

COUNCIL MEETING – 21 February 2024

CABINET QUESTION TIME

1. Question from Councillor J Armstrong to the Cabinet Member for a Greener and Safer Chelmsford

Many of my residents have complained to me that across the City Council at the end of the growing season, they have noticed that, after the Council had cut the grass, cuttings had not been removed or placed in designated compost heaps onsite.

Please can the cabinet member confirm that, in future, in all areas designated for species rich grassland that cuttings will be removed or placed in designated compost heaps onsite?

2. Question from Councillor A Thorpe-Apps to the Cabinet Member for a Connected Chelmsford

The subject of the Theatre refurbishment has been referred to at both Full Council and Cabinet and I am aware that a Task & Finish Group has been set up as part of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to look into the reasons why the cost of the Modernisation Project – originally the Enhancement Project – increased dramatically from the original budget of £1m to a final cost of almost £4m. In addition, many of the 'Enhancements' were not carried out and this too is being examined by the Task & Finish Group.

My question relates to the reports made at Council & Cabinet and why residents have been given answers which, in my view, are less than accurate. For example: -

On the 10th of October 2023 at Cabinet, in answer to my question about the huge overspend on the theatre budget the Leader stated, 'As we have said many times it was not an initial budget but an initial estimate. There has only been one budget for the theatre and that is the one we have delivered against.'

In the approved minutes of Full Council on 22nd March 2022 an update was recorded. This was not exposed to the public for commercial reasons but an increase in the budget was sought. It clearly states the 'original budget' had increased twice and costs had increased by 175%!

Members expressed concerns about this increase and the lack of detail in what was being delivered for the NEW Budget. This issue is important as it is clear the council faces difficult budget constraints.

Why have you continually tried to justify the massive overspend on the Theatre redecoration by making statements at Council meetings which, in my view, are at odds with the facts as set out on page 126 of the report to this meeting of Full Council?

Can you now confirm that the original BUDGET was £1m and that this has been successively increased to £3.246m by this Administration? Given it is over a year since the theatre eventually re-opened, will you please tell us what the total costs have been?

3. Question from Councillor S Scott to the Cabinet Member for a Connected Chelmsford

I welcome the theatre's new booking system called 'Spectrix' which allows people with a Disability to book accessible seats for themselves and their Carer.

However this is not matched by facilities available at the theatre itself, to support Disabled people. Despite the huge costs incurred, flexible seating and a 'Changing Places' facility for people with disabilities have never been provided.

When this was challenged I was told there was not enough room for a 'Changing Places' within the theatre and the solution was to have a mobile 'Changing Places' facility that would be made available for non-ambulant Disabled people with complex needs. Has this ever happened? If so when and at what cost? If not, what are the plans to make your promise a reality for Disabled people with heterogeneous requirements who attend the theatre?