

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Leisure and Community Scrutiny Panel

Date: 28 November 2018

Report of: Head of Leisure and Corporate Services

Subject: FERNEHAM HALL VISION REVIEW

SUMMARY

The Council's vision for a remodelled Ferneham Hall was approved by the Executive on 9 July 2018. The vision is a living document and is designed to evolve as more is understood about the needs of the public, hirers and potential operators.

A consultation on the Council's vision took place between 17 August and 1 October 2018. Whilst most of the vision was widely supported, the proposal to reduce the size of the main auditorium and the provision of a dedicated 'Dance Studio' both received a mixed response.

A large proportion of the public and a number of industry experts and potential operators felt that having 800 seats in the main auditorium would attract both more shows and higher quality productions. Many also felt that having a Flexible Studio Space would encourage a greater variety of uses and therefore more bookings than a dedicated Dance Studio.

It is therefore proposed that the vision is updated to include a larger main auditorium and the provision of a Flexible Studio Space.

The Ferneham Hall Vision Review report and updated vision document will be presented to the Executive on 3 December 2018.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Leisure and Community Scrutiny Panel consider and comment on the Ferneham Hall Vision Review report and the proposed updated 'Vision: Fareham's New Entertainment Venue' document.

INTRODUCTION

1. The purpose of this report is to feedback from the recent consultation on the Council's vision to remodel Ferneham Hall into a new community arts and entertainment venue. It will then seek approval for amendments to the vision.

Background

2. Ferneham Hall is becoming dated and tired, and its operating costs are escalating. In response to this a vision for remodelling Ferneham Hall into a new community arts and entertainment venue was approved by the Executive on 9 July 2018.
3. Officers then consulted on the vision and its proposals between the 17 August and 1 October. The consultation targeted residents, visitors to Ferneham Hall, regular hirers of the venue as well as the wider entertainment industry. A number of discussions with potential operators of the venue and other professional theatre managers also took place.
4. The vision is a living document and is designed to evolve as more is known about the needs of the public, hirers and potential operators.

Consultation and Engagement

5. The public were asked to take part in a survey asking for feedback on the main proposals within the Vision. A press release, social media campaign, E-Panel messages and bus stop posters were all used to publicise the new vision and consultation. It also received coverage in the entertainment industry magazine, 'Stage'.
6. Two static exhibitions in Ferneham Hall and Fareham Shopping Centre helped encourage engagement, along with four manned pop-up exhibitions, one each in Ferneham Hall, Fareham Shopping Centre, Locks Heath Shopping Centre and Portchester Village Centre. In total 338 people completed a survey on the vision and its proposals and the detailed results are in Appendix B.
7. Regular hirers of Ferneham Hall were contacted and asked to complete a more detailed survey on the proposals. There were 14 submissions in total. During this time there were also in-depth face-to-face discussions with 6 of the regular hirers.
8. Discussions were held with two experienced managers of successful venues of a similar size to Ferneham Hall. In addition, six meetings were held with potential operators of the venue who had expressed an interest during early market testing.

Feedback on vision and proposals

9. Respondents were generally supportive of the proposals in the vision. The following part of the report outlines the responses from the different groups to the main proposals in the Council's vision:

Reducing the main auditorium to 400-500 seats

10. **General Public:** There was a mixed response to the proposal to reduce the main auditorium to between 400 and 500 seats. Around half of respondents felt that this would be too small, with many saying that it would impact on the venues ability to

attract bigger and higher quality shows. Many of those who agreed to the reduction also felt that 500 would need to be the minimum number of seats available to remain viable.

11. **Regular Hirers:** Again, there was a mixed response received to this proposal. Most felt that around 500 would meet their needs. However, two of the larger local amateur organisations and the current providers of the annual pantomime, felt that between 400 and 500 seats would be too small, the latter pointing out the potential to generate greater income by having a larger auditorium.
12. **Industry Experts:** It was felt that seating of 400-500 would make it hard for the operator to put on commercial shows and generate sufficient income to reduce the subsidy. Some producers will not take shows to venues where there are less than 800 seats as they cannot make enough money on ticket sales. Increase seating to between 750-850 seats would help attract more quality shows and higher profile performers. Introducing raised circle seating was mentioned as a possible way in which to build capacity, and could easily be closed off for less popular shows, in order to maintain ambience.
13. **Potential Operators:** Whilst all felt that they could operate with seating numbers of 400-500, most felt that seating of between 750 and 850 would enable them to attract more, higher quality shows and artists. Most stated that having more seating could also help reduce the amount of subsidy needed from the Council.

Improving the stage and backstage areas

14. **General Public:** The public were not asked about this proposal.
15. **Regular Hirers:** Many felt that the loading area needed to be improved. Others stated that the depth of the stage could be increased as stage extensions were difficult to assemble and light. However, this should not reduce the amount of space for the storage of scenery (scene dock). More backstage changing facilities was a particular concern of the dance groups. They have a lot of young people to manage and the current changing facilities are not fit for purpose.
16. **Industry Experts:** They felt that a fly system would help attract more shows as many production companies will not attend venues without one. A fly system uses rope lines, blocks and counterweights to enable the quick, quiet and safe movement of curtains, lights, scenery, stage effects and, sometimes, people.
17. The loading area at Ferneham Hall is poorly designed and is restrictive with regards to loading and unloading. This should be improved as it would deter many production companies from using the venue.
18. **Potential Operators:** Several operators advised that the addition of a fly system would help attract a greater variety and quality of shows and would reap benefits over the longer term – 15 years plus. One operator said that this would be a major consideration/need if there were over 700 seats in main auditorium.

Retractable or fixed seating?

19. **General Public:** Whilst they were not directly asked about their preference for fixed or retractable seating, 'improved comfort and seating' was the most common response when asked 'what could be improved at Ferneham Hall?'

20. **Regular Hirers:** There was a mixed response to this with some hirers preferring the flexibility of retractable seating. One of the Dance Groups stated that using the floor allows disabled dancers to join in. Others felt that fixed seating was more in keeping with a theatre and would provide better comfort and superior acoustics.
21. **Industry Experts:** It was felt that fixed seating would be preferable as it would give more of a theatre feel in the main auditorium. Currently, due to the limited depth of Ferneham Hall's stage, some retractable seating is needed as stage extensions are sometime needed for shows.
22. **Potential Operators:** Most operators would prefer fixed seating, however some said a mixture of fixed and moveable would be preferable as this would allow for stage extensions and standing space.

A smaller secondary performance space of 100 seats

23. **General Public:** There was general support for the smaller space although, some people questioned whether it would be used.
24. **Regular Hirers:** Surprisingly there was only a limited amount of interest in this space expressed by the regular hirers.
25. **Industry Experts:** It was felt that this space would be difficult to programme for as it would be unlikely to make money for larger producers and would likely be too small for local amateur groups. Rather than having it as an auditorium, it was suggested that it could be an adaptable with removable flat seating to encourage a range of uses.
26. **Potential Operators:** Most operators would use it for comedy shows, films, filmed live theatre, smaller audience shows.

Dance Studio

27. **General Public:** Whilst a majority were in support of the proposal, many said they would like the space to be used for a variety of classes and not just dance.
28. **Regular Hirers:** Interestingly, there was not much interest in the studio from the two dance schools that took part. One queried the viability of a sprung floor as it could only be used for certain types of dance. Some amateur dramatic groups thought it could be used for rehearsals if it was big enough.
29. **Industry Experts:** It was suggested that it should be a general studio, that could be used for a range of events including hospitality.
30. **Potential Operators:** This should be used as a general studio and 'dance' should be dropped from the name as this may put off potential hirers who want it for other uses e.g. Brownies, exercise classes, hospitality.

Community rooms

31. **General Public:** Many liked the idea of a space that could be used for multiple activities, however, there was some concern that the space needed to be affordable, or no one would use it.
32. **Regular Hirers:** A number of groups saw the potential for these rooms to be used for

rehearsals as well as meetings. However, they would need to be competitively priced.

33. **Industry Experts:** It was felt that if designed correctly, the rooms could add to the flexibility of the venue and attract a range of uses.
34. **Potential Operators:** Most were supportive of the proposal and thought the rooms could be flexible to encourage a range of uses if designed correctly.

Food and beverage

35. **General Public:** The most popular offering was a café that provided tea/coffee snacks and simple meals e.g. pizza.
36. **Regular Hirers:** They were supportive of the proposal for food and drink facilities in the remodelled venue.
37. **Industry Experts:** They felt that food and beverages could be available from 10am to 11pm with different offerings when shows were on e.g. something more substantial for pre-shows in the evening.
38. **Potential Operators:** All felt that a full restaurant with chef is not needed, but simple food such as pizza, mezze boards, sandwiches, cakes etc that bar and kitchen staff could prepare would help attract footfall whilst keeping costs down. Two operators said they would look to bring in a chain such as Costa or Starbucks.

Other feedback

39. According to the regular hirers, one of the key areas a future operator would have to ensure is a clear and competitive hiring charge structure as many felt that they would struggle to continue with further price increases. This feedback will be considered as part of the Council's discussions with potential operators.

Overall themes

40. There was clear support and enthusiasm for the Council's vision amongst all the groups consulted and engaged with. However, the feedback identifies the following areas of the vision that could be updated to better reflect the needs of public, hirers and potential operators:
- **Main auditorium size:** The proposed size of the auditorium (400-500) seats would be too small to attract a greater range and quality of shows. When combined with an increase in seating, a fly system could help attract larger productions to the venue.
 - **Second smaller auditorium:** Changing from a second smaller auditorium, to a second smaller flexible performance space that could be used for a range of activities and events would encourage more use and be easier to programme for.
 - **Dedicated dance studio:** Calling the studio space, a 'dance studio' would put people off hiring it for other uses.

Proposed changes to vision

41. In response to the overall analysis it is proposed that the Executive approves the following minor changes to the 'A Vision: Fareham's' New Entertainment Venue'

document, attached at Appendix A:

42. Amend the text relating to the number of seats needed to attract shows (Fernehall Today paragraph's 4 and 5):
43. 'Fernehall's capacity of 708 seats is not high enough to attract the quality of performers that many people want to see, with shows only reaching an average of 53% capacity, or 372 seats.
44. Theatres with around 800 seats can generally attract higher profile and better-quality shows, generating more income through tickets sales and 'on the night' spending such as on food and drink.'
45. Replace 'dance studio' with 'flexible studio space' (A Vision for the Future, page 9 and Design Priorities, page 11) to highlight the spaces potential for different types of activity
46. Amend the text relating to the main auditorium size to reflect feedback stating that more seating would help improve the venues offer:
47. 'Improve the comfort of the main auditorium and increase the size to around 800 seats to attract better quality shows' (Design Priorities, page 11).
48. Add 'flexible' to the priority of having a secondary performance space to reflect its multi-use nature (Design Priorities, page 11).

Further work related to feedback

49. The current vision already reflects the need to improve the stage and backstage areas. There are a range of types of fly system with each requiring a significant capital investment. More research will be carried out, in consultation with the potential theatre operators, on the feasibility of and the most appropriate fly system for the remodelled venues' needs.
50. Further discussions about the most appropriate type of seating for the main auditorium, specification of the secondary auditorium and food and beverage offer will continue to take place with operators during the procurement process.

Project progress

51. In addition to the consultation, all other strands of the Fernehall project are on schedule and progressing well:
 - The Members Working Group has been established and is overseeing the project.
 - The business plan created by AEA Consulting in 2015 has been refreshed and updated.
 - The procurement process for a suitable leisure trust operator of the venue has begun, with a number of experienced organisations expressing their interest. The new operator is scheduled to be appointed in spring/early summer 2019.
 - Client Agent services to manage the design and construction process of the new facility are due to be procured before the end of 2018. The Council anticipate that separate design and construction contracts will be used.

Conclusion

52. The Council's vision and proposals for a remodelled Ferneham Hall was enthusiastically received during the recent consultation and engagement activities. Following analysis of the feedback it is proposed that the vision is changed to reflect the need for the main auditorium seating to be increased and the proposed Dance Studio be replaced with a Flexible Studio Space.

Enquiries:

For further information on this report please contact Lindsey Ansell (Ext 4567)

Appendices: **A:** A Vision: Fareham's New Entertainment Venue
 B: Public Consultation Analysis

Background Papers: Updated Financial Operating Model

Reference Papers: