

COUNCIL MEETING – 18 JANUARY 2023

**QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS PURSUANT TO
COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 14.3**

**Q1 Councillor Dixon to the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee,
Councillor Gunner**

Q1 In a recent Policy & Finance Committee meeting I drew the committees' attention to the annual survey question that asked if residents trusted Arun to make the right decisions. 65% of the eastern side of the district trusted Arun but only 50% of the western side did – a substantial and significant difference.

I used the two levelling up projects as an example of the differing treatment the council gives to the east and west.

The project for Littlehampton seafront has recently had a very successful public consultation, the council engaged with the public (as it should), listened to their comments, and as a result there is strong public support. It looks like it will be a successful project. Good.

My understanding, from previous questioning, is that there are no plans for a public consultation for the western side of the district. So, the east gets a public consultation and the west does not – and then the council wonders why it is so mistrusted in the west!

Force-feeding the Alexandra Theatre proposal to residents in the west of the district is not likely to engender public support. Will the council arrange a public consultation?

A1 Happily, I can confirm we have agreed with Bognor Regis Town Council to hold a public exhibition on the designs where the public can comment. Additionally, when we go through RIBA stage 3 designs the public will also have the opportunity to submit their comments on the design.

**Q2 Councillor Dixon to the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee,
Councillor Gunner**

Q2 The proposed Alexandra Theatre refurbishment has been substantially de-specified from the council's original application for Levelling Up funding. There are now six key criteria where I believe that the council will fail to meet the objectives that we all voted for.

Failure 1. The council's application states that it will deliver an "*additional 2,700 m² of arts/cultural floor space*". Yet the council has recently advised the government that it will deliver "*2,757 m² of refurbished and new build areas*". Some might consider this to be disingenuous and it is not "*additional*" arts/cultural floor space.

Failure 2. The council's application states that it will deliver an increase in seat capacity of 30% to 450 seats. Current proposals suggest that seat capacity will

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increase by 20 seats from 366 to 386 seats (5.5%) - NOT 30% and NOT 450. That's 20 additional seats for £15.2 million – so far.

Failure 3. The council's application states that there will be two new and three refurbished studios "and a new art gallery". Current proposals suggest that there is no art gallery.

Failure 4. The council's application states that the enhanced theatre will result in a forecast increase in paying audiences from an average of 47,000 to 55,000 p.a. This forecast cannot be met with an increase of only 20 seats.

Failure 5. The council's application states that the enhanced theatre will generate 8,000 new theatre goers each year. Another forecast that cannot be met.

Failure 6. The council's application states that the enhanced theatre will generate 11,750 additional visitor nights per year and 56,175 additional day visitors per year. There is no likelihood of this being achieved.

Do you agree with me that the council will fail to meet these 6 objectives?

A2 I reject your characterisation that this is a failure. As I said in committee, we are delivering the scheme that the council has voted for.

Q3 **Councillor Dixon to the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee, Councillor Gunner**

Q3 The "*new second auditorium*" for the Alexandra Theatre referred to in your e-mail of 27th September, is in essence, replacing like for like, where an existing studio with capacity for c 100 chairs will be replaced with a new/refurbished studio also with capacity for c 100 chairs.

Do you agree with me that this is a like for like replacement and that this "new auditorium" will provide no additional seating capacity above existing levels?

A3 I don't agree that the new theatre is a like-for-like replacement. This is a significantly enhanced experience with new studios, a gallery to showcase local artists, and a vastly improved visitor experience.

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Q4 **Councillor Dixon to the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee,
Councillor Gunner**

Q4 The Alexandra Theatre refurbishment has become a massively reduced specification project where any additional value has either been stripped out or substantially reduced and, at the same time, the price has escalated by an extra £3 million (to be funded by local taxpayers) so far. In essence, we are getting much less for much more! It bears little resemblance to what we originally voted for. Although we are prevented by confidentiality from discussing details of the deal with Whitbread it is arguably the worst financial deal in the history of the council. So, we have a substantially reduced specification, an escalating price (currently £15.2 million), and an appalling deal with Whitbread.

Given that this project is failing to deliver the promised benefits, whilst the cost to local taxpayers escalates - is it time for the council to change direction while there is still time?

A4 No, I don't think so. I think this delivers positive benefit to the town and the community, and officers are delivering the project the committee voted for.

Q5 **Councillor Dixon to the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee,
Councillor Gunner**

Q5 You confirmed to all councillors on 27th September 2022 that a "new solution" for refurbishment of the Alexandra Theatre had been agreed with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities – this was two days before all councillors were asked to approve an extra £3 million of expenditure towards this "new solution".

You said: "So, a new solution was reached - with the enthusiastic support of Arun Arts and agreement of DLUHC (who have been consulted) - that a new second auditorium of c 100 seats will be created within the footprint of the building."

However, a recent FOI by Opposition Group Leaders to DLUHC to clarify what exactly had been agreed has shown that on 28th September 2022 the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities was still seeking clarification on the key points of the "new solution", they chased for a response on 10th October, and the council did not respond to those questions until 17th October. Details of the FOI are on the whatdotheyknow web site.

The response to the FOI appears to indicate that no "agreement" was in place when councillors were informed that it was.

Can you provide any evidence that the DLUHC agreed the "new solution" before you informed all councillors that they had?

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A5 The civil servants at DLUHC are and were in agreement with our approach, but the formal paperwork – a variation on the Memorandum of Understanding between the Council and DLUHC – has not yet been completed and that is, I believe, why the Freedom of Information request found no agreement as the formal agreement is not yet in place. The process to do this follows a Government timetable and, considering the issues about which Councillor Dixon complains, it is right that DLUHC want to get the paperwork right this time.

Q6 **Councillor Dixon to the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee, Councillor Gunner**

Q6 I recently submitted an FOI for information relating to the relocation of the temporary ice rink.

The constitution requires officers to keep a written record of decisions made under delegated powers as soon as reasonably practicable after the decision is made, and for it to be available for inspection at council offices during normal working hours; and to view online.

The FOI appears to indicate that **no councillors or committees were consulted** on the relocation – but there are some names redacted. I am keen to know if all political groups were treated in the same way.

Why was no written record of the decision to relocate the ice rink provided as part of the council's FOI response?

A6 The decision itself was not one that required a formal record under the Constitution. The reason a record of a decision was not included with the FOI response was because that information/document is not held by the Council – because it was not considered to be needed at the time. Under Part 7, Section 2, Para 3.1 the Group Head of Community Wellbeing is delegated responsibility for this decision.

And if I may, what a successive event it has proven to be – in line with the lighting at Hotham Park – and our officer team deserve praise for pulling this off. You only need to look at social media – including the poll conducted on Bognor Regis Matters – to see how the public agree.

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Q7 **Councillor Dixon to the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee, Councillor Gunner**

Q7 Following on from question 6 above, when was that decision made and by who?

A7 The decision was made by the Group Head of Community Wellbeing. I do not have the information on when this happened, as noted in my previous response there is no formal record of the decision.

Q8 **Councillor Dixon to the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee, Councillor Gunner**

Q8 Following on from question 6 above, can you please provide the names of any councillors that were consulted prior to the decision being made?

A8 No councillors were consulted. The redacted names in the FOI were the names of officers, not councillors.

Q9 **Councillor Dixon to the Chair of the Economy Committee, Councillor Cooper**

Q9 We now know that the council spent £40,000 on illuminations and security in support of the ice rink and its relocation to the London Road coach and lorry park.

How will the financial success, or otherwise, of the ice rink relocation and illuminations be evaluated?

A9 Informal feedback has indicated that this was a very successful event combining the illuminations ice rink and event. We plan to consult partners to establish their views and share these with the Environment Committee.

Q10 **Councillor Dixon to the Chair of the Economy Committee, Councillor Cooper**

Q10 Footfall figures for Bognor Regis Town Centre for 2022 are now available.

January to December 2022 is up 20.3% on 2021, but December 2022 is down 0.8% on December 2021. December 2022 is down 3.2% on November 2022.

The Town Centre was doing well until December.

Nationally, town centres were up 12.9% in December 2022 when compared to December 2021. It seems that other town centres fared better than Bognor Regis which is behind the national trend.

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As a matter of interest, the town centre is still 20.1% down on 2019 – the pre-Covid benchmark.

There have also been complaints regarding noise and traffic chaos at school drop off and pick-up times (including motorists driving on pavements!).

Do you accept that relocation of the ice rink could have been a contributory factor in these footfall figures and, will you agree to commission an officer report to assess the full impact of relocation on town centre footfall, local residents, the school and its parents/children, to be considered alongside the perceived benefits?

A10 An Officer report will be presented to the Environment Committee regarding the event.