

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	16 JULY 2018	AGENDA ITEM:	11
TITLE:	THE FUTURE OF READING PRISON SITE		
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report sets out the current position with regard to the former Reading Prison site in relation to the anticipated future disposal for development by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). The parallel aspiration of Theatre and Arts Reading (TAR) Community Interest Company (CIC) to utilise the site for the development of a new theatre and a range of complementary uses, including 'enabling' development, as set out in their 'Vision' document which is attached as Appendix 1. The report then outlines a potential mechanism for taking forward TAR's Vision and seeks approval for the Council to engage in this process as a key partner and stakeholder. Finally, the report flags the recently announced opportunity to bid for a new 'Cultural Development Fund' announced by the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) in June 2018 that appears ideally suited to support the heritage led regeneration of the Prison site.
- 1.2 Appendix 1 - A Vision of Opportunities for Reading Gaol.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the draft 'Vision' developed by Theatre and Arts Reading (TAR) attached at Appendix 1 is noted and welcomed.
- 2.2 That the Council's support and engagement in developing proposals for a Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee in partnership with TAR as set-out in paragraph 4.1 is endorsed.
- 2.3 That a further report be brought back to Committee, in due course, on progress in establishing such a charitable company and how the Council might best support its objectives for the Prison site going forward.
- 2.4 That officers explore with key partners the opportunity of submitting an Expression of Interest to the DCMS's new 'Cultural Development Fund' as set-out in paragraph 4.2, recognising that the Council is unable to commit to any match funding.

### 3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Provision of cultural services is a non-statutory function of local government. The Council has for many years operated a number of cultural venues in Reading including the Hexagon, 21 South Street Arts Centre and the Town Hall & Museum (including the Concert Hall). This provision has been set within the context of a cultural strategy that sets a strategic framework for the development and delivery of cultural activity in the town not only by the Council but by a wide range of other agencies and organisations. The Culture and Heritage Strategy (2015-2030) clearly sets out an aspirational vision for culture and heritage to play a key role in the town's future, enhancing the quality of life for residents and increasing the attractiveness of the town for visitors and investors. The Strategy envisages Reading's profile and reputation as a cultural destination being transformed over the coming years building from a strong base of arts and heritage organisations and assets.
- 3.2 The final draft of Reading's new Local Plan for the first time references the 'Abbey Quarter' and contains explicit policies in this regard covering all the area once occupied by the Abbey and including: Town Hall & Museum, St Lawrence Church and graveyard, Forbury Gardens, the Abbey Ruins and the Prison site. With regard to the Prison itself, the Draft Local Plan states that the (Listed) building could be used for 'residential, commercial, offices or a hotel and should include some cultural or heritage element that draws on its significance'.
- 3.3 The Grade II Listed Prison sits in its entirety on the former footprint of the Reading Abbey complex, a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Reflecting the considerable constraints on the future development of the site afforded by these various designations and protections, the Council as Local Planning Authority has produced a 'Development Framework' setting out the policy constraints that would need to be considered in any development proposals.
- 3.4 The Council has previously formally endorsed in principle TAR's ambition to deliver a new theatre for Reading.

### 4. THE PROPOSAL

#### 4.1 Current Position:

The former Youth Offending Institute - Reading Prison - has been closed by Government and the MoJ is looking to dispose of the site. The MoJ has commissioned specialist consultants with experience of dealing with sensitive 'heritage' sites to produce a Development Brief as the basis for marketing the site. It is understood that the intention is to secure the Local Planning Authority's agreement to the content of this development brief prior to publication. Ongoing archaeological investigations have been carried out by Museum of London Archaeology to inform this work, including significant trenching across the site, although the Council is not currently sighted on the outcome of these investigations. It is understood that the final exploratory trenches were completed last month although there is, as yet, no confirmed timescale for the disposal of the site.

TAR have an aspiration to enable the delivery of a new theatre for Reading, an aim that the Council has publicly supported, and have now focused down on the prison site as a location where this could be developed. TAR is in the process of developing a 'Vision' for the development of the site and an early draft is attached at Appendix 1. A recent public launch took place at the Pentahotel on 22 May which was extremely well attended and a great deal of enthusiasm was expressed for the vision promoted by TAR. In parallel, TAR have been successful in obtaining funding from Arts Council England (ACE) for 50% of the costs of a feasibility study by specialist

consultants of the potential to locate a theatre (or theatres) on the site with a range of complementary uses. TAR is providing the remainder of the funding and this feasibility work is currently in progress.

The Prison site formed a major plank for Reading's Year of Culture in 2016 with Artangel's 'Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison' receiving national and even international acclaim, as well as being seen by a large number of Reading residents. This increased interest in the future of the site and also its' potential contribution to the cultural life of the town. This wider interest in the future of the Abbey Quarter has also been emphasised by the re-opening of the Abbey Ruins to the public on June 16<sup>th</sup> this year with over 18,000 people attending the linked attractions of the ruins, Forbury Gardens, the restored Abbey Gate and Waterfest. These venues will provide for an ongoing diverse programme of cultural events throughout the summer and in future years.

Last month the DCMS announced a new £20m Cultural Development Fund, to be administered by Arts Council England (ACE), that:

*'marks a new Government approach to cultural investment in England. Rather than investment going to a specific venue or artform, the funding will go to geographical locations, including cities or towns in rural areas.*

*Through partnerships and consortia, areas will be able to bid for between £3 million and £7 million for a number of projects in a certain area to help regeneration, create jobs and maximise the impact of investment. This could be for new spaces for creative businesses, bringing historic buildings back into use or redeveloping museums and art galleries. The investment is intended to help grow local economies and increase access to arts, heritage and the creative industries.'*

These objectives are all strongly reflected in the town's ambitions for the Abbey Quarter and, in particular, the potential of the future use of the prison as an exemplar of heritage led regeneration. However, competition for such a significant new national strategic funding stream is likely to be intense and chances of success are commensurately small as there will undoubtedly be more eligible bids than funding available.

## 4.2 Options Proposed

The future of the Prison site is potentially key to the long-term success of the Abbey Quarter and to the town's cultural offer and reputation. The Vision being developed by TAR is a powerful one and if it came to fruition would be a model of heritage led regeneration and economic growth with a significant impact on the town for generations to come. Conversely, given the range of constraints on the development of the site, as outlined above, the financial return to the Government from its disposal is likely to be relatively modest.

Emerging from discussions with a range of stakeholders, including TAR and the Council, is the potential of establishing a bespoke charitable organisation that would have the capability of taking responsibility for the Prison site if the opportunity arises through future dialogue with the MoJ.

Reflecting the seriousness of their intent TAR has commissioned some further work on developing such an option, including appropriate organisational structure, charitable objectives and governance. The current intention is to establish a charitable company limited by guarantee by November of this year and that this would be a corporate entity capable of taking on the prison site should the opportunity arise. In tandem with this work and the feasibility study for a theatre on the site commissioned

by TAR, further work would also be undertaken on developing the Vision and an associated business case to establish viability and sustainability.

Whilst deliverability cannot by any means be guaranteed at this stage, it is considered that the Council should support and contribute to the work to establish such a charitable organisation and publicly endorse their support for TAR's work in this regard given the Council's wider role as place-maker and community leader. In particular, the Council currently has a strong interest in delivering the ambitions for the Abbey Quarter and controls significant areas of the public realm, including the Town Hall & Museum, St Lawrence cemetery, Forbury Gardens, the Abbey Gate and the Abbey Ruins. By being fully engaged in the process the Council can ensure that it plays a proactive role as a key stakeholder, but at the same time remain in a position to objectively and fully assess the benefits and risks associated with any such charitable company or indeed any alternative solution that may come forward for the future of the Prison site and cultural offer over the longer term.

It is also proposed that the Council liaises with other partners and stakeholders to develop an outline 'Expression of Interest' application to the new 'Cultural Development Fund' recently announced by the DCMS (and outlined in Section 4.1 above) focused on the future development of the Prison site. The objectives of this fund are very closely aligned with Reading's aspirations for the Abbey Quarter and the Vision for the Prison site being developed by TAR. Development of such an application would build on established and developing joint working between a number of local stakeholders, including: the Council, TAR, the University, Reading UK, the cultural and creative sectors.

The funding available is significant with bids sought for between £3 and £7 million with a requirement that at least 20% match-funding is provided by local partners (at least 50% of this being cash). The Council is not in a position to provide a cash contribution but could explore potential investment options with partners alongside providing in-kind support if there was a sound business case. The Council would only be a party to an expression of interest if credible sources of funding to meet the match-funding requirements are identified. The deadline for submitting an outline "Expressions of Interest" is midday on the 15<sup>th</sup> August 2018. If successful the deadline for full submissions would be the 19<sup>th</sup> October 2018.

#### **4.3 Other Options Considered**

This report outlines a more proactive approach from local stakeholders, including the Council, to the future disposal and development of the Prison site. The 'do nothing' option has been rejected on the basis that the Council in its role as community leader and place-maker is well-placed to mobilise support and to influence central government.

TAR has committed to developing a charitable corporate entity that would be capable of taking on responsibility for the Prison site and have commissioned independent legal advisors to support this process. In parallel they are progressing a feasibility study with regard to potential future development of the site, including a new theatre which the Council has previously endorsed in principle. Whilst the outcome of the MoJ's disposal of the site cannot be, by any means, certain at this stage, it is clear that TAR are seriously pursuing an option that could deliver an exciting and appropriate range of uses on the site. Given the Council's adjacent land ownerships and the overall aspirations for the Abbey Quarter as a whole it is considered that the Council's engagement as a key stakeholder would be entirely appropriate.

#### **5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS**

5.1 The proposals contained in this report contribute primarily to the following Corporate Plan priorities:

- Providing the best start in life through education, early help and healthy living; and
- Providing infrastructure to support the economy.

Development of the Prison site as a 'cultural hub' would ensure continued and enhanced access for local residents to a range of cultural opportunities providing both educational and well-being benefits. Appropriate development of the Prison site is key to realising the potential of the Abbey Quarter to be a nationally significant destination, contributing positively to the profile, reputation and economic success of the town and encouraging visitors and investment. Complementary development could provide a further platform for the development and growth of creative and digital sectors of the local economy.

## **6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION**

6.1 There has been widespread consultation on the development of the Council's Local Plan, including relevant policies for the Abbey Quarter and for the Prison site.

6.2 Independently of the Council, TAR has established a broad forum of stakeholders and interested parties to share their ideas, aspirations and to gain feedback. In general terms, the principle of their aspiration to secure a new theatre for Reading and their Vision for the Prison have been widely supported.

6.3 It is envisaged that there would be widespread consultation and engagement in due course to secure public feedback on the principle of establishing a charitable organisation to take on responsibility for the Prison site and in relation to more detailed proposals emerging from the feasibility work when this is completed.

## **7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

7.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

7.2 It is not considered that an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is relevant at this stage to the decisions regarding the content of this report.

## **8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 The Council has power to seek funding and enter any associated funding agreements under s1. Localism Act 2011 (the general power of competence). The Council also has power under s.19 Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 to provide inside or outside its area recreational facilities as it thinks fit.

## **9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 Any costs associated with the development of a charitable company to take on the Prison site will be met by third parties and not the Council. There is no commitment from the Council to make any financial contributions towards the future development

of the Prison site at this stage. Significant further work is required to develop detailed proposals and a business case for the redevelopment of the Prison site, including commercial viability and sustainability.

- 9.2 DCMS's new 'Cultural Development Fund' requires a minimum of 20% match-funding, at least half of which needs to be a cash contribution. Exploration of potential funding sources across partners and stakeholders is yet to take place but the Council can make no financial commitments at this stage and no commitment is required at the EoI stage.

## 10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 'Theatre Provision in Reading' - Report to Policy Committee 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2015.

'New Theatre - Results of the Preliminary Market Consultation' - Report to Policy Committee 16<sup>th</sup> January 2017

Bidding Guidance for DCMS's Cultural Development Fund (to be administered by Arts Council England (ACE):

<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding-finder/cultural-development-fund>

'Outline Development Framework - The Site of Reading Prison'. Adopted March 2015:

<http://www.reading.gov.uk/media/1673/Reading-Prison-Framework/pdf/Outline-Development-Framework-Reading-Prison-Adopted-March20151.pdf>

## A VISION OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR READING GAOL

### From Theatre & Arts Reading (TAR)

A new cultural hub in Reading Gaol will be a celebration of Reading, of its extraordinary heritage, its dynamic energy and its wealth of opportunity, built as a public/commercial partnership venture.

There are boundless opportunities. They are for the existing buildings on the site, the free space on the site and the crucible building which is Grade 11 listed.

### Highlights

- Theatre 1 – large receiving theatre*
- Theatre 2 – smaller producing/receiving theatre*
- Performance/Rehearsal space*
- Cell space for creative start-ups*
- Oscar Wilde multi-media experience*
- Oscar Wilde museum*
- Café/restaurant/bar*
- Contemporary art gallery*
- Arts film theatre*
- Gift shop*
- Archaeological finds from Reading Abbey to be displayed under glass floors*
- Enabling Development*

## Gaol site

### THEATRE 1

Location: Amenities building

Run by: Theatre operator

Status: Commercial

A theatre of 1450 seats able to accommodate musicals, opera and dance. Suitable backstage set, storage accommodation to host casts (up to 40). Adequate set storage and design facilities to accommodate a medium sized orchestra (up to 24 players).

To be programmed and operated by commercial partner on a lease.

### THEATRE 2

Location: Administration building

Run by: Artistic director and programmer reporting to a board of directors

Status: Charity

A theatre of 450 seats to work as a producing and receiving space with a playhouse style of intimacy and unamplified acoustics. Music and art will be prevalent throughout the versatile building. While operating as an intimate and flexible receiving house for exceptional touring companies, the building will also partner and support the development and presentation of professional, innovative theatre and dance from our town. Community, student and educational productions will all be supported.

A strong education programme will ensure that this theatre is not only integral to the learning strategies of Berkshire's schools, but also an exciting place for young people to head to and be inspired by.

**NB** all the dressing rooms, green rooms, toilets etc to be used by crew and front of house talent for the two theatres is accommodated in the theatre buildings.

## Crucible (Grade 2 listed)

The Crucible building will have public access on the ground and first floors. The second floor will be for creative start-up businesses.

There could be an opportunity for theatre-goers to walk through the prison to get to Theatre 1.

Utilising all wings on public floors.

### Ground floor

**Café/bar/ restaurant, shop, box office, arts film theatre, box office, walkway to Theatre 1, archaeological finds under glass floor.**

#### Cafe/bar/restaurant

A café/bar/restaurant space and an attractive flexible public gathering/reception space.

#### Shop

Gift shop selling Oscar Wilde-related merchandise, educational merchandise, Reading Abbey merchandise, artworks and sculpture.

#### Arts film theatre

An arts film theatre – run by an existing company or a new one.

#### Archaeological finds under glass floor

Chance to display any interesting finds from the excavations.

### First floor

**Performance/rehearsal space, Oscar Wilde Museum, Oscar Wilde Experience, contemporary art gallery, creation space.**

#### Performance/rehearsal space

Rehearsal /performance space in the chapel. To be used/hired by Theatre 2 under management of Artistic Director.

A minimum of two rehearsal spaces to accommodate a range of rehearsal/ educational/community uses including visual arts, dance, classes, workshops, yoga.

#### Oscar Wilde Museum

A small museum to tie in with the Oscar Wilde Experience as the first floor is where his cell was.

#### Contemporary art gallery

This gallery will exhibit art from across the UK and with visiting exhibitions.

#### Creation space

A creation space/education suite for music rehearsal/recording. Education suite.

## Second floor

The cells to be used for around 20-30 start-up creative businesses, some on long-term lets and others on short term. Meeting rooms for businesses.

## Basement

Costume and prop storage.

Solitary confinement, sensory deprivation area (as part of the Oscar Wilde Experience)

## Enabling development

Residential/commercial/leisure

A residential/commercial/leisure development to be located on the site

## Landscaping/planting

Landscaping/planting and Improved access to the canal as part of the Abbey Quarter. Outdoor seating. Access to Abbey Ruins.

## Governance

Entire site controlled by a trust – trustees may include representatives from Reading Borough Council, Reading University, Arts Council England

- This is a vision of opportunities by TAR and feedback is welcomed. We have lots of other opportunities to develop, for example could a restaurant be built to overlook the Abbey ruins?