

## 11. The Great Bow Wharf, Langport – Update Report

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### Purpose of the Report

To update members on the first three years operating position of the Great Bow Wharf and Warehouse Trust, Langport.

### Public Interest

The project to restore a former Grade II listed warehouse (now known as the Great Bow Wharf) in Langport, received grants of around £240,000 from South Somerset District Council contributing to a total funding package of around £800,000. The project aimed to reinvigorate the western gateway into the town, and to provide additional workspace, community space and business support for the Langport area.

The Great Bow Wharf opened for business in 2007, and has continued to benefit from practical and advisory support from SSDC. This report sets out a brief update on progress since then.

### Recommendation

That members note and comment on the report.

### Background to this report

Situated in Langport, on the eastern bank of the River Parrett, Great Bow Wharf is a Grade II listed building, restored and reopened in 2007. The aim was to repair the warehouse as an example of sustainable and historic restoration and to develop a centre with high quality office space for permanent tenants, meeting rooms for hire and a cafe, thereby supporting the regeneration of the town.

The Warehouse Trust was set up to be the owner and managing body of the Great Bow Wharf. It is a charity and company limited by guarantee, with two members: the Ecos Trust (formally the Somerset Trust for Sustainable Development) and the Langport Area Development Trust (LADT). Each member appoints directors to the board of the Warehouse Trust which now owns and manages the building, providing services to businesses and the local community, and promoting sustainable development.

The Great Bow Wharf sits alongside the Great Bow Yard Eco-Homes development completed by the Ecos Trust.

SSDC was involved in the early stages of the development of the whole site, as both the Local Planning Authority and as a partner in the Langport regeneration programme. A capital grant of £200,000 from the corporate capital programme, £30,000 from the Historic Buildings budget, and around £10,000 for early feasibility work contributed to the funding of the project. Other sources of funds included a grant from the South West Regional Development Agency (£350,000), planning gain from the Eco-Homes development and loans.

**The Great Bow Wharf** [www.greatbow.org.uk](http://www.greatbow.org.uk)

### **Management and staffing:**

For the first nine months the management of the Great Bow Wharf was provided by Ecos and the LADT each drawing an income, however, it became clear that a dedicated manager was needed to run the centre, to provide a professional service to clients, to grow the business and to fulfill its stated social aims. A part time, 20-hour post was created in June 2008, which subsequently expanded to 24 hours per week. The Trust now employs two permanent members of staff, with the further creation of an 8-hour assistant's post.

The current staffing level has effectively minimised the reliance on the Trust's directors to provide support for core services. The staff team carry out marketing, tenant liaison, event & room bookings, the day to day running of the building and its services, administrative support to the directors board, developing social and community use, and financial management.

### **Business workspace:**

The Warehouse is an energy efficient building, recently receiving an "A" rating; it comprises ten usable units, including a mixture of rented office space, the cafe and meeting rooms.

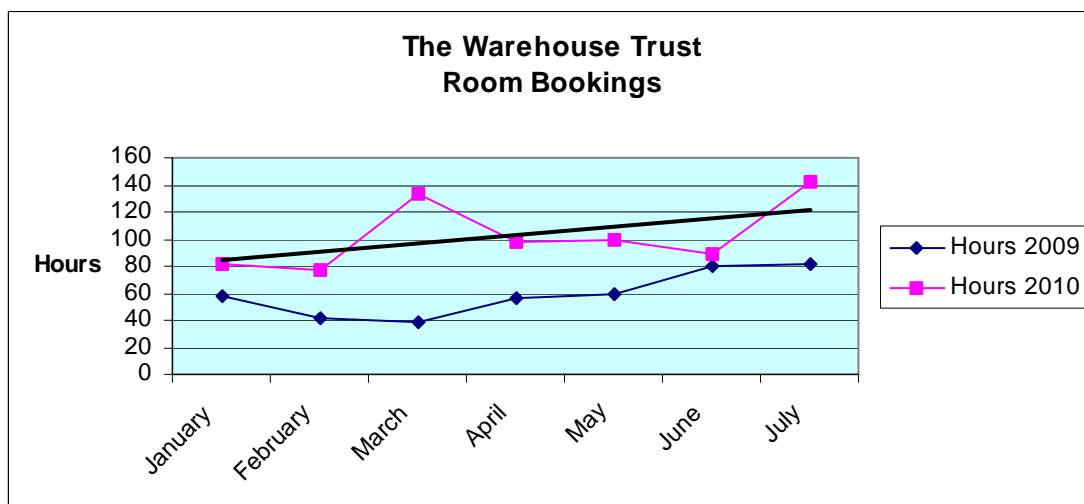
There are currently six tenant businesses in the Warehouse, including the Old Wharf Café and the Ecos Trust. Levels of occupancy have remained high, despite the recession. Of the tenants who have moved on, one has purchased their own property as a result of the business' success, while two moved into alternative premises more suited to their needs.

The Warehouse Trust has developed a flexible approach to the hiring of its spaces, accommodating desk hire for individuals and supporting growing businesses by moving them to larger units as they become available. If offices are left empty for any period of time, they are let as meeting rooms to maximise income.

### **Room Hire:**

Room hire comprises a mixture of community, commercial and public sector use. Rooms are booked on an hourly basis with the option to order refreshments and catering as required. Community groups and tenants receive a discounted rate.

Targeted marketing has contributed to an increase in room hire, especially within the public, voluntary and business sectors. The Warehouse Trust is aware that cuts in public sector spending could impact this side of the business, so it is a continuing priority to expand their customer base for room hire.



### **Café and catering services:**

The Old Wharf Café operates as a tenant of the Great Bow Wharf and provides some of the catering to organisations that hire rooms. It supports the new cinema club by providing pre-film suppers and is increasing its own customer base both for private functions and off site catering. The Warehouse Trust also uses other local catering firms to provide refreshments to hirers.

### **Community:**

Run by volunteers, the new Langport Community Cinema operates a monthly screening of films and provides matinee presentations for elderly people.

To extend the use of the building to other members of the community, the Warehouse has piloted a short holiday activities programme for children. In keeping with its sustainability ethos, it ran arts and crafts sessions using natural and recycled materials. It offers the SSDC Passport to Leisure scheme to ensure the sessions are affordable to all.

There is a regular Tai Chi class and some private hire at weekends.

### **Business Support:**

As part of its marketing strategy, the Warehouse Trust has targeted organisations offering business support and training as a key sector, they have also hosted business surgeries delivered by Business Link. The Centre Manager is looking to increase direct provision of support for local businesses and networking opportunities.

### **Marketing and Publicity:**

In 2009 the Warehouse Trust improved its marketing strategy for the Great Bow Wharf, which identified the unique selling points of the centre for potential users. A website was launched and used a feature for e-mail marketing, within two months the impact could be measured on room bookings. The Centre Manager continues to identify new potential markets and intends to use e-mail campaigns because of the relative low cost and wide reaching effect.

### **Governance:**

The Warehouse Trust is a charity and a company limited by guarantee. It comprises two members, the Langport Area Development Trust and the Ecos Trust; each member

appoints two Directors to form the board of the Warehouse Trust. In the light of the experience of the past three years, the Trust is now reviewing its governance, in particular to increase the numbers of directors for the board providing greater levels of involvement with the organization.

Key areas of focus identified for the directors are to increase support to the staff team, review and develop long-term targets and objectives, increase oversight of property management, continue to increase financial planning and promote wider community engagement. There are a number of options under discussion, with the intention to implement changes by the end of the year. Changes to the Memorandum and Articles need to be approved first by each member, prior to being adopted by the Warehouse Trust itself. SSDC is providing support to this process.

### **Finance:**

As with any new business, establishing adequate cash flow and meeting all debts has been challenging. At times the financial viability of the Great Bow Wharf has seemed precarious. The Board of Directors and Centre Manager have taken steps to address this situation, which is now much improved.

The current operating budget is around £86,000 per annum with a mixture of income from room hire, rents and service charges. Operating costs include loan repayments, property maintenance, salaries and utilities, with at present very little surplus for future years. The lack of a 'sinking fund' for future repairs to protect the capital investment is of concern to the Board, and this is the main focus for future financial planning.

Sound financial controls are in place, and a financial health check and action plan has been completed with assistance from the Somerset voluntary sector support service (ViSTA). In addition the board has benefited from advice and support from the Community Enterprise Unit, and from SSDC legal and financial services.

In the longer term, completing the repayment of loans (ten years from 2007), should in turn release funds for future repairs and maintenance, and for other projects to help develop the business. In the medium term the Warehouse Trust intends to apply for grants for development projects with contributions towards core operating costs.

### **Planning issues:**

At the time of writing, the area of land that surrounds the warehouse (including the river bank, shared residents garden and roadway) does not benefit from full planning consent for its change of use (from industrial land) and associated physical works. The Ecos Trust, which has to date acted as the applicant for the site, has indicated to SSDC officers that it intends to apply for a Certificate of Lawfulness.

At one time, there was an aspiration that there would be a public or permissive right of way through the site to the Common Moor, allowing the re-routing of the River Parrett Trail. This has not been achieved to date, and at the time of writing appears most unlikely to be progressed. Much of the land which could be used for public access is now owned by the Great Bow Yard Residents Association, who have voiced opposition to this scheme.

### **Parking:**

On-site parking for the Great Bow Wharf is restricted to disabled use and deliveries. The Warehouse Trust actively encourages hirers to limit car use. The Area North Committee recently funded improvements to the Westover car parking area to provide some additional parking in the area. As previously reported a further review of car parking

across Langport will take place in conjunction with Langport Town Council later in the year.

### **Summary and next steps**

Through its first three years the Warehouse Trust has faced a number of operational issues, however, with support from SSDC officers and business advice from organisations such as the Community Enterprise Unit, the board and management have reviewed practices to the benefit of the organisation. The reputation of the Great Bow Wharf is growing as evidenced by increased hire, often from word of mouth recommendation.

The Centre Manager and Directors should be commended for their commitment to the continued improvement and development of the Great Bow Wharf.

A long-term financial plan, including a sinking fund for future refurbishment is still a work in progress, but there are continuous signs of improving viability. SSDC financial services will continue to offer support as required. The Area North Development team maintains close contact with the Warehouse Trust supporting the delivery of its business plan, with the aim of continually reducing support as the capacity of the organisation grows.

Current priorities from the business plan:

- Implement review of governance to expand and develop the Board of Directors (Oct 10)
- Continue to implement marketing plan and develop programmes for community use.
- Revise targets and objectives for the next three years (Dec 10)

### **Financial Implications**

None from this report

### **Corporate Priority Implications**

The Great Bow Wharf contributes towards the following themes and key target areas in the Corporate Plan:

Theme 1: Increase economic vitality and prosperity

1.8: Increase VAT registered businesses showing growth

1.9: Increase overall employment rate

1.11: A vibrant and sustainable Yeovil, Market Towns and Rural Economy

1.17: Reduce previously developed land that has been derelict or vacant for more than 5 years

Theme 2: Enhance the environment, address and adapt to climate change

2.10: Make full use of the latest development and building regulations to make sure that all development conforms to the highest feasible standards of sustainable construction

## **Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)**

The Warehouse is a grade II listed building, sensitively renovated using sustainable building techniques and local materials; it is an “A” rated energy efficient building. Because of its reputation for sustainable development, it attracts clients who offer training and seminars in eco efficiencies and sustainability.

## **Equality and Diversity Implications**

The Warehouse Trust has its own equalities policy. The redesign of the building was DDA compliant and it is therefore accessible to all abilities.

**Background Papers:** *Capital Appraisal – District Executive – Dec 2005*

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