

Appendix A

Public and Members Questions – Executive 4 October 2023

All questions submitted relate to Item 10 – Octagon Project Update
Question from Kathy Rolls Not everyone is aware of the problems associated with being disabled when planning a venue and it is not sufficient to just put in the token ‘one disabled toilet’ to satisfy regulations. I am disabled (walking wounded), and my grandson is a wheelchair user, we both find it difficult using the facilities at the Octagon. I have often found the ONE disabled toilet being used by men who appear to not want to queue for their own facilities and have admitted to not being disabled (I know not every disability is visible). Also, parents with kiddies who require and need for them to all access and use the cubical at the same time (I understand the parent and children need), however, it still makes it difficult for the wheelchair user who for obvious reasons take longer to actually get on the loo. They need the easy and quick access. In addition, there is a need for toilets that are gender neutral. If a disabled person like me is seated in the upper area of the theatre currently, they need to make their way downstairs to use the conveniences which is not a convenient nor is it an easy journey as negotiating the one stairway or the one lift against the flow of rushing pedestrian traffic making their way to and from the bar can be quite precarious. I have frequently been knocked and pushed. Toilets need to be on both sides of the building and on all levels. I would suggest that gents on one side and ladies on the other with the gender neutral and disabled toilets in both locations on all levels also. I am more than happy to speak with the planners or architects to offer suggestions if required.
Response from the Lead Member for Communities, Housing & Culture, Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts: Please accept my apologies for the challenges you have experienced. These comments are noted but the report presented at the Executive meeting is to consider the financial challenges and business case rather than a specific design standard.
Question from Jason Welch In response to the recent Somerset Live article where it outlines the very strong possibility of this project being shelved due to the ever-increasing costs involved, I would like to ask just who in their right mind really thought that this was ever actually going to happen in these financially difficult times? This whole scheme from an honest point of view was never going to get off the ground let alone ever get to a point of completion either within a set budget or a

realistic timescale. So what we are left with is a facility that was useable is now closed and a bill of almost £1.8 million to carry out the feasibility studies and site surveys which I'm sure have made the site unusable!! Just who in the council is responsible for this utter debacle?

What then compounds this 'never likely to happen' scheme is you people at the council have done all this prep work/studies/design without actually getting an interested building contractor signed up and on contract! So in reality you never actually had an idea of actual true cost or timescales - surely this smacks of public deception and then someone needs to held accountable for this shameful affair! Just what other pipe dreams does the council have bearing in mind it's almost bankrupt?

Response from the Lead Member for Communities, Housing & Culture, Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts:

The issues we face relate to the affordability of financing, as you will hear / have heard through the presentation the business case itself would have been affordable had the whole country not been exposed to the rise in interest rates, a matter beyond the control of this or any council.

The presentation demonstrates the capital cost estimates and we do have a contractor actively engage in the bidding process.

The intrusive survey works are a necessary part of the tender process as they inform contractors of the building condition and the complexities they are likely to come across during refurbishment. This helps the contractor appropriately price the works and the Council manage its risk contingency. This is normal practice in large scale construction and refurbishment contracts.

Far from a pipe dream, this was until the interest rates increased, a funded and well thought through project that attracted millions of pounds of external investment, and once complete would bring considerable economic benefits to Yeovil and the surrounding area.

Question from Tareth Casey

For the statement referred to please see Appendix B – Octagon Theatre Statement

As I am unable to attend the Executive meeting on Wednesday 4th October due to work commitments and being unaware that The Octagon Theatre would be on the agenda for this meeting, please find attached my statement in regards to the discussion on whether to continue to progress the Octagon Theatre project in Yeovil. Just to highlight the contents of this document

- Pages 1 - 2 provide a high-level summary on why progressing this project should be reconsidered
- Pages 2 - 4 provide a more detailed statement

- Pages 5 onwards - details of previous objections on planning grounds as to why this proposal should not go ahead, largely all still relevant.

All sections are relevant and should be read by the attending Committee (whom I have included), however I am happy that just the Summary section is read out as my statement during the Executive meeting, but with reference to note the additional sections that have been provided and with confirmation that the Councillors on the committee have read the full statement.

My apologies in advance for the roughness of this statement, but with just 36 hours' notice that this topic was due to be discussed at this meeting and a deadline of 5pm today, it was a rush to complete. Once again, I would note that the public need to be given more notice on what these Committees are planning to discuss, to allow them a genuine opportunity to attend and engage! It would almost feel that you don't want engagement or scrutiny from the public?

Response from the Lead Member for Communities, Housing & Culture, Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts:

Thank you for your detailed submission, without wishing to inaccurately summarise, your request is that the Octagon project is not continued.

You will note in the recommendations that continuing with the project and absorbing the increased costs is not being put forward to Council.

The committee today has heard / will hear that it is my recommendation to have a further options appraisal conducted to gain the best solution for Yeovil and beyond. You have questioned the benefits assessment and I can confirm that this was not only a consideration for the Council but was also assessed by the Department for Culture, Media and Sports along with Arts Council England. Their support was so strong for the Octagon that they awarded a £10m grant, over 1/3 of the total funding package.

You raise concerns over the number of tender responses, it is disappointing that we haven't drawn greater interest in the project. Had we have been able to meet with the outline business case we could legitimately have awarded the contract. We have held an open market tender process. Whilst we have received a limited response, the process has been a compliant one, this position has been tested with our own procurement professionals and with DCMS who are satisfied in our approach.

The purpose of the report coming before Members today is to clearly articulate the issues, whilst we could wait for the final stage of the tender process to complete the main challenge is access to affordable borrowing and so it felt right to discuss this in public now.

Question from Ray Tostevin

I have felt very conflicted about the Octagon Theatre redevelopment. As "Somerset's premier art and entertainment venue", the Octagon in Yeovil already plays a vital role promoting and celebrating all forms of creative talent. Not just in Somerset, but from

across the United Kingdom and beyond. The hugely successful Yeovil Literary Festival has made its main home at the Octagon, for the past decade.

I am a keen supporter and advocate for improving the Octagon's "cultural offer".

However, reading the report from Community Services director Chris Hall, which you are considering this morning, I am not persuaded by the case to continue with the current proposals: likely costs already £30+ million, and expected to rise yet higher. No clear timeline on construction actually getting underway, never mind completing proposed work. No firm date set on when the Octagon will reopen. This cannot be allowed to continue.

Even reopening the Octagon as it stands now, would cost, according to Chris Hall's report, £9m (why so much?? Have contractors already gutted the inside as part of their preparations for the re-building ahead? How will they possibly need to spend £9m, just to get the Octagon, back up and running?? But reopen it must. As soon as possible.

Please, SAVE some of the remaining millions to finish the Yeovil Refresh works (already years late and £4m+ overbudget) , in a timely manner. Get Yeovil back on its feet, with people wanting to come and visit, and shop, and spend time here. Rather than giving our Town the widest possible berth. (Who can blame them?) As I walked through Yeovil centre last Friday, I asked a Man in Hard Hat, how much longer before the Town centre "refresh" would be complete? He said, they were "looking at another 18 months" (!!)

Please STOP the Octagon "redevelopment". Spend what it takes to REOPEN it NOW. FINISH the much-needed facelift in Yeovil town centre.

Response from the Lead Member for Communities, Housing & Culture, Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts:

A detailed cost to reopen the facility has not been established as this would divert the contractor from delivering their final tender price, whilst the report does not seek to approve the additional expenditure that would be necessary the price to deliver the designed scheme would still be a helpful benchmark.

The recommendations of the report are to return to Members with an options appraisal of which I would expect an assessment of reopening the facility to be one of those.

It is worth bearing in mind that the facility was in need of refurbishment and upgrading prior to its closure, one of the reasons to consider the larger scheme was due to the work necessary.