

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Minutes

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting of Wyre Borough Council held on Wednesday, 6 March 2024 at the Council Chamber - Civic Centre, Poulton-le-Fylde.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee members present:

Councillors Cartridge, Baxter, Amos, Sir R Atkins, Bolton, Collinson, Fail, Martin and A Walker

Absent- apologies received:

Councillors Beavers and Higgs

Absent- apologies not received

Councillor Blair

Other councillors present:

Councillors Bowen, McKay, Wells, Lady D Atkins, Le Marinel and Rendell

Officers present:

Clare James, Corporate Director Resources and Section 151 Officer
Marianne Unwin, Democratic Services and Scrutiny Manager (Temporary)
Daphne Courtenage, Democratic Services Officer
Joanne Billington, Head of Governance and Business Support
Jane Collier, Human Resources Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer
Mary Grimshaw, Legal Services Manager and Monitoring Officer
Marianne Hesketh, Corporate Director Communities
Jane Warne, Communications and Visitor Economy Manager

Officers absent- apologies received:

None.

Four members of the public attended the meeting.

45 Declarations of interest

None.

46 Call in of the decision made by Cabinet, titled "Update on the future operation of the Council's theatres - Marine Hall and Thornton Little Theatre"

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed those in attendance. He informed everyone of the housekeeping rules and the procedure for the meeting.

The Chair read out the details of the call-in of the Cabinet decision being presented at the meeting, titled "Update on the future operation of the Council's theatres – Marine Hall and Thornton Little Theatre" and Cabinet's agreed recommendations.

Councillor Victoria Wells, the nominated spokesperson for the call-in, presented the reasons for the call-in to the committee and several suggested actions for the committee to consider, as listed in the call-in request form. Overall, concerns were raised about the future operations of the theatres and the recommendations agreed by Cabinet on the 14 February 2024. The concerns raised were:

- Flawed methodology and validity of the consultation
- Options and timescales to outsource
- Insufficient data regarding the theatres' performance and remedial actions taken
- Loss of potential future revenue streams
- Opportunities for scrutiny
- Concerns for staff
- Lack of strategic planning

She summarised by requesting the committee consider the call-in and recommend that the report and recommendations be reworked.

The Chair then invited the Portfolio Holders, Councillors Lesley McKay and Lynne Bowen, to respond to the call-in.

Councillor McKay, the Resources Portfolio Holder, responded to the concerns raised in the call-in presentation. She stressed that the decision was in regards to a tender exercise and no decision had at this point been made in regards to the future operations of the theatres, and it was desirable to find a sustainable solution for them.

Councillor Bowen, the Leisure, Health and Community Engagement Portfolio Holder, agreed with the points made, reiterating that options were being considered at this stage in order to ensure a healthy future for the theatres.

Following representations from the spokesperson and Portfolio Holders, the Chair asked for questions from the committee to the three speakers.

Members raised the following questions/points:

- The wording of the consultation questions, particularly regarding leading questions
- The involvement of Human Resources (HR) in conversations with staff around potential job uncertainty
- Could third sector organisations submit a tender application?

- Responsibility of the council regarding the provision of the theatres service and what might happen should this tender exercise fail
- What kind of outsourcing was being presented and any potential outsourcing models submitted
- Whether the physical buildings would be included in any potential outsourcing
- Protecting access for community groups who currently use Marine Hall
- Concerns regarding performance figures
- Questions regarding potential reduced subsidies following Covid-19
- Whether staff were hitting targets in 2023/24
- Potential profits and who may be the beneficiary
- Whether there had been any complaints regarding previous outsourcing of council assets
- What consultations had taken place with staff regarding potential moves to the private sector and impacts on staff pensions
- The final decision-making process if a future report were presented at Full Council
- Theatres marketing budget over the last five years

Both Portfolio Holders as well as officers in attendance responded to the questions and concerns raised by members.

It was reiterated that the decision made by Cabinet was to start a tender exercise and no decisions had been made thus far. Members were reassured that there had been numerous informal sessions with staff, including with the consultants; however staff at Marine Hall were not being affected and the one member of staff at Thornton Little Theatre (TLT) that was affected had been involved in discussions to date.

It was said that there were limited skills in-house to effectively manage the theatres to their best potential, given that we are a local authority, and both the Portfolio Holders emphasised to members that this decision was to explore potential options to safeguard the theatres. They were hoping for a commercial partner, but anyone could submit an application including those from the third sector. Many of the questions raised by members would be addressed at any future contractual stage and it was too early to speculate. It was indicated that there was an expectation that those community groups currently using Marine Hall would still be able to do so, as was the case under the TLT process.

A clarification was given by officers in relation to the financial performance of the theatres and the deteriorating position based on 2022/23 outturn compared to 2023/24 forecast. It was also clarified that although the theatres may be performing in line with the budget expectations, these had been rebased and lowered to be more realistic. Overall the operating deficit was forecast to be worse than in previous years and members would have to go back to 2013/14 to find the best performing financial year with a circa £200,000 operating deficit at Marine Hall.

The Chair then asked each of the speakers to make any points of clarification. Councillor Wells raised a point of clarification regarding whether the decision

should be reworded as a commissioning exercise rather than a procurement exercise.

Following further discussion by the committee, it was proposed by Councillor Sir R Atkins, and seconded by Councillor Baxter, that the call-in not be supported.

Members of the committee voted on the proposal not to support the call in, which was carried at six votes to three. It was therefore agreed that the call-in was not supported.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and finished at 7.11 pm.

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