

## Chambers Institution, Peebles Community Consultation

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### Introduction

In 1859, William Chambers gave the building for the “social moral and intellectual improvement of the community of the said Burgh and County of Peeblesshire general and comprehends [to] ... be used as a public Reading Library, Gallery of Arts and Museum of natural and other objects for the instruction of the public, and a great Hall for public meetings and exhibitions of various kinds”.

Scottish Borders Council commissioned the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust (SHBT) to carry out a



*The Chambers Institution, view from the High Street. © HES*

consultation exercise with the local community to explore how they view and use the Chambers Institution today and their ideas for the future of the building.

The consultation has included background information gathering, a questionnaire and a series of stakeholder workshops (Tweeddale Area Forum, Vision for Peebles event, Bookbug, Parish Toddlers and St Andrews Leckie Parent and Toddler groups).

### Analysis of results

208 questionnaire responses were submitted. A further 173 additional people attended the Stakeholder workshops, giving an overall total of 381 people involved in the consultation.

#### *Analysis of the questionnaire*

- The building is **highly valued** by the local community and there is strong support for it to remain a building for community use and one where the community comes first.
- The majority of respondents also identified that there is a **need for change** at the building including upgrading of access, facilities and services, more investment in maintenance and for innovation and revitalisation of some of the existing services housed in the building. There was general acknowledgement that this will require a re-ordering of the layout of the building, especially to improve access to those parts of the building most used by the community, although opinions varied as to the scale of the re-ordering exercise needed.
- **Peebles Library** was the most regularly visited space in the Chambers Institution, and was identified as the anchor use within the building. The other spaces most regularly used by the community were the Burgh Hall, the Tweeddale Museum and Art Gallery and the courtyard. The inclusion of a variety of uses within the building was viewed as positive, helping to increase vibrancy of the building.



*Peebles Library*



*Burgh Hall event*

- Of all the important spaces in the building, the **Burgh Hall** was identified as the one most clearly under-performing currently and consequently the one with most scope for increasing its relevance to the community and intensifying its usage. A wide range of preferences for use of this space and a variety of proposals for increasing floor area through the introduction of another floor or gallery at high level were expressed.

• Some **challenges** were identified by the community. A more user-friendly booking facility for the Burgh Hall was suggested, plus it was noted that the uncertainty over who was responsible for management and decision-making – the Chambers Institution Trust, Scottish Borders Council or the new Sport and Culture Trust – was unhelpful in terms of retaining and building ongoing community support for the building.

#### *Analysis of stakeholder workshop responses*

- There is general support for the **library to have ground floor space**, as a means both to improve access to this service and to provide a welcoming entrance to the building and gateway to other uses housed there.
- **More flexible** accommodation in the building was desired, in particular in relation to removing the fixed staging in the Burgh Hall and providing more smaller meeting or breakout spaces.
- There was a strong desire to promote use of the building by **young people and for education**.
- There was an appetite for **closer collaboration** between the uses in the building e.g. the Tweeddale Museum and the John Buchan Story. Individual comments on the use of space showed the community exploring how a re-ordering exercise for the building could help promote this collaboration by ensuring uses with greater synergy were located near to each other.
- The cost of hiring the Chambers Institution should be **affordable** for the local community.
- There was also recognition that Peebles was generally well served with community halls, and that any decision on the future uses of the Burgh Hall should be mindful of the need to **avoid duplication** and hence competing with other venues in the town. Respondents recognised the potential scope for synergy with other venues, and that this should be explored. These findings were supported by evidence gathered from interviews with key contacts, including research into other community venues in Peebles.

The Community consultation results have fed into a proposed updated Vision for the building:

Local people want the Chambers Institution to maintain and enhance its role as the cultural heart of the community and for it to be attractive, welcoming, well-cared for, accessible and affordable.

The key uses of the building were identified as: library, museum, art gallery and meeting spaces, and the quiet contemplative courtyard setting for the War Memorial.

#### **Recommendations for taking forward this consultation**

We recommend the updated Vision for the building be adopted as it summarises the community's aspirations for the building and identifies the uses that the community has highlighted as critical to be housed in the building.

Further we recommend that a re-ordering exercise is undertaken for the Chambers Institution. This should include the appointment of a design team to prepare a number of sketch schemes to explore the architectural feasibility of delivering the ideas for the building put forward by the community. The sketch schemes should be the subject of a further community consultation to determine a final scheme. The final scheme should be costed and a viability appraisal prepared for it. This will provide a realistic roadmap to deliver a 21<sup>st</sup> century vision for the building.