

Cabinet Report



Report of Head of Development and Corporate Landlord

Author: Andrew Busby

Telephone: 07849701778

E-mail: andrew.busby@southandvale.gov.uk

Wards affected: Wantage in particular, but potential district wide impact

Cabinet members responsible: Cllr Helen Pighills

Tel: Cllr Helen Pighills 01235 534446

E-mail: helen.pighills@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

To: CABINET

Date: 16 February 2024

Future Direction of The Beacon, Wantage

Recommendations

That Cabinet:

- (a) Endorses the Beacon Development Action Plan (Appendix 1) to optimise operation of the in-house delivery model.
- (b) Notes the future potential options for the operation of the Beacon that officers will compare an optimised in-house operating model against, following delivery of the Development Action Plan to ensure best value is achieved (Appendix 2).
- (c) Acknowledge that the currently unbudgeted implementation costs outlined within the Development Action Plan, are subject to agreement of full Council at its meeting in February 2024.
- (d) Requests officers enter into formal discussions with Wantage Town Council in respect of their occupancy arrangements (Appendix 4).
- (e) Note that the strategic direction for the Beacon and the Arts more widely will be met within the council's new corporate plan 2024-2028.
- (f) Will receive a formal progress review of the actions above, and future options, during quarter three of 2024/25.

Implications (further detail within the report)	Financial	Legal	Climate and Ecological	Equality and diversity
		Yes	Yes	Yes
Signing off officer	Simon Hewings	Vivien Williams	Kim Hall	Abi Witting

Purpose of report

1. To propose a future direction for the discretionary service known as The Beacon, to enable ongoing development of the service to offer 'best value' to the council. This is to maximise community benefit and financial efficiency, and to establish the long-term sustainability of the centre.
2. To outline the proposed Beacon Development Action Plan, including the reasons why a plan has been developed, how the actions within the plan were identified and what the desired outcomes are. This report also outlines the impact of the actions that are proposed to be measured during the initial implementation period and in the future. Longer term actions can only be indicative at this stage, as the plan will need to be kept under review and the impact of earlier changes considered.
3. To provide Cabinet with indicative details of potential future operating models for The Beacon.
4. Any council decision that has financial implications must be made with the knowledge of the council's overarching financial position, as reported to full Council in February 2023 when the budget for 2023/24 was agreed. For Vale, the position reflected in the council's medium-term financial plan (MTFP) as reported to full Council in February 2023 showed that the council was able to set a balanced budget for 2023/24, but that there is expected to be a budget gap in future years. However, there is great uncertainty over this caused by a lack of clarity from government.
5. The future funding gap is predicted to increase to over £7.8 million by 2027/28, based on current cautious officer estimates of future funding levels. Whilst it is anticipated that overall funding for the council will remain relatively unchanged in 2024/25, the lack of certainty on future local government funding from 2025/26 onwards means the level of funding, and the resulting estimated funding gap, could be significantly different from current officer estimates in either a positive or negative way. Every financial decision, particularly those involving medium-term funding commitments (i.e., those beyond 2024/25), needs to be cognisant of the potential for significant funding gaps in future years. The budget report for 2024/25 will provide an update on the council's financial position.

The provision of The Beacon provides links to our Corporate Plan Objectives

6. Building Healthy Communities
 - The Beacon contributes to the wellbeing and health of our community through delivery of a variety of programmed arts activities and by offering an affordable venue for hire for community activities including dance/sports/special interest groups, wellness activities and community support and social events.
 - Implementing the action plan as outlined in this report will allow The Beacon to improve the services it directly and indirectly provides for the community, further increasing the positive impact the centre has on the wellbeing of the district's residents.

- The Beacon contributes to the economic wellbeing of Wantage and the surrounding area, as it is a key leisure and entertainment venue in the district, attracting people to the town centre. It also offers an affordable venue for community groups, businesses, and residents to use to deliver their own income-generating activities.
- As one of the key providers of entertainment/Arts infrastructure for Wantage and the surrounding area, the Beacon holds an important role for the community, offering affordable and accessible facilities and activities for all.
- Its location within the town centre location offers a well-placed entertainment venue and meeting place for the community. Currently several local groups and businesses use the venue to run activities for a range of people, including vulnerable groups for whom limited alternative provision exists. While some sections of the community are aware this, the action plan will look to promote this more widely in the community. The venue is a designated 'Safe Space' for the community, offering refuge for anyone, in particular as a safe haven for vulnerable individuals where they can come for assistance.

7. Building stable finances

- The Beacon Development Action Plan includes looking at ways to improve the financial viability of The Beacon, including accessing potential grants and external funding, increasing the in-house programme of shows, classes and events, and reviewing the centre's pricing and marketing strategies to maximise income. The Beacon team would continue to work with finance to develop the financial management processes and identify innovative ways to further boost income generation and minimise costs.
- The action plan also includes several capital projects and improvements for the centre, from additional external branding (see Appendix 3) to undertaking pre-emptive building improvements, to ensure the longevity of the building and its activities for the future. By investing in pre-emptive building improvements and maintenance the council will minimise the need for costly substantial, avoidable or urgent works in the future. Improvements will also improve the accessibility and sustainability of the building, offer a more appealing venue to customers.

Background

8. Wantage Civic Hall (now known as The Beacon) was built in 1973 and is typical of its time in architectural design. Upon local government reorganisation in 1974, Wantage Urban District Council ceased to exist, and The Beacon transferred from the Urban Council to the District Council. The council subsequently entered into an agreement dated 16 November 1977 with Wantage Town Council regarding user rights for The Beacon. This agreement gives the town council rights to office space, access and use of communal areas and free use of the venue for democratic meetings and civic functions each year in return for an agreed contribution annually in respect of the cost of maintenance, lighting, heating, cleaning and telephone services – there is no separate charge for occupation, in terms of a licence fee. See Appendix 4 for more information on the town council agreement/rights regarding the venue.
9. The potential current annual cost to the council of the free use Wantage Town Council receive for their democratic meetings (56 meetings in 2023/24) and the 12 four-hour

sessions they are entitled to for civic functions has an estimated value of at least £15,000 per year currently. This includes the value of the room hire that could not be billed, and cost of staffing the building for these uses. This figure does not include the annual contribution the agreement allows the council to charge, which is estimated to be 3.65 per cent of the cost of maintenance, lighting, heating, cleaning, and telephone services. In 2022/23 this equated to approximately £4,850.

10. The council's Strategic Property team are currently reviewing possible alternative office accommodation options which might be suitable for Town Council use with a view to commencing discussions with them shortly.
11. During the council's fifty-year ownership of the building, it has undergone numerous reviews and some internal improvements, with the last major building improvements undertaken in 1998.
12. In 2011/2012, following a steady decline in Wantage Civic Hall's financial performance over several years and following the transfer of ownership of another council-owned civic venue to a town council (Abingdon Guildhall), members of the public posed questions to the council about the Hall's future. The council decided to retain the venue as a valuable asset to the local community and commissioned a business review, which resulted in the renaming and rebranding of the Hall as '*The Beacon*' in 2014.
13. The centre currently employs 8.14 FTE and 3 casual staff. The FTE provision includes four posts that are shared with South Oxfordshire District Council, one apportioned 50 per cent and three apportioned 30 per cent to Vale.
14. Between March 2020 and September 2021, The Beacon closed to the public due to the Covid pandemic and was temporarily repurposed as an asymptomatic testing centre and the staff were redeployed where possible.
15. In September 2021, the venue reopened to the public for hire and began re-introducing and rebuilding programmed activities for the public. However, a decision was taken not to reopen the café on the ground floor after a second, brief lockdown in December 2021 following a review of the café income and expenditure in the years running up to the pandemic.
16. External hire is slowly returning to pre-pandemic levels, despite increasing competition in the area, and the venue is using the modest programming budget to provide a selection of shows and events for the community. These have seen good uptake and provide good profit margins for the centre as well as receiving positive customer feedback.
17. As with the whole entertainment industry, it has taken some time to see public uptake return to 'normal' levels following the Covid pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis, but sales and visitor figures are steadily improving for the centre and remain on a positive trajectory.
18. Through 2022/23 officers commissioned a range of advisory reviews of The Beacon, including those by Artisan Estates Management Limited and Bryn Jones Associates Ltd that reviewed a range of options for cabinet members to consider in relation to future options for The Beacon. Consultancy support from the Oxfordshire arts sector provided additional advice on the reports received from the above consultants.

Additional work has included a review of programming costs, capacity assumptions, catering options, stock condition review of the building and external areas.

19. The reviews and further investigations have provided a range of guidance for immediate and ongoing operational actions as well as options for future management of The Beacon. It should be noted that these reports each reflect a specific point-in-time, recognising that there are some inaccuracies/assumptions within them and that by their nature the situation described in them may no longer be accurate.
20. The Artisan report focused on the building viability and uses while the BJA review focused on the business operations, with some consideration towards the cultural aspects. Both reports included several recommended operational and strategic improvements in their areas of focus, with frequent overlapping areas, such as customer engagement, and maintaining a well-presented venue. See below the outline scope of these reviews.

Artisan Property Options Appraisal (full report in Appendix 6)

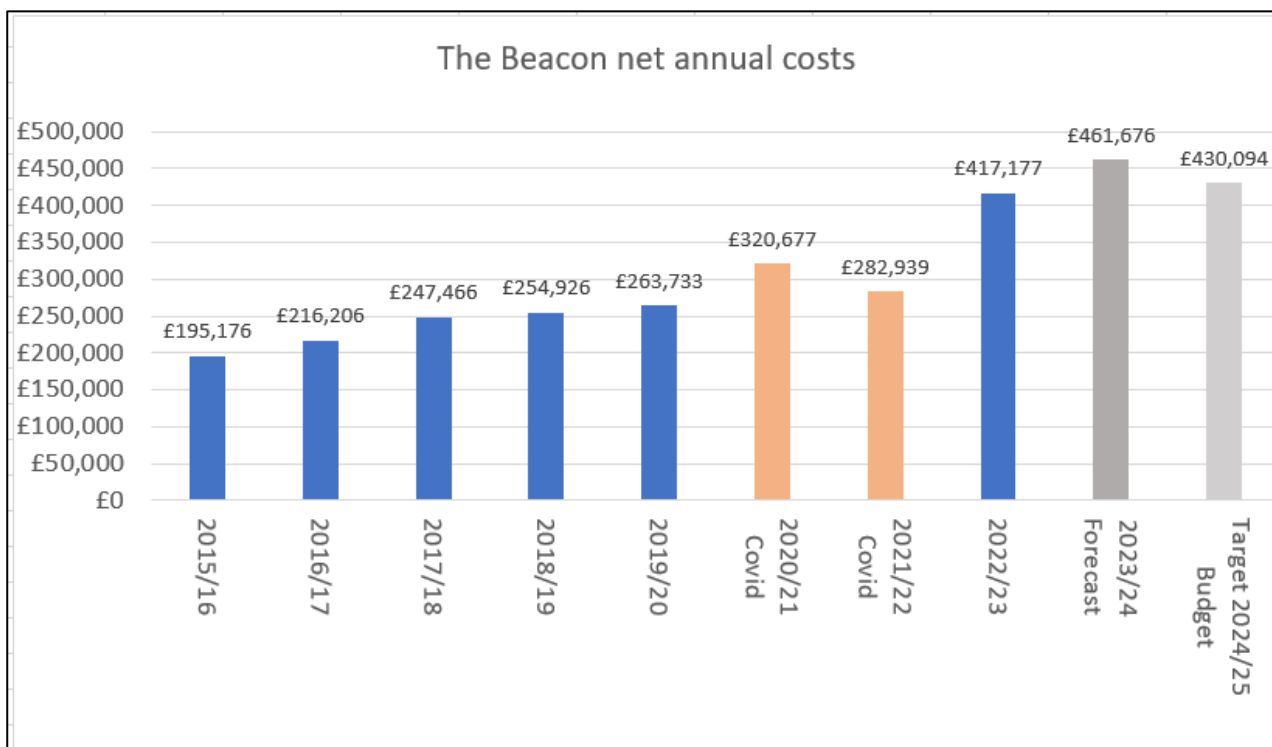
21. Artisan was commissioned by the Strategic Property team to undertake an options appraisal to explore avenues open to the council from a real estate asset management perspective. The approach of the Artisan property options appraisal undertaken in May 2022 for The Beacon was to:
 - explore and identify the most viable options available to the council to deliver the best yield from the property on its own and/or with use of the car park land
 - recommend a preferred option that generates the most income and provides best value for money to support the council's long-term financial position
 - consider regional and national funding sources.

Bryn Jones Associates Ltd (BJA) Business Options Appraisal (full report in Appendix 7)

22. In 2022 the council and South Oxfordshire District Council commissioned BJA to review the business options available to both The Beacon and South's venue Cornerstone. The report concluded in early 2023. The scope of the BJA business options appraisal was to:
 - establish the best cultural and community models for The Beacon
 - recommend a preferred option that will establish The Beacon as an artistic and cultural hub for the district, maximise its income generating opportunities and minimise the cost to the council of providing the facility to support the council's long-term financial position.
 - identify opportunities to benefit from external funding sources and partnerships.
23. BJA conducted an information review including finance, programming, hires, ticketing, catering and marketing; one-to-one meetings and consultations with relevant groups including members, officers and venue staff; mystery visits and area familiarisation; visits to other venues in the area; and secondary research including area demographics, arts and local business sector reports.

24. The BJA report included general recommendations for operational improvements, as well as management models. Officers are investigating and implementing the operational recommendations where appropriate and are reviewing the models in more detail. They recognise that some of the details within the report, such as the financial assessments, are not in line with actual figures and that the timing of this review required significant assumptions to be made as the most recent data available was heavily impacted by the pandemic.
25. Also, in 2022 the council commissioned a decarbonisation survey of the site, which identified a number of operational improvements that will significantly reduce the venues carbon footprint and energy costs. The survey also proposed some possible major works to improve decarbonisation of the site, such as solar panels. Officers are already progressing the operational improvements. The major works were not currently financially viable for progression in 2024/25 but will remain under consideration.
26. At the end of 2022, an officer working group was set up to consider the various consultant reviews, undertake additional investigations, and prepare an Arts Centre Development Action Plan for Cabinet to consider. This group includes representation from the Arts Centre Team, Finance, HR, Legal and Strategic Management Team with support from an external arts consultant from Oxford Arts Community Interest Company (CIC). The action plan incorporates the recommendations that were identified by multiple parties and/or that are expected to improve the centre's financial or community benefit performance.
27. Shown below in Chart 1 is the annual net cost of Beacon to the council for recent years. It shows the current forecast outturn for this year 2023/24 and the current forecast net cost in 2024/25. We have included the years affected by the pandemic in 2020/21 and 2021/22. During this period, the centre was predominantly closed and repurposed. Appendix 5 shows the expenditure breakdown for each year since 2015/16.

Chart 1 – annual financial performance of Beacon – see appendix 1 for detail



28. Chart 1 shows the 2024/25 net cost forecast, inclusive of additional spending on marketing and delivery of the action plan. It also includes income growth/saving projections as a result of the investment. The income growth suggested (see Appendix 5) shows a cost saving target, were all actions and additional activity being delivered from the 1 April 2024. The actual savings will be tracked through the financial year as actions are delivered.
29. The Beacon has not undergone any major capital building improvements since 1998 and several areas of the building and its fixtures have been identified as being overdue for investment. Officers have submitted capital budget/Community Infrastructure levy (CIL) proposal of £100,000 towards fire safety renovations. Additional capital works estimated at £1 million have been identified but are not expected to be delivered in 2024/25. As part of the action plan officers will investigate external funding options that may contribute to the costs. See the Financial Implications section for more detail on these projects and their costs.
30. Officers are committed to exploring and implementing all reasonable actions to improve the medium-term financial viability of The Beacon, while still offering substantial benefit to the community. In order to achieve these improvements and maximise financial improvements some investment is required in 2024/25. While the council may be able to bid for external funding towards some works and projects, it will also require financial investment by the council.
31. Initial delivery of the Beacon Development Action Plan is expected to cost circa £22,200 in addition to the marketing growth already underway. This comprises of £5,000 consultancy support to develop the Arts Strategy and £17,200 for a one-year 0.4FTE fundraising post. Officers will review the impact of the fundraising post in-year. See Appendix 1 for a breakdown by action. This cost of this investment expected to be offset by the target income and savings the action plan could realise.

Options

32. The key areas under consideration are:

- the proposed Beacon Development Action Plan in table 1 and Appendix 1
- potential future operating models for The Beacon Appendix 2
- the sequence in which any decisions should be implemented.

Beacon Development Action Plan

33. The commissioning of the BJA consultant report has been a valuable exercise in understanding the range of options other than direct delivery, which may be available to the council, including:

- the running of the centre by an external organisation, for example a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)
- an outsourced operator model.

34. It is important that officers review the implications of each of these options in full and set out clearly to Members the associated implications of each option, including any risks and future governance arrangements, noting that significant national funding routes have changed since the report was commissioned.

35. Officers have developed a Beacon Development Action Plan that collates the recommendations and opportunities identified in the various consultant reviews, associated stakeholder consultations undertaken during the reviews and from the officer working group. See table 1 for a list of the objectives, reason for inclusion and desired outcomes and Appendix 2 for the objectives, actions, measures, desired outcomes, responsible teams and target dates.

36. Using the high-level objectives and actions in the Beacon Development Action Plan, officers will create an in-depth operational work plan detailing all tasks required to achieve the action plan objectives. The estimated cost of additional resources to deliver the action plan and achieve the income growth stated in Appendix 1 is £22,200. This has been included in the budget proposals for 2024/25.

37. Officers will provide relevant stakeholders (as identified in the action plan) with regular progress updates and performance monitoring reports.

38. Before drawing all of the recommendations into an overarching action plan officers had already begun implementing individual recommendations.

39. Officers will provide cabinet with updates on the implementation and impact of the action plan during delivery. They will also provide an updated medium/long-term financial plan (MTFP) outlining the level of financial commitment required from the council to retain the centre as an in-house service following the implementation of the action plan, which will aid in evaluating the viability of any future alternative operating models being investigated to ensure best value is achieved.

Table 1 – summary of action plan objectives

Action Plan Objective	Reasons for inclusion	Intended outcomes	Due by	Started?
Short Term (up to 9-12 months)				
Launch an Arts and Culture Strategy alongside the new corporate plan	Place-shaping, communities and Partnerships, access for all.	A clear vision, purpose and strategic direction and objectives for the council's broader Arts and Culture provision, including The Beacon	2024/25 Q3	Yes
Increase the leadership capacity to provide direction and development of a new vision	To ensure the action plan and intended outcomes are met	Provide direction and the development of a new vision	2024/25 Q1-2	Yes
Produce a stakeholder map and extend the working group to become a strategic cross-council group	To enable services to feed into the action plan, to ensure all parts of the council to understand the wider benefits of the Arts	Create buy-in from across the council to deliver the vision for the Beacon	2024/25 Q1	Yet to start
Build relationships with local groupings including town centre partnerships, business networks and education providers	Better understand the needs of the community, business, and education providers in the area and how the Beacon can best meet them; maximise opportunities to work together collaboratively	Collaborative projects developed including wider funding opportunities; strong relationships with groups, schools, and local organisations in place	2024/25 Q3	Yes
Establish a community board that is fully representative of the emerging communities in Wantage and the wider district	To help define and measure cultural and community aspirations	To identify potential barriers to access for all communities	2024/25 Q2	Yet to start
Ensure the staff and volunteer team understand the equality, diversity and needs of the local community	To ensure that the centre operates and the programme that is inclusive and appropriate	To provide a suitably inclusive and accessible service for the community	2024/25 Q2	
Deliver an updated artistic and cultural offer	Improve community benefit and audience engagement	Improved programming built on the needs and desires of the community; improved relationship with artists and other art/culture providers; Improved positioning within the market and sales	2024/25 Q4	Yes
Improve/increase community engagement to inform review of the artistic and cultural offer	Improved programming to meet the needs and desires of the community; improved relationship with arts and culture providers	Improved positioning within the market; improved sales	2024/25 Q3	Yes
Undertake discussions with Wantage Town Council regarding historic agreement and their levels of interest in a possible transfer of the venue	To update terms of any agreement to reflect best interested of both parties; To confirm if the option of transferring the venue is viable	Agreement reviewed and any revised terms formalised, clear indication if the Town Council are interest in taking on the venue.	2024/25 Q3	Yet to start

Action Plan Objective	Reasons for inclusion	Intended outcomes	Due by	Status
Obtain specialist marketing resources as required	Develop team skills and capacity to develop the arts marketing strategy	Marketing activities are showing positive impact on sales and income, marketing plans and activities are developed	2024/25 Q1	Yes
Implement a Marketing Strategy/plans	Improved branding and marketing; improved signage	Improved branding and marketing; improved signage; increase in ticket sales and memberships	2024/25 Q2	Yes
Implement pricing changes following a full review	Improve commercial viability	Improved market positioning, improved income generation, improved social value, continuing a range of pricing options that are affordable for different elements of the community	2024/25 Q1	Yes
Implement a Fundraising Strategy and secure fundraising resources for The Beacon	Diversification of income streams	Reduction in net cost to the council	2024/25 Q1	Yet to start
Maximise room/space utilisation and set occupancy targets	Improved utilisation of services/spaces	Improved income; improved social value	2024/25 Q2	Yes
Re-introduce a coffee shop and catering offer	Improved Social Value, improve financial viability	Improved social value; savings and income generation as a result of change in incentives and hours of operation	2024/25 Q4	Yes
Implement updated operational procedures	To improved centre operations	Improved efficiency	2024/25 Q3	Yes
Medium Term (12-18 months)				
Introduce volunteers, friends, and ambassadors' initiatives	Community integration and engagement	Improved social value, community links, value for money.	2025/26 Q1	Yes
Establish more robust performance monitoring and evaluation	Management information on which to base decision making	Ongoing service improvement; foundation for future options appraisal and funding applications	2024/25 Q3	Yes
Revisit viability of the major Decarbonisation Work and external funding opportunities	Alignment with the Corporate Plan objectives	Carbon savings, establish new baseline	2025/26 Q1	Yes
Work with Economic Development to establish a Social Value Calculator and targets for The Beacon	Quantify social benefit of investment	Improved measurement of impact	2025/26 Q1	Yet to start

Action Plan Objective	Reasons for inclusion	Outcomes	Due by	Status
Long-Term (over 18 months and ongoing)				
Assess the impact of the action plan and how the revised in-house model compares to other possible operating models to ensure best value is achieved	Optimising the inhouse model before comparisons are undertaken with other possible models, to ensure best value is achieved	Optimised in-house model being delivered, updated forecasting projections prepared.	2025/26 Q4	Yes
Consider the councils ongoing financial commitment to The Beacon	To ensure the council achieves best value in regard to delivery of the Beacon.	Improved financial forecasting	2025/26 Q4	Yet to start

Possible Beacon operating models

40. The Bryn Jones Associates business review outlined several possible operating models the council could consider for the centre that would require the council and South Oxfordshire District Council (South) to commit to a joint operating model at the same time. The three joint options are:
- Joint in-house delivery
 - Joint external operator
 - Joint charitable organisation
41. Depending on any future decision of each council and the timelines to implement their decisions they may be opportunities to consider joint operating models, if they are looking to progress the same operating model, in a similar time frame. This cannot be assumed possible at this time.
42. The financial viability modelling for the options in the Bryn Jones Associates report were prepared using data from a fixed point in time, when the centre was still in the early stages of recovering from the Covid pandemic, and do not reflect the financial improvements that could be achieved by implementing the action plan.
43. Appendix 2 provides an overview of each model together with their key implications, risks, and benefits. That Cabinet could consider during or following implementation of the action plan.
44. Implementing the action plan will allow the council to establish the most efficient in-house financial forecasts and meet their best value obligations, while keeping momentum moving on any long-term service delivery decisions.

Other options

45. Considering alternative operating models without/before implementing the improvement actions identified is not considered appropriate at this time. However, as the improvement actions are expected to make a significant impact on the net cost of the current service, fair consideration to those options can only be undertaken once the initial period of the action plan has been implemented. Progressing further investigations into potential future alternative operating models while the action plan is implemented will mean the council is prepared to move forward at pace if, when reviewed against the optimised in-house model, a different model is found to offer best value to the council when considered alongside the emerging corporate plan.
46. Continuing with the service as it currently is, with no significant improvements is not considered a viable option given that all the reports commissioned, and officers have identified improvements in the way the centre can be operated. There is a requirement within the Best Value legislation for officers to continually seek to improve outcomes and efficiency. Not implementing improvement actions identified would mean opportunities for better service and financial returns are not realised.
47. Undertaking market testing and further investigation on alternative operating models while implementing the action plan will mean the council will have both optimised modelling for the improved in-house model, and up to date viability data for the alternative models at the same time.

Financial Implications

48. The forecast net cost of running the Beacon in 2023/24 is £0.46 million. The benefits of the operational improvements achieved to date have largely been offset by inflationary increases in utilities and other financial pressures linked to the significant increase in the cost of living crisis. Consequently, net costs for the Beacon have not significantly reduced. Officers are confident that the investment required to deliver the action plan will reduce the annual net cost to the council, predominantly through a greater focus on income generation and external funding bids that reflect the current national funding regimes that have stabilised over the past two years.
49. Recent reviews and investigations into industry comparators indicate that it is unlikely that a staffed venue like The Beacon can generate enough through ticket sales, hire and café/bar sales to cover the full operating costs. The Beacon will therefore likely need to rely on financial support to continue delivering the benefit it offers to the community. Implementing the action plan should maximise income opportunities and reduce the level of financial contribution required from the Council.
50. The current forecast net cost in 2024/25 is £430,094. This includes additional marketing investment already underway and an income growth target equal to 10 per cent more than the best previous year. The growth target represents the income growth and savings expected as a result of the additional marketing activity and action plan delivery. The income growth suggested (see Appendix 5) shows the cost saving were all actions and additional activity being delivered from the 1 April 2024. The actual savings will be tracked through the financial year as actions are delivered.
51. Officers modelled the current medium-term financial forecast for the centre using the current proposed budget for 2024/25, with indicative inflationary growth applied. This will be updated once the budget for 2024/5 has been set by Council and regularly reviewed with finance colleagues as officers work through the action plan. The objective is to see income increase beyond the previous best achievable levels and subsequently reduce the net cost as much as possible. Officers note that resources across many service areas are in high demand and availability may impact delivery of the actions within target timescales.
52. The 2024/25 target net cost includes increased income levels following additional marketing investment already in progress.
53. By implementing the other improvements in the action plan the council would position the centre on a trajectory that could see its net cost continue to reduce in future years.
54. In 2024/25 a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) proposal has been submitted for £100,000 to make fire safety improvements in the centre.
55. Other capital works identified for the centre that will be considered in future years include:
 - re-roofing the building
 - replacement passenger lift
 - refurbishment of the toilets
 - refurbishment of backstage and dressing rooms

- refitting the kitchen
- general refurbishment of all public areas
- equipment replacement and improvements
- reconfiguration of ground floor to improve hireable space and flow
- external branding improvements (see Appendix 3 for initial ideas)

56. By investing additional resources to implement the action plan, the council will ensure the in-house operating model is working at optimal efficiency in the long-term, maximising income opportunities, using existing resources to the best of their potential, increasing the community benefit delivered, and minimising the net cost to the council. The current estimated cost to deliver the action plan is £22,200, which is expected to be offset by the target income growth and savings the action plan could realise. This cost has been included in the proposed budget for 2024/25. The income growth suggested (see Appendix 5) shows the cost saving were all actions and additional activity being delivered from the 1 April 2024. The actual savings will be tracked through the financial year as actions are delivered.
57. While some of the staffing resources required to implement the plan can be provided using the existing team, including the recently advertised Head of Communities and Community Arts Manager posts, this may result in capacity deficits elsewhere in the centre's delivery. Should this occur, the council will likely need to buy-in expert knowledge to achieve the best outcomes, and the existing team may require additional training and development to maximise their potential on a long-term basis.
58. Key actions in the plan include securing external funding for the centre, which cannot be guaranteed in advance, and should not be included in future budgets until it is secured. If funding is secured, it is likely to be for specific projects that will require some level of matched funding. In these instances, officers would include the full cost to deliver in the expenditure budget proposal until funding is secured, when the funding income would be off set against the expenditure budget, reducing the cost to the council of that activity.

Legal and Property Implications

59. Legal implications of implementing the overall action plan are minimal at present, but individual actions may have their own implications, which will be assessed and mitigated as they are implemented. Officers will work with colleagues in Legal to identify and resolve any legal implications for individual actions identified.
60. Reviewing the agreement terms with Wantage Town Council regarding their occupancy of the Beacon will require legal, finance and strategic property resources to complete. It is expected the review of the current terms will be led by the strategic property team and it should be noted that any changes would require both parties to be in agreement.

Climate and ecological impact implications

61. Separate to any future decisions about The Beacon's ongoing operating model, the council has undertaken a decarbonisation survey that identified some minor and major decarbonisation improvements to help reduce the building's carbon footprint. While the major works are on hold for budget reasons, keeping the service in-house will make implementing them in the future more sensitive to operational and

community need. Minor improvements recommended in the survey are already being implemented for the venue.

62. Operating model options that are not managed in house will have reduced opportunity to implement the council's strategic objectives including action on the climate emergency and would be likely to have less access to national Government funding for such schemes.
63. Officers will apply the councils' Climate Impact Assessment tool for each action within the action plan as they are implemented to ensure any reasonable adjustments taken to contribute to the council's climate and carbon neutral goals.
64. If Cabinet decide to progress an alternative operator option in future, officers will seek to incorporate all reasonable climate and energy saving terms and KPI's within the scope of any future arrangements.

Equalities implications

65. As each action is developed officers will consider the equality implications, undertake Equality Impact Assessments and put mitigations in place if appropriate.

Risks and Mitigations

66. That the action plan is not delivered within the proposed timescale. Regular progress and performance reviews with the relevant Head of Service, officer working group and corporate programmes team to ensure timelines are monitored.
67. That there are insufficient resources to complete all actions identified in the action plan, reducing the overall impact achieved. If there are insufficient resources (financial or time) to carry out all actions within the timeline, the officers working group will prioritise the actions that provide the best value.
68. That the action plan does not have the expected impact on the performance of the centre, either in terms of improved benefit to the community or financial viability. The planned regular review of actions being implemented will allow officers to forecast the impact they will have, as will research officers will undertake before implementation starts.
69. If the Council were to resolve to transfer future operation of the Beacon to an alternative model (whether this is a charitable organisation or a contract provider) there are variable risks around the council's options. For example, the council may not be able to bring the operation back inhouse, if it has proven unviable financially for an operator to deliver due to best value standards. If an external operating model were identified for progression specialist advice regarding the council's stepping-in rights would be sought as part of the further investigation and viability work.
70. That the council resolves to find an existing entity to take on operation of the centre, but no viable operators come forward or those that do express interest do not represent value for money. If, during market testing, officers are unable to identify any potential operators with the knowledge or experience required to operate the centre they will bring this to cabinet's attention so alternative options could be considered, with the default position being that operation remains the improved inhouse model being developed via the action plan.

71. That the existing Town Council agreement and occupancy causes adds complexity to the process of moving to an alternative operator model, should one of these models offer best value to the council. The Council's property team need to engage with the Town Council at this time in order to be able to explore options of achieving a satisfactory resolution.

Other Implications

72. There may be some HR implications connected to delivery of the action plan, especially around developing skills and knowledge in the team, and potentially when bringing in additional resources to assist in implementation. Officers will work with HR colleagues to assess specific HR implications for each action as they are implemented.

73. If Cabinet decide to move to an alternative operator model in the future, there would be HR implications. These could vary depending on the option chosen. Managing these implications and their impact of the team would require support from HR colleagues and could incur additional costs to the council. Details of the specific HR implications for each option are outlined within their respective overviews.

74. Officers have met and will continue to meet with the centre's staff to ensure they are aware of the process The Beacon is going through, the proposed action plan, how it could impact on operational delivery and that they will have an opportunity to contribute and buy into the future plans for the centre.

Conclusions

75. After reviewing all of the consultants' reports and consultation feedback gathered during the reviews, and opinions of the officers' working group there appears to be several improvements the council can implement to improve The Beacon's performance, many of which have already begun implementation. The various improvements have been gathered into an action plan for officers to work through.

76. While the council should consider possible alternatives to in-house delivery, it should first do all it can to ensure the in-house model is operating to its best potential, by endorsing the action plan.

77. Establishing a clear understanding of the Council's stepping-in rights in connection to any potential external operating model is essential before the council make any formal commitment.

78. Officers will work with the Corporate Programmes Team to report and monitor delivery of the action plan. The centre team will also provide regular updates to the officer working group, cabinet members and other key stakeholder groups outlining progress of the implementation and measures of the impact for each action.

Background Papers

None

APPENDIX 1 – PROPOSED BEACON DEVELOPMENT ACTION PLAN

Ref	Objective	Activities	Outcomes	Responsibility	Measures	Est cost to deliver	Complete by date
1.	Launch an Arts and Culture Strategy alongside the new corporate plan	1. Develop a stakeholder map and explore barriers to access, 2. Draft Arts and Culture Strategy to be aligned with other council policies; 3. Engagement with stakeholders including cabinet, council, DGT boards and the wider community	Clear vision, purpose and strategic objectives for The Beacon within the broader Arts and Culture Strategy	Community Wellbeing including DGT team, Comms for engagement	Strategy agreed by cabinet	Met by in-house team and £5,000 consultancy support in budget growth proposal	Within 12 months
2.	Increase the leadership capacity to provide direction and development of a new vision	Identify resources needed, recruitment/procurement of external resources as needed, development of direction/vision for Art Centre, Launch new vision.	Development and provision of a new vision for the arts centre	Head of Communities	Resources secured and direction provided	Met by current budget proposals	Within 12 months
3.	Produce a stakeholder map and extend the working group to become a strategic cross-council group, which allows all parts of the council to understand the wider benefits of the Arts	Workshop with working group to identify additional internal stakeholder, invite additional stakeholders to join the working group, work with all stakeholders to improve cohesion across services	Create buy-in from across the council to deliver the vision	Arts Centres team and wider stake holder group	Working group extended, stakeholder map prepared, improved understanding of The Beacon's benefit across the council.	Met through existing in-house resources	Within 12 months
4.	Build relationships with local groupings including town centre partnerships, business networks and education providers	Identify groups and organisations to engage with, workshops to establish links and opportunities	To identify potential areas of collaboration (including around funding opportunities)	Communities team	Improved engagement with external groups, Collaborative activities undertaken	Met by in-house team	Within 12 months
5.	Establish a Community Board that is fully representative of the emerging communities in and around Wantage	(Linked to action 3) Develop a community engagement strategy, implement community engagement strategy	To identify potential barriers to access for all communities	Arts Centres team	Improved links with communities in and around Wantage, improved programming	Met through existing in-house resources	Within 12 months
6.	Ensure the staff and volunteer team understand the equality, diversity and needs of the community	Identify the knowledge levels required for the team, draw up and implement a training and development plan to fill any knowledge gaps	To provide a suitably inclusive and accessible service for the community	Arts Centre Team	All staff and volunteers have completed any necessary training	Met through existing in-house resources	Within 12 months
7.	Deliver an updated artistic and cultural offer	1. Review external funding for a curated programme 2. Engagement with other Arts/Culture Venues/groups 3 Develop partnerships with performers/community groups, 5. Consider changes to meet wider health, wellbeing, educational needs and also daytime offer 6. Review the customer journey	Improved programming built on the needs and desires of the community; improved relationship with artists and other art/culture providers; Improved positioning within the market; improved sales	Arts Centre Team	All actions implemented and positive improvement on community benefit, income generation and customer feedback	Met through existing in-house resources and/or through external funding if secured	Within 12 months

Ref	Objective	Activities	Outcomes	Responsibility	Measures	Est cost to deliver	Complete by date
8.	Improve/increase community engagement to inform review of the artistic and cultural offer	Achieved via stakeholder mapping and community board actions above	Improved positioning within the market; improved sales; improved social value	Communities with Consultation team support	Improved customer feedback and uptake of activities	Met through existing resources	Within 12 months
9.	Undertake discussions with Wantage Town Council regarding historic agreement concerning the Beacon and their level of interest in a possible transfer of the venue	Identify any terms of the existing agreements the council wishes to renegotiate, and possible transfer of ownership offer Initiate engagement with the town council to gauge interest in a transfer option, and/or to negotiate new agreement terms. Complete revised agreement and terms Report back the town council's level of interest in potential transfer, to be incorporated into any future decision making on the operating model for delivery of The Beacon.	Report to cabinet on outcomes of these discussions	Legal and Property teams, with input from arts centres management team	Agreement reviewed and any revised terms formalised (if applicable), clear indication if the Town Council are interest in taking on the venue	Delivered by in-house team	Within 12 months
10.	Obtain specialist marketing resources as required	Recruitment/commission	Address skills gap, resource to develop the arts marketing strategy	HR/relevant HoS	Link between marketing and bookings/ ticket sales improved	Recruitment being undertaken.	Within 12 months
11.	Implement a Marketing Strategy/plans	1. Develop an art and specific strategy including mapping of potential users, 2. Determine a realistic budget 3. Review Website and branding 4. Address disconnects between marketing and ticketing 5. Cross promotion and upselling	Improved branding and marketing; improved signage; increase in ticket sales and memberships	Arts Centre Team, Comms	Marketing strategy adopted,	Cost met from in-house team	Within 12 months
12.	Implement pricing changes following a full review	1. Review ticket pricing, memberships, and room hire pricing, 2. consider competitors and other council facilities, 3. discount approach and donating spare tickets to VCOSOs to generate social value	Improved market positioning: Improved income generation, Improved social value	Finance and Arts centre team	Revised pricing rolled out. New pricing policy in place.	Met through existing in-house resources	Within 18 months
13.	Implement a Fundraising Strategy and secure fundraising resources for The Beacon	1. Mapping potential sources of external funding including, trusts and foundations, corporate sponsorships, memberships; council pots; 2. Explore partnership bids 3. Link with marketing strategy 4. Explore friends/fundraising board	Diversification of income streams; reduction in the centres' net cost to the council	Arts Centre Staff, external bid writer,	External funding bids submitted	fundraising post £17,200 0.4FTE 1yr Fixed term (initially)	Within 12 months
14.	Maximise room/space utilisation and set realistic targets	1. Explore co-working hub, 2. Engage with co-working hub operator, engage with current and prospective room hires including businesses via econ dev 4. review opening hours, 5. Consider room separation for temporary or permanent occupation, 6. Set Targets for utilisation, 7. Optimise use of space/behaviours and other low-cost activities to maximise energy efficiency	Improved utilisation of services/spaces; improved income; improved social value	Arts centre team and Development and Corporate Landlord	Targets identified and being met, Positive impact on finances, appropriate works to improve useable space undertaken.	Operational improvements from inhouse team, capital works pending future funding bids	Within 12 months

Ref	Objective	Activities	Outcomes	Responsibility	Measures	Est cost to deliver	Complete by date
15.	Re-introduce a coffee shop and catering offer	1. Explore a combined reception/coffee shop servery 2. Engage with potential independent and 3rd sector operators; and catering providers for functions 3. Research menus and pricing options	Improved social value; savings and income generation because of change in incentives and hours of operation	Arts centre team and Development and Corporate Landlord	Review complete and findings reported on and actioned appropriately	Resource from existing budget	Within 12 months
16.	Review operational procedures and partnership working within the council	1, Identify services/areas where there are operational challenges using existing corporate processes to deliver arts centre operations, 2. establish review process with key officers in other teams to identify ways to improve both the centres and corporate processes and policies to improve efficiency 3. implement new processes and monitor their impact	Improved efficiency and compliance with wider council rules and policies.	Arts Centre Staff	Improved working efficiency Corporate and centre policies/ processes align better	Met through house resources	Within 12 months
17.	Volunteers, ambassadors and friends' initiative	1. Develop/review volunteering and ambassador scheme, 2. Consider 'Friends of' Committee	Improved social value; improved community links; improved value for money; improved programming	Arts Centre Staff (with communities' team)	Recruitment of volunteers/ambassadors, analysis of a Friends scheme completed.	Met through house resources	Within 18 months
18.	Performance monitoring and evaluation	1. Monitor performance against the strategic objectives 2. Monitor delivery of the action plan, 3. Develop a daily online/in person Customer feedback system, 4. Run annual survey, 5. introduce KPI's for service delivery and regularly report on performance	Ongoing improvement of the service; sound basis for future options appraisal; important for funding applications	Arts Centre Staff (with Corporate Plan Reporting team)	reporting to interim board	Met through existing in-house resources.	Within 18 months
19.	Revisit viability of the major Decarbonisation Work	1.research funding opportunities in addition to the SALIX funding, 2. review the feasibility of the proposed works and projected savings, 3. if viable for progression, apply for funding and if secured, procure relevant contractors	Carbon savings, establish new baseline	Corporate Landlord	Project completed, improved energy efficiency	Met through house resources	Within 18 months
20.	Work with Economic Development to establish a Social Value Calculator and targets for The Beacon	Explore the use of social value calculator	Improved measurement of impact	Communities Team	separate service value from operational costs	Met through existing in-house resources	Within 18 months
21.	Assess the impact of the action plan and how the revised in-house model compares to other possible operating models to ensure best value is achieved	1. produce detailed feasibility studies any alternative models selected for further consideration, 2. prepare updated and detailed financial projections for any alternative operating options and an optimised in-house option, 3. Cabinet and council to take a formal decision on a future service delivery model	Optimised in-house model being delivered, updated forecasting projections prepared.	Cabinet and Council	Full council decision in place	Met through existing in-house resources	April 2025
22.	Consider the councils ongoing financial commitment to The Beacon	Update financial forecasting for The Beacon reflecting the impact of the actions delivered. Update financial modelling for the inhouse and possible alternative models, consider which model offers best value to the council, agree a funding approach for the Beacon that minimises net cost and offers flexibility for the future.	Improved financial forecasting	Cabinet and Council	Future funding approach agreed for The Beacon	Met through existing in-house resources	April 2025

APPENDIX 2 – POTENTIAL OPERATING MODELS – CONFIDENTIAL

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Not for publication by virtue of paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing this information.

Due to the confidential nature of this report, it will not be published publicly, but will be circulated as a separate attachment to appropriate members and officers.

APPENDIX 3 – EXTERNAL BRANDING INITIAL PROPOSALS

Current External Branding

External Branding suggestions



APPENDIX 4 – WANTAGE TOWN COUNCIL AGREEMENT OVERVIEW – CONFIDENTIAL

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Not for publication by virtue of paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing this information.

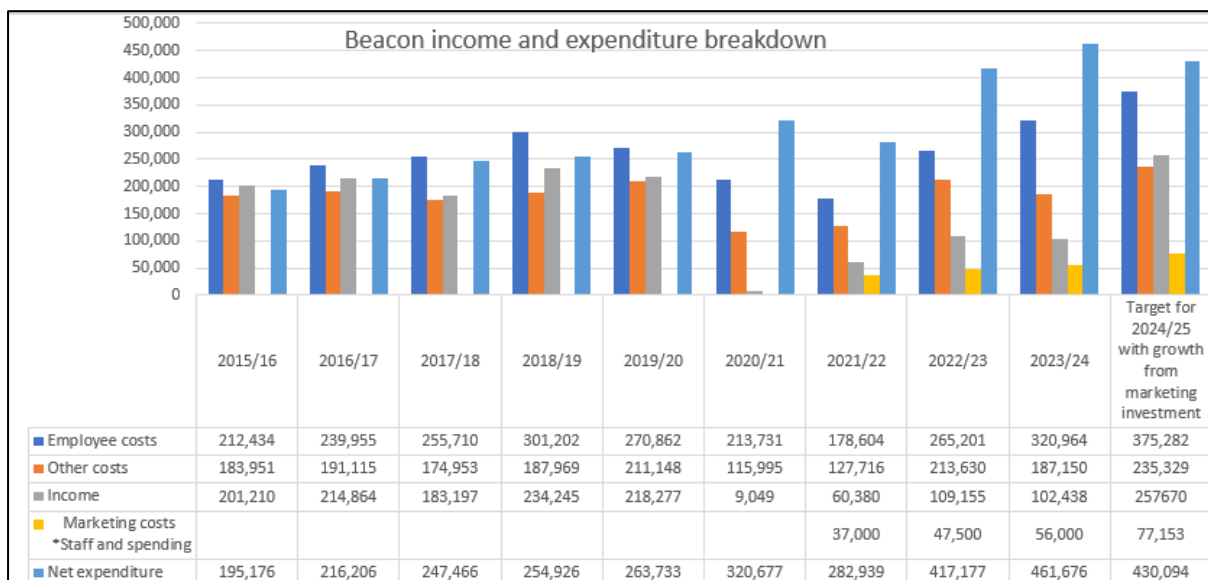
Due to the confidential nature of this report, it will not be published publicly, but will be circulated as a separate attachment to appropriate members and officers.

APPENDIX 5 – FINANCIAL INFORMATION

The tables and charts below reflect direct running costs and income only from 2015/16 to 2022/23 and forecast figures for 2023/24 and 2024/25. They do not include support service recharges, or year-end accounting adjustments for, for example, depreciation. Marketing costs were separated from the centre’s main budget in 2021/22 and are show separately from that point onwards.

The direct costs have been separated into the following categories:

- Beacon staff costs
- other direct costs, such as building operation costs, cost to deliver the arts activities
- marketing costs (staff and activities). The marketing costs reflect both the staff costs and other marketing expenditure budget
- income generated by the centre
- total net cost to the council.

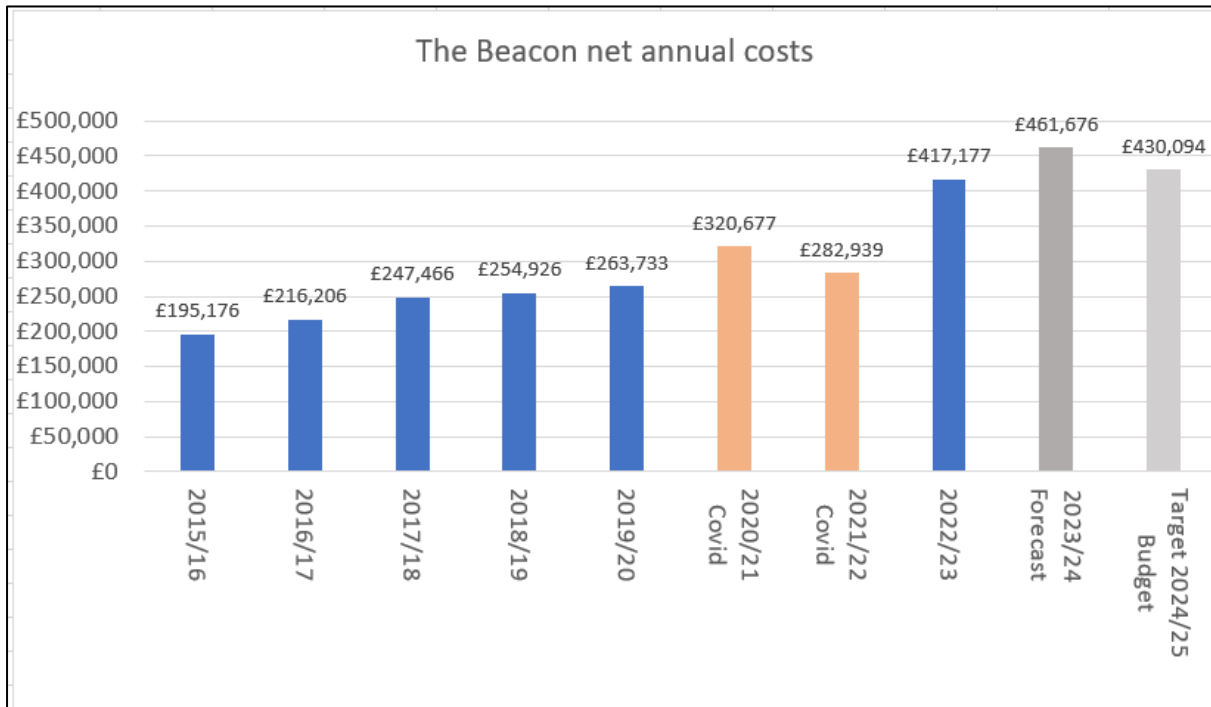


All budget projections for 2024/25 have been updated throughout the budget setting process and are subject to Council’s formal approval of the 2024/25 budget.

The target budget for 2024/25 includes income growth equivalent to 10 per cent of the best income achieved to date (in 2018/19). This target includes the additional income and savings expected to be achieved through the council’s investment in delivering the action plan and increasing marketing provision.

The income budget for 2024/25 was set to show the potential impact on income the investment in the action plan delivery and additional marketing activity should have. It shows the cost saving were all actions and additional activity being delivered from the 1 April 2024. The actual savings will be tracked through the financial year as actions are delivered.

Staff costs within the budget proposals include indicative inflationary increases that have yet to be agreed when the 2024/25 budget is set by Council. Once the budget for 2024/25 is set these table and forecasts will be updated.



APPENDIX 6 - ARTISAN BUILDING OPTIONS APPRASIAL - CONFIDENTIAL

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Not for publication by virtue of paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing this information.

Due to the confidential nature of this report, it will not be published publicly, but will be circulated as a separate attachment to appropriate members and officers.

APPENDIX 7 – BRYN JONES ASSOCIATES BUSINESS OPTIONS APPRAISAL CONFIDENTIAL

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Not for publication by virtue of paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing this information.

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