



Members' Bulletin – January 2021: Buildings Trust Report

Update on the Abbey Buildings Enhancement Project

Members will remember that in 2017 the Friends of Abingdon won a £70,000 grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) to undertake a feasibility study for major enhancements to the Buildings. The study was completed in February 2018 and we decided to pursue the 'Enhancement Project' seeking major grants from the NLHF towards the estimated budget of £4.5 million.

The process is quite complex, requiring two rounds of funding: Round 1/Development and Round 2/Delivery, the capital build phase. In normal times the process would take about 4 years to complete, however the past two years have been anything but normal. We had planned to submit our Round 1 application in 2019, but this was delayed when the NLHF closed the scheme for a while for a strategic review. For each stage, the organiser has to demonstrate to the NLHF that they can raise funding from other sources for about 20% of the budget so during this period, we raised the necessary matched funding with grants from Abingdon Town Council, and several local and national grant awarding bodies.

In early 2020 we prepared our application for Round 1 funding. Sadly, we all know what happened next, the global pandemic, COVID 19 and the NLHF halted all applications. I am pleased to report that the NLHF have recently announced that they will reopen for applications in February. We have been in close touch with our advisors there, who are very supportive of our project and we hope to make our Round 1/Development application in the next few months, nearly two years later than planned.

It has been a period of great international concern and sadness and every walk of life has been affected. However, it has strengthened our resolve to complete the Enhancement Project as we know it will conserve these important buildings for generations to come, make them secure and accessible for all and enable them to develop into an important heritage attraction and an enhanced community asset for local people to enjoy.

Current activities and plans

Like most other venues, the Abbey Buildings have been forced to close since Spring 2020, meaning we had to cancel all lettings for the Unicorn Theatre and all events apart from a handful of very small weddings.

The result is that we have had no income. We cannot furlough our two part time staff, as they are responsible for security in our town centre location and have had to deal with the cancellations and postponements. So, our main activity of the last 9 months has been to apply for emergency funding -with some success. Fortunately, we have some modest reserves and so will remain solvent for a while yet.

However we remain hopeful that things will improve this year, so I would like to take this opportunity to seek volunteers to help when we open the Buildings for visitors, hopefully in the summer. We welcome those who have kindly given their time in the past and we welcome new volunteers. No specialist knowledge is required - we provide induction training on the history of the Buildings and those who do it will tell you that it is fun and friendships develop. If you would like to know more, or put your name forward, please contact our Administrator, Brandi Simpson Miller: phone 01235 525339 or email administrator@abingdonabbeybuildings.co.uk .

Bryan Brown
Chairman, The Friends of Abingdon Abbey Buildings Trust