

Yeovil Town Council

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Minutes of the meeting of Yeovil Town Council held on Tuesday 10th October 2023 at 7:30pm at Westlands Entertainment Venue, Westbourne Close, YEOVIL BA20 2DD.

Present: Cllrs E Hopkins (in the chair); B Boyton; T Casey; N Gage; K Gill; K Hussain; G Oakes; E Potts-Jones; W Read; A Richards; J Sell; A Soughton; R Stickland and D Woan.

In Attendance : A Card (Town Clerk); H Ferdinand (Deputy Town Clerk); L Ryder (Assistant Town Clerk); Duncan Sharkey (Chief Executive – Somerset Council); Dan Bennett (Property Development Project Manager – Somerset Council); Cllr Mike Best (Chair of Somerset Council); Natalie Fortt Regeneration Programme Manager – Somerset Council); Elizabeth Dawson (Cultural Services, Service Director – Somerset Council); Adam Burgan (Arts & Entertainment Venues Manager – Somerset Council); Cllr Adam Dance (Somerset Council); Cllr Bill Revans (Leader of Somerset Council) and Cllr Theo Butt-Phillip (Somerset Council).

There was 312 members of the public present and 4 members of the press.

7:37 pm The meeting commenced.

In absence of the Mayor, Cllr E Hopkins took the chair and opened the meeting by welcoming the public. She called for nominations for a Vice-Chair. Cllr E Potts-Jones was nominated, seconded and voted by the Council to be Vice-Chair. The Chair then addressed the public explaining the process for the evening and that she would allow the public to comment on item 11/112 at that agenda item.

7:43 pm The meeting commenced.

Public Comment

There were no comments.

11/109 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TO CONSIDER THE REASONS GIVEN

Council to receive apologies for absence and consider the reasons given. *LGA 1972 s85(1)*

Apologies were received from Cllrs A Kendall (unwell); J Cabell (childcare issues); T Lock (conflicting engagement); J Lock (conflicting engagement); S Lowery (unwell); J Lowery (conflicting engagement); and R Spinner (work commitments).

RESOLVED: to accept the apologies with the reasons given.

11/110 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members to declare any interests, including Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPI) they may have in agenda items that accord with the requirements of the Town Council's Code of Conduct and to consider any requests from members for Dispensations that accord with Localism Act 2011 s33(b-e). (NB this does not preclude any later declarations).

Councillor	Reason	Interest
Cllr G Oakes Cllr E Potts-Jones Cllr W Read Cllr J Snell Cllr A Soughton Cllr D Woan	Member of: Somerset Council	Personal
All Councillors	They and/or close family members use the facilities of the Octagon Theatre	Personal

There were no other declarations at this time.

11/111 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS TOWN COUNCIL MEETING

To confirm as a correct record the minutes of the previous Town Council Meetings held on 5th September 2023.

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the previous Town Council Meetings held on 5th September 2023.

11/112 MOTION FROM CLLR G OAKES

The Chair set out the order in which people would be asked to speak. She advised that each speaker would be allowed up to 3 minutes. She asked if anyone was recording the meeting, (a member of the press indicated that they were), and she informed everyone that the Town Council recording was purely for administrative purposes.

Cllr G Oakes introduced his motion:

“This Council seeks the opportunity to work in partnership with Somerset Council to ensure the future of the Octagon Theatre project which will enhance culture and arts within Yeovil and Somerset.

The Council wish to financially support the plans outlined by Somerset Council (originally agreed by South Somerset District Council) and ensure that it progresses in accordance with the support of the people of Yeovil and Somerset as a whole.”

Cllr B Revans, the Leader of Somerset Council gave a brief presentation about the Octagon Theatre. He thanked everyone for their interest. He welcomed the opportunity of support and working in partnership with Yeovil Town Council to develop the Octagon Theatre into a flagship venue of arts and culture in Yeovil for Somerset. £10 million of Department and Culture Media

and Sports (DCMS) funding has been secured and Somerset Council continue to work with Arts Council England around the administration of the fund. South Somerset District Council had developed a robust outline business plan for this project but now the next steps and options had to be considered due to increasing interest rates. He went on to explain how Somerset Council were reviewing all capital projects, in light of the financial challenges that it faced. Interest rates and other costs indicate that Somerset Council would need to increase the subsidy by nearly £1 million each year; and to deliver the original business case, the Council would need an additional £14.4 million. Somerset Council recognise that they need to work in partnership with Yeovil Town Council, other parish councils and other grant funders. He did state that the figures quoted were indicative and more work needed to be carried out .

The Town Clerk explained that she was Responsible Finance Officer for Yeovil Town Council, with many years of local government accounting experience. She stressed that if Councillors agree to financially contribute to the redevelopment, they should only agree in principle. She said that there was not enough information available to fully commit and the Town Council would have to carry out their own due diligence

If the Town Council agreed to borrow a sum of money from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLb), there is a process that would need to be followed. The PWLB is a lending facility that provides loans to local authorities and is operated by the UK Debt Management Office on behalf of HM Treasury. Firstly, the Town Council would need approval to borrow from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Secondly, the Town Council would need to be fully transparent with residents and taxpayers and provide details of the project and the plans for borrowing and loan repayment.

When making the application, the Town Council would need to evidence that there has been consultation on both the proposed project and any proposal to increase the precept to meet borrowing costs. They would also need to evidence public support to increase precept because of the proposed borrowing. She stated that there were 3 variables which impact on the cost of borrowing - the loan amount, the loan period and the interest rate at the time of borrowing. She stressed that taking out a loan, could impact on other projects that the Town Council may wish to carry out.

Members of the public were invited to speak.

The first speaker asked if the vote went against the proposal of providing financial support, how could the people of Yeovil and surrounding areas help save the Octagon Theatre.

The second speaker spoke of the history of the Octagon Theatre and how she and her family had used the Octagon Theatre. She spoke of the creation of the Yeovil Literary Prize and the Yeovil Literary Festival which brought people from afar to Yeovil and that the Octagon Theatre was known all over the world. She reminded people that the Octagon Theatre was there for wellbeing and for the people of Yeovil.

The following speaker stated they were a new resident at Yeovil but he had managed to attend the Octagon Theatre prior to it closing. He stated that he was sad that it had been closed, and whilst he understood the issues of the business case he felt that the Octagon Theatre should reopen as it is.

The next speaker was the chair of the Quicksilver Community Group. He acknowledged that he felt very conflicted about the planned Octagon Theatre redevelopment. He said that he was a keen supporter and advocate for improving the Octagon Theatre's cultural offer. He expressed that he was not persuaded by the business case due to excessive costs which were rising and there being no timeline. He questioned the costs of reopening the Octagon Theatre without the development but he acknowledged that the Octagon Theatre must reopen as soon as possible.

The next speaker spoke on behalf the Foyer Club. She commented on how many hours of volunteer time went into supporting the Octagon Theatre and the advancement of arts through the Octagon Theatre. She spoke of how important the Octagon Theatre was to so many. She welcomed the redevelopment of the Octagon Theatre and the Town Council financially supporting it.

The following speaker spoke of his youth at the Octagon Theatre. He stated that he was the Director of Project Dance, a company he founded. He performs and presents his touring productions at both Octagon Theatre and Westlands Entertainment Venue. He commented on how the current climate for theatre production and touring has meant that many small and medium companies have had to reduce investment and the number of venues they visit. He spoke about how the renovations were necessary and that in real terms reopening the theatre as it was a regress in the ambition of the Octagon Theatre to move forward. The programme would not be sustainable as more companies will not deem the Octagon Theatre a viable venue to visit because the area would not have a cultural capital. He said it was a necessary investment into the town but also into culture, economy and education for generations to come. He stated that the people of Yeovil and Somerset needed to be more ambitious about what they deserve.

The next speaker spoke of living in Yeovil all his life and that the Octagon Theatre had been part of his life and his families in one way or another. He believed that there was a need for investment in the changing rooms and behind the scenes. He believed that the Octagon Theatre project could be a springboard for much needed inward investment into the Town. Over his time in Yeovil, he had been disappointed in the lack of leisure facilities, he commented on the reduced Goldenstones project and the failed Sportszone project. He said that the Town needed better facilities to draw people in and that he often went to Dorchester as it had more to offer. He spoke of Westlands and how the relevant people were able to work together to redevelop and keep that facility. He concluded by saying he thought Yeovil would die if this project did not go ahead.

The following speaker was the Chair of Yeovil Operatic Society. He questioned whether the project could be carried out on a piecemeal basis because he was aware that work did need to be carried out.

The next speaker spoke as a member of both the Octagon Choir and Dance Inclusivity. She has been a lifelong user of the facilities. She spoke as a mother of a daughter with disabilities who was also a wheelchair user and wanted to dance. The Octagon Theatre run Dance Inclusive classes. She stated that without the Octagon Theatre her daughter would never leave

the house. She asked for everyone to not only consider able bodied people but to also think of disabled people.

The following speaker stated that she was involved in Johnson Hall and involved in the Yeovil Operatic Society but she was also a retired businessperson who still has much involvement in the financing world. She commented on interest rates and inflation. She said although she would like a new theatre, budgets have to be stuck to. She commented on the liability that borrowing would pass on to future generations of Yeovil. She said if there was a precept increase, then the taxpayers would have to pay more. She stated that no-one knows how much the project would cost or when it would finish.

The Manager of the Octagon Theatre and Westlands Entertainment Venues spoke next. He stated how he had been touched by a previous speaker as one of the principal reasons for this project was to provide better facilities for disabled people. He spoke of his time in his current position which he moved to in 2009. This was when he first saw plans for the redevelopment of the Octagon Theatre. He asked for people to be patient whilst Somerset Council explored the options. He also said that he missed the Octagon Theatre. He wanted to ensure that the Octagon Theatre was there for generations to come but that it also served the community far better.

The Town Clerk read out an email from a member of the public which asked for everyone to support the redevelopment of the Octagon Theatre. He stated that quality of life should not always be based on monetary value and that he was sure that the delivery of a redeveloped Octagon Theatre would benefit the local economy in so many ways.

The floor was opened to the Councillors for comments.

Cllr Oakes spoke on his motion. In 1974, Johnson Hall was built and gifted to the people of Yeovil by the Johnson family. In 1985, the hall changed its name to the Octagon Theatre but it was not until 1988 that the proper seating was installed. Since then, the Octagon Theatre has grown and it had become regionally significant. The Octagon Theatre is approaching its 50 years and is starting to look tired. He commented that the Octagon Theatre was no longer fit for purpose. The Octagon Theatre cannot host the big productions as the backstage need to have flying sets to host west end shows. There is not enough seats for big shows, nor enough toilets. Adequate air conditioning was also needed.

One option is for the necessary work to be carried out so that the Octagon Theatre can be reopened but the basic issues would still remain. The second option is to revamp the existing Octagon Theatre as this would attract a wider range of acts and productions including touring companies. The higher roof would allow flying sets. Increased capacity would make performance viable for the touring companies. The big shows fund the smaller, amateur and local shows. Yeovil needs a modern, fit for the future Theatre.

The economy of Yeovil has taken a hit but this project would help boost the economy. It would support the local hospitality trade which will safeguard and create jobs. It will also support trade, hotels and car parks.

Cllr Oakes put forward this motion, because without partnership working this redevelopment would be lost forever. He stated that if the project did not go ahead, the £10million grant would

be lost, resulting in the possible loss of support from the Arts Council. To keep the promise that South Somerset District Council made to develop the Octagon Theatre, there was a need to work with partners to raise fund for this project to keep the £10million and pump prime the project, so that by the time Yeovil Town Council and Somerset Council had to put money in the interest rates should have reduced.

Cllr Potts-Jones stated that she would be looking at all financial implications. She commented that when she read the motion she could picked out four words – “opportunity”, “partnership”, “enhance” and “Yeovil” and that she would be supporting the motion.

Cllr Gage identified that he would be speaking against the motion but not against the Octagon Theatre . He stated that costs had risen at every stage and that the shortfall and significant risks had increased and will continue to rise in the short and medium term. He highlighted that although Somerset Council have full responsibility for completing this project, they are unwilling to raise the necessary capital because of the huge financial risks involved. He was concerned that the Town Council, without a financial or risk assessment, would be contracted to raise the capital by the same expensive methods, rejected by Somerset Council. Any borrowing would have a substantial impact on the Town Council for many years ahead. He stated that the motion should be rejected and that Yeovil Town Council should send a strong message to Somerset Council to get the Octagon Theatre opened as soon as possible.

Cllr Read stated that he fully agreed and supported the motion.

Cllr Woan said he was 100% behind saving the Octagon Theatre but that everyone needed to be clear about what that meant. To truly save the Octagon Theatre, facilities need to be brought in line with demand and ambitions. He said that there is only one solution - redevelop the Octagon Theatre which will regenerate and sustain the Octagon Theatre for the next 50 years. If this is not done now, the money will go somewhere else that does want to be ambitious. He stressed that this motion is not about committing to the rebuild – it is about Yeovil Town Council asking for the chance to look at the revised business plan to assess if it able to contribute financially to the project. He stated it was time for the Octagon Theatre to take the next step as a centre of excellence for aspiring local artists to grow and shine, and a magnet to attract West end shows. It would bring a much-needed increase in footfall to Yeovil boosting hospitality sector businesses and the local and regional economy.

Cllr Casey stated that he was opposed to the motion. He argued that there had been a failure to provide information and a viable business case for this project and that he had been refused access to information following a Freedom of Information request that he submitted. He said that there was nothing to justify the level of investment for the project. He said to invest money, (especially public money) there had to be a return of investment for the town and that the Council had to consider whether it was a sound investment. He said that the project was now estimating an additional £8 million over the original £23 million budget - even with funding from Yeovil Town Council there was no guarantee that there would be sufficient funding for this project. He questioned the timescales and how long it would take for the town to get the Octagon Theatre back. He believed that this was not a viable investment opportunity. He spoke about ticket levies and increases in ticket prices and the impact it would have on demand as many families would be outpriced. He questioned who would foot the bill for the

loan repayments and interest payments. He said the Octagon Theatre should reopen as soon as possible.

Cllr Gill highlighted his love of the theatre. He said that he volunteers with several of the theatre groups in the area. He spoke of the opportunity that the project would bring to both Yeovil and the area. He said that it would bring people in the town and the hotels and restaurants and with that further investment.

Cllr Soughton commented that it was really good to see so many people at the meeting with their varying views. He said that he had visited the Octagon Theatre that day and the damage that had been created during investigatory work was mostly superficial. He believed that about £1.7million had been spent on the project so far. He said that if the Octagon Theatre was put back to use, it would take about a year for that to happen. He stated that this meeting was to find ways forward so that the project can be funded. He believed that the Octagon Theatre project would compliment the regeneration programme, increasing footfall and enabling the town to grow which will lead to more businesses coming to Yeovil.

Cllr Boyton said the Town Council should explore the facts and figures as well as listening to what people were saying. He also said the process should be trusted. He commented that the value is not just in money terms but consideration had to be given to community and creativity value.

The motion was proposed by Cllr G Oakes and seconded by Cllr A Soughton. A named vote was called for and it was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED: This Council seeks the opportunity to work in partnership with Somerset Council to ensure the future of the Octagon Theatre project which will enhance culture and arts within Yeovil and Somerset.

The Council wish to financially support the plans outlined by Somerset Council (originally agreed by South Somerset District Council) and ensure that it progresses in accordance with the support of the people of Yeovil and Somerset as a whole.

*(Voting: 12 for; and 2 against) **

** For (Cllrs E Hopkins; B Boyton; K Gill; K Hussain; G Oakes; E Potts-Jones; W Read; A Richards; J Snell; A Soughton; R Stickland; and D Woan); Against (Cllrs T Casey and N Gage)*

Public Comment

A member of the public commented that the population had doubled and that facilities within the town had not met demand.

Meeting closed at 9:17 pm.

Signed:

Date: