

PORTOBELLO CENTRAL

Introduction

Portobello Community Council (PCC) is consulting on two proposals received for the Town Hall. It says:

“City of Edinburgh Council is considering two expressions of interest in Portobello Town Hall, one from a community group (Portobello Central) and another from a ballet school (Peter Schaufuss). Both groups have submitted outline proposals and these will be considered by the city council's Finance & Resources Committee in March.

“We have collated questions for both proposals and have asked the groups to respond by 14 February. We will update this page to link to the responses when we get them. So please delay responding until then, if you wish to read the additional information.”



Portobello Central Ltd wishes to make clear that we do not regard our proposal to be, in any way, part of a competition. The Council suggested in December 2019 that it would ask for proposals and our work began long before the formal call for tenders. We have worked right through 2020 for and with the wider Portobello community, and with no knowledge of any other work in hand. Certainly no one else can have engaged with our community to the extent and depth we have achieved (in the current circumstances).

That another significant proposal emerged was a surprise in December 2020, with no hint that this was in prospect, and we were ready to welcome an active participant in our goal of a community, commercial, council partnership. Our material and ideas have been in the public domain for many months and it is surprising that more use of it has not been made by others; as we were ready for partnership.

Our goal is to re-open the Town Hall for and with the community – if others have a better proposal for achieving this, it must be welcomed. If the community is not an active component of the mix, we think any such proposal should be rejected by the community and the Council.

The material below has been provided to PCC for its exercise and is published now, in advance of the PCC deadline of 14 February, to help public debate and personal decisions.

QUESTIONS FOR PORTOBELLO CENTRAL

- 1. In your bid to the Council you proposed a transfer to Community Management for a period, looking to a possible Community Asset Transfer in 3-5 years. You're now inviting the Council to reject all bids and call for a report on a community based asset transfer within 6 months. What would the purpose of the report be, and how would it advance our understanding, given that any asset transfer would require to be judged on the merits of particular proposal, and by your own estimate you wouldn't be in a position to make a firm proposal for several years?*



The Council originally intended to have a process looking for ideas, as reported by Portobello Community Council in its update published on 3 December 2019. That would have opened the way to a variety of solutions, including asset transfer. By moving direct to a call for commercial bids, consultation and discussion was limited, as tendering is done under commercial secrecy arrangements and the Council has made no public statement since that call.

We have yet to make our formal deputation to the Committee but we expect that we will ask for the current process to be paused – to explore all reasonable options with, importantly, the community at the core. Current consultations will assist our decision.

This is not a redundant building seeking a new use, it is a central part of our community that should be managed and, probably, owned by the community.

- 2. Your bid included a Phase 1 Income and Expenditure Forecast that assumed grant funding of £312,000 over the first two years. I appreciate there's a lot of uncertainty to such figures, but what potential sources have been identified to meet that scale of funding?*



The process of proper business planning has been limited by the need to assess the level of community and Council support – this is a slow process, which accelerates as deadlines approach. It is evident now that there is a substantial body of support within the community and its organisations, and that opens the way to fund-raise, seek anchor tenants, have commercial conversations.

We are about to commission architects and consultants to produce a feasibility study, drawing strongly on previous experience of similar projects. This exercise is to be funded mainly by a grant from the Architectural Heritage Fund, awarded in September last year, together with a Community Fund Microgrant and early donations. We expect that a charitable body created for the purpose would manage the building and that would open the range of funding sources to include Scottish Land Fund, National Heritage Lottery Fund, independent charitable funds, community share or crowd-funding or other options yet to be identified and explored.

3. *Since the Peter Schaufuss proposals have been publicised there have been many comments on the Porty Central Facebook page highly critical of both the proposal and Peter Schaufuss personally, including that he is "rude", has "pals in the clowncil", has "a big ego", and "lives in Luxembourg". Does the hostility on the Facebook page reflect a hostility on the part of Porty Central to both Mr Schaufuss and his proposal?*



The Board of Portobello Central Ltd is not in any way hostile; it has been unable to have meaningful discussions with Mr Schaufuss or his team. Both parties have been encouraged by the City of Edinburgh Council to examine partnership working, something with which those who work in the community are familiar. Mr Schaufuss has avoided engaging in such discussions, preferring to draw attention to his existing businesses, and did not participate in the PCC meeting on 25 February. This is a considerable disappointment

4. *It's noted on the Porty Central Facebook page that Porty Central were offered a tour of both St Stephen's Church and the Rose Theatre but turned down the offer due to Covid. However, representatives of the Community Council were given a virtual tour of both buildings. Is there a reason why this option was not pursued?*



Two offers were made by Mr Schaufuss' team to see a virtual tour – at short notice in the week immediately before Christmas. Although we welcomed the approach, we made it clear that sight of other buildings was irrelevant to a discussion on partnership. No offer of a meeting to discuss matters has been made. If it had been we would have accepted with alacrity. Several members of Portobello Central were prepared to join a Zoom at 3pm on 16 December, for which we requested information on the proposal; four paragraphs were sent to us at 2pm that day, but no Zoom link followed. There has been a number of telephone calls to individual members of Portobello Central in which partnership did not figure.

5. *Comments on the Porty Central Facebook page regarding Peter Schaufuss include the following:*

"An interesting read. He does sound brash and full of ego. He seems to throw himself into projects. Some work others don't. For those that wish to know he is 71 so you have to admire his energy.

He has three children who are all dancers. His son Luke danced with Scottish Ballet.

His parents were both dancers.

His wife and ex wife are dancers/ teachers. He comes from a world of classical dance. His ego has been stroked to the point of him perhaps thinking he is God. And he is a 'theatrical gypsy'. He was brought up wherever his parents were dancing. His daughters have Australia accents. His son sound more English/Danish.

People like that have no understanding of community. Having never stayed anywhere long enough to get to know neighbours."

Do you think that allowing such personalised comments on your Facebook page leaves a poor impression of Porty Central as an organisation? Especially since the comment was made by a member of your working group?



The board of Portobello Central Ltd decided not to censor the views expressed on the Facebook page. We had undertaken not to discuss the Town Hall on the Porty People Facebook page, where many Portobello issues are aired. Mr Schaufuss is unknown to our community, and we do not believe he has entered the building in recent years. We have had no contact with him in any form. We do not know the name on the bid made to the Council – although we know that Mr Schaufuss has a number of companies running his various businesses. However, there is considerable published material about this figure of significance in the dance world which was worth collating.

- 6. It was mentioned somewhere, that they have recommended that the council reject both bids – could we have some clarification around this? I may have missed the explanation somewhere.*



This is dealt with in Question 1.

- 7. Do you have any funds or offers of funds?*



We have accepted a grant offer from the Architectural Heritage Fund for a Project Feasibility Study. This will cover the works needed to re-open the building and options for improving it for community use. A second part will look at business options. We expect to let the contract for this very shortly. In addition we have received a National Lottery Microgrant.

- 8. How will you finance the project?*



Our AHF grant will allow us to scope what works are needed to reopen the building safely and what can be planned for the next few years. Funding methods depend on tenure and ownership – options are being explored with people knowledgeable and practising in these areas. A transition to community ownership, by asset transfer, would provide both collateral and access to charitable funds.

- 9. How will you manage the building?*



We believe the building should be managed actively, daily, positively and profitably to maximise the benefit to the community. The oversight of that should come from a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) which would have a board of trustees elected by its members, who would be the community. Our board of directors has experience in the

management of two other Portobello community venues: Bellfield and The Washhouse: there could be advantage to all three organisations to work collaboratively.

As we judge that more pro-active management of the Town Hall day to day might well have secured higher occupancy and greater income for the Council, we think there should be a full-time manager and an accessible and pro-active booking system. In business terms, we think the community would like the asset to be “sweated”.

10. When will it be open for use?



We think that there might be 3 months work within the building to return it to safe use. The work to set up the SCIO has begun, and overall we think a conservative estimate would be 6 months from the day the Council agrees to our proposal. Recruiting the right manager will require care and everything depends, as with most aspects of current life, on progress with COVID-19.

11. You say it would be run by another body: what is that and why would Portobello Central continue?



Portobello Central Ltd was set up solely to be a vehicle to develop a community-based proposal. It is a company limited by guarantee so as to be able to apply for funds and to enter into contracts on its own, without depending on other bodies. Portobello Central Ltd will be wound up when the SCIO is approved; and any remnant funds will be transferred to the SCIO, if formed, or Action Party if not.

12. What changes to the building would you make?



Initially none, beyond those needed to make it safe to open. We think there is a volunteer workforce with many of the professional skills for this. It would be for the SCIO to consider, consult and seek consents for any fundamental changes. As the building is listed grade “B” Listed Building Consent would be needed for anything beyond repair and maintenance. No doubt the SCIO will consider with the community how changes to the building configuration would improve its use having regard to the costs and income that would result.

13. Why do you think you know better than the Council about the condition of the building?



The Council has not made any statement about its condition. It has published extensive documentation about the works it thinks are required for its long-term protection. The Council reports of works detail a plan of maintenance expected to be done over a three year period, the total cost of which lead the Council that it was not fundable within the priorities set for the capital budget, almost entirely committed to schools.

The building was closed in July 2019 after concerns about the condition of a ceiling, a net having been erected over the stage because of falling plaster fragments. We have had two visits to the building, on both occasions accompanied by architects and other professionals. We think we have entered every accessible and some barely accessible parts of the building and nothing of deep concern has emerged. We are seeking professional advice through the report to be commissioned shortly with the Architectural Heritage Fund grant.

14. What right do you have to be in charge of the building?



We have absolutely no ambitions to be in charge, except as temporary proxies for the community which has indicated, strongly, that possession and, probably, ownership should lie in its hands. The Council owns the building as a public asset, therefore for us all and there is considerable concern that the views of the community, for which the Town Hall was built, have had no say in its future.

15. Who are the office bearers in Portobello Central?



The group started with 6 local people, who are directors of the company and have been joined by two more who are associates; brief biographies of each are given on page 36 of our proposal. We expect to bring in others as skills needed are identified and already have had group meetings to take such advice.

At this size of group, there has not, so far, been any call for office bearers. We cooperate, vigorously, for the community, of which we are each part.

16. Are you competing with Bellfield?



Not at all, we have a member who is on the Action Party board and another on the board of The Wash House. We draw on the successes and trials of those and other Portobello organisations, and expect to work collaboratively with them. That's the core of partnership working in this community. A commercial operation in the world of stage and dance would compete with many local businesses, which are central to life in Portobello

17. Why won't you work with Mr Schaufuss?



We will, today, immediately, with vigour if he gives any indication that even a preliminary discussion of partnership is possible.

18. Why so are you making so much effort on the Town Hall and ignoring The George?



The Town Hall has been owned by the community since it was built. Or so the community thought, as it had been constructed by the Council and run for the community for the last century. Now, there is a serious risk that we will never be in it again and, in a few years, its function and potential will have been forgotten and it ends up in private hands.

In contrast, The George was built as a profit-generating private enterprise and has always been in private hands for that purpose. Making that a community space is a different and more substantial exercise, not within the remit of Portobello Central.

19. Who have you consulted? How? How would you consult better if there were more time?



We are lucky in Portobello that there is a lively, connected community – there are over 15,000 members of the Party People Facebook page. Social media was always going to be the best way to contact our community, and vital in lockdown and social distancing. Conversations were had over zoom. We set up a campaign “300 Conversations in 30 Days” using online, email, Twitter and Survey Monkey. In the end we had 540 conversations, analysed in detail in our proposal “New Life for the Centre of Portobello”. The key sense was of potential, strengthened by the growing awareness that space in which to socialise safely was likely to be important over the next few years. The potential was for the new as well as for nostalgia.

If we were doing it again now we would do much the same but use more people and do so in the streets more. Time wasn’t a constraint, contact was. We know we did not get to older and younger people as much as we would have liked – but the core needs expressed would not have changed with more engagement. We addressed this question in the lessons learned section of our consultation (on page 23 in our final proposal).

20. What do you bring to the Town Hall that a commercial bidder can’t?



Fervour, community, commitment, a volunteer army and a wish to work with anyone and everyone who wants our community to thrive.

21. What is your medium-long term solution to help the Council save money?



The current Council plan does not really save much money. The total bill for reviving the building is less than £1 million. A commercial tenant, who would have to pay rates as the Council does (but a charity does not), is not likely to do all the works identified in the Council reports and might easily give up long before the lease expires. The arts and entertainment industry is volatile; the community is always there.

Restructuring as a SCIO would mean the building never returned to the Council as, even if the project failed, it could be transferred only to another charity. The transition to community ownership is a permanent fix.

22. Why do you think you can succeed when the Council report it was making a loss?



We would manage the building to be occupied rather than it being a troublesome and ill-fitting adjunct to the Library service. Letting would be agile and opportunity-seeking and, probably, done in partnership with other community venues. We would actively promote

the venue. Already there are local organisations and businesses interested in being anchor or primary tenants.

23. How do we know PC will stick around?



It won't. If the Town Hall is offered to the community, Portobello Central will catalyse the creation of the SCIO and then either be absorbed into it or just wind up. However you can be sure PC will stick around because we live here, because we have a vested interest in making this work, because we have the track record of Action Party at Bellfield for 4 years and the Wash House committee for the last 30 years – we know how to run Portobello venues.

The SCIO will have trustees, elected by its members who must be members of the community - could be anyone and everyone. It will be regulated by OSCR and have to report each year.

24. What else can PC offer the Council other than taking the building off its hands?



Portobello Central's proposal is for a major contribution to an active community, to be run by a community-managed SCIO. That alone changes the applicable financial regime, and opens access to funding sources not open to the Council (or the Council alone – such as The Regeneration Capital Grant Fund).

The people for whom the Town Hall was built will take it into their own hands to manage under a community-led programme bringing together local people and local businesses of all kinds. Once that has happened it would become an asset which could contribute to major Council priorities such as community cohesion, 20 minute neighbourhoods, local economic regeneration and more. Day to day it would be available for Council funded and run activities with school kids, for evening classes and community education, youth groups, one-stop Council contact point, Councillors' surgeries -it would grow with the community.

In short, it would become a real Town Hall for a vibrant community.

QUESTIONS FOR BOTH PROPOSALS

1. *Portobello Town Hall was built for the benefit of the people of the old Burgh of Portobello. Under your proposals, what legal guarantees are there that the primary beneficiaries of the Town Hall will continue to be the community of Portobello in the long term?*



The creation of a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation, with a board of trustees elected by members of the community and regulated by OSCR would ensure that its charitable purpose was maintained in perpetuity. That is the core of the Portobello Central proposal.

2. *There is no expansion on what the process for determining community is when it comes to rental hours. Both in how this would be determined, and what would be available?*



The management policy and plan for the Town Hall would be a key task for the SCIO Board to develop, implement and monitor, reporting annually to its members, the community.

3. *How would different groups competing for hours be compared. What would be the availability for other community or commercial hire after the essential business hours were utilised?*



The management team, working within the adopted SCIO plan, would be responsible for meeting the needs of the community as far as possible. Community and commercial hires would be part of the mix.

4. *What process of equality would be put in place to review this?*



The management plan would be subject to public consultation and the priority given to different types of users would be set by the SCIO board.

5. *Would other venues in Portobello be involved in the identification of community groups?*



The aspiration is that all Portobello community venues would work collaboratively.

6. *What would the determination process for every night being at Full capacity?*



It is certain that the SCIO board would be ambitious for its business; equally the plan is to make the Town Hall the place to be.

7. *Would a full 24 hour type liquor licence be awarded? Or would a cafe be of a community level or full commercial? Would there be a commercial kitchen available? To what level of availability?*



Given the café culture of Portobello, it is not obvious that a café would be a welcome use for the limited space in competition to existing small businesses. Community cafés are fragile. Events, such as weddings, would need appropriate licensing and catering facilities and this can be provided, with local firms involved.

8. *Would this become a venue for extended activities in periods like the fringe? How would this be monitored?*



While it is tempting to think Fringe or other Festival events would be worthwhile the primary focus would be on service to the community – it would be wrong to suspend child care for comedy. This would be a matter for discussion and decision by the community.

9. *How do they envisage securing the funds for the necessary work required to get the building back up and running in a meaningful/useful way?*



The transition to charitable status changes the applicable financial regime and opens the way to funds like Lottery and Scottish Land Fund. Equally, there are models of funding applicable to charities working under long-term leases.