

NewSPAL

The performing arts library in Surrey

25 January 2019

To members of the Cabinet
of Surrey County Council

Dear Cabinet members,

Surrey Performing Arts Library

We wrote to you in November 2018 at the time we submitted to your officers a comprehensive business plan supporting our proposal to take over the performing arts collection (the **SPAL collection**) formerly housed in the Surrey Performing Arts Library (**SPAL**) at Denbies, Dorking. We were requested by you to produce such a plan at your meeting in June 2018 for consideration by you in Autumn 2018. We did so. Your officers then advised that our proposals should be the subject of a formal public consultation, the results of which would help inform your decision. We have been told the you will make your decision at your meeting on 26 February. While the further three month delay in a decision being taken is unfortunate we have nevertheless welcomed the additional opportunity for users of the SPAL collection and others to give you their views. Other than in relation to the timing implications arising from the further three month delay in a decision being taken, there are no other substantive changes to our proposal. We now seek your final agreement to enable us to implement it.

NewSPAL is an independent charitable incorporated organisation which was specifically set up in January 2018 by users and supporters of SPAL with the sole objective of giving the SPAL collection a revitalised long-term sustainable future in the charitable sector for the benefit of current and future generations of users and prospective users.

What the plan envisages

Our plan envisages a carefully planned and phased transfer of the SPAL collection from the Council to NewSPAL. Although a great deal of preparatory work has been done, until Cabinet approves the plan and agrees to allow NewSPAL to implement it we cannot move to the next steps. We cannot, for example, call in pledges of funding from supporters and grant-awarding trusts. Nor can we proceed to enter into contractual commitments with third parties (e.g. take on the lease of the premises in Woking which have been offered to us or purchase the bespoke IT system from Nottingham Performing Arts Library which will deliver more cost-effective services for groups).

To safeguard the public interest, the plan includes a range of conditions which NewSPAL will need to satisfy before the initial transfer of the SPAL collection (by way of a conditional loan) can take effect. These include NewSPAL raising all the money required to fund the transition and to provide a financial reserve for the early months of operation. We are confident that we will be able to meet those conditions.

When NewSPAL has demonstrated its financial viability for a period (expected to be approximately two years), the SPAL assets will be transferred unconditionally to NewSPAL.

The principles which underlie our proposal

Our proposal is about preserving, re-invigorating and investing further in a highly valued service and giving it a sustainable future.

We aim to:

- mirror, so far as possible and consistent with our charitable obligations, the public service ethos which has historically guided the Council's stewardship of the SPAL collection
- continue to provide a broad collection of materials relating to all the performing arts accessible to both individuals and groups
- ensure that NewSPAL is and remains financially viable by investing in systems which increase efficiency, by careful cost control and by increasing income primarily from increased usage of the SPAL collection by a wider and more diverse range of users both in Surrey and beyond
- recognise that the SPAL collection has been built up over many years through investment by the Council but also from donations from Surrey residents and others by making continuing to serve Surrey residents and Surrey-based performing arts groups the core of our mission
- ensure high standards of service for users by recruiting, training and retaining experienced professional staff with relevant specialist knowledge and a personal commitment to maintaining and enhancing the SPAL collection and the service
- offer volunteering opportunities to members of the community who wish to help us enhance and expand the service
- invest in the SPAL collection through active fund-raising and a carefully managed process for encouraging donations (for example, from closing libraries elsewhere and from individual or group donations of potential stock)
- encourage individuals interested or engaged in any of the performing arts to discover the resources available to them in the SPAL collection
- actively promote the SPAL collection and service through a programme of marketing, events and social media contacts - including to groups and individuals who do not currently use the SPAL collection.

We cannot replicate the network of local libraries through which individual borrowers can currently reserve and collect items. However, we will seek through the use of innovative methods (such as delivery and return arrangements using commercially available secure drop boxes in accessible locations) to provide a range of options for users. We are open to any bi-lateral proposals from the Council which would broaden the range of options.

As an independent charity we must, by definition, be entirely self-financing. We must cover all our operational costs from income derived from users, from donations and from fund-raising. Any surplus income will be re-invested in the service. We cannot promise that charges will not rise, nor can we justify

providing free services to some users at the expense of others. However, this will be a service led by, and for, users and we will seek to maintain affordable access to the SPAL collection for all members of the community (including those on low incomes, in education or with disabilities).

It is important to recognise that the NewSPAL proposal is not that NewSPAL should operate and manage the SPAL collection as a contractor, agent or partner on behalf of the Council. The essence of the proposal is that (1) NewSPAL (an independent charity) will fund, set-up and run a new library (in Woking) and performing arts study and lending service and (2) the Council will donate to NewSPAL the SPAL collection. The shared objective is to preserve and re-invigorate a hugely valued collection and service and give it a long-term sustainable future in the charity sector for the benefit of current and future generations of users and potential users.

Why we think it will work

We are fully conscious that our proposal is both ambitious and challenging. In the face of its own challenges, the Council has declared its intention to be innovative in finding new ways in which services valued by residents can continue to be available to them. We think our proposal is entirely consistent with the transformation agenda espoused by the Council.

SPAL has already changed substantially. It is no longer a separate and easily identifiable library within the Surrey Libraries network. It is no longer managed by specialist staff with deep knowledge of the SPAL collection. There is (at best) limited prospects of the Council being able to make further investment in the SPAL collection or the service in the foreseeable future. None of these are conducive to long-term sustainability.

Our proposal will give a new independent SPAL a clear identity which will help us to promote it widely, both in Surrey and beyond, to increase awareness and usage of the SPAL collection. Our proposal will open up sources of funding and support which are not available to the Council and relieve the Council of the burden of seeking to maintain a specialist service as part of a hard-pressed general library service. Our proposal retains access to the SPAL collection for Surrey residents and Surrey-based groups, albeit on a different basis to now. In short, we believe it is in the public interest for you to support our proposal.

Substantial levels of support have been expressed to us from a large number of individual and group users. They are key to the future of the SPAL collection and we respectfully suggest that their voices should be listened to, particularly if (as we expect) these are supported by the results of the specific public consultation on SPAL which the Council has conducted.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Welling

M. R. Welling
Chairman, on behalf of the Trustees

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