to the lease.

4. PUBLIC OPEN SPACE

4.1 The planned extension however will have to be built on the public open space at the side of the hall. This, together with the driveway up to the rear of the hall, is not part of the existing lease. The open space, one of very few in the middle of Topsham, is maintained by the City Council.

4.2 The Council would have to advertise any proposal to build on the land and take into account any subsequent objections, because of its status as public open space.

4.3 The Association's proposals have taken the importance of the open space into account, and their architect has discussed them with the Parks and Open Spaces Manager. The extension isolates a section of the open space adjacent to the bowling green, and this could be better managed by the Association as a secure area for the pre-school group. His view is that the project as planned would not unduly damage the space, as long as the opportunity is taken to re-design the remaining space so that it becomes a better amenity, more closely integrated into the town, and therefore more usable.

4.4 There are some issues of access for the Bowls Club, and it would be a condition of any agreement that these issues are resolved.

4.5 It is the officers' view that the undoubted benefit to the hall, when combined with the chance to improve the townscape will significantly outweigh the loss of the open space, and therefore we would recommend approving the application to vary the lease to include that part of the open space to be built on provided that the process referred to 4.2 does not throw up any sustainable objections. It should be made clear that this approval is for management purposes only, and does not imply any approval under the planning regulations. Planning permission for the whole project must be separately sought.

5. FUNDING

5.1 The Association is intending to fund the capital costs of the work partly from its own resources, but principally from grant applications, including a major one to the Big Lottery Fund's Community Buildings programme, which closes at the end of April this year.

- 5.2 The Association also intends to seek £15,000 from the City Council, to enable it to achieve matching funding from the Community Council of Devon.
- 5.3 The current lease obliges the Association to maintain the inside of the building, while the Council retains responsibility for structural and outside repairs. The question arises as to whether the new extension should be incorporated into the lease on the current terms, or excluded, with the Association retaining responsibility for that part of the building. There is of course no way of knowing when such liabilities would arise or how much they would be, but it is clear that if the new extension is added on the present terms it will eventually increase the liability of the City Council. The installation of the lift will also give rise to increased maintenance costs, but these are internal and it is recommended that they remain the responsibility of the Association.

6. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 Topsham Community Association is a strong and proactive organisation, which takes a professional approach to its work in the town. They have invested a great deal of time, money and expertise in the design of this project, which will enhance the facilities in the town. We anticipate that they will invest a similar amount of care and attention in its implementation.

7. RECOMMENDED

that Executive resolve:

- 1) that the Association be permitted to pursue the project
- 2) that the Council advertises its intention to allow building on the public open space
- 3) that the building of the planned extension on the neighbouring public open space be approved, subject to planning permission and the resolution of access issues for neighbouring sites and provided there are no sustainable objections.
- 4) that the Head of Estates be requested to agree the terms of a new lease taking into account the land to be occupied, and that the new extension be included on the present terms with regard to external repairs and that it becomes the property of the council.

HEAD OF LEISURE AND MUSEUMS

Originator: Alan Caig

S:PA/LP/Committee/207SCC4

14.2.07

COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:

None