

## Transition Plan – Guildhall and Corn Exchange

**To:** Antoinette Nestor, Cabinet Member

**Meeting:** Cabinet

**Date:** March 24<sup>th</sup> 2026

**Report by:**

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**Wards affected:**

TBC

Director Approval: Sam Scharf confirms that the report author has sought the advice of all appropriate colleagues and given due regard to that advice; that the equalities impacts and other implications of the recommended decisions have been assessed and accurately presented in the report; and that they are content for the report to be put to the Cabinet/Cabinet Member for decision.

### 1. Recommendations

1.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Approve progression to planning submission for a temporary performance and events venue to support the transition period during the closure of the Corn Exchange and Guildhall, subject to statutory processes and continued engagement.
2. Note that preliminary expenditure within the £1million approved provision will be incurred prior to a planning application and September Cabinet decision on the Civic Quarter project.
3. Approve progression to procurement of required venue infrastructure, equipment and ancillary services, in preparation for a final decision in September.
4. Note the indicative programme and key delivery milestones.
5. Note that alternative transition options have been considered and assessed.

### 2 Executive Summary

The Corn Exchange and Guildhall are scheduled to close from December 2026 as part of the approved Civic Quarter Programme.

Without a managed transition, there will be a two-year absence of cultural and civic provision from these two venues which currently attract audiences of over 200,000 annually and support civic events, conferencing and community programmes.

As identified in the September Cabinet report<sup>1</sup>, further work was required to ensure a successful transition during closure. This report responds to that requirement following

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<sup>1</sup> [\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Cabinet, 25/09/2025 17:00](#)

exploration of the options recommended by specialist consultants Blue Horizons<sup>2</sup>.

A number of scenarios have been considered:

- Do nothing
- Meanwhile use of existing sites
- Phased construction
- Temporary venue
- High quality modular venue

This report seeks approval to progress the temporary venue option to planning and preparatory procurement only. It is estimated that c£60,000 of costs ahead of any final decision will be incurred covering legal, planning and specialist venue and sound consultants.

A final decision on implementation will be taken alongside the wider Civic Quarter decision in September 2026.

No new financial approval is sought beyond the £1m earmarked provision agreed through the 2026/27 Budget.

### **3. Purpose**

- 3.1 Both the Corn Exchange and Guildhall are scheduled to close from December 2026 for major refurbishment within the Civic Quarter Programme. Without a managed transition, there will be a two-year absence of cultural and civic provision from these two venues which currently attract audiences over 200,000 and support civic events and large-scale conferencing and community programmes.

Alongside this there is projected impact on secondary economic activity of £21.6million in business and income in the city.

As highlighted in the Cabinet paper in September 2025<sup>3</sup> this report responds to the challenge of providing a structured transition plan that maintains visibility, protects staff, maintains promoter and stakeholder relationships, and contributes to the rapid recovery on reopening. Three scenarios have been considered: do nothing, a temporary venue, and a larger more permanent venue.

This report recognises that an earmarked provision has been made within the 26/27 Budget for the potential costs of a temporary venue and sets out the principles for considering a continuation of activity, a focus on a temporary venue rather than the other options and outlines the programme of work ahead of any final decision for the Civic Quarter project planned for September 2026.

A final decision regarding any temporary venue will be considered following any required planning decision and alongside the wider Civic Quarter Project in September 2026. Preparing for such a transition requires work ahead of this date.

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<sup>2</sup> [Business Continuity Scenario Analysis for Cambridge Guildhall and Corn Exchange Redevelopment](#)

<sup>3</sup> [\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Cabinet, 25/09/2025 17:00](#) (P.20; 6.7.2)

This report does not set out any financial details further to the funding already approved, with this modelling being carried out for the whole programme in the coming months.

### **3. Alternative options considered**

- 3.1 The options identified in September have been assessed for feasibility operationally and economically. The alternative options outlined below are not recommended for differing reasons.

#### *Do nothing*

Under this option, the Corn Exchange and Guildhall would close for the duration of the works with no interim provision. Permanent staff would be redeployed to other events, decant activity and future programming with no continuation of any of the activities currently programmes into either venue over the closure period.

Although the retention of permanent staff is already modelled through the closure from an operational and economic perspective, this option still increases the likelihood of losing specialist staff. Alongside this it creates risks from pauses in promoter engagement and allowing audience habits to form elsewhere. Re-engagement with key stakeholders could take 12–24 months post-reopening, as was found following Covid.

This option presents the most significant financial, operational and reputational risk related to the recovery assumptions within the Civic Quarter business plan.

#### *Meanwhile Use of Existing Sites*

This option was explored through engagement with city partners and venue operators. Capacity, technical specification, booking availability and commercial viability constraints mean that existing venues cannot accommodate the scale, production requirements or conferencing function currently delivered by the Corn Exchange and Guildhall. As such, this option would not meet the strategic objectives identified in September and has not been progressed further.

#### *Phased construction*

Phased construction is not a realistic option for the Corn Exchange itself – it will be impossible to keep the venue open and undertake works. It has been looked at to consider doing the Corn Exchange after the Guildhall which is possible. The impact of this would add c.£1m due to higher preliminary (operational costs) and other programmatic costs. There would be no gain in the closure of the Corn Exchange with this option and cost of closure would need to still be considered.

#### *High-quality modular venue*

The September Appendix 9 Business Continuity Scenario Analysis identified a high-quality modular venue as the preferred long-term continuity option in strategic terms.

This option looked at a larger demountable venue with a 25–30-year lifespan, potentially capable of generating a long-term operating surplus. While attractive in principle, and the recommended option within the initial papers in September, progressing this model would

require significant additional capital approval, site strategy and longer-term infrastructure decisions beyond the scope of the current transition planning.

Initial investigations were carried out on this option with a number of sites across the City. The enabling works, planning and longer-term considerations linked to the wider cultural infrastructure strategy presented significant constraints to develop this as an option for a transition venue.

Given lead-in time and scale, this option does not meet the immediate strategic purpose of managing the closure period and is not recommended for progression at this stage. The early assessments developed for this will rather feed into the longer term infrastructure planning separately of this.

#### **4. Key considerations**

- 4.1 The report presented to Cabinet<sup>4</sup> set out a Civic Quarter appraisal that modelled a total of £12.3million to be set aside before the project breaks even and produces a surplus for the council after debt financing.
- the Guildhall and Corn Exchange are closed for a period and then ramping up,
  - commercial income takes time to reach the new projected levels,
  - but debt charges start immediately.

Further to this, the Cabinet paper reflected that further work was needed to ensure a successful transition. Material to immediate decisions requested within this report, this provision already assumed no redundancies for those salaried staff covering events across Corn Exchange and Guildhall. The rationale for this covers requirements for decant, redeployment to either a temporary building or wider events (with many staff covering more than just these venues) and requirements to programme and plan for the reopening.

- 4.2 The defining strategic principles set out below were set out help appraise options that support the operational and financial risks of the Civic Quarter future business plan and more widely Councils Vision. These were developed from the initial work set out in the September<sup>4</sup> Cabinet Report.
- a) Enable a successful reopening and rapid return to sustainable trading
  - b) Maintain cultural visibility and prevent audience drift
  - c) Retain specialist staff and organisational capability
  - d) Preserve key stakeholder and client relationships
  - e) Provide continuation of economic and cultural activation of the City Centre

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<sup>4</sup> [Business Continuity Scenario Analysis for Cambridge Guildhall and Corn Exchange Redevelopment](#) (p.27)

### 4.3 Temporary venue option

This option proposes the provision of a demountable temporary venue of approximately 1,000 capacity, operating for an 18-month stretch during the closure period. Current work is exploring sites that would locate a venue in the City Centre. Work remains to identify a suitable site.

Any proposal identified would be subject to planning permission, supporting a mixed programme of live music, comedy, talks, conferences and civic events. Modelling indicates that this option could retain approximately 50–60% of the Corn Exchange programme, maintain relationships with regular promoters and clients, and provide continued visibility for the Corn Exchange brand. While the venue would not replicate the full specification of the permanent venue, it would act as an effective operational bridge to reopening.

The net additional costs modelled are within the £1m provision approved by Full Council (26 February 2026). Continued work alongside the wider modelling of the Civic Quarter continues and is proposed to be complete in July. This will explore any changes to the costs within the closure period and any impacts of the temporary venue on the future business plan, a requirement within the strategic principles.

Other important considerations supporting this investment include maintaining a positive reputation for the City, supporting the wider development of Cambridge as a city providing a comprehensive cultural offer in line with its Vision. Specialist advisers (Blue Horizons) advise that while this option carries short-term cost, it reduces long-term financial and reputational risk and supports recovery assumptions within the Civic Quarter model.

Specific work on the modelling for a temporary venue include:

- Development of the financial modelling set out within the original report to minimise additional costs and bring in line with the provisions set out in 26/27 budget.
- Site identification and viability – working to assess a number of potential locations, alongside any required legal and planning considerations.
- Site visit and continued dialogue with similar real life case studies – [Orchard West Theatre](#) in Dartford. This includes reviewing costs, programme, cultural activity.
- Programme modelling on the frequency, type of bookings and related income and attendance.
- Soft engagement with key stakeholders including:
  - Regular clients
  - Current and potential promoters
  - Community organisations who may benefit from the venue throughout the period

### 4.4 A site visit to Orchard West (Dartford) highlighted:

- Importance of early planning engagement
- Realistic programming assumptions
- Clear communications strategy
- Strong operational mobilization

These lessons are informing current development work and have meant adjustments particularly to initial programme planning and operational management.

4.5 Officers appraised the option against the strategic objectives set out from the Councils Vision, Cultural Strategy and Business case assumptions

*a) Enable a successful reopening and rapid return to sustainable trading*

The transition strategy seeks to ensure that the Corn Exchange and Guildhall reopen with strong booking pipelines, retained expertise and sustained demand.

The temporary venue supports this by:

- Maintaining active relationships with promoters, agents and conference clients;
- Enabling forward booking discussions for the refurbished venues during the works period;
- Preserving operational knowledge and commercial capability within the staff team.

Without interim provision, recovery following reopening is likely to be delayed by 12–24.

*b) Maintain cultural visibility and prevent audience drift*

Extended absence from the market risks audiences forming new habits elsewhere and promoters deprioritising Cambridge within touring schedules.

The temporary venue would:

- Maintain a visible city-centre cultural presence;
- Sustain engagement with core audiences through a reduced but consistent programme;
- Support experimentation with formats and partnerships that inform future programming.

*c) Retain organisational capability*

The venues rely on a small pool of specialist technical and programming staff. Potential loss of this expertise would significantly increase recruitment costs and delay reopening. The temporary venue enables continued employment, skills utilisation and professional development, protecting organisational resilience.

*d) Preserve key stakeholder and client relationships*

The venues support a wide ecosystem of universities, conference clients, promoters and civic partners.

The temporary venue provides a credible interim offer, maintains confidence and supports proactive engagement ahead of reopening.

*e) Provide continuation of economic and cultural activation of the City Centre*

The Corn Exchange and Guildhall support footfall, secondary spend and civic programme.

The temporary venue sustains cultural activity, economic contribution and civic function during the works period.

The temporary venue represents a proportionate, time-limited intervention, designed to mitigate risk rather than replace permanent provision.

## **6 Next steps**

6.1 An indicative programme of technical milestones is set out below:

- Cabinet consent to progress: March
- Pre-application engagement and preparation: March - July
- Planning submission: July (subject to pre-planning application)
- Planning determination: August – September
- Civic Quarter Project decision: September
- Procurement and mobilisation: June - December
- Installation and commissioning: January - February
- Opening: April 2027

All dates are indicative and subject to gateway decisions along the way. Further detail will be developed that sets out timeframes for public engagement, further stakeholder engagement and detailed procurement activity.

A defined date for planning will be determined by engagement through a pre-planning application. Subject to the potential requirements for consideration this timetable move. Current plans are for the venue to be programmed from April 2027 which provides for a short delay in a decision.

## **7. Vision**

7.1 This proposal directly relates to the Councils Vision where:

*Arts, sports, and culture are thriving*

- Cambridge celebrates the city's diversity through a vibrant arts and cultural scene, including music, festivals, sports, and food and drink.
- Accessible arts, sports and culture provide spaces for people of all ages to come together to enjoy the city, both during the day and at night.

The continued activation of the City over the eighteen-month period of closure will maintain and enhance the culture offer to the City.

## **8. Consultation, engagement and communication**

8.1 This proposal has built on consultation through the Civic Quarter Project governance

structures, with a number of internal team and work with our specialist consultants, Blue Horizons.

Within the public Budget Papers <sup>5</sup>an earmarked reserve has been identified of £1million specifically for this purpose should planning be achieved and the Civic Quarter project approved.

In the development of the proposal, engagement has taken place with promoters, wider users of the events venues from conference users to those that use it for graduations and exams. Early engagement with planning and environmental health specifically through a Pre Planning Application will be fundamental to the development of a proposal to be submitted for Planning.

## **9. Anticipated outcomes, benefits or impact**

### **9.1 The decision sought:**

- enables progression to planning and preparatory activity
- does not commit to delivery
- maintains options ahead of September and enables turnaround of a solution subject to decisions.

## **10. Implications**

### **10.1 Relevant risks**

Two categories of risk are relevant:

#### **Risk of inaction**

- Audience and promoter loss
- Reduced speed of recovery
- Reputational decline
- Increased long-term financial pressure

#### **Risk of action**

- Planning delay and/or refusal
- Cost pressure within £1m provision
- Programming constraints
- Delivery complexity

At this stage, the principal risk relates to progression to planning without certainty of final delivery; however, failure to progress at this stage would remove the option entirely due to programme constraints.

At this stage, approval is sought only to progress to planning and preparatory work. A further decision will be required alongside the Civic Quarter determination.

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<sup>5</sup> [\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Council, 26/02/2026 18:00](#)

## 10.2 Legal Implications

We are engaged with appropriate legal professionals to support through the Pre-Planning Application process and to support with wider considerations regarding the potential use of particular sites.

## 10.3 Equalities and socio-economic Implications

The proposal supports continued access to cultural and civic events during the closure period and helps maintain inclusive provision. An Equality Impact Assessment will be completed alongside the planning submission.

## 10.4 Net Zero Carbon, Climate Change and Environmental implications

Sustainability principles will be applied to temporary infrastructure and developed ready for any Planning Application

## 10.5 Procurement Implications

Limited preparatory procurement activity may be required to protect programme timelines, in accordance with Contract Procedure Rules. No contractual commitments will be entered into prior to the September 2026 decision related to progressing with a temporary venue.

## 10.6 Community Safety Implications

Any proposal would be submitted to the Safety Advisory Group for consideration, which would include any licensing requirements

## 11. Background documents

### 11.1 A list of documents used to develop this report:

- Cabinet – Cambridge Civic Quarter Reports: [Cambridge Civic Quarter: Scrutiny committee and Cabinet reports - Cambridge City Council](#)
- Appendix 9 [Business Continuity Scenario Analysis for Cambridge Guildhall and Corn Exchange Redevelopment](#)
- Full Council – Budget [\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Council, 26/02/2026 18:00](#)

To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact Sam Scharf, Director of Communities, [sam.scharf@cambridge.gov.uk](mailto:sam.scharf@cambridge.gov.uk)