**Report regarding recent matters raised at or by members of the Bracken Hall Management Team for the attention of the Environment Committee at its meeting on 15 February 2022.**

Introduction

At the most recent previous meeting of the Environment Committee and following the resignation of former councillor Alan Clubb, I offered to serve on a temporary, short-term basis as the councillor linking the Environment Committee and the Bracken Hall Management Team.   This was agreed as sensible given the shortage of recent councillors and my experience of managing Bracken Hall in previous years.  I have attended four meetings of the Management Team during the intervening period, roughly one per month.  Three were general meetings and one meeting was concerned specifically with the creation of three interpretation boards as one element of the scheme of building works being funded by the Rural Payments Agency and Baildon Town Council (hereafter referred to as the "building works").  I am reporting back to the Environment Committee on several matters that I believe the committee should be aware of.  I am willing to continue in my liaison role until the first meeting of the Environment Committee in the new municipal year or until a successor is identified, whichever is earlier.  My interest in Bracken Hall will, however, continue and I intend to recommence my volunteering with the centre when the Government lifts all COVID-19 restrictions.

Issues for consideration by the Environment Committee:

1. Councillors' awareness of Bracken Hall

There has been quite a large and rapid turnover of councillors in recent years and especially in recent months.  These changes, along with recent disruption caused by significant changes to staffing arrangements and the various disruptions of the coronavirus pandemic, have made it harder to communicate about the range of functions provided by Baildon Town Council.  The Management Team of Bracken Hall feels that awareness amongst councillors about Bracken Hall is quite low and I am in agreement with this view.  I have therefore been asked to co-ordinate a briefing for all councillors about the history, purpose and future potential of Bracken Hall as a visitor information and interpretation centre for the local countryside.  This briefing is proposed to be held as an "open day" in advance of the public re-opening of the centre following the recent building works.  The public re-opening is expected to take place on Saturday 2nd April  The last week of March is therefore proposed for the councillors; perhaps Sunday 27th March.  See below for further details regarding the proposed re-opening of the centre to the public.

2. Building works at Bracken Hall: general observations

Although most works are complete and the new building is an excellent addition to the centre, it is also apparent that the management of the contract for the recent building works has at times been less than satisfactory.  This is due in part to staff and councillor changes, which has disrupted the lines of authority and responsibility.  Following discussions between members of the Management Committee and the current chair of the Environment Committee, Councillor Paul Sharkey,  matters of concern have now been largely resolved and clarified, with Councillor Sharkey taking over the role of "project manager" on behalf of Baildon Town Council as client.  Councillor Sharkey has met with me and the building contractors and I am satisfied that the outstanding building works are now on schedule to finish on the revised completion date of 8th March 2022.  This is much later than the six weeks for the works as originally envisaged in 2021.  The Management Team would like to re-open the centre to the public on 2 April 2022 and will need the best part of a month to clean the premises and re-install the exhibitions.

3. Building works at Bracken Hall: finance

There have been several changes to the original budget for the building works.  I have not attempted to document them here and there does not seem to be an easily accessible record of the changes held in one place.  I propose a meeting between relevant members of the Management Team and the Town Council's Responsible Financial Officer, in order to produce a summary report for the project for consideration by the Environment Committee after year-end.

The changes I am aware of are:

1. Changes relating to planning permission and the rules of the Rural Payments Agency

2. An increase to the Baildon Town Council match funding for the building works, which appears to have been agreed under delegated powers during the lockdown period of the pandemic

3. An additional £1,000 for footpaths because some of the grant aid was found to be ineligible

4. A question about the use of the original contingency fund

5. The need for additional contingency for electrical works (see below)

4. Building works at Bracken Hall: electrical works and heating

It was brought to my attention by Mr Eddie Nash, a Bracken Hall volunteer and the principal author of the grant application to the Rural Payments Agency, that some of the heating works contained in the agreement with the Rural Payments Agency for the building works had not been completed to the required specification and that part of those works were no longer proposed to be completed as at the start of February 2022.  This situation resulted from an innocent error when the specification was originally written.  The additional electrical outlets and hard wiring required to erect the proposed new, re-located heating panels in the exhibition room and classroom (to replace or supplement the existing convection heaters) had not been included in the costings and consequently, although the heaters could be purchased and erected, they could not be powered.  The building work contractor's electrical subcontractor had also commented that the new proposed heaters would not be effective in a building with such poor insulation (the exhibition room and classroom being poorly insulated, something which is out of the scope of the building works).  However, the decision to not spend the additional money on the additional wiring and not to fit the new heaters was made after the agreement as to the scope of the works was signed by me (when previously Chair of Council) and the former Town Clerk, Louanna Winch, as required by the terms of RPA grant.  The agreement with the RPA states that no changes to the specification, suppliers or costs can be made without RPA approval.  I was persuaded by Mr Nash's argument that this created two financial and reputational risks for the Town Council, both outweighing the forecast additional expenditure required to install the new heaters.  The risk of not complying with the agreement could be a partial or complete clawback of funding (or the payment of a contractor for works not completed).  If the new heating was not installed, further expenditure on heating would be required at a later date, at further additional cost to the Council.  Having concluded that the new heating should be installed and trialed, I have arranged with Councillor Sharkey and Suzy Kaprinski (Responsible Financial Officer) that the Environment Committee considers allocating the additional funding needed to complete the electrical and heating works to the amount not exceeding £3,000.  The effectiveness of the new heaters will then be reviewed and if necessary, addressed, in the winter of 2022/23.

5. Bracken Hall Website

There are currently three websites which relate to Bracken Hall.  The Friends of Bracken Hall have a website.  A member of the Friends of Bracken Hall created a new website for the centre but this does not appear to have the approval of the Town Council and is probably not to the public sector accessibility requirement.  Baildon Town Council's own website has a section for Bracken Hall.  Following discussion, the Management Team would like to redirect visitors to the existing websites to the relevant section of the Baildon Town Council website and to use tags to ensure that this page is highlighted in internet searches.  The Baildon Town Council website will therefore function as the Bracken Hall website until such time as the Town Council might decide to create a separate website for Bracken Hall.  The existing section on the Baildon Town Council website needs updating and this work is being considered at present.

6. Volunteering

Volunteers are critical to the centre and there is a shortage of the number thought to be needed to operate the current proposed regular opening hours (Saturday and Sunday afternoons).  Numerous initiatives have been explored and will continue to address the need for volunteers.  However, a question remains over the role of Baildon Town Council's Volunteer Co-ordinator in supporting this work.  I have been asked to raise this with the Environment Committee, with a view to it being reconsidered by the Governance and Staffing committees.

7. Inventory and assets

During the re-opening of the centre, an inventory of equipment and supplies will be finished.  It is likely that this will need to be compared with the Council's Asset Register, in order to ensure that Bracken Hall is appropriately covered for the purposes of the Council's accounts and risk management arrangements including insurance.

8. Forward Plan

There have previously been proposals to create a forward plan for Bracken Hall.  Much of the preparation work for this has been completed.  The compilation and adoption of such a plan seems a good idea for when the re-opening has taken place.

9. Future of the Management Team

Councillor Sharkey and I believe that the Management Team is functioning quite well but does need to be reviewed in light of recent changes.  We think that the name is a little misleading and that "Management Support Team" or "Support Team" might be more appropriate.  Currently, the members for the Management Team, except for the chair and liaison members, have areas of responsibility as "senior volunteers''.  We see no reason to change that except to ensure it is clear that the Centre Manager is in charge of the centre on a day-to-day basis and that the centre manager reports to the Environment Committee.  It is suggested that the chair of the Management team could act for the Centre Manager in reporting to the Environment Committee, on occasions when the Manager is unavailable but that it is important that the Manager knows the date of the Environment Committee meetings and that reports are timetabled accordingly.

Conclusions

It appears to me that there are several lessons to be learned from the problems encountered with the building works at Bracken Hall.  I judge these to include the following, which reflect my opinion formed on the basis of what I have seen and discussed with colleagues.  In no way are these comments intended to be a criticism of any individual but rather something to reflect on as an organisation, with actions required from officers, councillors and volunteers alike.

*1. Ensuring an officer of the council is appointed at all times, with appropriate delegated authority to have the final decision on the execution of works and any matter of disagreement or conflict, within any policy or scheme agreed by councillors.*

*2. Ensuring that contractors are clear who they should take instruction from and report to.  This should ordinarily be an officer of the council.*

*3. Appointing more than one officer and more than one supporting councillor to oversee works and contracts so as to ensure that knowledge of such is shared by more than one person and that there is always a clearly appointed deputy in place for any decision-maker, in the event of absences or departures from the organisation.*

*4. More frequent communication between those appointed responsible for works and contracts, throughout the project.*

*5. A closer watch on spending with a more easily accessible record of all expenditure within the scope of any contract or grant agreement.*

*6. Physical inspection of all completed works to ensure compliance with terms before payment is made.*

*7. Reporting of any significant variations from agreed works and budgets for consideration by the relevant committee(s) in a timely manner, preferably allowing a commissioning committee to make informed decisions before significant variations are implemented.*

*8. More detailed and frequent briefings for committee chairs and vice chairs on areas of business and projects with relatively more significant spending and risk.*

*9. Regulating access to premises for authorised personnel only and especially where construction works are taking place and hazards are likely to be present.*

*10. Ensuring that roles and responsibilities are clear so that volunteers, councillors and officers better understand their roles and the decision-making structures and processes of the council.*

*11. Addressing key areas of risk more swiftly and with greater resources from across the organisation.  For example, the recruitment and retention of volunteers is very important to the success of the centre and other activities of the Town Council.  This could be given greater status and priority within the organisation as a whole.*

***Author:***

***Councillor Joe Ashton***

***February 2022***