

Bath and North East Somerset Cabinet Meeting 11 July 2012

The Redevelopment of the Victoria Hall Radstock A statement by Amanda Leon, Radstock Action Group

When planning the restoration of the Victoria Hall, we need to set the bar high. If this operation is to be successful it requires community involvement, including young people; well-chosen means of organising the running in the longer term and the involvement of the highest quality professionals including architects, business experts and community law experts, at all points in the decision making process and the execution of plans. I would like to make three points:

1. Involving the Community

It is already evident that there are many people in Radstock who wish to be involved in the development of this exciting space. In order to ensure its success, offers of support and expertise must be incorporated in the plans.

2. Organisational Issues

The nature of the organisation which takes responsibility for such developments, and the ultimate running of the space, is crucial. We acknowledge that B&NES is the owner of the building and that there is much to resolve in terms of an organisation. As an example, we urge the council to look at the model offered by Martock which set up a Local Community Partnership to oversee all aspects of the rebuilding of the Market Hall and its running as a community resource. We also believe that the Council can join with local people to determine which of the many types of structures for not-for-profit organisations would prove best for the Victoria Hall. We do not claim to have the relevant legal expertise but we clearly need to look at the pros and cons of, for example, Community Benefit Societies, Cooperative Societies, Community Interest Companies.

We urge B&NES to identify a suitable organisational model which will enable it to work hand-in-hand with the local community at all stages from now on.

At the same time, we believe that it is only with a watertight business plan that any type of organisation will be successful.

We believe that without the correct organisational model in place, it will be impossible to attract the necessary finance from either statutory or voluntary sector funders.

3. Aiming for the best

A key part of the redevelopment will be the inclusion of the right experts – architects, lawyers, builders, conservationists and many others. A lowest common denominator solution will end in failure. The example offered by the Holburne Museum in Bath is relevant here – the choice of architect and design led to massive local involvement and resulted in a building of which everyone can be proud. There are now many examples in the immediate area of old buildings which have been successfully restored and brought into community use. If the Victoria Hall seems like a major project, then you are urged to consider the old Morlands Building in Glastonbury, now the Red Brick Building Centre, which sees a combination of a whole range of local organisations working together on the successful restoration of this massive, and largely derelict site. The keys are professional involvement, vision, enthusiasm, determination and hard work.

We urge B&NES to ensure that the Victoria Hall becomes a building fit for a forward-looking 21st century community which can take pride in a building that it helps to develop and run.

(A copy of our submission to the consultation is follows)



www.radstockactiongroup.org.uk

A response from Radstock Action Group to the consultation on the future of the Victoria Hall, Radstock

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Radstock Action Group (RAG) welcomes the moves made by B&NES to ensure the future of the Victoria Hall and the opportunity to contribute.
- 1.2 RAG wishes to see Victoria Hall developed as a community facility, applying sustainable methods and principles and involving the community in its future running
- 1.3 RAG values the role past and future of the Victoria Hall as the key civic building in the town. Whilst we would welcome the opportunity to use the hall for a range of functions, it has rarely been available, partly because it is well used at times when we would use it – namely Saturdays and weekday evenings, and partly because there have been staffing issues, access issues and lack of readily usable booking systems.
- 1.4 Whilst we would expect the façade to be preserved, it does present a barrier to ready access; as used in the recent period, it is unwelcoming, hard to negotiate and poorly 'labelled'. We regard all these problems as readily soluble through some very basic signage but also through bearing in mind the need to consider alternative entrances to the building, incorporating them in any plans for extensions or reconfiguration.

2. Preferred activities

RAG would like to see the following included. These are not in any specific order:

- A Council Chamber for Radstock Town Council, properly equipped with audio and video equipment and available for rent to local organizations for meetings – this would ensure that everyone attending meetings would be able to hear and see properly; it would enhance the standing of the council since its current arrangements tend to underplay the importance of the democratically elected group. Clearly the Town council does not hold enough meetings to warrant sole use of the 'council chamber space'. Other organizations requiring a pleasant and well-designed and equipped formal space would undoubtedly welcome the chance to use these facilities. We are aware that Radstock has no such space at the moment and that those seeking spaces for such events always have to go elsewhere. This is particularly unfortunate as Radstock is strategically placed at the meeting point of routes from other major centres.

- The return of Radstock Town Council Offices to the Hall – whilst the Town council currently finds it impossible to maintain staffing for full office opening hours, the redevelopment of the Hall would enable a shared reception area and would enable members of the public to come in and see Town Council notices and functions even when the Clerk is not present.
- A café/restaurant which could also be open in the evenings. This would not pose a threat to other cafés in the town, all of which provide important services to one or more groups. However, Radstock needs an attractive café/restaurant serving interesting and high quality food particularly in the evenings; somewhere where young people feel welcome and can enjoy the sort of café life that is already developing in many other places.
- A flexible studio/events space suitable for dance activities, films, drama, music and art exhibitions. The range of arts/entertainments activities that can be organised in Radstock is seriously limited by lack of appropriate spaces. Yet Radstock boasts a thriving arts community, those in search of entertainment have to go elsewhere. Because of the inevitable pressure on space, it is essential that the spaces should be flexible, both in terms of size, lighting, sound systems and floors.
- Office spaces of varying sizes for hire, either for short slots or for longer lease, with priority for local businesses and enterprises, including locally based artists
- Snooker to remain.
- A tourist and information office for the town and surrounding area. Radstock attracts a considerable number of visitors, for the museum, through cyclists using the cycle routes, walkers and others who come to enjoy the local natural environment. Our experience suggests that a tourist and information office would help tremendously to cement interest in the full importance of the town in cultural, heritage and natural environment terms. In addition it could house information about transport and other services, links to and information about other towns.
- A range of meeting and activity rooms. These too should be as flexible as possible, have state-of-the art communications/broadband access and enable users to use their own laptops etc as well as possible hire of building owned computers and related equipment.

3. Radstock Action Group would like to see the following principles applied to the renovations:

- The Victoria Hall is a medium-sized building, it has great potential and can be sympathetically extended to provide welcoming, fully accessible and flexible space for everyone in Radstock. There should be every effort to

make it a model of good practice in design and access terms, a beacon building for the whole area.

- We believe that the current accommodation needs internal reconfiguration but that there should also be a sympathetically designed extension which could also enable the addition of proper lift access to the first floor. We know that the interior has, in the past, been subject to many changes and see no reason why this should not be possible now to meet twenty-first century needs.
- If at all possible, changes should incorporate the introduction of an outdoor area where hall users can enjoy café facilities and sit outside to meet friends.
- The people of Radstock will be willing to help to get the Victoria Hall back into use – they have relevant experience, expertise and commitment which must be used. Many have already volunteered to work on all aspects of building development and maintenance. We ask the Authority to build on the immense reservoir of good will that exists and to listen to local inputs.
- B&NES says it will cost £250,000 to get the hall to the required condition – this is not a huge amount compared with the costs of new public buildings, but it will require hard work in this period when there is little money to spend. It will also benefit from the adoption of organizational structures which enable individual and corporate financial investment in the project.
- B&NES must look to finding partners in funding the building – Radstock people will be happy to help building up links and making the case. Additionally, whilst the Authority might own the building at the moment, we suggest that alternative models such as (but not only) Cooperative Society and Community Benefit Society structures are examined and their relative merits assessed in terms of best business outcomes and highest ongoing community involvement
- Choice of architects and designers will be key to a successful and suitable building – plans should be subject to the widest possible public consultation.
- The aim should be to provide spaces for Radstock organizations and individuals who can then base their activities in the town rather than going elsewhere.
- The inclusion of young people from the start will be crucial to success.
- Any future plans should take into consideration the current Library building, the Children's/Youth Centre and other public buildings in the town. All are located within a relatively small area of the town and could form part of a 'joined-up' redevelopment which will ensure that they complement each other and meet all agreed community requirements.
- There are many examples of good renovations of public buildings in Somerset, for example: Langport, Glastonbury, Ilminster, Martock, Shepton Mallet – we can learn from their experiences.

4. The Planning Situation and Strategic Policies

- 4.1 With the adoption of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), and the ongoing application/relevance of the Core Strategy and Local Plan, we urge Bath and North East Somerset to guarantee that the aims and aspirations of these strategic policies are rigorously applied when the redevelopment is agreed.
- 4.2 The NPPF *Core Planning Principles, Ensuring the Vitality of Town Centres, Supporting High Quality Communications infrastructure, Requiring Good Design, Promoting Healthy Communities, Conserving and enhancing the Historic Environment* are all highly relevant to the future planning for the Victoria Hall.
- 4.3 In particular, we urge B&NES to take particular note of *NPPF 12.126* which stresses the importance of:
'a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment, including heritage assets most at risk through neglect, decay or other threats. In doing so, they should recognise that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and conserve them in a manner appropriate to their significance.'

'In developing this strategy, local planning authorities should take into account:

- the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;
- the wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits that conservation of the historic environment can bring;
- the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness; and
- opportunities to draw on the contribution made by the historic environment to the character of a place'.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Radstock Action Group would like to register its wish to be fully involved in all aspects of the development of this exciting and valuable building.