

Draft Excerpt of the Minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 September 2015

15. Thameside Complex Review

Councillor Snell, Chair of the Thameside Complex Review Panel, introduced the report which detailed the findings of the Thameside Complex Review Panel and the recommendations they wished the Committee, and subsequently Cabinet, to endorse.

In introducing the report, Councillor Snell explained that the panel had visited the Thameside Complex and noted that museum displays were dated and needed refreshing, and opinion was divided about the building. He explained that following discussions with some of the charitable organisations located within the complex, some felt that they could locate elsewhere but were happy being based at Thameside.

Councillor Snell advised Members that the panel were in agreement that the Thameside Complex required modernisation, that it should be commercially viable and that a theatre should remain in Grays.

Councillor Ray acknowledged that a decision about the future of the Thameside Complex was likely to be a difficult one, however the decision did need to be made and it was evident that the theatre in its current form was commercially unviable, with a small seating capacity and compact space which did not lend itself for audience comfort. He further reported that many smaller museums around the country faced closure and were merging with larger institutions to secure their future.

Councillor Snell highlighted the following key points:

- That the seats in the current theatre were cramped and too close together, however a decision needed to be made as to whether modernise and improve the Thameside Complex or relocate theatre provision elsewhere.
- That the museum also had a lot of exhibits in storage that the public were not able to view, some of which were highly renowned and required security.
- That the panel considered whether artefacts of local importance could be displayed in the local community, for example in a library, depending on adequate security and protection.
- That the museum could apply for Lottery Funding however applicants were required to have evidence of 25 year tenure.

Councillor Liddiard commended the report and explained that he valued the theatre, museum and library, but felt that the report contained little information regarding possible options going forward and the full cost implications of any alternatives, for example relocating the library in the Civic Offices or building a theatre elsewhere.

A brief discussion took place on the utilisation of the theatre, during which it was reported that there was an average of 57% audience capacity for each show across a year, although it was questioned whether this included school performance and youth productions.

Councillor Ray suggested that high value exhibits not on display at the museum should be sold to generate income if they were not going to be available for public view.

In response Councillor Snell highlighted that no curator would want to willingly sell their collection but it was suggested that Cabinet could evaluate this and an inventory supplied.

Councillor Liddiard reported that security was essential if displaying high value artefacts which could make it difficult for public displays in the local community, however if adequate security could not be guaranteed for such items to be on public display, the Council could donate to the British Library or sell them.

Councillor Hebb felt that there was not a winning situation but difficult discussions needed to start taking place. He highlighted that the building itself was not fit for purpose, and whether alternatives could be explored, such as locating a theatre at High House Production Park in Purfleet, although he recognised the panel recommended maintaining a theatre provision in Grays.

Councillor Hebb further asked for clarification as to whether there were any capital spends to facilitate the construction of a new theatre in Grays or whether the Council would need to dispose of the Thameside Complex to secure funds.

The Assistant Chief Executive observed that it was a significant question as to whether the Council would want to borrow funds to build and run a theatre, but that there were possible alternatives that could mean a theatre remained in Grays.

Councillor Hebb remarked that he did not believe it was the role of a local authority to provide a theatre and that Thurrock needed to think 'outside of the box' for a solution, which could include part or complete privatisation or the formation of a charitable trust.

The Head of Adult Services explained that the formation of a trust had been considered but there were a number of limitations, which included:

- The building was not fit for purpose and would require significant refurbishment that would incur considerable cost.
- Competitors included the Queens Theatre in Hornchurch, the Towngate Basilson and the West End.

Councillor Snell remarked that it was aspirational to have a theatre in Thurrock, otherwise residents would be required to travel outside of the

Borough for entertainment and Thurrock would be stripped of its cultural assets.

Members debated a number of options for the local a theatre which included High House Production Park and school auditoriums, which some Members felt would be impractical and unviable.

There was a discussion as to whether the recommendations included with the Thameside Complex Panel review report should be approved as some Members were not in agreement, during which the Chair suggested that more work should be undertaken before the matter was referred to Cabinet in order to determine the full cost implications of any alternative delivery model.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer advised that the Thameside Complex Review Panel was member-led and their findings were detailed in the report, it was not within the remit of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee to overrule or change the panel's findings, however the Committee's comments could be taken into account by Cabinet – alongside those of the panel – when the information was presented to Cabinet.

Members were further advised that the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee had no formal decision making powers and it was the role of Cabinet to consider the alternatives in more detail and report back to Scrutiny at a later date when more comprehensive information was available for consideration and comment, including that of any costs.

The Chair explained that he was not satisfied to approve the recommendations printed in the report in their current format, to which it was suggested that the recommendations be amended slightly to replace the words of 'endorse' and 'accept' with to 'note'. Members were in agreement with the proposed amendments.

RESOLVED:

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny to note the following recommendations of the Panel which will be put to Cabinet:

- 1. Cabinet notes the conclusions set out on page 22 of the report (attached as Appendix 1) as a set of guiding principles when exploring future cultural provision at the Thameside Complex.**
- 2. A site that represents the Arts should remain in Grays.**
- 3. The Council should endeavour to improve and modernise the library, museum and registry service whether this be in the Complex or in another location.**
- 4. Any theatre needs to cater for the community but also a variety of professional acts and productions. It should represent the aspirations of a competitive regional theatre.**