

Response to the Petition

Full Council on 22 February 2017 agreed to continue with Stage 3 of the Civic Development to ensure it had an informed position before taking a decision on whether to proceed or not. The timetable for returning to Full Council for a decision with this information was outlined.

The Council has from the outset undertaken a staged process with decisions by Cabinet/Full Council to progress with expenditure and investigation at each stage. We have been operating along the RIBA (Royal British Institute of Architects) Plan of Work. It has been made clear from the outset that any work completed prior to a formal decision to proceed is at risk.

The current programme will see the completion of developed design by the middle of August with draft reports being submitted, with all associated information by the beginning of September, in advance of the Council being able to consider all the factual information to take an informed decision on whether to proceed in December 2017 at Full Council. A number of detailed elements have been brought forward in the programme from later stages at the Council's expense to address the concerns of stakeholders.

Calverley Grounds

The Council has identified the Mount Pleasant Avenue Car Park and Great Hall Car Park fronting Calverley Grounds as the preferred location for the development of a new Civic Centre and Theatre which would release the current Town Hall and Assembly Hall Theatre sites for a future redevelopment. The proposal has the opportunity to heal the western edge of Calverley Grounds and create a new public space between the buildings establishing an improved entrance from the heart of the Town Centre into Calverley Grounds. There will be encroachment into the grounds but once built this is equivalent to less than 2% (993sqm) of the total size (46,133sqm) of Calverley Grounds. An area at the entrance which is currently the access to the Great Hall Car Park (530sqm) will become part of the new open space and entrance to the Grounds. The inclusion of this area would bring the loss of public space to less than 1%. This is shown in Appendix Two.

There will be disruption and an impact on Calverley Grounds during construction. However this is temporary with a longer term landscaping plan for the areas affected, replacing poor quality and predominately self-sown trees. The details of this are being prepared together with a longer term vision for Calverley Grounds. The Council would like to work with the Friends of Calverley Ground on this vision.

Building on the edge of Calverley Grounds will introduce a building line that is not currently there replacing the existing trees. While the design is being carefully considered the new buildings will increase the level of overshadowing. Information on the current level of overshadowing contrasting with the potential overshadowing by the new buildings is being prepared for pre-planning discussions and for wider stakeholder engagement in the next few weeks. It is however expected that there will be an increased area of overshadowing.

Building on the current site

Building a new theatre on the current Civic Complex site has been examined. In the report Assembly Hall Theatre Update to Cabinet in October 2014 there is reference to the Stephen Browning Associates report. The consultants were asked to identify if an auditorium of 1,200 seats could be delivered on the current Assembly Hall Theatre site. This did not address fundamental issues with the capacity of the public areas, the height of the fly tower, wing space, access to the building for shows and the lack of changing facilities. In short the main limitations in not being able to attract leading shows would remain. The cost quoted is based on assumptions in 2013. A summary of the Stephen Browning Associates report was included as appendix b on the Assembly Hall Theatre Update report (Item 6) on the 30 October 2014 Cabinet papers. The report noted that:

SBA notes that it would need to be considered whether there was sufficient space for audience access and fire exits from either side and noted it may be necessary to break through the current footprint of the building to achieve the necessary scale.

We have updated these figures for this limited approach to 2017 with the potential cost of this being estimated as £31m.

While the original mandate was to look at a theatre on or adjacent to the Civic Complex, or on land owned by the Council a key requisite was continuity of theatre use. Initial options considered did look at the implications of the theatre being reprovided on the current Civic Complex. In addition the provision of a 1,200 seat theatre with the required facilities to attract leading shows. The footprint of the proposed new theatre gives an indication on the impact on the listed Civic Complex, impacting on the AHT, Town Hall and Police Station. There are issues with compromising the other buildings on site from both a commercial and an historic listed basis. While the theatre would be closed for approximately three years with additional impact on the Town Hall during this period.

The footprint of a 1,200 seat theatre addressing the back of stage and technical areas space requirements, the public space including foyer and bars superimposed on the current Civic Complex is attached at Appendix Three.

The opportunity to attract leading shows in the current venue is highlighted in this response from UK Productions who were approached regarding the forthcoming Legally Blonde tour:

“I just wanted to confirm our reasons for not including the Assembly Hall Theatre on the UK tour we are producing.

As you know we are very aware of your space and the technical limitations therein. Whilst we would love to bring the show to Tunbridge Wells we would have to compromise the physical production too much to get it on stage. There are several elements in the design of the show that simply wouldn't make it on to the stage due to lack of wing space and a useable dock area.

I know that there are ongoing discussions to build a new theatre for Tunbridge Wells and as a touring producer I can assure you that were this to go ahead

there would be no shortage of number one productions queuing up to be a part of your programme. The market in your area is absolutely right for large scale shows and deserves a theatre capable of fulfilling this potential, and showing them off as they were designed to be seen."

In our wider planning for the new theatre other production companies have also expressed their support for the market offer that Tunbridge Wells would be able to support. Selladoor Worldwide highlighted:

"We've thoroughly enjoyed developing a strong relationship with the Assembly Halls, and developing daring, dynamic and diverse shows with them. The team at Tunbridge Wells has the audience at their heart, and is interested in making the building a home for all patrons – with a strong programming ethos and friendly staff base. We look forward to continuing to work with a building with such strong ambition. I think the new theatre will regenerate the area and continue to build Tunbridge Wells as a destination town for A-quality shows that the AHT cannot currently host."

As part of the Stage 3 process, a business plan for the theatre is being produced.

Leaving the Civic Complex empty

A key component of the investigation of the delivery of a new Civic Centre and theatre is how the current Civic Complex site is brought to market in the future. The Council despite its best endeavours has never had the legal ownership of the cinema site to influence the assessment of a new owners ability to deliver. It does however own and control the Civic Complex. The Council has already carried out two stages of soft-market testing to investigate the offer, its attractiveness to the market and the steps needed to bring this to the market. This has demonstrated that the site is attractive to potential developers, but that a sale up to five years before being available is not a realistic proposition. Disposal to the market needs to take place approximately two years before we exit the site. The consultancy team have been looking at the legal approaches that would allow the Council to retain control over development on our site to ensure delivery.

Less Disruption and Greater Value on the Civic Complex

There is no financial assessment provided by the petitioner to confirm the greater value for money that they believe will be received. The current Town Hall has a value of £4m. The refurbishment for modern purposes at 2017 prices would cost approximately £13m and the building on the asset register would still have a value of £4m. Yet a new office development will provide the Council with an ongoing income stream and be an appreciating asset.

Redevelopment of part of the town or elsewhere in the borough will have some form of disruption to someone or something. Through the construction plans being considered and through the planning process disruption will be minimised as much as possible as it is for any development. The proposal in the petition is that a redevelopment on the Civic Complex would result in less disruption in the Town Centre. On one level with disruption only on the Civic Complex site this could be correct however other elements of disruption would be closure of the Theatre for at least three years with the short to medium term loss to the local economy, loss of cultural market share and theatre staff being made redundant. In addition the current

Town Hall would be both compromised as a future opportunity and would need to be vacated while it was rebuilt. Suitable office space in the Borough would be required with associated costs for this period and a double decant.

Servicing the Debt

The Full Council decision on the 16 July 2016 requested that the s151 officer in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance, bring back to a future meeting options to address the revenue implications for funding the capital cost, when or before, the capital request is being considered.

This remains the position and a fully costed and independently audited plan will be provided to Full Council to enable an informed decision to be made with the Stage 3 information on the Civic Development.

The Council has already confirmed publically that there will be no additional increase in Council Tax to pay for the Civic Development project.

The Council has also confirmed publically that the proposed initial increase in subsidy, part of the Council's wider business planning for a new theatre, is included in the total cost. Incorrectly the petitioner has stated that the subsidy to the theatre is an additional cost. Councillors have already had confidential briefings on the funding of the capital cost within which it has been made clear that any subsidy to the theatre is included in the overall cost.

20,000sqft of new office space will be brought to the market, helping to replace office space in the town centre currently being lost to permitted developments. This element will pay for itself in 25 years bringing longer term income stream to the Council. The underground car park will also pay for itself within 50 years. While the theatre will not directly pay for itself, it is an investment in the cultural and economic future of Tunbridge Wells over the next 50 to 100 years. The benefit to the local economy is estimated between £14m - £18m per annum (Bonnar Keenlyside). The increased benefits of a new theatre have been demonstrated elsewhere such as Canterbury.

Loss of Car Parking

The reprovion of car parking is a fundamental element of the scheme. The Council is proposing to build a new 250 space car park under an area of Calverley Grounds which will provide spaces to a higher standard and size than those currently in the Great Hall car park and Mount Pleasant Avenue car park. An additional 100 spaces are also to be created with the expansion of Crescent Road car park. During the construction period there would be a reduction in car parking spaces in the Town Centre, however there is sufficient capacity in the Town Centre car parks to accommodate the temporary loss of car parking. Analysis of current use of car parking in Tunbridge Wells highlights that the overall average occupancy of the town centre car parks on a weekday is 71%.

The petitioner refers to concerns raised by local businesses about loss of car parking, however we have not directly received any comments from local businesses regarding this, but would be happy to discuss this with any businesses that are concerned about this aspect.

Appendix One

Engagement

Set out below is a list of the meetings in the public domain including Cabinet Advisory Boards, Cabinet and Full Council where papers and minutes are available.

The Mandate to investigate:

7 October 2014 Finance and Governance CAB Item 6 - Assembly Hall Theatre (AHT) Update

30 October 2014 Cabinet Item 8 - Assembly Hall Theatre (AHT) Update

Progression to Stage 1

As a potential office tenant had been identified and with a very specific timetable a report on progressing with the potential office element was considered prior to the full report and wider agreement.

5 October 2015 Planning and Transport CAB Item 7 – Mount Pleasant Avenue – Office Accommodation

6 October 2015 Finance and Governance CAB Item 8 – Mount Pleasant Avenue – Office Accommodation

29 October 2015 Cabinet Item 8 – Mount Pleasant Avenue – Office Accommodation

The report on the Assembly Hall Mandate followed to Full Council in December 2015 again progressing through Finance & Governance CAB and Cabinet.

10 November 2015 Finance and Governance CAB Item 11 - Assembly Hall Theatre Mandate and Next Steps

3 December 2015 Cabinet Item 13 - Assembly Hall Theatre Mandate and Next Steps

9 December 2015 Full Council Item 8 - Assembly Hall Theatre Mandate and Next Steps

Progression to Stage 2

The report for approval to progress into Stage 2 and 3 was taken at Full Council on 20 July 2016.

7 June 2016 Finance and Governance CAB Item 11 - Civic Complex Review of Stage 1 and Next Steps

22 June 2016 Cabinet Item 11 - Civic Complex Review of Stage 1 and Next Steps

20 July 2016 Full Council Item 8 - Civic Complex Review of Stage 1 and Next Steps

Progression to Stage 3

Progression to Stage 3 had in the decisions of the 20 July 2016 been delegated to the Leader, Finance & Governance Portfolio Holder, Director of Planning & Development and s151 officer. However a decision by Cabinet was that a Full Council decision to progress would be undertaken. This was considered at Full Council on 22 February 2017.

22 February 2017 Full Council **Item 14 Civic Development – Delivery of Stage 3**

Other committees that, in public, have discussed the proposal are:

Audit & Governance Committee

The review of the Strategic Risk Register – Risk 10 Development Programme was considered on the Audit & Governance Committee on 5 December 2016. The Civic Development was a main part of the discussion related to the programme.

5 December 2016 Audit & Governance Committee **Item 6A – Strategic Risk Report**

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

In addition the Civic Development has been a regular item on the Overview & Scrutiny Committee agenda.

20 June 2016 Overview & Scrutiny Committee **Item 7 - Civic Complex Development**

15 August 2016 Overview & Scrutiny Committee **Item 8 - Civic Complex Development**

31 October 2016 Overview & Scrutiny Committee **Item 8 - Civic Complex Development**

28 November 2016 Overview & Scrutiny Committee **Item 7 - Civic Complex Development**

13 February 2017 Overview & Scrutiny Committee **Item 7 - Civic Complex Development**

10 April 2017 Overview & Scrutiny Committee **Item 7 - Civic Complex Development**

12 June 2017 Overview & Scrutiny Committee **Item 8 - Civic Complex Development**



