

ABERGAVENNY TOWN COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 15TH SEPTEMBER 2021 HELD REMOTELY USING TEAMS

Present:

Chairman – Cllr T Thomas
Cllr T Davies
Cllr T Konieczny
Cllr N Tatam
Cllr S Burch
Cllr L Van De Vyver
Cllr R Harris
Cllr M Harris
Cllr G Jones

Apologies:

Cllr M Hickman
Cllr M Groucutt

Absent without apologies:

Cllr F Morgan
Cllr D Simcock
Cllr P Simcock
Cllr M Brocklesby

In Attendance:

S Rosser (Town Clerk)
Cath Fallon – Head of Enterprise and Community Animation (for presentation)
Dave Baxter – Borough Theatre Manager (for presentation)
Saul Cooke – South Wales Argus

No public session.

83/21	Receive and approve apologies for absence Apologies received from Cllr M Hickman for personal reasons. Cllr M Groucutt is out of the country. Reasons for absence approved.
84/21	Receive Declarations of Interest None received.
85/21	Receive Presentation from Cath Fallon, Head of Enterprise and Community Animation, and Dave Baxter, Borough Theatre Manager, Monmouthshire County Council.

Councillors received a detailed report from Cath Fallon explaining the purpose of her report was to secure additional funding to support the Borough Theatre, to make it fit for purpose for future generations. Cath thanked Abergavenny Town Council for their funding to date, and acknowledged that they are a key stakeholder for the Theatre.

Refit plans have now been extended to make the entire offer fit for purpose. Costs continue to rise, and there is now a £278,000 shortfall in funding. Section 6 of the report shows this, and they now need to fund this gap. Monmouthshire County Council are looking to Abergavenny Town Council for ongoing financial support, initially for a 5 year period, at a cost of £20,000 per year to assist with core costs. Along with Monmouthshire County Council, this support will give the Borough Theatre Team the ability to expand their offer and give financial stability. They would like to work with Abergavenny Town Council, to look at future civic events, working with Primary Schools, and how the history of the theatre is important to the town.

MCC inherited, in 2018, the debt from the Theatre Trust. Since then, they have worked closely with the Arts Council, built up a new volunteer base, and employed a new manager. As the Theatre has been largely untouched for years, it now needs reinvigorating, to make it fit for the future.

The refurbishment will see the seats replaced with retractable seating, giving a more useable space, adding to the diversity of the theatre, enabling further funding streams. The heating/cooling system will be completely replaced, making it Covid-compliant. A new wire tension grid will be installed giving safe access and ease of use for lighting, also enabling the theatre to offer training to younger technicians. The foyer will be reconfigured, going from two separate serving areas to one central bar, giving a better customer experience. The number of toilets will be increased. The Box Office will be housed in with the Tourist Information Centre which will increase footfall and sales. The backstage area and Corn Exchange will be refreshed. They have considered all the options, from closing, to phased works to doing them all at once, and the various implications of each option. The aim is to make the Borough Theatre a cultural centre for the county.

Contractors have currently held the price of carrying out the refurbishment until 23rd September 2021 when the report goes to Full Council.

To date, £200,000 has been spent – this includes stripping out the seats for full investigations due to lessons learned from the Hub refurbishment. Costs now have escalated from the original £400,000 to just over £1million. There were benefits of the preparatory work, particularly given the listed status of the theatre, so this is no longer superficial facelift. There are now Zero Carbon commitments to meet, plus the additional costs of moving the Box Office to accommodate the new lift at the front of the building, and the refreshing of the backstage areas and Corn Exchange. There is a knock-on from global issues- the Suez Canal, Brexit, and Covid all playing a part in cost rises.

The Arts Council have already funded £200k, there was £50k from ATC, MCC £313K, Transforming Towns funding is coming, Access for All funding and Capital Programme funding. These leave £278k shortfall.

Cllr Burch asked if the refurbishment would be keeping the original character of the building, as it is a Victorian gem? Dave Baxter responded that this was a big part of it – the balcony frontage being a feature. The seating will be upgraded, as will the construction for the seating - a steeper rake for better leg room and

viewing, with 2 aisles. The current air conditioning system will go, and the new wire tension grid will not mask the ceiling so it will retain its charm and intimacy. Cllr Burch was concerned about the time the Borough Theatre was often not in use – will usage increase going forward? Dave Baxter explained that there is a staff resource implication, but yes, they envisage it being used more thanks to the new reconfiguration enabling the space to be used for workshops, exhibitions, etc.

Cllr Konieczny asked, as the Town Council, we have a precept of £437K, and £20k per year over 5 years will have a big impact on the budget. Paying for this will come from the Public. Is it a political decision to ask Abergavenny Town Council? MCC could put a relatively small increase on Council Tax instead of us putting a larger increase on our precept. 63% of the precept is spent on public services, and this will increase to around 68% with this additional commitment. Cllr Konieczny recommended we should look at the budget priorities. In relative terms, how would we approach this?

Cath Fallon responded that it was not a political decision – they want to see the theatre being used more and with the Town Council being such a key stakeholder this will cement the relationship further. MCC are keen for the Borough Theatre to become the cultural centre for the County. The Borough Theatre is a County Asset and a big part of Abergavenny's Heritage. It is an amazing building and the team decided to approach the Town Council.

Cllr Jones asked about the £175k from Welsh Government's Transforming Towns, and if it had been confirmed. Cath Fallon responded, informing the Council that an email had been received that morning, so signing off on this would happen as soon as possible.

Cllr Jones reiterated that the funding had not been agreed yet, and Cath Fallon explained that costs have been so high, even QS officers were shocked at how much all the costs had escalated.

Cllr Jones asked how the Suez Canal had impacted on costs, was it simply building materials that this affected. Cath explained that all details are contained within her report, but the entire project has expanded greatly, as there hadn't been any investment in the building for so many years. Cllr Jones thanked Cath for her report.

Cllr Van De Vyver said he understood the difference but stated it was still a heck of a jump. He asked if the removable seats make the area more versatile, or was it down to costs – fixed v retractable? Was it the difference between buying a Ford and a Rolls Royce? Dave Baxter responded, explaining retractable seats versus the cost of static seating weren't very different, there is an increased element in construction to rake the seats, install lights for steps, but the benefits were much more – so we're getting a solid Ford Focus which everyone will like! Cllr Van De Vyver acknowledged that this alteration to the seating will increase what the theatre can be used for.

Cllr R Harris followed on with a further comment about the seats, and how changing these had caused disquiet amongst groups within the town. It will decrease the number of seats to around 50 less than previously available. What was the average occupancy before the refurbishment?

	<p>Dave Baxter didn't have the exact figures to hand, but explained the theatre wasn't fully occupied all of the time. By looking at the user groups and their audiences, there was capacity in the week to spread out the performance run over. To allow for step free access from the front to the back of the auditorium, and increase leg room, a reduction in seats was a pragmatic solution for the customer experience to improve – in reality it wasn't always sold out for the size of the venue, so anything over 200 seats is a good offer.</p> <p>Cllr Thomas thanked Cath Fallon and Dave Baxter for their report and for attending the meeting. Cllr Thomas stated it was a comprehensive view and can appreciate that costs have sky-rocketed. The Town Council acknowledged there is a desire to help, but that it needs further discussion to see if they feel it can be affordable. Questions from fellow Councillors were good, especially about the retractable seating, as this is what is used in the comprehensive school and allows for the space to be better utilised. There is a big desire to have a good cultural facility and experience, which the Town Council would want to see continue.</p> <p>Cath Fallon and Dave Baxter left the meeting at 7.31pm.</p>
86/21	<p>To Consider request for £20k a year support over 5 years</p> <p>Cllr Thomas asked if we can afford this. Abergavenny Town Council can't afford a capital investment, we're not in that position, we aren't big enough, our precept is not high enough. We have other commitments, like the setting up of the new Town Team. We gave £15k to the MCC Youth Team last week. At the heart of it, we want to help – but we need to look at our finances.</p> <p>Cllr Konieczny proposed we move the discussion to Policy and resources Committee and ask Cllr Groucutt what the implications of servicing this request will have on forthcoming commitments. Before we make our decision, we need to look at alternatives – could we give a one-off donation from reserves? We need to look at this proposal objectively, being mindful that to commit to a 5-year agreement will affect the new Council. Cath Fallon's responses to questions asked didn't explain the need for funding from us fully - £250k is peanuts for MCC to borrow.</p> <p>Cllr Konieczny proposed to move the discussion to Policy and resources for Cllr Groucutt to compile a report to guide and make the Council fully aware of implications of servicing request. This was seconded by Cllr Jones.</p> <p>Cllr Tatam agreed that we are heavily committed already, with a staggering amount of the precept already committed.</p> <p>Cllr M Harris commented that we cannot burden future administration to £20k per year. More than happy to have Cllr Groucutt review the proposal. Mindful that we would want to make a contribution, but we need to know the implications, before the end of the financial year and our tenure to see if we can commit to this.</p>

	<p>Cllr R Harris if when the review is completed, it will be interesting to see if we could pitch it to the people of the town to see if we agree to it, do they support it? Keen to see what the public think.</p> <p>Cllr van De Vyver suggested looking at different monetary contributions rather than the £20k that has been requested.</p> <p>Cllr Burch commented, that as with all projects, will this end up being a year-on-year request for core funding commitments, or should we ask to see the business plan? The theatre is an under-utilised asset. Can we use the request as a lever to become more inclusive in operations, marketing, events, and improvements? Maybe taper the funding rather than committing to £20k per year for 5 years.</p> <p>Cllr Thomas recognised we are being mindful of the budget, and of our reserves.</p> <p>Cllr Konieczny reiterated that the Borough Theatre is a Monmouthshire County Council asset, it belongs to them, and if they decide to close it we can't do anything to stop them. Same as with the toilets in town.</p> <p>The proposal was then put to a vote and the motion was carried.</p> <p>Agreed to pass the proposal on to Cllr Groucutt to prepare a paper and to not make any decisions regarding support until reviewed by Policy and Resources Committee at their next meeting.</p> <p>No further actions. Cllr Thomas thanked everyone for their attendance.</p>
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There being no other business the meeting ended at 7.44pm

APPROVED AS A TRUE RECORD

CHAIRMAN DATE