

**Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee - Thursday, 15th
December, 2016**

4. **Petition re: Arts and Community Services at the Shire Hall, Stafford** (Pages 1 - 2)

Verbal Evidence from the lead petitioner

Statement in support of the Save the Shire Hall Gallery petition

It is a privilege and responsibility to present to you the petition as detailed in your agenda, to save the Shire Hall Gallery and related arts services. It has been signed by over 3000 people living in, and associated with, Staffordshire and I am delighted to know that the County Council wants to hear, and more importantly respond to, the ideas and wishes of the people of our county.

Hundreds of the petitioners took the time to write impassioned statements alongside their signatures. To have to try to convey the full depth of their concern for the future of the Shire Hall Gallery within 5 minutes is extremely difficult but I will try! Please give me a fraction over 5 minutes and I shall be able to breath as well as speak!

Many petitioners spoke of the gallery and its associated community and family based activities as fantastic and amazing, educational and enlightening, improving the quality of our lives, giving solace to vulnerable and needy people, a great place to take the children, a place of cultural diversity offering an ever changing and exciting programme of exhibitions, workshops and events, a place to visit time and time again and to bring visitors to. One person summed it up by saying 'It is far more important than money - a wonderful place that simply must be saved'. Thousands of people – your people - feel very strongly indeed that the Shire Hall Gallery **MUST BE SAVED AT ALL COSTS!!** On behalf of the petitioners, I appeal to you to make it happen!

Set this against the County Council's avowed plan to close the gallery for ever next April! Is that listening? Is that hearing? Is that using your resources wisely? I DON'T THINK SO!

Let's take a minute or two to consider some of the facts.

The Shire Hall Gallery has, over more than 23 years, built and maintained a nationally recognised reputation for excellence and innovation. No other Staffordshire gallery approaches this achievement.

'Pop up' exhibitions have been mentioned as an alternative – but I suspect not costed! As visual arts officer at what is now Arts Council England West Midlands, one of the many things I established was touring exhibitions to non-gallery venues throughout the region. Done properly, this is, I can assure you, very expensive and would show no saving against the cost of the gallery.

The Shire hall Gallery continues to welcome around 76,000 visitors a year, **DESPITE** suffering the indignity and the total surprise of having to give up half its space to an unsightly recruiting area for Wolverhampton University, **DESPITE** losing the footfall associated with the library and the Balcony coffee bar, **DESPITE** the traffic gridlock which made the centre of Stafford a no go area for the past two to three years, **DESPITE** the commercial demise of the town centre over the same period of time. The Shire Hall Gallery is still there delighting its many visitors from all over the country and indeed the world. As a tourist attraction alone it has to be worth its weight in gold – and, incidentally, the gallery makes more than £80,000 a year from sales which tends not to feature in any of the figures I have seen.

The Shire Hall Gallery is not only a spectacular survivor, continuing to warmly welcome everyone right in the heart of our county town, but it makes uniquely appropriate use of a beautiful and majestic, late 18th century, grade 2* listed building which cannot be touched inside or out.

The building and the gallery are inseparably described by the petitioners as the heart and soul of the county town and the jewel in the crown of our town's dwindling heritage. The town is currently welcoming 10,000 new homes and it needs to offer all those new families excellent cultural amenities or, heaven forbid, the place will become simply a dormitory town.

I understand that SCC has been drawing up some plans to try to justify the closure of the Shire Hall Gallery. It seems the old library will house a couple of local organisations and that there might also be a restaurant in the main atrium - Stafford town centre certainly needs more good restaurants.

I am less sure about the idea of a coffee bar in Court 2. Even if the stringent 2* listing could be renegotiated to remove the original late 18th century tiered seating, access is exceptionally poor and it is tucked away out of sight. Surely it would be far better to retain and enhance its present use for family, community, and cultural use.

Finally we come to the Shire Hall itself and the plan becomes very unclear to me and, I suspect, even to those devising the plan. Guess what! A wedding venue! A conference centre! Perhaps a bit of a display retained as the vestiges of the gallery. **WHAT A TRAGIC WASTE!** To throw out our much loved and established gallery and for what – an empty space the demand for which is totally unproven!

A far better place for the coffee bar and tea rooms would be alongside the saved Shire Hall Gallery in the Shire Hall itself. Wow! Think about the splendour of the Pump Rooms in Bath or the art gallery and tourism complex in the Pump Rooms in Leamington Spa. This would be Stafford's equivalent! As a total package I am sure you could not only balance the books but also anticipate a reasonable profit.

I implore each and every one of you to use your personal integrity and set aside party political divisions by passing on a positive recommendation to the Cabinet.

LISTEN TO THE PETITIONERS AND PLEASE, PLEASE DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO SAVE THE SHIRE HALL GALLERY!

Lisa Henderson. 15th December 2016