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Sir Henry Bellingham MP
North West Norfolk

12th April 2018

Dear Sir Henry

It was so good to meet you this evening to share some of my ambitious thoughts on how St George's Guildhall can be at the heart of a resurgent arts, heritage and cultural scene in King's Lynn.

As promised, I summarise below a little background about me and the key aspects of my ideas. I have tried very hard to keep this brief, but I have far too many ideas to make this a quick read.

Career Background

I have worked in the fast-moving consumer goods industry for over 30 years, in large and medium internationally-oriented businesses. For most of that time I have operated at senior executive or boardroom level. Most recently working in the seafood industry for the last 12 years, I am a director of a small, privately owned, £40m turnover company in North Norfolk. My specialism is in sales and marketing.

Personal Background

I have been a long-standing advocate for King's Lynn ever since my wife and I moved from Manchester to work here 27 years ago. Our two children were both born and grew up in Lynn. Since the children have left for university, and my work is based more reliably closer to home, I have had time to become involved in several Community based organisations.

Over the last two years, I have become involved with many experienced people with a huge collective knowledge of Art, Culture and Heritage and of the recent history of St George's Guildhall and the King's Lynn Arts Centre. It is through these connections that I have developed my thoughts and enthusiasm about the Guildhall.

Ideas for consideration.

1. Heritage value of the entire site.

As the largest mediaeval guildhall in England, oldest theatre in Europe, only surviving theatre in the world where Shakespeare performed and its link from the River Ouse to King Street, the entire site has huge potential for tourism exploitation. By engaging with the National Trust to use their expertise and resources, this could place the Guildhall at the heart of Lynn's heritage assets.

2. King's Lynn Art and Culture

King's Lynn (and West Norfolk) is a thriving centre of creativity and hosts a multitude of creative organisations from Orchestras to Festivals, from Artists to Galleries and from specialist interest groups to individual practitioners. There is no support framework nor any organisation that

represents all this creative energy, and so they exist in a competitive “every man for himself” environment.

There is an opportunity for an umbrella organisation to act in the collective interests of **all** Lynn’s creative groups to promote and market them and act as a melting pot of ideas and support for collective endeavour. This would allow the maximum “noise” to be created in the media and promote the town as a venue for creativity.

There is a gap in arts provision for young people and other community-based groups since the demise of KLACTION and this needs to be catered for.

3. National Trust

The Borough Council stepped in to take over the Guildhall’s tenancy in 1992 when the NT faced the loss of its tenant. Now the tables are turned, and the Council is in some difficulty, the NT needs to be made to play a reasonable role in supporting the Council’s plans to re-develop the site, especially in the fields of heritage, retail, catering and marketing.

4. Programming and management

Without proactive programming the site will continue to diminish and fade if it is simply left as a series of spaces for hire. A thoughtful, proactive creative programming schedule is needed to maintain life in the auditorium, galleries and other spaces. This needs to fill the huge audience void that sits between the Corn Exchange (mass market, populist) and the Festival (Radio 3, specialist) offerings. This is a thoughtful, mainstream (Radio 4, BBC2) audience.

Alive Leisure could take on this role, or more appropriately, a new body should be formed to take on the current Corn Exchange and new Guildhall responsibilities. Alternatively, or as a development on this, the Festival should play a key role in this organisation.

5. White Barn

As the largest, un-listed, Council-owned part of the site, there may be compelling reasons to quickly hive off this space to generate much needed income. However, due consideration needs to be given to ensure that its use is complementary to the other future potential of the whole complex. Specifically, the construction of office space for rent to businesses and organisations in the creative and media industries would be beneficial to the use of the whole complex as an art and culture hub. Conversely, using the site for a cinema, as is being suggested, may have detrimental implications for the Majestic cinema and the community cinema club which accounts for 1/3 of all current Guildhall bookings.

6. Shakespeare Barn

The largest and most versatile gallery space, sitting at the heart of the complex with direct access to two outdoor spaces, this has great potential for exhibitions, workshops, studio use and meetings. It needs to be kept as a key accessible part of the whole site and not hived off for inappropriate private use, eg as is being suggested for heritage construction skills course.

7. Permanent Collections and Visiting Exhibitions

Norfolk Museums are sitting on a large archive of unseen works of Walter Dexter, Thomas Baines and other local artists, many of which are stored but not displayed in King’s Lynn. Other bequests of

entire collections of work have been offered to the Art Centre in recent years, but not followed through. Combined with some of the rarely seen work in the Town Hall, this could form the basis of a permanent collection of art, on public display in the Guildhall.

The Eastern Open annual art competition was the largest provincial art competition in the country until it ceased in 2015 with the closure of KLACT. Nothing has yet replaced this, and, except for Groundwork Gallery, no notable art exhibition has been held in Lynn for three years.

8. Catering and Retail

A vibrant, accessible and relevant food and beverage operation is a vital driver of footfall for any attraction of this kind. Similarly, a relevant retail offer – selling gifts, books, souvenirs etc – is a key revenue generator and footfall driver. These are also important to enhance the visitor experience and have the added benefit of generating income. The National Trust has great expertise in this area and should be involved. The current premises – Riverside and Crofters – are ideal locations but need a significant overhaul of their offerings, opening hours and accessibility. If necessary, a tenancy review should be undertaken.

9. The River

A suspended or cantilevered walkway, running from Common Staithe to Purfleet, accessible from the rear of the Guildhall would provide the opportunity for river-based activities to be enjoyed from the Guildhall and link with the Crown & Mitre, Ferry Lane Social Club and Lynn Ferry and provide future potential to further exploit the riverside location.

10. Longer Term

A resurgent Arts Centre at St George's Guildhall could provide a focal point for a credible bid for UK city of culture in 2025. Check the selection criteria from 2021 if you have any doubt about Lynn's suitability for this.

More ambitious and longer term, but nevertheless achievable based on the selection criteria, UNESCO World Heritage Status is a real possibility for King's Lynn. The biggest and only stumbling block to this will be the ambition, drive and vision of the community.

Summary

The above is only a snapshot of some of the things to be considered. My real hope is to encourage the council to listen and engage in real dialogue, stop the secrecy and trust those who have honest ambition for the town and simply want to use their considerable expertise to help achieve the best outcome.

I look forward to hearing back from you.

Yours sincerely

Ivor Rowlands