

# Public Meeting on the Future of Stroud Subscription Rooms

## Sub Rooms 9<sup>th</sup> March 2017 Stroud Town Council

Kevin Cranston, the Mayor, opened the public meeting on behalf of Stroud Town Council (STC) and introduced the Councillors in attendance.

He explained the Sub Rooms consultation process, and that the purpose of the meeting was to seek viable, workable and sustainable solutions to enable the Sub Rooms to be retained as a successful arts venue. STC was there to listen and to collect ideas, not to tell people what to do.

Cllr Lucas Schoemaker advised that STC wished to facilitate the retention of the Sub Rooms as a political and civil centre, not just for the arts. Proposals would be welcome as STC cannot do it alone. Stroud District Council (SDC) do not have an arts strategy and need to reduce outgoings, so a whole community effort is needed to find workable answers.

Cllr Camilla Hale explained the background history to the building. SDC purchased it in 1962 and the finances have always fluctuated, necessitating several financial bailouts over the years. SDC held a Sub Rooms open day in February which was attended by over 300 people. Information currently on display at the rear of the hall, also available on the SDC website, covers the process, timescale, and financials.

The description of the SDC 'Option 2' was read out, with 'Option 2B' ( where the Sub Rooms remain in public ownership but are managed by another body) being promoted as the preferred choice. In response to a question from the floor it was confirmed that all the other options were still available. Cllr Hale then advised of the process and timescale and posed 3 questions to the public:

- How can we achieve the 2B outcome?
- What role should STC play in the process?
- Who else should be contacted and/or involved?

The attendees were asked to form small discussion groups and spend 10 minutes talking over ideas. Questions would then be taken from the floor.

SDC Cllr Simon Pickering explained that council funds were being cut back drastically and many very difficult decisions had to be taken on all non-statutory public services such as parks and gardens, arts and sports centres, and the Neighbourhood Warden services. If a private organisation or charity managed the Sub Rooms, they would not face the same level of overhead and staff costs as SDC.

A comment from the floor was that the Sub Rooms were a symbolic community venue at the heart of Stroud, and provided people on a low income with a good night out for £10, which should be funded out of local taxes. Cllr Schoemaker explained that SDC comprised of councillors from the whole district, only 6 being from Stroud itself, so the majority may not have the Sub Rooms as their main focus because they represent broader interests.

Some of the financial details were then discussed with concerns being expressed over how to interpret the published figures if some of the allocated cost calculations were opaque.

A question was raised about a lack of acknowledgement for the arts sector in the district, as there is currently no arts strategy. SDC Cllr Doina Cornell explained that a Subscription Rooms Task and Finish Group had been formed which includes members with a strong arts and culture background, and a new Arts and Culture Strategy is now being developed.

SDC Cllr Pickering explained that to call a referendum on the future of the Sub Rooms would cost circa £90k of public money. Contrary to wider belief, the building of the Sub Rooms was funded by a private syndicate of 50 local businessmen and millionaires, and not through a general public subscription. It was later run successfully as a Masonic Hall, then eventually purchased by the council.

A statement from the floor was that there were some business models to be found around the country that worked like 'Option 2B' (The Phoenix Theatre in Exeter?). Having invested millions into the local canal project to attract more tourism and leisure spending to the area, SDC should ensure the tourists have somewhere like the Sub Rooms to visit in the evenings for entertainment.

Other questions and comments were made regarding:

- Why representatives from all the other local councils in Stroud district were not present. There was no one there to comment on their behalf.
- What could be learned from the way Cheltenham runs the Pitville Pump Rooms and their Town Hall, and also the Gloucester Guildhall ?
- More publicity is needed for events like this.
- There is a lack of clear information about the running costs of the Sub Rooms.
- When the Arts Council withdraws grants there is a tailing off period. Can the Sub Rooms have that?
- Can capital expenditure funds be diverted into revenue expenditure?
- There is a building in Frome which is a good model with a lively café and a large bar, so it can be done.
- We need new ways to run the venue, it's not currently viable, but who will pick up the financial pieces if the New Sub Rooms fail?
- What are Neighbourhood Wardens?

Various councillors provided comment:

This meeting was publicised in the local newspapers and on their websites, on the STC website, via email to people who had previously expressed an interest and provided their email address, through networks such as Create Gloucestershire, and on a banner displayed across the footbridge near the cinema. 8,000 people on the Sub Rooms database have been contacted by SDC about the situation.

SDC is not like the Arts Council, and councillors cannot speak on behalf of the whole council tonight regarding such funding.

Our councils are being forced to make choices about funding cuts possibly to the Neighbourhood Wardens who deal with antisocial behaviour and similar issues in the locality, and even the Citizens Advice Bureau. Arts venues cannot always be prioritised, which is why the community is being encouraged to find solutions.

The Mayor confirmed that STC cannot fund nor run the Sub Rooms alone, but can facilitate and help other emerging groups to come forward. He asked the attendees to reform into small groups to take forward their ideas, discuss new models, then to share their positive ideas, and for anyone present with experience of running or managing an arts venue to make themselves known.

The public continued to make comments and raise questions regarding their need for financial clarity and the true costs of the Sub Rooms, how much help can SDC provide with interpreting the accounts, service revenue and building costs, and the level of savings to be made by using the mothballing option.

The councillors responded that more detailed financial information is being sought from SDC. It is now time to move from planning to action, maybe with demonstrations outside Ebley Mill or to tour around outlying villages. There is 6 months to invest in a viable answer.

Last year SDC subsidised the Sub Rooms with £206k for non-controllable costs, and £209k for the running of the building, totalling £415k. The approximate sums are turnover of £600k, income of £300k. The auditable figures are in the public domain.

If a simple Expression of Interest (EoI) is put forward, by a group with a suitable track record, then a two way process can begin with SDC where more detailed information will be shared and help given.

The response from the floor was that no credible group would come forward without the necessarily vital financial information first, rather than after having to put an EoI together without it. The Sub Rooms could be used more during the day, not just evenings. The £50m national fund "Power to Change" is available to assist communities to run some public services which have ceased in their area. A funding bid could be initiated.

An audience member, Lucy Vincent, stood up and volunteered to form and co-ordinate a community group to potentially put forward an EoI. She provided her contact details and immediately received a good response.

The Mayor thanked all for attending.