



Committee	Full Council / Agenda item 8
Month	April 2024
Report Title	Civic Furniture
Report Author	Lisa Courtney, Town Clerk
Attachments	Appendix A: Report to February 2022 Assets & Services Committee Appendix B: Extract from March 2022 Assets and Services Committee

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1. Summary

1.1: The purpose of this report is to bring together information and historic details of the civic furniture (tables and chairs) previously held in the Council Chamber. This information may then be considered by Council in reaching any formal resolution regarding the future use and/or location of the tables and chairs.

Specific information or history relating to the furniture is not readily available, and time does not allow for further research, given the closure of the Parish Meeting on 8.4.24 and the issuing of this report on 10.4.24.

1.2: A brief timeline is presented:

October 2019: The Council's Assets and Services Committee considered the layout of the Council Chamber, resolving the following (extract from Minutes as recorded under Min Ref A & S 090-19 / 28th October 2019):

Council Chamber Table

Committee considered the changing and or removal of the large table and chairs in the Council Chamber so as to make the room more useful for a wider range of meetings. After much discussion it was Resolved that:

Committee authorise the Town Clerk/Operations Manager to further investigate the options which are available and to report back to a future A&S Committee meeting with a recommendation.

January 2020: No further action taken with regards to the furniture or in progressing the resolution from October 2019 as above; this in acknowledgement that Council business was heavily influenced by covid and resourcing was diverted to maintaining ordinary business under the covid 'regime'. The issue of the tables and chairs is considered a low priority and purposefully not progressed.

September 2020: The furniture in the Council Chamber was removed as the space was used as office accommodation during social distancing/covid measures; this coincided with the ending of the lease agreement at the Council's former office space in Emson Close. Furniture was placed in storage, allowing the space to be used as office accommodation.

February 2022: Assets & Services Committee (A & S) resolved to dispose of the tables and chairs. See [Appendix A](#) being the report as considered by Committee.

March 2022: A delegation of former Councillors/Mayors and members of the public attend the March Full Council meeting to speak in opposition to the resolution reached at the February A & S Committee. It is noted the Full Council meeting cannot reverse the decision of Committee (as prescribed within the Council's Terms of Reference), and that the matter is not a specific agenda item on the March Full Council agenda. The A & S Committee is requested to reconsider the decision reached and the matter is referred back to Committee.

March 2022: A & S reconsidered the previous resolution and resolved the following: *“The Town Council should not dispose of the table and chairs currently held in storage and its future use and/or placement is subject to agreement at a future time”* (see [Appendix B](#) for an extract of the minutes).

Since March 2022, the Council has not reconsidered the future of the furniture, noting that resourcing and time has been allocated to delivering the core objectives of Council. The most recent version of Council’s core priorities is available online: [FC-March-24-10-SWTC-Priorities-Update.pdf \(saffronwalden.gov.uk\)](#)

2. The Parish Meeting held on Monday 8th April 2024

2.1: At the Parish Meeting, a member of the public proposed the following motion:

“I propose to this annual parish meeting that the civic furniture currently in store is restored to its rightful place in the Council Chamber”.

The motion was seconded and debated amongst those present. There followed a public vote of electorates of Saffron Walden on the motion, recorded as follows:

In favour of the motion: 15

Against the motion: 8

Abstentions: 8

2.2: No poll was requested at the meeting, and whilst Council is not obliged to further consider the motion or the matter in hand, it is considered good practice for Council to formally consider this further. Further consideration accords with the undertaking made in March 2022 to reconsider the future use and complies with best practice as per the National Association of Local Councils (NALC:2014):

“In a parish with a separate council, a parish meeting’s resolutions will not be binding on the council except in exceptional circumstances (e.g. a resolution for a parish council to provide allotment gardens will trigger a parish council’s duty under s. 23 Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908 to consider if its provision of allotment gardens is sufficient to meet demand). Unless one of the exceptions apply, the parish meeting’s resolutions provide an indication of the views of the local government electors who attended the assembly at which the resolutions were made. It is good practice (but not a requirement) for a council to consider them formally because it may, subject to having the relevant statutory powers, wish to take action in respect of such resolutions.”¹

¹ Extract taken from NALC’s publication “Meetings of Parish Meetings”, Legal Topic Note No 6

3. Current Use of the Council Chamber

3.1: In May 2023, the number of Town Councillors increased from 16 to 18. Whilst the large table remains in storage, the Council Chamber has been used for Council meetings. Using fold-away tables, the room has been set up in a manner which allows attendance of 18 Councillors, Officers and public in attendance.

Following a trial of several months, the Council Chamber was deemed inappropriate and not large enough to host future Full Council meetings. Concerns were expressed at the public inclusivity as public seating could not be readily accommodated, resulting in some members of the Council sat with their backs to the public, this is not an appropriate manner to engage with the local community.

3.2: SWTC office staff have vacated the Council Chamber and it is currently used for a variety of community activities, including meetings, teaching sessions and weddings.

More recently, Council had intended to move the Tourist Information Centre into the Council Chamber but this move is no longer being progressed. The room is therefore available for private hiring and whilst time has not allowed all of these opportunities to fully progress and develop, it is noted opportunities include:

- Private hire on an hourly basis (yoga/exercise class and the like)
- Teaching lessons
- Work space (rent a table per hour/session)
- Office accommodation (for 3rd parties)
- Service industry
- Community use
- Community weddings (in addition to those already hosted in the Court Room)

4. Council meetings

4.1: In noting the Council Chamber no longer meets the current or future needs for Council meetings, Council meetings have been held in either the Court Room or Assembly Hall of the Town Hall.

4.2: This report does not seek to mandate where future Council meetings are held, but it does note the difficulties in hosting future meetings in the Council Chamber and that the Court Room and/or Assembly Hall are appropriate alternative rooms, which can readily accommodate 18 Town Councillors, Officers and members of the public. Both rooms can be laid out in such a way that Councillors are not sat with their backs to the public and the meetings are more inclusive, allowing greater participation and inclusivity of the public.

5. Recommendation

5.1: This report does not seek to offer any definitive answer to the future use / allocation of the furniture but to raise the awareness and opportunities available to SWTC. It provides an historical update on recent decisions regarding the furniture and seeks to inform Council further so that Councillors may reach a fully informed decision.

Council should be mindful that returning the table to the Council Chamber actively restricts the future use and lettings of the room, potentially reducing income opportunity for SWTC and the town. Furthermore, to note the Council Chamber is no longer an appropriate venue for the hosting of Full Council meetings, for reasons as noted above. The Council Chamber continues to be an appropriate venue for committee meetings with 8-10 attendees, providing appropriate space for public attendance.

5.2: The opportunities available to Council are as follows:

- a) Return the furniture to the Council Chamber whilst acknowledging the limitations this places on the future use and functionality of the room.
- b) Return the furniture to another room in the Town Hall (although note the restrictive size of the table will inhibit future use and lettings of the venue).
- c) Loan the furniture to a 3rd party. Previously suggested hosts include the library, museum, Sun Inn although none have been formally contacted to seek any interest in hosting the furniture.
- d) Dispose of the furniture via some process (auctioneers / Mayor's auction / private sale etc).
- e) Keep in storage, acknowledging the Council's progression of a new depot at the cemetery and the restrictive space available.
- f) Any other ideas / opportunities.

5.3: Council is recommended to determine its preference regarding the future use / location of the furniture in question. Failure to resolve this matter now, may result in the topic being resurrected on a regular basis.

A formal resolution is sought so that certainty is afforded to all with an interest in this matter. A resolution further provides Officers with greater certainty regarding the future lettings and opportunities of the Council Chamber and the Town Hall as a whole.

Options provided in 5.2 above (excluding option (a)), allow further and flexible use of the Council Chamber. Council could determine to set aside some of the monies from hiring of the Council Chamber to be granted to local charitable causes/organisations.

Appendix A: Report as presented to Assets & Services Committee February 2022

Agenda item 12

Committee	Assets & Services
Month	February 2022
Report Title	Potential disposal of Council Chamber furniture
Report Author	Terry Frostick, Operations Manager
Attachments	None

Summary

As part of the general housekeeping and maintenance plan of the Operations Team, equipment kept in storage is periodically reviewed. This review includes looking at the viability of the equipment, whether it is of any current or future use, ultimately seeking to reduce the storage space and cost to the Council.

As part of this continuous review, it is appropriate to look at the continued storage of the large table (previously held in the Council Chamber) and the chairs. These are all currently stored at the works depot, taking up considerable space and therefore incurring a direct cost to the Council.

History

At the Full Council meeting in October 2019, Council agreed to consider the location and use of the large table, given that it actively inhibits public participation in meetings. When Councillors are sat around the table, the only public seating is around the edge of the room, resulting in Councillors sat with their backs to the public; this is not (and never has been) a positive means of engaging with residents. When the table was in situ, public attending the meeting had commented they found the room layout restrictive and uninviting due to the large table and the fact that Councillors were sat with their backs to the public gallery.

As part of the October 2019 review, Council agreed to consider the removal of the overbearing table and furniture to ensure compliance with new fire regulations. Subsequent to this and due to covid, the Council Chamber was not used for face-to-face meetings from March 2020 and thus the issue around public participation and engagement in the Council Chamber was temporarily suspended.

Fire risk

The table and chairs are thought to be non-compliant with modern fire regulations for furniture rules as they are old. It is believed that the Chairs are not covered in fire retardant material and thus safety certification would need to be obtained (if possible) before any reintroduction into the Town Hall could be considered.

Use of the Town Hall as Office Accommodation

In September 2020, Council considered the relocation of Town Council staff into the Town Hall, this included conversion of the Council Chamber and Committee Room into office space. This move was initiated given the rental agreement on office space at Emson Close was coming to a close and the Town Hall was closed to the public due to covid measures.

The following is recorded under Min Ref FC114-20, September 2020:

“Council received and noted the report as presented by Officers who spoke further to the report. Following clarification on some matters, it was

Resolved:

- (a) To note that whilst the current premises at Emson Close have served the Council well, they are no longer appropriate facilities to house staff and that it is difficult to socially distance in the narrow corridors and shared spaces of this office accommodation*
- (b) To serve notice to the landlord of Emson Close*
- (c) That staff move into the Committee Room and Council Chamber of the Town Hall at the earliest opportunity, noting that these facilities are not currently being used due to Covid-19*
- (d) That the existing furniture in the Council Chamber be moved to the Town Council’s storage depot*
- (e) That the Clerk be authorised to incur costs of £5,000 towards the relocation costs (this will include costs for carpeting the Committee Room, cessation of utility services at Emson Close and commencement of same at the Town Hall). Any additional spend to be authorised as detailed within the report”*

Options

- (a) To continue storing the tables and chairs at the current depot recognising the annual cost of circa £1200 pa. The impact of this means there is less space for the storage of tools, equipment and necessary materials for the furtherance of Town Council work.
- (b) To relocate the furniture to an alternative storage depot. A preliminary review of storage space has found there are no suitable storage facilities in Saffron Walden with the nearest at Stansted charged at £1.10 per sqft, this would equate to a cost of approximately £250pcm or £3,000pa.
- (c) To sell the tables and chairs although previous initial enquiries with a local antiques firm are not especially encouraging. When asked if they would like to provide a quote on the value of the tables and chairs, the reply received was “We cannot do anything with them as we cannot sell them (the chairs) without a fire proof rating and the table is too big for anyone to use”. The furniture could potentially be sold on commercial selling sites although no further enquiries have taken place regarding this option (it is not known for example if the chairs must meet fire regulations if sold via ebay or the like).

Recommendation

Not to reintroduce the large Table and chairs back into the Council Chamber or the Town Hall and to agree the best method of disposal and authorise the Town Clerk to dispose of the furniture as appropriate.

Appendix B: Extract from A & S Committee March 2022, as recorded under Min Ref A & S 036-22

In accordance with the motion received from five Councillors (Cllrs Coote, Freeman, Light, McLellan and Porch – members of this committee), the following item is returned to the Assets & Services Committee for further consideration regarding the Council Table and Chairs.

The original motion as presented to Committee reads “We the undersigned, request that the matter of the Town Council furniture is reconsidered at the March Assets & Services Committee meeting. This action will require rescission of Standing Order No 7a. This notice is provided in accordance with Standing Orders 26 (a) and (b)”

Committee recognised that for the motion to reconsider a previous decision to be accepted, Committee was required to suspend Standing Order (SO) 7a. Cllr Coote proposed that SO 7a be temporarily suspended to allow the motion as above, this was seconded by Cllr de Vries and unanimously agreed.

Cllr Light noted the table and chairs should be considered artifacts and once Officers are relocated to alternative premises (ie move out of the Council Chamber and Committee Room), the furniture should be reinstated in the Council Chamber at this point. Cllr Light proposed to keep the table and chairs and to return to the Town Hall as soon as possible and these items should not be disposed of. Pending a seconder to this motion, the Chair allowed continued discussion to ensure that the matter was fully debated.

Cllr Asker noted that from May 2023 the total number of Cllrs will increase to 18 from May 2023. There is insufficient room with the current 16 Cllrs and members of the public, with an additional two Cllrs the space will be limited. Cllr Asker proposed that the furniture is retained but used elsewhere for members of the public to use, perhaps the library or museum.

Cllr Coote explained that the furniture is not a suitable size for SWTC businesses but at this stage it is too early to make a formal decision as the table cannot yet be reinstated. Cllr de Vries agreed that a decision should be made as part of a larger plan.

Cllr Asker appreciated the passion for this discussion but disapproved that this is the top of the agenda given current ongoing world issues.

Cllr Coote proposed an amendment to Cllr Light’s proposal being that the tables and chairs should not be disposed of and for any future use and/or placement to be agreed at a future time. Cllr Light was content with this amendment to the motion.

The motion laid before Committee as proposed by Cllr Light and seconded by Cllr Coote was agreed as follows: “The Town Council should not dispose of the table and chairs currently held in storage and its future use and/or placement is subject to agreement at a future time”

It was Resolved: To accept the motion as proposed and seconded.