**Review of Newbridge Town Hall**

**January 2018**

**Introduction**

Newbridge Town Hall (‘Town Hall’) is a protected structure located in the centre of Newbridge.

Kildare County Council (‘KCC’) undertook major restoration works on the Town Hall with a view to it being used for community activities. The building opened with the 1916 housing exhibition in May 2016.

An independent consultant was commissioned by KCC in December 2017 to review the operation of the Town Hall. The methodology included a review of existing documentation including financial information, enquiries and bookings and customer survey (7 respondents in August 2017); consultations with KCC, K Leisure, the Board of Management, County Councillors and a sample of five customers who had used the Town Hall and three groups who had enquired but not proceeded. The review was conducted in the month of December 2017. The findings are set out below.

**Terms of Reference**

The terms of reference for this review were as follows:

* Review the effectiveness of current arrangements for managing the building
* To review the cost of hall hire charge
* Examine the uptake of use by community groups
* Recommendations going forward for Newbridge Town Hall

**Board of Management**

Newbridge Town Hall is not a separate legal entity and is held in trust by Kildare County Council for the community. A voluntary Board of Management (‘the Board’) was set up for a two year period to December 2017 to oversee the management and operation of the Town Hall. The Board is comprised of five members representative of youth/education, community/voluntary, culture/heritage and business. Its terms of reference are to:

* Consult and engage with local community groups and interests and local business representatives to gain an objective understanding of local needs and to provide transparency in relation to use of the facility.
* Explore and investigate opportunities for the optimum use of the Town Hall.
* Research examples of similar successful ventures elsewhere, in order to explore the potential of the building that offer potential project concepts and how they can emerge.
* Prepare a business plan to demonstrate the most viable options for the Town Hall.
* Governance of the Town Hall.
* Building relationships to ensure complementarily with other amenities in the town.

The Board engaged in a public consultation process in June 2016 after the restoration of the building. Two open evenings attracted 140 attendees. Groups that had expressed an interest in using the building were also invited to meet with the Board to view the building and to discuss their plans for use in detail. Some of the suggested uses included dances, festivals, markets, craft exhibitions, weddings, functions, food fairs and drama.

In the period after completion of the renovation and up to September 2016, the Town Hall was used for a number of events including an art exhibition, community celebrations, JuneFest and poetry reading as part of the Hopkins Festival.

The Board felt it important that the use of the Town Hall would be consistent with being a benefit to the community and it recommended a trial period of one year to monitor the operation of initial usage of the Town Hall.

A business plan has not yet been developed as it is not clear what the best use for the space is.

**Service Level Agreement**

In November 2016, KCC entered into a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with K Leisure for the management of the Town Hall for one year.

The services contracted from K Leisure included booking management, web site management, event management including set up arrangements, opening and closing the Town Hall, supervision of events, care of the facility and liaison with KCC Facility Management regarding security and building services. In addition, as part of its booking management role, K Leisure is expected to work with the Board to maximise the usage of the Town including liaising with community groups, statutory bodies and other groups. K Leisure reports to the Board on a monthly basis by means of a written progress report and also attendance at Board meetings.

The Facility Management section of KCC is responsible for managing maintenance and repairs, the cost of heating, lighting, insurance and security alarm monitoring.

**Facilities**

The consultant, who is not an expert on historic buildings, visited the Town Hall on December 19th. First impressions were that it is an impressive space and interesting structure that has had a sensitive restoration. The building took a considerable time to heat up on the day of the visit, although some customers commented on how warm the building was for their event.

The nature of the space with large church windows limits its utility. There is no mezzanine and putting one in would compromise the character of the building. The high ceiling means that sub-dividers would be ineffective in reducing noise transfer if the building was split into smaller spaces.

A portable PA system, eight trestle tables, 60 loose chairs and 150 interlocking chairs was purchased for use in the Town Hall. The capacity of the Town Hall is 300 standing and 200 seated.

In discussions with K Leisure, KCC, the Board of Management and customers it emerged that other facilities which limits its current utility include the following:

* No storage space
* No raised stage
* Absence of WiFI
* No overhead screen or projector
* No changing facilities
* No lighting system
* Catering facilities that are limited to a small pull-out bench and sink with no separate kitchen
* No bar licence which limits its use for certain types of functions

The overall impression was of a space suited to large groups, performances or exhibitions. K Leisure had enquired of the HSE about the possibility of holding civil ceremonies in the Town Hall. Progress on this matter was not made as it appears that the HSE inspector will not indicate the building’s suitability unless a couple intending to marry in the Town Hall make an enquiry in order for the inspector to come out and determine if it is suitable – a ‘chicken and egg’ situation.

There was positive feedback from those interviewed about the quality of the restoration work and the location of the building in the centre of town beside a car park.

One group noted that while the old photographs were lovely, the way they were displayed was not safe as they were not affixed to the wall and could easily fall and injure a person.

Eighty-three percent of respondents to the customer survey indicated that there was adequate equipment for their event and 17% indicated that equipment was inadequate.

The venue was considered to be clean by all those who responded to the customer survey.

Some people interviewed felt the building was quite large and noisy as a result. There were mixed views on the acoustics and it may not be suitable for speeches or performances without soft furnishings on the walls. As currently laid out and priced it was considered more suitable for events lasting only a few hours.

**Pricing**

In its report to the Director of Services, Planning & Culture on 16th September 2016, the Board of Management recommended that ‘..*any charge rate should endeavour to achieve a reasonable balance between attracting demand and covering costs, while being in line generally with the charges levied elsewhere within the immediate community for similar facilities. The Town Hall should not adversely impact demand for other venues in the town, and should be a complementary facility…..the charge recommended by the Board is at least €40 per hour for community groups and non-commercial activities. In relation to an Open Door Paying Event of a commercial nature a charge fee should be negotiated on a recovery cost plus basis as may be considered appropriate in any particular instance.’*

The current price charged to customers is a fixed price of €40 per hour (including VAT).

A review of enquiries indicated that of those who provided feedback only two groups had said it was too expensive to proceed with a booking. The requirement for insurance and the cost of this was a more frequently named consideration. However, all of the groups interviewed (4 who had used the Town Hall and 3 who had not) commented on the price. In general, €40 per hour was considered too high for community groups. One respondent expressed concern that booking deposits were required. Another community group had been charged extra hours for setting up and taking down a stage which they felt should have been complementary. Some felt that the Town Hall should be available for free to community groups, while others felt that a lower hourly or daily rate should be charged. Comparators provided ranged from €10 per hour, to €20 per hour for the first hour and €10 thereafter, to €30 per night.

Sixty-seven percent of respondents to the customer survey also considered it expensive, 33% considered it fair, with none rating it inexpensive.

Suggestions made included discretionary pricing or a tiered pricing system with commercial hourly rates being charged for private or commercial events and a modest fee being charged for community events or community groups. Both are potentially challenging in terms of perceived fairness and in terms of defining ‘commercial’ and ‘community’ and full transparency would be necessary.

**Booking & Invoicing**

The booking system came in for some criticism and was described as cumbersome, slow, unresponsive or taking too long to obtain a response. While 71.43% of respondents to the customer survey found it easy to follow, 14.29% found it somewhat difficult and another 14.29% found it confusing. Three other people interviewed indicated it took over a week to get a response on availability and even then a satisfactory answer was not received by one group. As a result, this group went elsewhere as they needed to know about availability quickly.

One person commented that K Leisure being a business can make it difficult for volunteers to feel comfortable booking and using the space. Another expressed a preference for the Town Hall being run by the community rather than a separate company.

Comparisons were made with other venues where bookings could be made either online or by phone/email with an immediate response or response within 24 hours.

Invoicing is carried out by K Leisure. One user felt that electronic payment options should be provided.

K Leisure indicated that the number of steps required in the booking process had been reduced as a result of feedback received early on. Most enquiries come into a designated email address (advertised on the web site and advertising banner) and are sent a booking form by email, usually by return. A small percentage of enquiries (estimated at 10%) come in by phone call either referred by KCC or through word of mouth. Once the group confirms a booking, telephone follow-up is usually necessary to agree requirements and finalise details.

**Promotion**

A web site has been developed specifically for the Town Hall by KCC. While the SLA with K Leisure refers to managing the web site, K Leisure indicated that it does not have administrative rights on this web site and therefore cannot update its content.

More recently, an advertising banner has been attached to the railings at the front of the building.

A Town Hall Facebook page is in existence but it was not established by either KCC or K Leisure and it is not known who controls it. K Leisure is currently in the process of ‘claiming the page’. Some of the groups using the Town Hall regularly are active on social media and promote their events in the Town Hall.

The Board felt that there are opportunities for greater co-operation and co-ordination within KCC to cross-promote facilities and refer events to the Town Hall.

**Usage**

The Town Hall is only open by appointment in respect of a specific booking/event. From January 5th 2017 to November 5th 2017, there have been 59 enquiries about possible use of the Town Hall. Of these, 28 (47%) resulted in a booking that proceeded, 12 (20%) enquiries were pending confirmation of deposit and/or insurance (of which 6 related to events in 2018), 8 (14%) bookings were cancelled and 11 (19%) enquiries did not proceed to a booking. The reasons for cancellations or enquiries not translating into bookings are not known in all cases but where it is known the main reasons given included unsuitability of the venue, insurance and venue hourly rate.

Between January and early December 2017, approximately 349 hours were confirmed bookings that proceeded for 25 organisations or individuals generating total income of c.€13.5k.

Of the twenty-five customers, six organisations used the venue on more than one occasion. This is comparable to regular custom in Nass Town Hall, a more established venue. Around 40% of booked hours came from three organisations that have used the venue regularly.

The hours for which the Town Hall was used ranged from 2.5 hours to 93.75 hours. When regular users and the JuneFest are excluded, the average hours for which it was used was around 7.

June, August, October and November had the highest usage in terms of hours.

**Monthly Town Hall Usage (hours)**



The Town Hall was used by a market, health and fitness organisations, church group, local development company, community and voluntary groups, GAA, drama groups, library, music groups and for public and community events and festival. It has not been used by schools (many of whom have their own halls or access to other school halls) or dance groups and given the historic nature of the building is probably not suitable for in-door sports.

The number of people attending events in the Town Hall ranged from 20 to 250. For the groups for which information was available about attendance, more than 2,400 people took part, an average of 115 per event.

Assuming a minimum capacity of 140 hours per month based on 7 hours a day for 5 days a week, for the period February to November, usage was around 24% of capacity. Two factors are possibly at play here:

* The length of time it takes for any new venue to build up a customer base.
* An incorrect presumption that there is a need for and demand from community groups for this type of space in the area. The level of enquiries suggests that there may be sufficient alternatives available in the area for both large and small events and this needs to be investigated further to identify what the niche for the Town Hall is. It is perhaps unfortunate that the restoration was conducted prior to a proper assessment of needs and identification of function for the building going forward.

**Recommendations**

***Needs Analysis***

While there were plenty of suggestions for use of the Town Hall ranging from markets, to civil ceremonies, performances, community celebrations and family gatherings, a comprehensive needs analysis should be conducted to determine what the demand for these possibilities are, what alternatives already exist, what gaps in provision exist and what are the real needs that can be addressed through the Town Hall space. A county approach may prove more beneficial than focussing solely on the immediate locale. It is important that whatever takes place in the Town Hall does not displace what may already be catered for elsewhere.

The needs analysis should identify what facilities are necessary to make the venue attractive and fit for purpose.

The overall aim of the needs analysis should be to identify a clear niche for the Town Hall that would enable the development of a strategy and business plan with clearly identified purpose, aims and objectives.

***Promotion***

A coherent strategy for promoting the Town Hall is necessary. However this is linked to the recommendation above. Opportunities for better co-ordination of activities within KCC that might use the venue need to be advanced.

***Management & Operations***

Currently different organisations have responsibility for different aspects of the management and operation of the venue – Board of Management, K Leisure and KCC. Income to date suggests that the running costs can be covered before staff overhead is taken into consideration. However, even allowing for the time it takes for a new venue to build up revenue, the current SLA arrangement does not represent good value for money.

The necessity for a Board of Management at this stage in the development of the Town Hall that effectively acts in an advisory role with no managerial functions in respect of a non-legal entity is questionable. The Board has probably fulfilled its terms of reference in so far as this was possible and for the time being should be disbanded. It may be necessary to reconstitute a board with the right skill set once a clear direction for the Town Hall has been established. Such a board’s function could then be to develop a strategy and business plan.

Three options in respect of operations for the future are set out below:

**Option 1: Revert Operational Control to KCC**

KCC is already responsible for repairs, maintenance, security, heating, light and insurance and has control of the web site. KCC has developed its own booking system for Naas Town Hall within the local authority and now has staff that could be used to manage Newbridge Town Hall. Effective management of the space will also require at least a part time resource capable of co-ordinating and managing the facility, promoting it, and communicating with the community about the availability and suitability of the space.

**Option 2: Renegotiate the SLA with K Leisure**

K Leisure has established systems and has staff to manage operation of the venue. Relative to current usage, the current Service Level Agreement is costly. While the venue has been capable of generating income above the threshold established for the retainer with K Leisure, the income stream comes nowhere near to breaking even. The SLA has expired and this affords an opportunity to revisit it terms. Payment could comprise a combination of a fixed rate to cover basic operational expenses and staff time (probably equivalent to one person) and payments linked to the achievement of income targets. Reporting should be directly to KCC.

**Option 3: Go to Tender**

This option only makes sense in the context of a clearly established purpose for the Town Hall, but once this is established requesting tenders to operate the venue is an option.

Given the current unattractive pricing structure, cost of the SLA relative to income generated and lack of clarity of purpose for the venue, Option 1 is recommended until a comprehensive needs assessment is conducted leading to a clear direction about the function and purpose of the Town Hall. It is important that a proper hand-over occurs between K Leisure and KCC if this option is progressed as a number of events are already booked for 2018.

***Pricing***

In the short term, until a needs analysis is completed a tiered pricing system should be introduced. This pricing system should be transparent and ensure fair and affordable access to the community, particularly small community groups, with higher rates for commercial use, civil ceremonies (if this is identified as a need) and other non-community uses.