

An Open Letter to Cllr Newman and Croydon Council.

From Andy Hylton 'Save Our Fairfield' Campaign.

Dear Cllr Newman.

Following my recent request for a public meeting to discuss the future plans for the Fairfield Halls development, I have received no official reply from neither yourself or Cllr Godfrey. It is regretful that this issue was not seen as 'major' enough within the town to warrant a meeting, where local residents, community groups and staff would be able to have their concerns addressed, in accordance with your commitment to 'openness and transparency'.

With seemingly no opportunity for public discussion or appeal, we are about to lose the Fairfield Halls by stealth. Once closed, it is difficult to say for definite whether it would ever be reopened. Simon Thomsett the Fairfield CEO has said as much, so have others in the entertainment and venue management industry.

Whilst I fully welcome the proposed £30m spend on this much needed refurbishment, I urge the council to rethink the extraordinary decision they are taking to fully close it for at least two years, and to look at the impact on Croydon that the closure will have. I have severe concerns at the council's plans to close Fairfield Halls for two years for refurbishment, rather than the phased approach which Fairfield Halls themselves and many others favour.

Fairfield (Croydon) Ltd have their own plan, which would cost a lot less than £30m, and will keep the venue open for the community during refurbishment. The venue has been running at an increasing rate of success over the last years and this continuity has allowed them to continue to reduce historic debt and bring down subsidy levels.

Due to the Mott MacDonald report being repressed, part of the problem here is lack of information, so I can only hazard a guess at exactly what negative aspects of a full closure are contained in the Mott MacDonald report.

Let us look at the figures. The figure 'thrown' around of an extra £4.8m for construction costs from a phased scheme has not been publicly verified. Then there is a supposed extra £3.2m of running costs during phasing on top of that. How this figure has been calculated is not entirely clear, as to base this on current running costs of a fully functioning building would not be correct. It stands to reason that if a large chunk of the building is out of use and handed over to builders then there would be no running costs for that area, thus less utility bills, insurance payments etc. Equally, less programme would require less staff. In the phased option the majority of redundancies would be by choice, or natural wastage.

We do not know what the true costs of closing the building, making everyone redundant and then reopening from scratch will be.

Re-staffing will be extremely costly, requiring specialist recruitment and recruitment consultants. Those staff will require specialist training in some cases and at least a period to train in the venue itself. Remember that everyone who currently works at the Fairfield Halls will lose their jobs in July.

If the venue is to be run by a commercial operator then there would also be no volunteer corps of stewards to reduce costs and provide a community charitable connection. This volunteer corps is made up of men and women from 17 to 93 years and was originally created before the Fairfield Halls were built in 1962. A detail of Croydon history soon to be lost forever.

A huge marketing campaign would be needed to get the audiences back and a huge programming budget to get the shows back. We don't know how all this corresponds to the supposed £8m phased figure.

Could the closure and re-opening end up costing far in excess to tax payers that the costs of a phased development? Is this giving tax payers value for money?

This needs to be debated in a public meeting so a clear understanding of the advantages/disadvantages of both approaches can be clearly stated. Only then can this be fully scrutinised and we will all be able to see what is clearly in the public interests of Croydon.

What is the council's operational plan and strategy for the venue when it reopens?

Given that orchestral programmes are booked often two years in advance - due to the commitments of the various orchestras - surely you need an operator and plan in action from before the day Fairfield closes? Equally, fixtures, fittings and equipment are essential to get right in a multi-function space like Fairfield. Only the operator can know what is required and how it is likely to be used.

Then there are the practical questions. What is Croydon to do during the two year closure? What are the council's interim plans to replace the lost capacity of these three professionally equipped venues, and various smaller spaces?

As a casual technician at Fairfield Halls, I know many of the full time technicians are very sceptical both of the designs themselves and of the works being completed properly so that the finished product is efficient and fully functional. Many have contacts elsewhere in the industry, where refurbishments at other venues have left the operational technicians having to patch up and create work-arounds for bad design or bad implementation during the construction phase, due to lack of consultation with operational staff throughout the whole process until completion. Many of these professionals fear that these works will proceed with no logistical operational minds on hand to compliment the theoretical and ultimately less operational minds of the architects and theatre consultants. This alone is a practical reason to favour a phased refurbishment to keep the knowledgeable staff on site.

Another major issue is that Fairfield trains up apprentices, further adding to the value it provides the community. These apprentices will be half way through their courses and are very worried about how this will affect them. Where will they go? Other theatres which may be able to take them are a much further commute for them and the mere fact all this is happening is bound to affect their learning. Fairfield is a specialist venue, it can't simply relocate to a new location, nor can the staff be moved to another branch. The only option with full closure is full redundancies - unless meantime activities are possible - and with redundancies in a place like Fairfield you lose all the passion, knowledge and specialist skills to other venues outside the borough. It will be difficult to get them back.

You then have the loss of visitors to the town when Fairfield closes. Last year over 170,000 people went to ticketed live performance events at Fairfield alone. That doesn't include films or any other uses of the building apparently. That would imply that there are over 200,000 visitors to Fairfield. Their input to the Croydon economy is £2m per year according to the Fairfield Annual Report. If you phase the refurbishment you can maintain a good chunk of this. If you close for two years that is completely gone. I doubt the remaining arts & culture venues in Croydon could possibly get up to even a third of that figure whilst soaking up the lost capacity. Fairfield's audience is growing at the moment, they have momentum since they upgraded their box office and website. A phased approach

will keep the audiences in the habit of coming to Croydon to see shows. Closing now would lose all that. If the charity closes then all the customer data goes with them. Again, adding to the costs of starting from scratch.

The building is perfect for a phased approach. The way it is designed helps split the three venues; Concert Hall, Ashcroft Theatre and Arnhem Gallery. With work done during a much shorter closure, the electrics, water and heating etc can be re-routed to allow each venue to operate independently. During this time essential works, like replacing the boilers and removing asbestos can also be done. Much asbestos removal has already been done without need for closure. Then, once that is complete, one or two venues can re-open whilst work continues in the other(s) and then alternate over however long it takes 12-18 months per venue.

This is a true phased approach and this is why we need the full Mott MacDonald report published immediately, to answer all these financial questions and show us what the negative side to the Council's plans are.

Close down the Fairfield Halls for more than two years and you lose everything that has gone before. You lose the people who are emotionally invested in it, the skills of the people who currently work there, the loyal audiences who support it, the talented artists who play there. You lose the enthusiastic children and the schools who use the venue to enrich the lives of their children and to teach our young people about cultural arts. Remember it wasn't so long ago that the streets of Croydon were burning and the venue has been home for many community events and for disadvantaged young people. Fairfield Halls is not just about classical music.

Arts and culture are vital to a community's wellbeing. We need it to lift us out of day-to-day life, to teach our children about music and drama, to take our minds elsewhere. To challenge and to delight. At a simple level, all this is provided, for example, by going to watch popular entertainment such as the pantomime each year. Pantomime is often a child's first introduction to a live performance, in a professional venue, with production standards equal to any West End tour. This is true popular entertainment, drawing diverse audiences from across the Borough and across all social classes and all ages.

Where will our children go to see a pantomime this year? There are simply not enough other venues in Croydon to take up the capacity - and they do not have the facilities. The council would need to invest to bring them up to scratch or even build a temporary venue and kit it out. All this eats into the so-called savings created by closing.

We already have a deep connection and strong cultural bond within the community and our schools. Two years is a long time in a child's development. This plan could see the Fairfield Halls closed for much longer. Please remember that a whole generation of Croydon school children may have the very special access to culture and the arts at Fairfield Halls, taken away from them, with no alternative plans offered.

Croydon Council, If you truly care about the children and the future welfare of this town, and you truly want to revitalise the borough's cultural offer through this redevelopment of Fairfield Halls, I strongly urge you to please reconsider this decision to close the Fairfield Halls down. Let us keep music, arts and theatre alive at the Fairfield Halls during a phased development, and put into action these exciting plans for the benefit of the current population of the Borough, as well as for what the future years will bring.

Regards

Andy Hylton

Save Our Fairfield Campaign