

Introduction

Coventry City Council seeks to understand the potential of St Mary's Guildhall in Coventry city centre to offer a quality visitor attraction that complements the Council's ambitions to develop the cultural, heritage and tourism offer in Coventry and to also generate an income stream so that the asset is at least self-funding.

A study (the Feasibility Study) is required to review the current situation, establish a vision for the Guildhall that delivers a strong cultural asset and visitor experience, and to develop a business plan that captures capital and revenue investment and the likely income returns that may be achieved. It is likely that external funding would be sourced to fund any capital investment.

Context - St Mary's Guildhall, Coventry

St Mary's Guildhall is considered to be one of the finest surviving medieval guildhalls in the UK. A meeting and ceremonial place for 700 years, its history embraces visits by Mary Queen of Scots, Shakespeare, writers, performers, artists and politicians.

St Mary's Guildhall is local authority managed, free to enter and currently has limited opening hours. Although it features in Google searches, its web presence could be greater and the hall is not widely known by local residents or many visitors to the city.

Most recently, the Guildhall has been used for multiple purposes, both internally to the Council and externally – a visitor experience, venue for private and civic events, and a corporate meeting space. The Guildhall has benefitted from only limited investment in recent times, with previous building adaptations now appearing dated and being considered to have limited sympathy to the building fabric or heritage.

Through its current operating model, the Guildhall offers a limited visitor experience in respect of the depth of information, interpretation and communication. Furthermore, the Guildhall does not operate a structured education programme, although the visitors that do attend (including some school parties) clearly appreciate what is on offer.

Purpose of the Study

The Council is keen to protect the future sustainability of the Guildhall, to ensure its historic significance to the city is recognised and to build a sustainable visitor experience. Importantly, a robust business model needs to support the cultural offering, to at least offer a self-funding outcome.

A study (the Feasibility Study) is required to review the current situation, establish a vision for the Guildhall that delivers a strong cultural asset and visitor experience, and to develop a business plan that captures capital and revenue investment and the likely income returns that may be achieved.

At the heart of any future vision must be the history and the medieval fabric of the building. However, its use is also important – it is a Guildhall that has been a meeting place in the city for the past 700 years and a place which has commissioned and inspired artists for generations.

There have been a number of studies in the past (most recently in 2005) looking at its functionality, restoration, orientation and uses. Budget and context restraints prevented any major development taking place at that time. It is noted that those studies are now out of date in respect of proposed visitor experience expectations and the financial aspects of achieving the recommendations.

The timing of producing a new Feasibility Study is good; Coventry is bidding to be UK City of Culture 2021; and the city has a new 10-year partnership Cultural Strategy which is independent of, but supportive of, the bid. The potential for developing a greater profile for St. Mary's with visitors and for extending cultural programming is explicitly recognised in the Strategy,

Coventry is also developing a cultural place partnership, and has recently been awarded Cultural Destinations funding and Great Place funding by Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund respectively. Coventry has also been awarded Heritage Action Zone status, in recognition of its unique medieval and modernist architecture. An in-depth tourism and audience research study will inform a new destination management plan, with work on the plan commencing in 2017. An historical asset and visitor experience like St Mary's Guildhall must be central to each of these initiatives.

There are challenges to the building's orientation and it is likely that whatever its focus, capital investment will be needed. It could be a potentially high priority for Heritage Lottery Fund (Hull has just secured £15 million for its maritime museums) and is likely to be of interest to major trusts and foundations, providing that the end use can demonstrate increased public benefit through social and cultural impact.

It is on the back of the above Coventry cultural and heritage initiatives and developments, complemented with a strong vision and business plan for the Guildhall, that the Council believes funding may be available to support the re-development.

Scope of the Study

The output of the Feasibility Study is required to answer the following questions;

Phase 1 – Familiarisation and Vision Setting

1. What is the current visitor offer at the Guildhall? How does it compare to other similar venues locally and nationally? What current attributes of the Guildhall have a material impact on the visitor experience, both positively and negatively?
2. What is the Strategic Vision for the Guildhall? What is its identity and purpose? How does it fit within other strategies and the wider change in Coventry, especially the bid to be UK COC 2021? How can The Guildhall play a role in the unique identity of Coventry as a city? In helping shape a feeling of community togetherness?
3. How should the Guildhall be branded? What is the branding intended to achieve, and how will it succeed?
4. How should St Mary's be positioned so that it is up there as a first choice destination for tourists? What would the visitor experience need to include for this accolade? How should the Guildhall be promoted to achieve this?

5. What “use” options would achieve a high quality visitor experience? How would these be achieved? What distinctive activities could be delivered from the Guildhall to achieve audience development, volunteering and training associated with its heritage?
6. How would links to other attractions in the city and region support the vision and achieve a high quality visitor experience?

Phase 2 – Costs and Funding

7. What physical and communicative improvements and renovations are required for the Guildhall to achieve the vision described in Phase 1? (Guidance - access, orientation, location and use of catering, seating, restoration, tapestry, interpretation, etc)
8. What are the likely capital costs of the renovations required as described above and activity costs for the Guildhall?’
9. What options are available to the Council for securing funding to support either the initial refurbishment or ongoing running costs associated with the Guildhall?

Phase 3 – Business Plan Development

Develop a business plan and investment business case that;

10. Considers the benefits and impacts of increased use and a more focused role and vision, operating model, consistent opening times, balance of uses, etc.
11. Explores and recommends digital and contemporary art options for interpretation and cultural engagement
12. Examines and recommends commercial uses - that drive income without losing focus
13. Considers the merits of different Governance options to achieve the business plan
14. Review marketing and make any appropriate recommendations for enhancing educational and community engagement and local and national profile