

Institution Trust (Chambers Institution) Consultation Summary Report

Introduction & Brief History of the Building

The Chambers Institution have carried out extensive community and stakeholder consultation over the past decade with major consultation exercises undertaken in 2016 and in 2022. These consultations aimed to collect opinions around future capital plans for the Chambers Institution and the various services provided from within the building.

The Chambers Institution is a Category A listed building located in a central position on the High Street in Peebles. The oldest parts of the building date back to 16th and 17th century when it belonged to the Cross Kirk and was known as the Dean's House. The property was acquired by John Hay, 1st Earl of Tweeddale in 1624 before eventually passing into the ownership of the Dukes of Queensbury in 1687. The Queensbury's sold it to the Provost, Dr James Reid in 1781 and it remained in the ownership of that family until 1857, when it was acquired by William Chambers, the Scottish publisher and politician (who with his brother published the Chambers Encyclopaedia and the Chambers Dictionary).

William Chambers remodelled the building to create a space for the social improvement of Peebles. This remodelling was carried out in the Scottish Baronial style made popular by Sir Walter Scott at nearby Abbotsford and was designed to incorporate a museum, art gallery and new Burgh Hall. The building opened for the benefit of the local community on 8th August 1859 (165 years ago this year). Ownership of the building passed to the Burgh Council in 1911, who took up an offer from the great Scottish American philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie, to finance a five-bay extension to the building, which was designed by the famous architect, George Washington Browne (his most notable buildings are the Central Library and the Royal Hospital for Sick Kids in Edinburgh).

The Chambers Institution Trust was created in 1859 by Disposition and Mortification from Sir William Chalmers to the Provost Magistrates and Councillors (and their successors in office) of the Royal Burgh of Peebles, as Trustees (Trust Deed). Since 1859 there have been several local government re-organisations, changes in Trust Law and significant changes in the way that local services are delivered to the community.

The Trust Deed vested the Chamber Institute in the Town Council in Trust for the community of Peebles in 1859. The Trust Deed provided that the building was to be held in Trust and devoted to "the social, moral and intellectual improvement" of the Peeblesshire Community; for use as a public reading room, public library and 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. The Trust Deed appointed a board of Directors to manage the property consisting of William Chalmers, the Provost and Magistrates of the Burgh, the Member of Parliament for the County of Peebles, various notable office holder and 5 elected subscribers who were connected to the town or neighbourhood. The Directors were given equal powers to the Trustees "as if the same were actually vested in themselves".

In 1905 the Directors were authorised by the Court of Session to borrow money to provide cloakrooms, following an application to the Court as the Trust Deed did not provide for this. In 1910 to facilitate expansion and improvement of the library, museum and art gallery, a gift of £10,000 was received from Andrew Carnegie. The gift to the Trust provided the funds required to acquire the shop premises 23 and 25 High Street to support the library and museum extension. It was a condition of the gift that the Town Council adopt the Public Libraries Consolidation (Scotland) Act 1887, with the administration of the Institute being transferred at that time from the Board of

Directors to a committee set up in terms of the 1887 Act i.e. a committee to administer the library and museum functions of the Council. The committee members were to be appointed by the Town Council and were to include 2 householders from the burgh of Peebles. The conditions of this gift were formalised in the Chambers Institution Peebles Order Confirmation Act 1911.

These committees were then replaced following the Local Government Scotland Act 1973 which transferred the powers to the local councils. As a result Borders Regional Council became responsible for the management and administration of the Institute in addition to the property being vested in them in Trust. In 1994 the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act transferred the functions of Borders Regional Council to Scottish Borders Council (SBC). The Institute is therefore vested in SBC in Trust and SBC is the body responsible for the management of the Institute by virtue of the 1973 Act. Currently the Trust comprises of the six elected Tweeddale Councillors as Trustees, with wider community consultation taken into account via a beneficiaries group who meet prior to each Trustee meeting so that their views are represented and considered. The Trust and SBC are investigating the possibility for the Chambers Institution Trust to become a SCIO.

Over the past 100 years, the building has undergone unsympathetic subdivisions and alterations to the detriment of the building aesthetic and also presenting increasing challenges for the various services delivered from within the building.

The original narrative of the building has become confused and disjointed and the visibility of the institution and its intended purpose have been lost, with poor connectivity between the services within the building. There is no clear entrance from the High Street with no space for a public welcome to the building. There is little interpretation about the history and heritage of the building. There is poor accessibility across the building and no lift to the top floor, with limited accessible toilet provision. Staff accommodation is too small, uncomfortable and restricts the services that staff can offer.

Today the building complex houses the War Memorial, the Burgh Hall, the Library, the Tweeddale Museum, the Registrar's Office, the SBC Contact Centre and the Citizens Advice Bureau. The John Buchan Museum opened within the building complex in 2013 and is managed by an independent Trust.

The Consultations

Scottish Borders Council and the Chambers Institution undertook a significant public consultation on from September 2015 to April 2016. This engaged with 923 local people and 124 local organisations.

The following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats were identified for the Chambers Institution through the community consultation:

Strengths

- the building is highly valued by the local community
- there is strong support for it to remain a building for community use and one where the community comes first
- the different uses of the building are seen as positive, making it a lively place to visit
- the Library and Burgh Hall are the parts most regularly visited
- the war memorial and the quiet courtyard are much valued
- Peebles High Street is a vibrant place
- Peebles is an attractive and creative place

Opportunities

- there is a desire to learn more about the history of Peebles
- the part which has most scope for change was identified as the Burgh Hall and the removal of fixed staging. There were a range of ideas for removing the false ceiling and adding a gallery or floor at a high level (much of this has now been addressed in recent restoration work).
- there is scope to improve collaboration between those providing services at the Chambers Institution
- there is a desire to promote the use of the building by young people and for education

Weaknesses

- access to, and within, the building can be difficult for some people
- there is a shortage of facilities such as, toilets, catering, storage
- there is a need for more flexible accommodation within the building
- opening hours vary between the services based in the building, which can be confusing for visitors, and can cause problems accessing some parts of the building
- the booking system needs to be more user friendly and the cost of booking a space should be more affordable
- major repairs are needed to bring the building into a good condition
- the most visited spaces in the building are not easy to find or to physically access

Threats

- the older population of Peebles is predicted to increase over the next 20 years. There are currently barriers to accessing the building for those with reduced mobility, visual or hearing difficulties. These are likely to prevent older users from accessing services provided at the Chambers Institution, but this also presents an opportunity to develop spaces for this age group and others, including dementia friendly spaces and activities and spaces that facilitate social prescribing, connecting people to activities, groups and services in their communities to meet the practical, social and emotional needs that effect their health and wellbeing.
- lack of clarity over who is responsible for the building management (Chambers Institution, Live Borders or SBC) is unhelpful in building ongoing community support for the building
- Peebles has many community facilities, particularly halls. People understand that any decision about future use of the Burgh Hall must avoid duplication, the possibility of co-operation with other venues should be explored.

Consultations identified the following threads:

Placemaking

- Link to the Peebles Place Plan
- The building is highly valued by the local community and seen as an important community facility. There is a strong desire for it to remain as a focal point in the community.
- A belief that the building should continue to respect the original vision of William Chambers – that it be for the improvement of the local community
- War memorial a key focal point and much valued by the community.
- Location in a much-visited town in the Borders considered to have a vibrant high street and creative community.

- Opportunity to address social concerns within the town (anti-social behaviour, make the building more attractive for young people)
- Important the building enhances and does not compete with other community spaces in the town (such as the Eastgate Theatre).
- Maintain and enhance the Chambers Institution's role as the cultural heart of the community

Building Usage & Access

- Support for multiple uses and services in the building
- Library and Burgh Hall most visited spaces
- Full access a big issue – parts of the building not fully accessible. No disabled toilets for those visiting museum and art gallery.
- Car parking an issue
- Lack of catering facilities and a lack of storage across the building
- Inflexible spaces – flexible staging for the Burgh Hall, more spaces suitable for meetings and classes
- Confusing opening hours across all services in the building
- Confusing access to some services within the building and a lack of connectivity between these services
- More user-friendly booking services
- Lack of regular maintenance
- Location of services in Building – most used are not visible from the High Street and hard to find.
- Lack of clarity around building management
- Co-location of Library, Museum and Art Gallery
- Improved Fire Safety provision
- Environmentally Controlled storage
- Creation of Off Site Collections store for Tweedale that could be open to the public
- Staff and volunteer accommodation
- Creation or welcome/orientation point

Learning & Engagement

- Desire for a place to learn about the history of Peebles and the High Street
- Creation of modern and fit for purpose learning spaces

Economic Potential

- Could be important to the local tourism economy
- The Burgh Hall has huge potential, but the opportunities here have not yet been fully explored, although works to remove the suspended ceiling has been a significant improvement. It was highlighted during the consultation in November 2022 that the most recent Page & Park feasibility study did not address the Burgh Hall area or the need for additional and/or improved operational space, and particularly the idea of introducing a mid-floor that had been raised in the previous public consultations in 2016, and again in 2022. This was discussed at the presentation with the architect, who said that this had not been part of their feasibility brief but agreed that this would be worth investigating. This piece of work has yet to be completed.

All of the above can be summarised as follows:

To seize opportunities to re-order and refurbish the building, increasing flexibility and hence use, especially of the Burgh Hall. This will deliver an attractive, welcoming, well-cared for, accessible and affordable building that celebrates its unique history and heritage. In so doing, to engage local people in a unique piece of their community story and to attract new audiences into the town, contributing and enhancing the local economy. To ensure service delivery is responsive to current needs of the community and to build the trust of the local community through delivering effective building management in conjunction with other venues in the town, as appropriate.

Chambers Institution – Transformation and Renewal

Following on from the community and stakeholder consultation process in 2015-16, Page and Park prepared an options appraisal for SBC and the Chambers Institution within the context of the statement that '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'.

Two main strands were identified for possible capital works:

1. Physical changes to the building to improve accessibility, legibility and welcome.
2. Operational changes to the services, to increase the range offered, increase engagement and attract a diverse audience of local people and visitors to Peebles.

To achieve this the following physical changes were identified:

- More visible and accessible entrance.
- Improved access to all levels.
- Regulation compliance, especially in terms of fire safety.
- New sanitary facilities, including accessible toilets.
- An updated interior that enhances the heritage of the building.
- Better connections between the courtyard and to public areas.

Operational changes needed were identified as:

- Must be developed in consultation with stakeholders
- To retain the Library, Museum and Art Gallery, meeting spaces and the contemplative courtyard.
- A need to modernise and futureproof the Museum and Library service.
- Museum and Library staff to work together as a team to enhance the service to the local community.

Two different options were then outlined in this document with the preferred option seeing the following work undertaken:

- New entrance from the High Street.
- Welcoming reception area for the whole building.
- Retain the existing staircase
- A new glazed lift providing access to all floors with floor void at first floor to reveal upper level.
- Ground floor rooms opened up with partitions removed to create connected spaces.
- New link corridor connection to Register office, Burgh Chambers and Burgh Hall.

- New glazing to link in front of Burgh Hall opening up the space to the courtyard garden.
- First floor rooms reorganised to provide a temporary exhibition space.
- Environmentally controlled storage space.
- New fire exit from rear wing at first floor level .
- New staff base in former Museum room
- Second floor art gallery made accessible
- Lift access to collections storage at second floor level.

2022 Public Consultation Exercise

The 2022 consultation exercise saw a series of banners to inform the public about the context of the work and describe what the architect's proposals were coming out of the options appraisal. A UX display was then created to gather feedback on what the public thought of the proposals; whether there were any gaps in the proposals and whether there were any gaps in the Peebles community that could be co-located in the space. The public were asked to put gold stars against proposals that they supported and red dots against those that they objected to with the results (in order of highest to lowest scoring) as follows:

1. Accessible Public Toilets First Floor – 30 votes
2. Accessible Public Toilets Ground Floor – 25 votes
3. Accessible second floor art gallery – 25 votes
4. New Entrance to the High Street – 23 votes
5. Lift access to collections store on second floor – 22 votes
6. Welcome Reception for whole building – 20 votes
7. New fire exit from rear wing at first floor level – 18 votes
8. First floor rooms reorganised to provide different temporary exhibition space – 17 votes
9. New glazed lift to provide access to all floors – 16 votes
10. Ground floor opened up, with partitions removed, to create connected spaces – 15 votes
11. New glazing to link in front of Burgh Hall opening space up to the courtyard garden – 15 votes and one against
12. New link corridor connection to Registry Office, Burgh Chambers and Burgh Hall – 14 votes
13. Retain existing staircase – 12 votes
14. Environmentally controlled storage space – 12 votes
15. New Staff Office in current Museum Room – 3 votes (2 against)

The above highlights that accessibility was a key concern and the need to improve accessible toilet provision and improved accessibility on the second floor were the top scoring proposals, with lift access also being a high scoring desire.

Less popular were provision for staff/office accommodation, the need for environmentally controlled storage and retaining the existing staircase, but these could have scored less as participants may not have as great an understanding of the needs around these issues.

Staff working in the building also undertook a similar exercise with a new entrance on the high street, accessible toilets, a new fire exit at the rear of the first floor and better access to the second-floor gallery all being the top scorers. Lift access also scored highly. The least popular were placing the new staff provision in the current museum room, due to its aesthetic and heritage importance, environmentally controlled storage spaces, and a new link corridor to the Registry Office, Burgh Chambers and Burgh Hall.

Themes around What Might be Missing from plans were as follows:

- How to engage local people in the work, opportunity for local people to be involved and learn new skills.
- Green/Net Zero credentials (this will be very important for funders as well)
- Interpretation of the history and heritage of the building, the link to Chambers etc.
- Be ambitious with the Refurb (Bigger Museum mentioned)
- A desire to keep the library space distinct from Museum and gallery spaces.
- Learning and engagement plans, how will these be incorporated and catered for.
- Design of the outdoor spaces (the courtyard – a suggestion for a veggie plot)
- Burgh Hall – better catering facilities, better use of balcony area
- Combine the Buchan Museum and Tweedale Museum
- Space for a café? – Lots of café facilities near by could cause competition concerns?
- Modern meeting rooms and facilities, dementia friendly spaces and flexible multipurpose spaces.
- Better bike and car parking
- Robust policing
- True community representation
- Must be the building that is the true heart of the community in line with the original bequest – a hub for charities, a space for ideas sharing and one that is well marketed.

To summarise the above, accessibility improvements seem to be the highest priority work for the building. Installing a new lift, providing accessible toilets and improving public access on the second floor seem to be the most desired work to the building as a priority. In terms of what was felt to be missing, effective marketing scored highly across the board, with a feeling that more needed to be done to raise the profile of the building, the museum and the Burgh Hall. Several individuals also stressed the need to develop learning and engagement plans, to better engage the local community in the history and heritage of the building and create learning spaces for the Museum and Library.

Creating a new visible entrance on the High Street and a dedicated welcome space for visitors also scored highly across both groups and was mentioned in all consultation exercises. This requires thought on how best this could be achieved within the context of listed building consents and internal spaces within the building – it could require high cost to achieve this, so this needs to be properly costed to ascertain in what phase of works this should be undertaken.

Both staff and public mentioned the desire to separate the Museum and Library spaces and to provide a more comfortable and engaging space for the Library. Staff felt a refurbished building might address some of what was missing in the local community – more activities for teenagers and more spaces for evening classes, adult classes and workshops.

There is an opportunity for the Chambers Institution to develop spaces that meets the needs of all age groups to fulfil local social prescribing needs. The term ‘social prescribing’ is used to describe a variety of approaches by which individuals are linked to resources and services within local communities with the aim of improving mental and physical health and wellbeing. It encapsulates the concept that people’s health is largely determined by socio-economic factors, and that people who have access to social supports within their communities are healthier. It covers a range of needs around mental health, social isolation, dementia and a range of other factors and conditions that impact on health and wellbeing. The Scottish government have identified the importance of arts, culture and heritage in tackling these needs and see local community activities around these as important within Social Prescribing – as such there are many funding opportunities for organisations looking to facilitate this.

November 2023 Whiteboard Scoring Exercise

In November 2023 the Trust undertook a whiteboard scoring exercise to identify activities that could be delivered or should take place within the building. It should be noted that not all members of the Trust took part in this exercise.

The Tweedale Museum, Art Gallery and the Library were identified as essential as they are a core purpose of the building and all part of the original intent of Chambers when he bequeathed the building to the town.

Catering was identified as a key issue as the current kitchen is not adequate for being able to generate possible commercial income through the hire of spaces within the building and running of various events. The kitchen does present issues in terms of how a professional catering kitchen could be made to fit with the current physical challenges within the building.

A need to be sensitive to other offers in the town was identified and that the Chambers Institution should not aim to compete or detract from these offers, such as the various cafés in the town and the Eastgate Theatre.

Taking all of the above into account, the possible activities that scored the highest were:

- Music professional classical concerts - Strong potential for income generation as the Burgh Hall is a prestigious venue, better potential acoustics than Eastgate, but requires suitable stage and backstage facilities.
- Cultural Exhibitions - Ideal central location, activity fully in line with bequest conditions.
- Professional Catering Kitchens – this would enhance the attractiveness of the Burgh Hall and other spaces for venue hire and open up more income generation opportunities.
- Bookable Creative Spaces - Bookable flexible spaces for education and learning activities for groups/clubs or related to library/museum
- Coffee Morning activities – The building is a good central location for these types of activities.
- Silver Band – provide a venue for Peebles Silver Band
- Beltane Events - Would be appropriate activity for Chambers Institution, but dedicated space allocation for Borders College use would likely conflict with other priorities.
- Peebles Cycling Club – Provide a space for the cycling club
- Tourism Hub/Go Tweed Valley – provide a space for tourist information
- Museum of the Bronze Age/Historical Finds – The Borders and Tweedale have a rich bronze, Iron Age and Roman history with among the highest concentrations of sites from these periods in the UK – this Museum could tie in nicely with the recently refurbished Trimontium Museum in Melrose.
- Museum of the Written Word – The Borders has a rich literary history with strong associations with John Buchan, Sir Walter Scott, Robert Burns, James Hogg (The Ettrick Shepherd), Jane Bathgate, and more recent authors such as Douglas Jackson. The Borders also hosts the annual Borders Book Festive in Melrose and the Beyond Borders Festival at Traquair. Such a Museum could bring this rich history into a unique narrative and be a significant visitor attraction, but thought is needed on how such a Museum could impact on/compliment offers like the John Buchan Museum and on Abbotsford (The Home of Sir Walter Scott)
- Visiting Exhibitions – important to maintain interest and fulfil role as a cultural place for the people.

Further Views from Staff

Summary: Accessibility for lib/museum service users is key priority

- A need for the library, museum and art gallery to be co-located with a public reception area, environmentally controlled secure collections storage, public toilets and staff work area.
- Flexible activity spaces for use to drive income generation and participation-including Burgh Hall as large space for accommodating cultural and community events/meetings/private or commercial hire.
- A separate learning/activity space for accommodating museum/library learning activity participants.
- Storage spaces for museum collections with appropriate environmental controls, weight-bearing floors and safe emergency exit routes in case of fire.
- Fit for purpose wiring and public access to WIFI throughout the buildings on campus, for online information and interpretation access.
- Access is unsatisfactory regarding existing lift provision to upper floor and is very inconvenient for staff/public to use.
- Fire Safety/Emergency Exit (from top floor and art gallery) - Current top floor museum storage/former office cannot be used for regular access to collections storage as it does not meet fire evacuation safety regulations. There is no emergency exit to outside from current art gallery and only a single escape route via stairs which is a concern regarding safety standards, being via an unenclosed stairwell
- Office space is not adequate for staff but the best use of space for staff office accommodation requires consideration- There is a staff preference to free up the current upper floor backroom office and make this a library/museum public space. One option was suggested to relocate staff into the current museum exhibition room which is adjacent to current library floor. This is not supported by consultation to date and it would be preferable to retain the museum room for improved public access to collections/information and relocate office staff to a new ground floor office.

Priorities Emerging from Consultations to Date

Taking into account all of the consultation undertaken to date, it is clear there are some key priority areas of work that should be addressed as soon as is possible. However, it is also clear that a final concept encapsulating a full vision for the building also needs to be mapped out.

The overriding priority that leaps out from all the consultation undertaken to date is around accessibility. This includes improving access to and across all floors, installing an improved accessible lift, improving and making access from the High Street much easier and clearer, including the creation of a reception/visitor orientation point on entering the building. As part of this, fire safety improvements are also required.

The above scope of works could be drawn up as a plan for the first phase of work to be funded through the Levelling Up Fund, but it is crucial that before this work commences, there is a clear plan for the future use of the building and the ambitions for the final design, to ensure any work undertaken now is cohesive and connects with the final ambition and the wider capital works required to achieve this.

This requires work to articulate and agree what this design ambition and concept should be and, importantly what services will be delivered from where within the building. For example, reconfiguring the Library, Museum and Art Gallery were identified as fairly high priorities, mirrored

by concerns from some people to keep these three areas as distinct within the building. The current library has inadequate space for children and is squeezed into a space on the first floor – it may be better suited to move this space to the ground floor and possibly also incorporate within it the Visitor Welcome and Orientation space (it could also make sense to incorporate the tourism information into this area as well but this all requires discussion with staff and other stakeholders).

Learning space has also been identified as a high priority and the location of such a space also needs careful thought (ideally near to the Library, Museum and Art Gallery, but also near to the Burgh Hall).

The functioning of and access to the Registrar’s Office needs consideration in terms of the overall operation of the building once completed.

The current room that is home to the important Parthenon freezes is poorly presented and hidden away and the freezes, so unique to the building, are poorly marketed. This could become an important element of the building but requires thought around access and the spaces that it should connect with.

Consideration is needed around the site of the Citizens Advice Bureau, whose requirements also present challenges about where this service could be sited if it continues to be housed within the Chambers Institution. Likewise, thought is needed around the location of the John Buchan Museum and how this could function alongside a possible museum of written words.

The positioning of a professional standard and accessible catering kitchen needs thought and how best this can be sited within the challenging footprint of the building.

Page and Park did present options for the building following on from the consultations, but these options did not fully address all of the above ambitions and so a new design vision (building on those produced by Page & Park) should be commissioned as a priority.

Perhaps most importantly from all the consultation undertaken to date, has been the evidence of how much the local community want to see the Chambers Institution Building used and operating as a cultural place within the local area, and how much the current offers within the building are valued and loved by the local population. It is clear from the consultations, that people are engaged with and enthused by the future plans for the building and it will be important to keep them connected and involved as these plans develop.

From a wider funding perspective, ambition and vision are key to success. Funders like value for money but they also want to fund something that is truly creative, groundbreaking and ambitious and, in the world of heritage funding, preserves all that is unique about a historic building while injecting new life fit for a modern world. The Trust should look to develop a vision and ambition for the building that achieves this.

Recommended Next Steps

Following on from the consultations that have taken place to date and in consideration of the above and also the funding secured through the Levelling Up Fund, key next steps are recommended as follows:

1. Identify and confirm the full project vision and within this, the scope of works feasible within the Levelling Up funding envelope. To achieve this requires a brainstorming/workshop session, as soon as is practicable, to run through the findings from all the consultation to

date and ascertain what could be achieved in different phases of the project, and how best the project should be phased.

2. Identify and appoint a design team who can draw up reworked plans for the building and provides costings.
3. Identify the full fundraising target as well as specific matched funds that may be required to support the work undertaken as part of the Levelling Up funding. Following on from this, draft a comprehensive fundraising strategy for the project.
4. Based on the above, draft a new business plan for the project (both for the works to be completed within the Levelling Up fund envelope and for the full project) with full costs, detailed cash projects and realistic timescales.
5. Programme future consultation sessions to keep the local community and all stakeholders engaged and on board with all future plans.
6. Increase marketing and PR activity to help drive up interest (which in turn helps to make the fundraising easier) and encourages community engagement.