

Town Council Community Briefing

Your Centre – Your Say

Consulting local people on the future of Otley Civic Centre

An opportunity for the Town

The Civic Centre is a large and handsome Grade II listed building on Boroughgate, opposite the Maypole. It has been closed since 2010.

The proposed refurbishment of this historic building is an important opportunity for the Town. There is plenty of evidence from elsewhere that, even during a recession, reviving historic buildings in this way can both contribute to regenerating the local economy and provide a vital centre for the life of local communities. It can become a vibrant and attractive resource for community use, as well as offering opportunities for cultural, commercial and business enterprises, activities and events that can help create jobs, attract visitors to the town and generate income.

A very brief history

First opened in 1871 as 'The Mechanics Institute', ownership passed to Leeds City Council in the 1970s. It was the home of Otley Town Council and housed several long term tenants including Otley Museum and Otley Action for Older People. It was a venue for various annual events, such as the folk festival and beer festival, as well as regular markets, fairs and even tea dances. Many local organisations and community groups held meetings and receptions or ran regular activities or courses in its many rooms, and it has hosted private functions such as wedding receptions and ceilidhs. Before it closed, the level of use was high compared to other similar buildings such as Yeadon and Morley Town Halls.

Since 2005 the aim has been to raise funds to refurbish the building and develop a sustainable future for it. But up to now, for various reasons, a comprehensive and achievable business plan for the building's future development and management has not been produced.

Where we are now

The new Town Council has set up a working group to determine whether a viable and realistic business plan can be achieved. The working group has given itself a target of six months to do this. The working party wants to involve local residents and organisations in open discussion about what the town needs that could be provided in the spaces within the building.

The annual running costs and work on the business plan

The Town and City Council are fairly confident that the capital funding needed to refurbish the building can be put in place. The more serious problem is the £125,000 per year needed to run a building of this size (based on the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors standard).

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Up and down the UK, it has become uneconomic to keep historic public buildings open purely through taxpayer subsidies. In some areas, these publicly owned buildings have been sold off but in others, local communities are finding new and creative ways to bring them back into use.

This is why the Town Council is asking local people to take part and share your innovative and exciting ideas. The working group can only put together a credible business plan if the plan is based on the town's aspirations for the building, has the support of local residents, community organisations and businesses, and is economically sustainable. This is a complex task!

Learning from other projects' concrete experience

Members of the working group have begun to visit other projects which have established successful new community facilities in historic and new buildings (so far, in Prudhoe, Hexham and Bishop Auckland.) These projects have kindly provided detailed advice on the practical and financial aspects of setting up, and managing their refurbishment projects, and on managing, maintaining and generating enough income from their buildings to make them economically viable. This invaluable advice, based on concrete experience, will help to inform the development of the Civic Centre business plan. A fact-finding visit is now planned to projects that have re-developed theatre venues of a similar heritage value and size (400 seats) and as the large hall and gallery upstairs in the Civic Centre. It's clear that a flexible large hall and theatre space, successfully run, has the potential to contribute a major part of the building's annual income.

What the working group hopes to achieve with your support:

- Hold an open discussion with local residents, community organisations and businesses about what future uses you want to see for the building.
- Create a shared vision for the building's future that has the support of local people and is economically sustainable.
- Gather detailed information from projects elsewhere that have successfully re-developed large public buildings for community uses, and created specific facilities or innovative resources within such spaces.
- Accurately identify future annual running costs.
- Develop specific proposals for uses of space within the building, and identify the income that these will generate.
- Get expert advice from specialists in marketing, promoting and running activities, events and facilities that could help generate a commercial income to help meet running costs.
- Explore the potential for long term tenants to generate income for parts of the building.

The working group welcomes your creative ideas and would be happy to discuss business proposals for use of particular spaces within the building.

It's your building – what do you think it should be used for?