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Cllr Avril Wright  
Chair  
The Guildhall Informal Working Group  
BCKLWN

2<sup>nd</sup> March 2018

Dear Avril

Encouraged by my recent meeting with you, and of reports in the press of the progress being made towards an improved option for the Guildhall, I have provided below some further detail on a few of the points I alluded to, for your fuller consideration.

### **National Trust involvement**

Do not under-estimate the extent to which the NT could provide support to further a new venture at the Guildhall. Specifically, in the areas of retail, catering, heritage and marketing – all of which are important drivers of footfall and income for any new venture. In the Eastern region, the NT already operates at least 2 joint ventures in its properties – Bury St Edmunds Theatre Royal and Ickworth Hall, which is mostly occupied by a luxury hotel chain.

The NT will never freely agree to any significant involvement while the Borough Council has the legal obligation to maintain the Guildhall. I have studied the NT constitution and have had extensive correspondence, including at the very highest levels with two of the NT Trustees, and am confident that pressure could successfully be brought to bear on the NT to reasonably support an ambitious plan for the Guildhall:

- For a NT Members' Resolution to be put forward to the AGM, its constitution requires only the support of 50 members. It is likely that the Borough Council would get full support from The West Norfolk NT Association for an ambitious Guildhall plan that required reasonable support from the NT.
- Through all my dialogue with the NT, it has been recognised that the Guildhall is a hugely important complex of buildings on a national scale. It is therefore extremely likely that any resolution calling for reasonable NT support would get support of the wider NT Membership and be adopted as NT policy.
- John Sell, a NT Trustee, is a former director of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) and knows Lynn well. He is supportive of the need for appropriate usage for the Guildhall.
- Antony Penrose, the nephew of Alexander Penrose, is supportive of the need for appropriate usage and has offered his support to me and LArCH and written to the NT to tell

them so. He has strong NT connections through his family's bequest of Peckover House in Wisbech (bequeathed to the NT at about the same time as the Guildhall by Alexander Penrose's Aunt, at Alexander's request).

- Because of the Landlord/Tenant relationship between the NT and Borough Council, it may be easier for the negotiations with the NT to be handled by a 3<sup>rd</sup> party. I am more than prepared to do this, as a NT member of some thirty years' standing, and have already been in correspondence with the NT from the highest level down to regional management and with the local Association.

### **Lease arrangements**

Encouraged by the retired Regional Director of the NT, Merlin Waterson, I have been pursuing documents relating to the Guildhall leases. When I spoke to Merlin recently, he recalled that there was a change to the lease in the 1980's or 90's but couldn't recall the detail. I have a copy of the original 1951 lease, and it contains no reference to the Borough Council. **The 1951 agreement is between the National Trust and the St George's Art Trust.** Presumably, at some later point, the Borough Council took over the liability. It is important to understand the circumstances around this change, as it could have a significant bearing on the "moral" if not the legal responsibility for the NT to help the Borough Council.

I have been locked in an unfortunate and rather bizarre stand-off with the Council's legal department, Eastlaw, over a Freedom of Information Act request for these documents. To date, Eastlaw have refused to provide full disclosure and so I am now having to undertake a formal complaint in the hope of revealing the later lease amendments. I am deeply frustrated, not to say angered, by this intransigence and truly wish there was more openness from the Council in this matter. It would seem far more appropriate and sensible if someone on your group could access these documents and understand and share the details, if not already done so.

### **Arts Centres**

I was encouraged by the reports of your visit to Snape Maltings – a great example of the successful conversion of a range of historic buildings into a thriving arts & performance venue, heritage tourist attraction, retail and catering outlets.

I would like to suggest a few other sources of inspiration that I have come across since my involvement, that I could put you in touch with:

- Future Arts Centres (formerly the National Association of Arts Centres) is a group of leading Arts Centres and a source for inspiration, ideas and support.
- Through contact with the FAC CEO, Gavin Barlow, I have visited The Albany – a successful arts centre in south London, which serves as a thriving venue for community arts projects and performances, professional productions and as a hub for local creative businesses to have office space. At the time of my visit – on a Thursday morning in November – the café area was bustling with people in either small social groups, or one-to-one business meetings or simply on their own.

- Also, through contact with FAC, I have spoken at length with Chris Kirkwood, CEO of the Drill Hall, Lincoln. He was very encouraging, supportive and understanding of the challenges of running a small-scale performance venue in the shadow of a larger “mainstream” theatre and happy to advise in relation to the Guildhall as a performance centre.
- Norwich Playhouse (and Norwich Arts Centre and Cinema City, to some extent) is a good example of how a small-scale venue can differentiate itself to thrive in the shadow of its larger competitor (Norwich Theatre Royal). For example, the bar at the Playhouse is a destination in its own right.

### **Community Participation**

King’s Lynn (and West Norfolk) is a thriving centre of creativity and hosts a multitude of creative organisations from Orchestras to small and large 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** these 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 conventional and social media and promote art and culture in Lynn across the board, as well as promote the town as a venue for creativity.

A good example, is the current dilemma of the Greyfriars Art Space group of artists. Their future is uncertain as the benevolent owner of their premises is being forced to sell the building to pay for care costs of an elderly parent. The Guildhall has ideal accommodation for their uses, but there has been a stumbling block created over rental costs. A “bigger picture” scenario might see this as an opportunity to create a vibrant, ongoing use for part of the Guildhall complex.

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 the King’s Lynn Arts Centre. Nothing has yet replaced this, but the vacuum left by the demise of KLACTION has meant that no-one has come forward to re-instate it, losing for the town its most prestigious art event. An umbrella organisation could secure these kind of activities, independent of the success or failure of any one organisation or committee.

I have termed this group LArCH (Lynn Art Culture and Heritage) but am quite happy for it to take on any form. This would be a fantastic feature of a revitalised Guildhall / Arts Centre.

### **King’s Lynn Festival**

It is difficult to envisage a successful outcome for the Guildhall that doesn't include the current Festival being at the heart of things. Apart from the historical connections, the Festival is the only organisation with a management structure, staff, resources, financial control and experience to be able to take on such a large scale complex project.

Undoubtedly, the Festival is not currently fully equipped to do this, but with the correct support from all other sources, including the Council, and with a comprehensive joint business plan, the Festival could be enlarged to play a much bigger and leading role. I know from my discussions with Festival Directors and Staff that this is a difficult challenge and that there are a wide range of views amongst them. I am also acutely aware how far the Festival is dependent on the Council financially and how this may influence the views that their Directors may feel able to express.

We like to think of King's Lynn as a Festival Town, but there is little that joins the various festivals together – except, ironically, the Borough Council, which supports all of them in a non-cohesive way. The Borough Council and the Festival would need to both be fully engaged for a LArCH-like organisation to work.

### **Specialists, Artists and Performers**

This is by no means an exhaustive list of people I have collaborated with. You may be aware of some or all of these and may have your own reasons for wanting to engage with some or all of them, or not:

- Veronica Sekules – Director of Groundwork and former Education Director of the Sainsbury's Gallery at UEA – has extensive knowledge, experience and contacts in Arts administration. In addition to showing great willingness to be involved in LArCH, Veronica has suggested that a first step towards creation of a LArCH-like organisation could be to apply to the Arts Council for a small grant, sufficient to fund a feasibility assessment, business plan development and identify funding sources.
- Nick Balaam – Director of King's Lynn Preservation Trust, Adrian Parker – Retired Planner, Chair of Friends of St Nicholas', Festival Vice Chair – both enthusiasts for the arts with specialist knowledge of heritage planning and conservation and supportive of the aims of an ambitious plan and a LArCH-like organisation.
- Darren Taylor – MD of KLFM and Chair of King's Lynn BID – enthusiastic supporter of what an ambitious solution to the Arts Centre could do for local business.
- Desmond Waite MVO – retired architect with a lifetime's experience of heritage development in King's Lynn – sadly now in very poor failing health, but a huge advocate of an ambitious plan for the Guildhall to be developed into a significant cultural and heritage asset for the town. Despite his failing health, over the past three years Desmond has written several discussion papers with expansive ideas and has written to me repeatedly in support of my endeavours to push for collaboration. Sadly, there has been little discussion of these suggestions. I can supply copies of Desmond's papers if desired.
- Robert Anderson – former Director of the British Museum – has a house in King Street and has offered his considerable expertise to help formulate and/or support an ambitious plan.

- Andrew Jarvis – experienced Shakespearean actor and director, recently moved to Clenchwarton and keen to support the Arts Centre and bring performances including Shakespeare, to Lynn.
- Tim Fitzhigham – actor, eccentric world record breaker and son of Norfolk – has offered to help in any way he can.
- Sir Antony Gormley – leading British sculptor, now a resident of and with a studio in West Norfolk. He expressed an interest in working in Lynn when I first contacted him immediately after the closure of KLACTION, but I have had no means to follow up his interest.

### **Leadership**

To pull together the various strands of interested parties that could allow an ambitious and credible solution to emerge will require strong leadership and a clear vision. It also needs the willing participation from all of the wider groups and organisations in the community. However, I know from my own part-time involvement, that there is a real appetite for collaboration. What is now required is for a strong leader to take the initiative and this can only come from within the Borough Council as the ultimate holder of the Guildhall's lease.

The success of Alive Leisure could serve as a good example of how the Council has provided leadership to the challenge of the provision of sports facilities across the Borough. Perhaps a similar structure could be used for Art, Culture and Heritage? This could be facilitated by an expansion of Alive's remit or, more likely, removing the Corn Exchange from Alive and including it, along with the Guildhall complex into a new formally constituted body.

### **Being a Critical Friend**

Over the past couple of years, as I have tried to establish a dialogue with elected councillors and appointed officers, I have found myself largely vilified, shunned and referred to as a troublemaker. This is not my intention and it is precisely because I **support** the town, the Guildhall and the Borough Council, that I have remained involved and committed so much of my time to identify possibilities. I would like to be considered a critical friend, whose only intention is for the right and best result for the town and the Guildhall. I don't have all the answers and I'm sure many of my ideas don't stand up on their own. However, the best outcome will be found from as many credible inputs as possible. It is completely unreasonable for this to be a problem that the Council must resolve by itself, when there are so many other experienced and available sources.

I am delighted that you are leading the working group to a proposal and pleased that I have been able to address you in that process. I dearly hope that we will have more dialogue and discussion in the coming weeks.

Yours sincerely

Ivor Rowlands

cc: Cllrs Collingham, Manning, Middleton and Tyler.