

Appendix 1

Contents of a covering email sent by Councillor Sir Ron Watson on 8 June 2021, in respect of his submission of a report for consideration by Audit and Governance Committee on Bootle New Strand and Surrounding Area.

Request for items to be included on the Agenda

With reference to the prior notification I have given to have the situation in respect of the Bootle New Strand placed on the Agenda I can now confirm that the report I submitted to be considered under the provisions that exist for Elected Members to have items placed on the Cabinet Agenda is to be included in my current request for Audit & Governance.

Whilst the information contained in this document remains relevant I submit the following as an addition for the benefit of Members.

“Many Members may not be particularly familiar with the provisions that exist within the Council’s Constitution for Members to have items placed on the Agenda of the Cabinet.

This process also allows the Member concerned to attend the Cabinet Meeting to explain in person the policy issues to be considered but the Member is not allowed to vote.

In addition, the Member has to submit their own report as part of the Agenda Item.

I followed this procedure to the letter and made two formal requests but there is also a provision that allows the Leader of the Council to veto the Item if he/she chooses to do so even if all the criteria laid down in the Constitution have been met.

The Leader of the Council has exercised this veto on both occasions.

The matter however is of critical importance to the Audit & Governance Committee and it is a critical part of their role to ensure that they have all the relevant information to enable them to come to a view based on the facts presented to them.

Much of the information relating to The Strand has been denied to all Members but particularly Audit & Governance and this places both the Chairman and all Members in a very invidious position.

Since my initial report was prepared there have been further developments which make it even more important that Members know the situation in full.

As a Member of Audit & Governance any Member can have an item included on the Agenda and providing the procedure is followed this cannot be vetoed.

In addition to the information in the initial report I want to draw Councillors attention to the following matters that have become apparent and where they may feel they wish to have an input.

A. The initial financial position of The Strand indicated that it had produced a revenue surplus of £1m.

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This figure was used over a two year period at £500k per year to relieve pressure on the revenue budget and in itself now means that there needs to be at least a 1% council tax increase as before the Covid situation developed the figures indicated that The Strand had made a surplus of £30k but was on a weekly downward financial spiral.

B. I have asked that for this meeting the Executive Director of Corporate Services brings us up to date on the total revenue loss that has now been accumulated by The Strand.

C. As part of what is described as an overall concept for the area the Council submitted to itself a planning application which in turn was rejected by the Planning Committee.

This application included a number of potential revenue generating activities involving other aspects of the public sector that had originally been part of preliminary proposals for the main Strand complex.

We have received no further details as to how what appears to be a contradiction in terms between two aspects of the Council's responsibilities can be met.

D. There will be no national tax payer assistance via the Government to assist with the financial situation at The Strand as this was purely a locally determined decision.

E. There has been no recent assessment of the capital value of The Strand which will have deteriorated and Members need to know an estimate of its current market value as opposed to the original purchase price upon which there is an ongoing commitment to fund the PWLB interest charges.

My contention is that Audit & Governance must have a role to play in this issue because of their statutory responsibilities and the purpose of submitting this report is to seek the views of Members and Officers on what action could be taken in the future.

Any recommendations that are forthcoming should be referred back to the Cabinet and a joint meeting arranged of both Bodies to try and agree a sensible way forward that seeks to balance the undoubted severe financial burden of The Strand with the understandable desire to at least maintain some element of viable retail in the area.

A majority of Members have now indicated that they accept that The Strand represents a continuing financial burden on council tax payers as opposed to the original aim of it being revenue generating but as this is a fundamental change of policy the public would benefit from a greater understanding as to how this change can be met and on what terms and conditions.

I hope these details will provide Members with the background to enable them to consider the issues openly in the manner I have indicated."

Kind regards,

Councillor Sir Ron Watson