

**Agenda Item No:** **Report No:**  
**Report Title:** **Office Accommodation**  
**Report To:** **Cabinet** **Date:** **21 November 2007**  
**Lead Councillor:** **Councillor J Freeman**  
**Ward(s) Affected:** **Lewes Bridge**  
**Report By:** **John Crawford, Chief Executive**  
**Contact Officer(s):** **John Crawford**

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**Purpose of Report:**

**To explain changes that are needed to implement the Cabinet's policy to reduce operating expenses by vacating and disposing of 3A Fisher Street, Lewes.**

**Officers Recommendations:**

- 1** To agree to dispose of the freehold of 3a Fisher Street for a capital receipt.
  - 2** To resume the office use of the ground floor of Thebes Annexe at Lewes House as part of the accommodation review.
  - 3** To continue to employ the part-time staff in the Cultural Services team to support gallery exhibitions within the District.
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**Reasons for Recommendations**

- 1** To enable the Council to dispose of 3a Fisher Street.

**Information**

- 2** At the Cabinet meeting on 6 June (Minute 27) I reported that a feasibility study had been carried out to establish whether it would be possible to reorganise accommodation within Lewes House and Southover House, to accommodate the staff who currently work in 3a Fisher Street. The outcome would be to dispose of 3a Fisher Street for a capital receipt and to save the running costs of the building.
- 3** The Cabinet resolved that the District Valuer be instructed to give a current valuation of 3a Fisher Street, on the open market and that we test market interest in the building through local estate agents.
- 4** We are satisfied that we can relocate the staff and that 3a Fisher Street can be sold for a substantial capital receipt. However, we will need to use every

available space in Lewes House and recover for office use the 65 sq. metres of space in Thebes Annexe currently in use as an art gallery.

- 5** Once 3a Fisher Street is disposed of, the Council's administrative buildings in Lewes will be:
  - Lewes House and Thebes Annexe
  - 4 Fisher Street
  - Southover House
- 6** Although we are reducing the floor space we occupy, we also need to make some provision to improve some cramped working conditions in 4 Fisher Street.
- 7** To enable us to release 3a Fisher Street we need to resume the use of the ground floor of Thebes as office accommodation. One of the Finance teams, probably Audit and Performance Review, will be accommodated in that space.
- 8** Thebes Annexe was used as office accommodation for the District Council and its predecessors for many years. Until 1997, it accommodated most of the Environmental Health department. When the Council purchased Southover House, we transferred a lot of storage to the basement of the Town Hall. That left some space on the ground of Thebes Annexe. We made some alterations to accommodate an exhibition for the Railway Land Project with the support of Arts Council grant. When that exhibition terminated, we allowed the use of the space for art exhibitions to continue on an informal basis.
- 9** The art gallery has been successful in providing low cost gallery space for artists. The financial terms on which the gallery space is let is explained in the financial paragraph. During the past few years there have been other spaces that have been used for exhibitions. With the support of the District Council, ArtWave has become a very successful cultural activity within the District. In respect of the Lewes House buildings, we can continue to support temporary exhibitions, such as the one that was recently in the garden at Lewes House and on occasions make the Warren Room available.
- 10** There have been four major sculpture exhibitions in Lewes Town Hall within the past 10 years, which the District Council has supported:
  - Rodin – 1999
  - Anthony Caro – 2003
  - Henry Moore – 2005
  - David Nash – 2007

We have also supported incidental exhibitions in Southover Grange gardens and other places within the District. We have supported an exhibition of Finnish art in the Fort at Newhaven. I have mentioned those exhibitions as a reminder that the District Council has supported art exhibitions as part of the cultural activity in the town and its benefits to tourism.

- 11 I sent a letter to the organisations that have been involved with the Thebes Galley explaining the need to make the change back to office accommodation. I have received in response a number of representations (see Appendix A). The most common themes in the letters are that the terms for exhibitors are much more favourable than commercial galleries and that we should not implement the closure of Thebes until another equivalent facility is open. I do not think that the Council can give such a guarantee but we will look at other options to continue art exhibitions as part of the cultural and tourism activities within the District.
- 12 As time moves on, there will be other spaces that may become available to be used as exhibition space and the staff will take those opportunities as they arise and build them into ArtWave and other cultural programmes. The Chapel Arts Centre in Newhaven has recently come under new management and is another resource for art exhibitions in the District.
- 13 I have discussed with the Town Clerk of Lewes Town Council the new opportunities that will arise following the installation of the lift in the Town Hall and the refurbishment of the All Saints Centre. The Town Hall could accommodate some of the exhibitions that have previously been held in Thebes. The refurbishment of the All Saints Centre will provide new space which could be used for some of the exhibitions that have previously taken place in Thebes.
- 14 The Crypt Gallery will continue to be an attractive venue for art exhibitions and may in the future be devolved to Seaford Town Council.
- 15 We currently have two part-time staff who assist in the administration of Cultural Services within the District. One part time Gallery Manager helps to coordinate the programme for exhibitions (including exhibitions at The Crypt, Seaford and Thebes) and one part-time steward looks after the stewarding of Thebes and The Crypt for 30 hours per month.
- 16 I propose that we continue to employ these staff to support gallery exhibitions within the District.

## **Financial Appraisal**

- 17 Hirers of Thebes Gallery pay an inclusive licence fee of £175 per week. Hire income from Thebes in 2006/07 was £3,325 plus an extra £330 for use of the Council's credit card machine and database mail-outs. There were 17 exhibitions and the exhibitors recorded 10,022 visitors. In quarters 1 & 2 this year there were eight exhibitions which produced hire income of £2,625 plus £215 for the extra services. The exhibitors recorded 6,652 visitors.
- 18 The users who book the gallery look after their own staffing and commercial arrangements. The District Council does not take any commission from any paintings that are sold during an exhibition. The Council pays for security, lighting and heating and business rates of the art gallery space. The Cultural Services team provide coordination of exhibition programmes for the Thebes

and the Crypt galleries. The staff costs are set out in Appendix B to this report in the exempt section of the Cabinet papers.

- 19** The maintenance costs of the art gallery space in Thebes would be removed from the operational budget of the Cultural Services team but the rest of the budget can remain to support exhibitions in other venues.

### **Environmental Implications**

- 20** I have completed the Environmental Implications questionnaire and this Report is exempt from the requirement because it is a business progress report.

### **Risk Management Implications**

- 21** I have completed a risk assessment in accordance with the Council's risk management methodology and the following risks in mitigating factors have been identified:

There are two different kinds of risk associated with this proposal:

- (a) The first risk is that if we do not take back the space in Thebes we will not be able to complete the office accommodation changes that are necessary to enable us to dispose of 3a Fisher Street. That building will therefore be a continuing cost to the Council.
- (b) There is a risk that some of the goodwill that has been built up over the years in respect of exhibitions within Thebes will be lost. We can mitigate that risk by working with arts organisations within the District and the Town Councils of Lewes and Seaford.

### **Background Papers**

- 22** The bookings register and other administrative records relating to Thebes gallery. The Cabinet decision at its meeting held on 6 June 2007 (Minute No 27 refers) which approved the proposal to review the Council's office accommodation and dispose of 3a Fisher Street.

### **Appendices**

#### **Appendix A: Representations Received**

#### **Appendix B: Staff Costs for Thebes Art Gallery**

**Appendix A: Representations Received**

Letters or emails from the following:

1. The Sussex Watercolour Society which has commented on the successful exhibitions they have held in Thebes and the fact that there is nothing in this area, including Brighton and Hove, to compare with Thebes Gallery.
2. A resident of Cowfold, West Sussex who has exhibited at Thebes and considers the Gallery has a very high reputation and should not be closed.
3. Sussex Downs College who have expressed their disappointment that the facility will no longer be available for prisoners to exhibit their work.
4. Two residents of Alciston who ask the Council to provide a permanent alternative exhibition space for local artists prior to the closure of Thebes.
5. A resident of Lewes who held a successful art show in February 2007 and asks that we provide alternative suitable space.
6. A resident of Lewes who considers that Lewes House and garden, with Thebes is an important cultural visitor attraction and should not be used for office accommodation.
7. A resident who comments that any artist residing in Lewes District can book exhibition time in Thebes on a first come, first served basis without any entrance fee and that is what arts development and cultural services should be about. The resident refers to commercial art gallery practice and the changing circumstances of art galleries in Lewes.
8. A letter from the Star Group of the All Saints Centre signed by nine people commenting that there are few commercial art galleries in Lewes and that these do not provide a platform for the diverse and wider artistic community in East Sussex. They consider a dedicated exhibition space is necessary for the Lewes economy for tourism and to help enrich cultural life for the people of East Sussex.
9. A resident of Selmeston, Polegate who comments that commercial galleries do not provide a platform for everyone and who refers to the proposal to transform the crypt in the town hall into a public art gallery which did not proceed. The resident suggests that the crypt in the town hall might be looked at again for that purpose.
10. The Eastbourne Group of Contemporary Artists. A letter signed by 12 people who ask the Council to provide a permanent alternative exhibition space for local artists to show their work in Lewes prior to the closure of Thebes.
11. A letter from a resident of Pevensey in East Sussex, who is a member of the Star Gallery Group. The resident mentions successful exhibitions that have been held in Thebes and stresses that Thebes has provided opportunities for

group and solo exhibitions on a regular basis for works of a varied and interesting nature by amateur, semi-professional and professional artists and young aspiring artists. The resident asks that we find alternative exhibition space.

12. A letter from a resident of Whitesmith in the same terms as the one from Star Gallery Group.
13. A letter from a resident of East Chiltington who expresses regret at the number of art galleries that have recently closed. The resident suggests that the closure of Thebes will disrupt the established art trail that brings visitors to Lewes with knock-on effects on the local economy.
14. A resident of North Chailey who makes the point that Thebes is the only publicly owned gallery space of its type and size in Lewes that can be privately hired by anyone in the artists' community.
15. Three letters from residents of Lewes in similar terms expressing regret at the closure of Thebes and asking for an alternative space for local artists to be able to show their works at economical cost.
16. A letter from a resident of Lamberhurst, Kent expressing regret at the decline in Lewes District Council's support for visual arts, suggesting that the Council should have alternative facilities in place before Thebes closes.