

Cultural centre could be open just 30 hours a week

BRECON'S new library and restored museum will only be able to open for 30 hours a week unless a partner is found, a public meeting was told.

Hundreds attended the meeting at the Castle Hotel, in Brecon, to discuss the y Gaer centre amid claims it could be handed to the NPTC College and concerns at sharing the space with the further education college and its students.

Public speakers said that would compromise the purpose of the museum and specially fitted art gallery - while questions were also raised over whether Powys council, which owns the building, would be meeting the requirements of funders, including the National Lottery and Welsh Government, by changing its use.

But the two members of the council's Independent/Conservative controlled cabinet responsible for the project, and two senior officers, said a new way of running the centre had to be found.

Councillor Phyl Davies, the Conservative cabinet member for buildings, said "without a partner the building wouldn't be able to open for longer than 30 hours a week."

The council only disclosed in July it has been in discussions with the college over expanding its role in the new centre and the authority has been accused of holding talks in secret.

But Cllr Davies said no agreements have been reached. He said: "There isn't really any proposal yet, we are having discussions."

The councillor said an agreement could see the college hire space in y Gaer for teaching and learning: "That would be, between college hours, it would be used for learning but after 3.30pm and on weekends and public holidays it would be a community space."

"If we don't find a partner to enable us to open for six or seven days a week the building would not be available to the public for more than 30 hours a week."

He also claimed talks are mostly centred on the new library and when questioned about plans that have circulated showing areas of both buildings that would be reallocated

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to the college he denied they were drawn up by the council.

He said: "The museum space is largely untouched. Those are not Powys County Council plans or are they in date."

The possibility of funders withdrawing money promised was also raised and Cllr Davies replied: "We are having discussions to ensure we are as compliant with as many conditions as possible."

Elizabeth Jefferies of Brecon said she had been "waiting" seven years for the gallery that has a "collection of outstanding, national significance" to re-open but had been "horrified" by the proposals. Local artist Robert Macdonald, who is president of the Welsh Watercolour Society and the Brecknock Art Trust, that is a funding partner, said the society was "astounded to see the Sir John Lloyd Gallery was to be handed over to the college as lecture theatre," he added: "It seems an abomination to raise millions towards a gallery and then turn it into a lecture theatre."

Cllr Davies again said there were no firm plans for the gallery space: "We are all more than aware of the significance of the Sir John Lloyd Gallery. These are proposals and nothing is set in stone and we will gladly hear suggestions."

Nina Davies, the council's head of communities, said as soon as there are firm proposals for the gallery space the council would come back to its funding partners. Nigel Brinn, the authority's corporate director for the economy, said it was "right to keep options open in discussions."

Ms Davies had opened the meeting by outlining the financial challenges facing the authority, which needs to make savings of £13m this year, and possibly as much as £36m over the next three years.

She said the 30 hours a week opening time could be reduced in further years and that is why the council is seeking a partner.

When Ms Davies said the NPTC college has "long been a partner" in y Gaer plans there were loud shouts of "no" from the audience but she said there was always an agreement it



Construction work is continuing on the new library at y Gaer, above, while the ball room of the Castle Hotel, below left, was filled with every seat taken and many couldn't even enter the room and were stood in the hallway, below right, while it was reported around 100 people were turned away



would run the centre's cafe and there would be a shared library space.

Cllr Rachel Powell (Independent) who is the cabinet member responsible for libraries said she recognised the time and commitment volunteers have already given to y Gaer but said the council had to be "inventive" in how it delivers services.

She said "y Gaer is a tremendous building to have for Brecon town and also for Powys," but said austerity had to be acknowledged and she has already run a consultation on the council's library service.

Cllr Powell said: "Culture needs a long term secure strategy in Powys, no community wants to see me talk about cuts, reductions and closures." She said a partnership with the college would support that and help younger people access the library and museum and also asked the public for their "solutions" to the council not being able to fund the running of the centre.

John Gibb, of the Brecknock

Society, which is a significant funding partner, said it was known the college would provide catering but said the meeting was being told other possibilities over the college's role aren't yet agreed. He called for a meeting of all stakeholders to look at "all options" for future funding.

Questions were also raised about the involvement of the NPTC College.

Brecon and Radnorshire AM Kirtley Williams, who is the education minister in the Welsh Government, acknowledged her department allocates a significant amount of money to the college. She said although the college is a private business the government would want to be satisfied any project it was part of wouldn't jeopardise its core business of providing education.

The Liberal Democrat also warned if the Welsh Government isn't satisfied the council was fulfilling commitments it made when it was awarded funding for y Gaer it could demand its £1m contribution be repaid.



She said: "The Welsh Government have put money in and one of the things it would look to the council to do is to demonstrate it has met the terms and conditions of that grant."

"I don't know if they have, that needs to be looked at. If not the Welsh Government could ask for the funds to be repaid, if it saw fit. I will ask those questions on your behalf."

"What's disturbed people is the council has a problem it needs to solve, and people have put their heart and soul into this project and funding partners have put resources in, the council needs to act in a transparent way so people have trust in it."

"Coming to Brecon and telling Brecon what they are going to get - that's what upsets people" MP Jane Dodds asked how the council would improve consultation and transparency and also asked the council to ensure documents can be made available. She said: "It is really important everyone has the same information."

Mr Brinn said it has been difficult for the council to communicate confidential discussions and in response to Ms Williams said: "I'm not sure if there was an indication of Welsh Government support hopefully it was in there."

Bookshop owner Leigh Hendra said the council had failed to keep people informed and had appeared to change its plans late in the process. She said: "If it was five or six years ago and people had known at the outset you would be in this position,

where you need to find partner to open, people would feel less hard done by and not that they have had the wool pulled over their eyes."

Brecon St John councillor Matthew Dorrance, who organised the meeting with his Labour colleague Cllr David Meredith, closed the meeting by calling for people to maintain pressure on the authority. He said: "We are fighting to get Brecon what it was promised, that is a cultural centre."

He said there had appeared to be "a bit of a climbdown" from the council at the meeting.

It had originally been intended y Gaer would open in spring 2017 but wrangles meant construction work was delayed. It was then due to open in spring 2018 but building delays meant that date was missed and a revised opening date of March 1 this year was also missed.

The project has also been hit by cost over runs. It was originally supposed to cost £8m and when that figure raised to £9m the council said its contributions would be £5m.

The failure to meet deadlines has also meant two art exhibitions haven't been able to go ahead as planned.

Mr McDonald revealed at the meeting the Welsh Watercolour Society had planned a major display with its Scandinavian counterparts to stage an opening exhibition which it had spent hundreds of pounds preparing for.

An exhibition celebrating opera singer Adelina Patti was also set to be held.

What we learned during y Gaer meeting

The centre is now set to open in either November or December this year.

The total cost has now risen to just over £14 million or £14,148,972 to be precise.

Of that Powys council has put in £9m with £3m having come from the Heritage Lottery Fund and £1m from the Welsh Government.

The rest has come from grants and charities including the Brecknock

Society and Museum Friends and the Brecknock Arts Trust as well as some individual donations.

However the contractor is now working a fixed price contract meaning delays are no longer costing the council or funders more money.

Cllr Phyl Davies also confirmed the council intends to open y Gaer "as soon as we can, with or without a deal with NPTC".