

**REPORT TO: EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE ON
13 FEBRUARY 2008**

**SUBJECT: ELGIN TOWN HALL: ALTERATIONS TO SUPPER ROOM TO
PROVIDE A TRAINING VENUE**

BY: DIRECTOR OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

1. REASON FOR REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is for members to consider approving alterations to the Supper Room at Elgin Town Hall to increase its function as a Council training and meeting venue during weekday daytimes. The Supper Room would continue to operate as a community facility during the evening and at weekends.
- 1.2 This report is submitted to Committee in terms of Section D (13) of the Council's Administrative Scheme relating to the Council's statutory duties dealing with the management of facilities for recreational, sporting, cultural and social activities.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 **It is recommended that Committee approves alterations being made to the Supper Room at Elgin Town Hall to enable it to operate as a Council training and meeting venue during the daytime on weekdays.**
- 2.2 **It is recommended that conversion take place no sooner than August 2008 in order to provide a time period for existing daytime users to find alternative accommodation.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Council is short of adequate training and meeting venues, particularly in the Elgin area. During 2006/07 expenditure by the Council overall on the main external venues for meetings, training and conferences was £92,000. The trend for 2007/08 shows a significant reduction but expenditure is still likely to be in the region of £70,000.
- 3.2 Whilst the cost is substantial, there are also practical problems associated with using a variety of non-specialist venues. These include:- training often has to be organised around the availability of venues rather than at the most effective time, bookings can be cancelled at short notice, equipment has to be transported, set up and dismantled (which takes time and can result in damage) and the size and accessibility of venues can severely limit the number of course participants.

3.3 Whilst the demand for training and meeting venues covers all departments, the need is most acute in Development Services (Educational Services), Training (Legal & Administration) and Community Services.

3.4 Investigations have been conducted into existing Council accommodation that could be utilised for training purposes. These included:-

Bishopmill House: This facility is maintained on a wind and watertight basis in order that accommodation can be made available quickly in the event of a civil emergency. This facility was rejected as a corporate training venue due to the cost of conversion and the difficulty of integrating the training function with the premises' primary purpose as an emergency rest centre.

Moray Music Centre: Parking, access difficulties and the fact that it is unmanned means this venue is not ideal but it is felt that improving its availability during the day would help to meet some of the demand for training space. As a consequence, in combination with other facilities, it is believed the Music Centre should be more widely used as a training venue.

East End Primary School: Work is now complete on conversion of spare classroom accommodation into training space for Educational Services and this will help reduce overall corporate demand.

Elgin Town Hall, Supper Room: The Supper Room is already used as a training facility on an ad hoc basis. Trainers have identified that greater use would be made of the room if the quality of the accommodation was upgraded and the facility were more generally available. Excluding Council use, weekday daytime bookings (9am to 5pm) are relatively light with the principal user being the Out of the Darkness Theatre Company. Evening and weekend use is far heavier with the facility being booked for the majority of its time.

3.5 A survey at a recent training event identified that, whilst participants were happy with many elements of the Supper Room, there were some problem areas, particularly in relation to acoustics, heating and lighting. Provisional estimates for undertaking improvements in these areas together with the provision of additional equipment and furniture indicate that the cost of upgrading the Supper Room would be in the region of £33,000.

3.6 Discussions with Council training managers have identified that the room could be used for up to 5 days per week for training or similar activities. If this were to happen the room would continue to be available for community use during the evenings and at weekends as at present.

3.7 The average income for weekday daytime use of the Supper Room (excluding Council use) is £4,861 per annum. The estimated savings achieved by using the Supper Room for training and meetings rather than using external venues would be in the region of £17,500 for 5 days use and £10,500 for 3 days.

3.8 Based upon these figures, the estimated net savings resulting from the use of the Supper Room as a Council training and meeting venue would be £12,639

(5 days) and £5,639 (3 days). If these savings were realised, this would enable the cost of conversion to be covered in either 2.6 or 5.8 years respectively.

- 3.9 In addition to financial savings, training managers have also expressed the benefits that would result from provision of a dedicated training and meeting venue. In particular, they have highlighted the improvements there would be in the delivery of training and also the savings in terms of staff time that could be achieved by not having to source alternative venues and in setting up and dismantling equipment.
- 3.10 The principal issue with upgrading the Supper Room and utilising it more extensively as a Council training venue is the resulting impact on daytime community use, particularly the Out of the Darkness Theatre Company (ODTC). However, following discussions it is anticipated that it will be possible to relocate most users and to accommodate the vast majority of the ODTC's needs through utilisation of other suitable areas within the Town Hall. As a consequence, if the Supper Room were to be used as a Council training venue during the week, whilst there will, inevitably, be some inconvenience for existing daytime users, it is anticipated that most, if not all, can be accommodated in some way.
- 3.11 As a further safeguard, it is proposed that should committee approve the changes to the Supper Room that alterations do not commence until May. This will provide time for alternative arrangements for existing users to be properly considered and prepared.

4. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

(a) Corporate Development Plan

The recommendations within this report support the Corporate Plan working principles of sound management of resources.

(b) Policy and Legal

There are no policy or legal implications directly related to this report.

(c) Resources (Financial, Risks, Staffing and Property)

Financial: The Council currently spends in the order of £92,000 per annum on external training and related venues. It is estimated that, if upgraded, the Supper Room could reduce the use of external venues with an annual saving of up to £17,500.

Risks: The principle risk associated with utilising the Supper Room as a training venue is the loss of weekday daytime usage for community organisations. The greatest impact would be felt by the Out of the Darkness Theatre Company who provide theatre performances and training opportunities for all, particularly people with disabilities. It is

anticipated that most of this groups and other users needs can be accommodated by utilising alternative spaces/times within the Town Hall.

Staffing: It has been identified that the provision of a dedicated training and meeting venue would have benefits for staff both through the quality of training provided and more efficient use of time.

(d) Consultations

Consultations have been held with Carol Sheridan, Senior Employee Development Adviser; Asset Management Group Members; John Carney, Head of Children & Families Services; Sally Chisholm, Head of Community Care; Educational Services SMT all of whom are in agreement with the terms of this report.

Preliminary discussions have been held with staff and directors of the Out of the Darkness Theatre Company who have expressed their willingness to relocate to other suitable accommodation within Elgin Town Hall.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Members are asked to consider approval for undertaking works to enable the Supper Room at Elgin Town Hall to be more widely used as a Council training venue during weekdays. It is anticipated that this would save money and improve the current Council training service. An impact of increasing training in the Supper Room is reduced community access during weekday daytimes. It is anticipated that this impact can be minimised through use of other suitable accommodation.

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Background Papers:
Ref: DMD/JR/Reports/ Education and Social Services Committee/
13 February 2008/Elgin Town Hall – Alterations to Supper Room
to Provide a Training Venue

Signature: _____

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