

Written responses to question – 12 October 2023

A. Question from Councillor Gawrysiak to Councillor Filipova-Rivers, Cabinet member for community well being

Henley Town Council has recently extended a loan facility of £100,000 to the Henley Kenton Theatre because it needs time to restructure and get back on its feet. This came about as a legacy of Covid and some management issues. South Oxfordshire District Council currently budgets around £470,000 per annum, with a total six year bill of £3,346,000, to operate its own arts centre Cornerstone, a district council owned building, which is for the benefit of Didcot and the wider region.

Cornerstone costs						
	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
	£	£	£	£	£	£
Cornerstone	482,969	599,052	599,478	493,476	526,385	571,136
Café	(12,422)	(7,399)	(1,980)	61,723	61,724	(16,142)
Total	470,547	591,653	597,498	555,199	588,109	554,994

Currently the district council makes no contribution to other theatres around the district in Thame, Wallingford and Henley. I believe that it is fundamentally unfair that the district council tax base is disproportionately spent on Cornerstone as a subsidy for the Arts, and other theatres across the district get nothing. We should equally support cultural life across South Oxfordshire and, budgets permitting, financially support other arts venues.

As a first stage in the process to address this inequality of funding, would the Cabinet member agree to write to Didcot Town Council (Population 35,000 to see if they would be willing to make an ongoing financial contribution to support Cornerstone in the future?

As a second Stage, would the cabinet member be willing to ask officers, as part of the Budget setting process, to propose a suitable grant structure for the Theatres in Henley, Thame and Wallingford for consideration as part of the wider budget?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Councillor Gawrysiak,

It is true that all arts and culture facilities have been badly impacted by covid, and subsequently by the inflationary environment and cost of living emergency. The arts, culture and heritage offer in our district contributes to quality of life, community wellbeing, social connection, it creates jobs, and enhances learning. It is enormously valued by our residents, and I am sure this council as well.

Cornerstone is the only District Council owned and managed facility in the area. It was planned for and delivered by previous administrations in response to high levels of growth in Didcot and intended to serve areas beyond the town.

Since 2019 the council has made a series of changes to the management and delivery of the service in an effort to reduce the net cost whilst also protecting the valued service. Some such activities include:

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- Bringing communications into the council's central comms team
- Moving away from a curated offer
- Raising the profile of the facility via externally funded summer 'Garden Party' activities
- And developing and funding (also with external sources) the large decarbonisation project

In the 2022/23 budget setting report an ongoing annual reduction in net running costs of £170,000 was included but those decisions were taken before war in Ukraine, the increases in costs experienced since then and the cost of living crisis that has impacted on people's spending power, and meant that this reduction has not been able to be realised.

There also has been recognition that in addition to some of these short- and medium-term changes, we need to look at longer term options, which is why three different expert studies have been commissioned and now completed. On the basis of these, we as a council will be able to make informed decisions about the long-term management of Cornerstone. These reviews have taken longer than anticipated but I can confirm that officers in the Development and Corporate Landlord service will be bringing forward an options paper before the end of the calendar year.

Following the Cornerstone review, our officers will begin work on a district-wide Art and Culture strategy which will look at how we work with, support and deliver local facilities, events and initiatives, and will seek the views of Town, Parishes among other stakeholders. The development of such policy will not only allow us to be more intentional about our role but will help us to understand how we can better support partners.

Cornerstone is a facility we have as an administration inherited, along with a plethora of challenges inherent in the sector. We, as owners, have obligations to it. These are likely the same issues the trustees of Henley Kenton Theatre are grappling with, and I have every sympathy.

I do hope that the imminent publication of the reviews, actions thereof, and the development of a district-wide strategy will help the local arts and culture sector as a whole to learn from one another and work together to weather these challenging times.

Your questions are duly noted, and I thank you for yours, and this council's continued patience whilst we bring forward evidenced options for Cornerstone, and a way forward for the wider arts, culture and heritage sector in due course.

B. Question from Councillor Rawlins to Councillor Simpson, Cabinet member for planning

It is very important to monitor the housing mix policy in our current local plan to ensure new residential development provides an appropriate mix of one, two, three and four bed (and above) housing for our residents. A swathe of household extensions and permitted development (PD) can increase the number of bedrooms

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to a home and change the mix of our market housing stock over time; thus limiting the availability of more modest housing stock and thereby increasing prices and rents.

The 2021 census data provides recent data about our housing stock and the impact of actual cumulative changes in that stock. It would appear that overall the change in housing stock materially diverged from planning policies under previous administrations of this council, particularly as the vast majority of new housing that is being delivered will be on sites granted permission before LP2035 was approved.

What steps can be taken to ensure we achieve the right housing mix for our residents in the future? To comply with our policy, it would seem that future permissions will need to change applied mix for a number of years in order to correct the past cumulative and ongoing current divergence caused by extensions?

Answer

The census data from 2011 and 2021 provides a useful measure of the housing stock in the district and how many homes there are of different bedroom sizes. Some of these changes will be from the construction of new homes which we can shape through planning decisions, while others result from home improvements by householders, like loft conversions. Our annual monitoring of the local plan (Authority Monitoring Report) shows that we have seen an increase in the delivery of smaller housing units over recent years on our major housing sites.

A comparison of the census data in 2011 and 2021 shows that there are now more homes overall in every category (1 bed, 2 bed, 3 bed, 4 or more bed). Comparing the proportions between the bedroom sizes, there has been a slight decrease in 1 bed homes, a slight increase in 2 beds, a decrease in 3 beds and increase in 4 or more beds. The changes in proportion are small, a maximum of around 2% change between the bedroom sizes over ten years.

It is important that our planning policies sustain an appropriate balance in our housing stock. As part of developing our emerging joint local plan we have commissioned studies which will take into account the wide variety of data and information relevant to our future housing mix, including the recent census outputs. This evidence will help inform any changes to our housing planning policies, including housing mix, in our emerging joint local plan and help provide the right housing mix for our residents.

As with all policies within the Joint Local Plan, housing mix will need to be subject to a full equalities impact assessment to ensure it delivers the intended outcomes sought over the new local plan period and reflects the wider policy drivers, such as the latest Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, which did not exist at the time the last local plan was developed. My understanding is that we are likely to consult on our emerging JLP housing policies early next year. Like all cabinet members, and I am sure all members of Council, I am committed to ensuring that consultation is meaningful and that we carefully consider the outcome of it. Full Council will, of course, consider any final proposals made by cabinet regarding all aspects of the JLP before it is submitted for examination.

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A crucial element of ensuring that we achieve the desired mix currently is that when considering major planning applications, the planning committee ensure that the required weight is given to all South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 policies and recent appeal decisions have confirmed these retain significant weight. Were a developer to argue that there are specific reasons to vary from the housing mix policy within the adopted local plan, this is highlighted in the officer's report to planning committee, and forms part of the committees' consideration of the application. I am confident that the members of our planning committee do so diligently and act in a manner that is in line with the council's policies and the wider legislation. I believe that they understand the importance of housing mix to our residents and recognise that it is important that this Council respects their role and democratic remit as our planning committee.