

Agenda item 5

For decision – Support for Cheese & Grain’s project to extend the building

Author: Peter Wheelhouse, Economic Development & Regeneration Manager and Deputy Town Clerk

1. Background

Councillors will be aware that the Cheese & Grain have an aspiration to develop an extension to their building between that building and the Canoe Club. The Cheese & Grain building and most of the land needed for the extension are leased by Somerset Council to FTC with a sub-lease to the Cheese & Grain. FTC’s lease runs until 2096, and Frome Cheese & Grain’s sub-lease expires in 2040.

This leaves only 15 years on the sub-lease which is likely to present a risk to the Cheese & Grain when they try to secure external funding for this project given that many funders would require a minimum of 25 years on any lease or sub-lease held by an applicant. Extending the term of the Cheese & Grain’s sub lease would remove this risk.

A minor adjustment to the boundary of the leased area and planning consent are also required to enable the project to proceed.

2. The project

The existing recording studio at the rear of the venue is used by internationally famous artists, but this can make it difficult for local artists to book time. As a result, the priority now is to establish a new centre, referred to as “Event Tec”, that will make available more affordable ‘dry hire’ spaces that can be used without a house engineer or producer that will appeal to local up-and-coming artists.

A key element of Event Tec will be to enhance the Cheese & Grain’s vocational training offer to local people in a range of music industry skills, including sound engineering and stage lighting, logistics, hospitality, digital security and marketing.

The Event Tec project will also improve the logistics for the venue overall through provision of a lift large enough for a grand piano, a third wheelchair-accessible toilet/washroom facility and new storage facilities. In May 2024, the Cheese & Grain undertook some public engagement around their plans which was well received.

The project will have significant benefits for the community including a scaling up of accredited vocational training, creating local apprenticeship opportunities, new links between the Cheese & Grain and colleges, universities and employers and generating business for other local businesses. Investment in the new building would improve the appearance of the area around the Cheese & Grain and support the cultural development of this part of the town centre.

3. What help is needed?

At this stage, the priority is to secure the funds necessary to build the extension thought to be in the region of £1.6m. Capital funding is not being sought from FTC. Rather, the intention is to seek such funding from other external sources. The running costs of the centre would be met from income generated.

FTC and the Cheese and Grain worked up an application for a 'Levelling Up' grant that was submitted to the last Government by Somerset Council in 2024. It is uncertain whether the current Government will support such funding to continue although a robust case has been submitted to the Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government. A response is expected in March. Given the uncertainty around this funding source, the Cheese & Grain is keen to explore other potential sources of funding.

The chances of success will be significantly enhanced if funders know that:

- the project has the full support of FTC as leaseholder and Somerset Council as freeholder
- the term of the Cheese & Grain's sub-lease will be extended
- the land needed for the project will be available
- planning permission is in place for the development

Reference was made to this project in the adopted Frome Devolution Prospectus recognizing the role that Somerset Council and FTC can play together in enabling this project and supporting Frome's cultural and economic development. Somerset Council have already indicated their support for the project and FTC is working closely with their officers to try to secure Government funding. Somerset Council have also indicated their in-principle support for the extension of the sub-lease term and the necessary (marginal) adjustment to the boundary of the leased area.

The next steps would be for FTC to make the following commitments:

- To write to the Cheese & Grain to confirm FTC's support for the project and the Council's preparedness to extend the term of the sub-lease to 2055
- To work with Somerset Council to complete the necessary legal work to enable the project to proceed
- To submit a planning application with a view to securing the necessary planning consent

Recommendations

1. Confirm FTC's support for the project
2. Approve the extension of the term of the Cheese & Grain's sub-lease to 2055
3. Delegate authority to the Deputy Town Clerk to work with Somerset Council to complete the necessary legal work to enable the project to proceed
4. Delegate authority to the Planning & Development Manager to work with the Cheese & Grain and their architects to submit a planning application for which the application fee is estimated to be £1226.00 (to be funded from the current New Projects budget)