

Ashford Borough Council

Minutes of a Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **13th December 2018**.

Present:

Her Worshipful the Mayor, Cllr. Mrs J E Blanford (Chairman);

Cllrs. Adby, Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Bell, Bennett, Bradford, Buchanan, Burgess, Chilton, Clarkson, Clokie, Dehnel, Farrell, Feacey, Galpin, Heyes, Hicks, W Howard, Howard-Smith, Knowles, Koowaree, Krause, Link, Macpherson, Miss Martin, Michael, Murphy, Pickering, Shorter, Suddards, Waters, Mrs Webb, Wedgbury, White.

Also Present:

Chief Executive, Director of Law and Governance, Director of Finance and Economy, Director of Place and Space, Head of Legal and Democracy, Head of Culture, National Management Trainee, Member Services Manager (Operational).

Apologies:

Cllrs. Barrett, Iliffe, Mrs Martin, Ovenden, Smith.

Prior to the commencement of the meeting Members remained standing in respect of the late Jill Kirk who was the Member for the Ashford Stanhope Ward from 1979 to 1987. The Reverend Cathie Aldis then said prayers.

271 Exempt or Confidential Information

The Mayor asked whether any items should be dealt with in private because of the likely disclosure of exempt or confidential information. The Director of Law and Governance advised that there were none.

272 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Bartlett	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Member of Kent County Council.	275(b)
Mrs Bell	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Member of Kent County Council.	275(b)
Farrell	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Member of Kent County Council.	275(b)
W Howard	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a close family member was a Director of the Ashford Indoor Bowls Centre.	275(b)

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Howard-Smith	Made a Voluntary Announcement as Chairman of the Friends of Victoria Park Group.	275(b)
Koowaree	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Member of Kent County Council.	275(b)

273 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Council held on the 18th October 2018 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

274 Announcements

(a) The Mayor

The Mayor welcomed everyone to the meeting. She advised that the two months since the last Council meeting had been particularly busy but also spectacular. The effort put in by so many to mark the commemorations of the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War had been outstanding. The Memorial Gardens had looked so good and with the improvements to the setting of the memorial itself, more people had been able to attend the Remembrance Service and witness it on a large screen. Despite the rain, she had been very glad to take part. In the evening the Borough had held its own event as part of the national lighting of beacons with military music, speakers, prayers and of course Ashford's lovely poppy display. It had been the most moving occasion and she had received many comments from the public saying that Ashford had really 'hit the mark'.

The Snowdogs had been a great attraction for Ashford. All, from grandparents to toddlers became enamoured with the Snowdogs and congratulations should be given to all those who: - came up with the scheme; saw it through a certain amount of scepticism; and brought it to fruition. It got families out and about in the town and for the future she said she would like to find a way of incorporating the rural areas in to any future projects of this nature. The auction had been great fun and whilst she thought it would be difficult for an auctioneer to sell 35 of the same thing, one after the other, even if they were decorated differently, to raise £142,000 for the Pilgrims Hospice at Willesborough had been a real achievement. She thought that Ashford had looked incredibly dull and empty after the Snowdogs had been removed, but she was glad to see that several had begun to reappear.

The Mayor said that the events she had been asked to attend had been extremely varied: - from the BBC One Show's Rickshaw Challenge; the opening of the new metal recycling centre at Cobbs Wood; and attending many musical events. One engagement she did want to mention was the opening of Blossom's Baby Bump. A new shop on the lower floor of County Square, opened by a trained nurse providing scans for pregnant mothers, advice and a range of baby clothes. She hoped Ashfordians would support this new business. She had also attended the topping out ceremony of Care UK's newest care home by the William Harvey Hospital. Unlike another Member of the Council, at

another event, who had been able to go up in a crane to the roof and receive a glass of beer at the top, she had had to tramp up 60 steps to set the last roof tile, but she had got a magnificent view from the top!

Another event which showed that you never knew what you were letting yourself in for was attending the Maidstone pantomime – Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Members may remember that at the last Council meeting Councillor Neil Bell had volunteered to accompany her to this event and he had stuck to his word. She had initially had low expectations after a 300 yard tramp from the car park, through mud, to the venue and a small bar serving gin and tonics in plastic mugs with no ice and lemon. However things perked up when their host arrived, the Mayor of Maidstone, who insisted on paying for the drinks and when the performance started it was great fun. A really traditional panto with a Widow Twankey character with suspect jokes, all of the main characters including a Wicked Queen who enjoyed insulting the audience, masses of costume changes, plenty of good music, dancing, scenery and lighting effects. As for the 'its behind you' scene which involved a ghost, she had never seen children so excited!

The previous day had seen a more serious event – the unveiling of the statue of Queen Marie of Romania – granddaughter of Queen Victoria and born in the Borough at Eastwell Manor. Over 60 Romanians, including the cultural attaché, a Romanian Ambassador and Her Royal Highness Princess Elena of Romania, attended and it had been well supported by Ashfordians. The main three visitors had spoken about Queen Marie, who may have faded from British memory, but was still a very potent symbol in Romania. Not only had she worked to raise money for injured Romanian soldiers, prisoners and their families during the First World War, she had also helped to unite the various States in Romania to form a single country in 1918. It had been a unique occasion for Ashford and she hoped it had brought the two countries closer together.

The Mayor said she wanted to thank those who had kindly accompanied her to various events. She did try to fit the occasion to the person but it did not always work out that way and extra points were always awarded for bearing up under un-promising conditions!

Finally, the Mayor advised that she continued her environmental work with the ten Primary Schools around Ashford who were part of the CARE Foundation. She had visited them all now with Amy Casey from Environmental Services and without exception these had been very enjoyable occasions. The schools varied in size and the usual format was to attend assembly, give a short introduction and then pass over to Amy for the specifics and to show a short film about plastics in the oceans. Following the assemblies they met the "Eco-Warriors" or "Eco-Kids" or "Green Team" depending on the designation and they explained what they were doing and took them on a tour around the school, showing their recycling bins and gardens. In every single case the children had been enthusiastic, informative and confident and it had been an eye-opener to see what went on in modern Primary Schools. Of course, the questions that followed did not necessarily apply to litter or the environment! She had forgotten how many times she had been asked about the chain of office. Usually, "how much is it worth?", "did you buy it?", and yesterday a young man had remarked that for the price of the chain he could "buy a Ferrari and I think I would prefer that!" Saturday would see the long awaited opening of Elwick Square and the Picturehouse Cinema. All were welcome to attend as they were welcome to attend a short drinks reception after this meeting in the Committee

Rooms to celebrate Christmas. The rooms looked lovely and she hoped all present would attend.

(b) Leader of the Council

The Leader said that he would like to take a few moments to update colleagues on some recent developments of note. As already mentioned, a bronze statue of Queen Marie of Romania had been unveiled outside the new Picturehouse Cinema earlier that week. The two metre high bronze statue had taken pride of place in Elwick Place, a location chosen because it was a stone's throw from Victoria Park, and as granddaughter of Queen Victoria, it seemed very fitting. Following the unveiling there had been a reception in the new Ashford Picturehouse cinema, followed by a documentary film screening about Queen Marie and her life and work. There was no doubt that Queen Marie had been a very special woman, having led the reparations in her country following the First World War, a War they had joined on the Allied side when neighbouring countries were fighting on the other side. The statue had been donated to Ashford by the Romanian Government. Whilst the opening of the Picturehouse had been delayed due to problems with the electrical mains in that road, the workers had pulled out all of the stops over the last two or three weeks, working day and night and this was great credit to them. The project had been on budget and on time until the last minute interruption of the electrical main, which was no fault of the contractor, and the facility was a really splendid one and now the hoardings were coming down and the official opening was happening that coming Saturday, the whole area was beginning to look great.

A few weeks ago, he had attended the topping-out ceremony for Curious Brewery's new facility in Ashford, and the Mayor was quite right, he had had a ride in an extremely tottery crane! The brewery, owned by Chapel Down Group, and due to open in March 2019, was a multi-million pound project, state-of-the art, custom-built brewery, located a stone's throw away from Ashford International Station and, being within in the town centre, especially in this economic climate, said just how well Ashford was doing. He was sure, with everything it had to offer, the Curious Brewery would be a great addition to the town centre. The 1.6 acre site included a custom built five vessel brewhouse, which would be capable of producing more than four-and-a-half million pints per year. The brewery had the capacity to bottle beer at a rate of more than 4,000 bottles an hour. Curious guests would be taken on a journey through the production side of the brewery before sitting down for a tasting of the core range and then be able to enjoy a meal in the restaurant.

The Mayor had mentioned the Snowdogs, and he had also been at the auction – he now had a Snowdog in his garden that he wasn't quite sure what to do with! However, the £142,000 that had been raised was remarkable and a number of people had purchased dogs and donated them back to the Borough Council, which was delightful.

One final area the Leader wanted to mention this evening was recycling. There had been vast improvements from a position where a few years ago they had been the worst recycler in the country, but they were now the best in Kent, and one of the best in the country. Figures out earlier that day from Defra for 2017/18 showed that they were once again the best in the county and they also had the lowest residual waste (in tonnages) – and, the overall recycling rate had gone from 55% in 2016/17 to 56.6% in 2017/18.

Finally, as this was the last meeting before Christmas, he wanted to wish colleagues, Officers and residents a Merry Christmas and a happy, healthy and a safe New Year.

275 Cabinet – 8th November and 6th December 2018

(a) Cabinet – 8th November 2018

Resolved:

- That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 8th November 2018 be received and noted with the exception of Minute No. 220.**
- (ii) Minute No. 220 be approved and adopted.**

(b) Cabinet – 6th December 2018

Resolved:

That subject to the expiry of the period by which decisions arising from the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 6th December 2018 may be called in, i.e. 19th December 2018: -

- (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 6th December 2018 be received and noted with the exception of Minute No. 243**
- (ii) Minute No. 243 be approved and adopted.**

276 Audit Committee – 5th December 2018

In accordance with Procedure Rule 9.3 Mr Relf, a local resident had registered to speak on this item. He referred to Minute No. 177 and quoted “The Investigation and Support Manager advised that the year 2017/18 had been a busy year for the team” the 2017/18 report stated that “should the use of RIPA (Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000) and direct surveillance be required then this would be used to its full ability”. He said the Council therefore had the tools available to it that could be used with regards to Environment Agency cases (reference numbers 1664350 and 1597083). These were major incidents, one of which was still ongoing at the Chilmington Caravan site which this Council was responsible for as the landlord. He asked if someone could give him an explanation as to why this option had not been used?

Councillor Bradford, Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Wellbeing advised that Ashford Borough Council took the management of the Chilmington site very seriously and Officers worked very closely with a number of external and internal partners. In the past three weeks Council Officers had served three Community Protection Warning notices at the site on the grounds of unauthorised fires and had also increased their weekly unannounced visits. Officers were continuing to ensure that residents were reporting the repairs and that they understood their obligations under the licence. There were vacant plots on the site that had been offered and the Council was currently carrying out standard checks prior to full offers being made. With regard to the use of powers under RIPA, this involved using hidden CCTV at locations to fight terrorism and

serious crime. Needless to say it was therefore a tightly regulated area. Authority for a Local Authority to use these powers would only be given effect once an Order had been granted by a Justice of the Peace and Local Authority use of directed surveillance would be limited to the investigation of crimes which attracted a six month or more custodial sentence. Before using RIPA the Council needed to show a valid reason for its use, and consideration would be given to the use of less intrusive methods first. RIPA powers were an important tool that Local Authorities could use to address issues that affected many people's lives such as consumer protection, environmental crime and benefit fraud, but their use must be targeted and appropriate. He wanted to assure Mr Relf that this Council continued to work with Kent County Council, the Environment Agency and the Police on the investigations of the incidents he had mentioned.

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on the 5th December 2018 be received and noted.

277 Selection and Constitutional Review Committee – 6th December 2018

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee held on the 6th December 2018 be approved and adopted.

278 Petition – Former Mecca Bingo Site

The Mayor directed Members' attention to the report of the Head of Legal and Democracy which set out the procedure for considering the Petition and also the advice of the Director of Place and Space on the subject of the Petition itself.

In accordance with the Council's Petition Scheme, Mr Peter Morris-Kelso, spoke to the Petition he had submitted.

Mr Morris-Kelso advised that the Petition proposed conversion of the former Odeon/Mecca Bingo building in to a theatre. He said that Members may have heard some of what he was going to say tonight previously, either on social media, by email or in the local media, who he thanked for publicising this idea.

He said that whenever the concept of a theatre for Ashford had been raised before, normally on the pages of Kent Online or Facebook, the idea had always been met with almost universal approval. However as with any social media posts, they were quickly replaced with something else and put to the back of the mind. After Mecca Bingo moved out of the building, the idea gained new ground but he feared the same would happen again and once a new talking point came up the plan would drop off the page. Encouraged by friends and family, he started a petition on change.org and posted the link to a couple of Facebook groups. It quickly became apparent that the idea behind the petition was a popular one and meant different things to different people. For some it meant keeping a part of Ashford's history intact, whilst for others it meant the exciting

prospect of Ashford having a theatre of its own, instead of having to travel some 20 miles to the nearest theatre, the Marlowe in Canterbury. Keenest on the idea had been his Mother who loved the theatre and had never driven. At nearly 70, and after his father had passed away four years ago, it was impractical and unsafe for her to travel to Canterbury or Maidstone on her own. So theatre trips could only happen when he or one of his siblings could take her – she could walk to town but she could not walk to Canterbury. He knew his mother was not alone as a few years ago Ashford Cineworld had shown a live performance of Michael Morpurgo's War Horse and so popular was the demand for a live theatre experience that they had had to show the performance on four screens simultaneously to meet demand. He said that for most, travelling to a theatre was only half the task. Depending on the venue this usually meant having to park in an unfamiliar town or travelling long distances by car or train and arranging overnight accommodation. In the case of younger theatre goers there was also the need to find babysitters.

Mr Morris-Kelso said that for the building itself, its location in the centre of town and its proximity to the international train station and parking made it an ideal location for such a venue. The history of the building could not be overlooked either, as was explained in the letter sent to the Council's Director Place and Space by the Cinema Theatre Association (CTA). The letter had been tabled for Members this evening and he sincerely hoped all had had a chance to read it and he considered it would be a travesty to see the main auditorium part of the building destroyed simply for the given reason of getting a better view of the Church from a car park. The national advisory body of public theatres – The Theatre's Trust – had also expressed support for exploring options with regards to cultural and community uses for the building. The Trust had advised in another letter to the Council that many former Odeon buildings had been successfully converted in to theatres such as the Stephen Joseph in Scarborough and the former Ritz Cinema to the Capital Theatre in Horsham.

He said that having a theatre in the town would also contribute to revenue and footfall. Being able to stage plays, performances, live comedy and pantomimes would not only attract local theatre goers, but also tourism from afar. As a perfect example, in 2004 before they started a family, he and his wife had travelled to Eastbourne to watch Eddie Izzard live at the Congress Theatre. For this trip they had booked two nights in a nearby hotel and spent time visiting the town itself, buying lunch and shopping and they certainly weren't the only ones to do so. The Congress Theatre had a seating capacity similar to that of the Odeon in its heyday, around 1600, and it was full. In simplest terms the presence of Mr Izzard had increased revenue for local businesses in the area, just by him being there. The phenomenon of local attractions could also be demonstrated locally by the popular and successful Snowdogs trail. This unique experience had been responsible for an increase in footfall of over 120,000 as well as benefitting local businesses. This was a concept that had made Ashford stand out for once and the recent news that nine of the dogs would be staying in Ashford was welcome news indeed. It was often mentioned that the town was being overrun with wine bars and barbers and there were few shops that could not be found in other towns in the County. The Designer Outlet may be considered a tourist attraction, but any claims that it attracted visitors to the town centre were spurious at best. In short, he considered you would not find many people travelling to Ashford town centre to spend money in the same shops they had at home.

Mr Morris-Kelso said that he considered the proposals for what would replace the Odeon building were also rather uninspiring. People in Ashford were sick and tired of having more flats and apartments springing up on every square scrap of land and green space. Having more here would do absolutely nothing for the town centre itself, nor would including more of the same wine bars and restaurants. The recent news that the new Picturehouse Cinema in Elwick Place had not found tenants for most of the eight restaurants should tell how successful other restaurants half way down the High Street would be. With regard to the concept of an open air performance space, he again considered this would depend on the availability of parking and passing pedestrians half way down the High Street. Ashford was not Covent Garden and asking performers to set up and perform in an area with the lowest footfall in the Town Centre was a little demeaning. Especially when there was already an open air performance space at the Bandstand. He thanked Council Officers for directing him to the recent report from Fourth Street consultants, which expertly explained how well placed Ashford had become to be the home of a theatre, either refurbished or new. He particularly mentioned the passage on page 20 which described Ashford as “sizeable, with a culturally engaged population for whom theatre was the most popular art form, despite the town’s lack of a dedicated venue”. Indeed, both the Fourth Street report and the correspondence from the Theatre’s Trust and the CTA made the case for the placement of a theatre in Ashford, as well as the preservation of the former Odeon, better than he ever could on his own. From this he was informed that architects Burrell, Foley, Fisher were in a position to provide a concept of conversion work and they also believed that the Odeon building may be of interest to the Jasmin Vardimon Dance Company. Whilst Fourth Street’s report went into details of different types of theatre both locally and nationally, nowhere in the report did it take into account the Odeon building as a possible location. In fact the building was only mentioned once in the entire report at the bottom of page 5, stating “we understand that the prospect of a space satisfying the town’s need for a theatre is unlikely.” The wording of this sentence was very disheartening as it implied that Fourth Street had been dissuaded from contemplating the Odeon for inclusion from the outset. The extensiveness of their report indicated that they may have been best placed to evaluate the suitability of the building.

Finally, whilst he had started the petition, Mr Morris-Kelso reminded that he was only one signature on a list of many. The petition currently had a total of 3248 signatures, with many taking the time to add their comments to the report and to finish, he wanted to read some of those quotes: -

“Ashford needs a theatre. Theatre groups struggle to find venues and receive little or no support from our City Fathers. Canterbury has two theatres whilst Ashford is left in a cultural vacuum. This is an iconic building which needs to be preserved.”

“This should be a theatre. The internal décor is perfect and it will be great to have some sort of entertainment in town as all there is are nightclubs, which are fine if you are a younger person. We travel out of our local town to see shows so to have it on our doorstep would be an excellent opportunity for local restaurants and businesses. ABC will only tear down this building and replace it with more flats. We need to preserve the few historic buildings we have left in the town.”

“Ashford needs a theatre. We are the first town on the International railway line for goodness sake, surely we can have a theatre. Canterbury has one so what can’t we?”

“We have an expansion in housing and business both in progress, we need an expansion in culture too. It will take very little to adapt the space for this purpose, it is a great size and would reinvigorate the Lower High Street, bring more people back to the town centre and there is no reason it would not attract performances as big as the Leas Cliff Hall or the Marlowe.”

“As a former Ashford music and drama teacher, and a KCC Advisor running hundreds of music and drama workshops in Kent and London, I have seen the difference theatre makes to the lives of children, students and people of all ages and abilities. It encourages them to think, create, work as a team, empathise with others and promote self-esteem and confidence. I have never taught anyone who did not benefit from the process of engaging in musical shows, plays, concerts and choirs and a theatre would bring enormous hope and joy for Ashford and provide a much needed performance space for our amazingly talented citizens. I hope everyone will get behind this idea and enable more people to experience the joy of local live theatre, especially on behalf of our children – the artists and audiences of the future.”

“The building has been bought with tax-payers money, surely the tax-payer should have a say on what goes there.”

The Leader of the Council said that he first wanted to thank Mr Morris-Kelso for his comments. He said to go back four or five years, there was an empty space where the College now stood, along with an empty space where the Commercial Quarter had been planned and laid vacant for 10-15 years and the old market at Elwick Road had been a derelict and unused site. Over those four or five years there had been a gradual transformation in Ashford which had seen the creation of a College to prevent hundreds of students leaving the Borough each day, and development on those other sites. Such things did not happen overnight and a number of people in this Chamber had long held an ambition for a theatre in Ashford and the Council had never said it did not want a theatre. They had looked at this quite seriously about three or four years ago and spoken to the Arts Council who had advised that, at that time, because of the close proximity of theatres in other towns, and the population size, a theatre in Ashford would not have found favour with them. However, as Ashford grew, and as they now had a College and an emerging night time economy with Elwick Place, the situation was changing. The Snowdogs and photographic exhibition in conjunction with the City of London, showed that Ashford was beginning to do new things far above its weight that were making a mark, and there had been recent press interest from as far afield as the Economist and the New York Times. He said that he personally loved the theatre and often travelled to London, Eastbourne and Brighton to see shows whenever time allowed and this Council had certainly not ruled out the possibility of providing a theatre in Ashford. As the Council progressed down its route of being self-sufficient and more entrepreneurial, he considered those behind the petition were pushing at an open door. Ashford would have a theatre. The Fourth Street report had talked of a 350-400 seat theatre, but he wanted to see a minimum of a 750 seat facility for Ashford's growing international town – a modern complex incorporating theatre, conferences, a gallery and a museum, but you could not do everything overnight and you had to have the population to make it viable. To be fair, the Fourth Street report had been commissioned, but they had not asked them the direct question about the Bingo Hall. There were still potential sites in and around the town for a theatre, but the advice they had received was that the Bingo Hall would not be suitable for such a facility and the likely costs involved to provide a building as they would want it, would exceed the costs

of a new theatre. They were looking to retain the façade of the building and the floor above it, which could accommodate upwards of 150 people and it was likely that KCC would be providing Jasmin Vardimon with their own dance academy facility. In conclusion he said that viability was growing and whilst a theatre in Ashford would not come tomorrow, it would come in the next four/five years because of the lead in time.

Councillor Farrell said that he was staggered that the consultants had not been asked to at least look at the Mecca Bingo site. He thanked the petitioner and his colleagues for administering this work. Politicians were often accused of not listening to the public and this was an opportunity for Members to do just that and he considered it would be regrettable if the Council were already in advanced stages of project planning and procuring demolition of this site in advance of this debate, considering the Council had known about this petition for some time. A note of caution on any proposals being debated this evening had come earlier that day when the Secretary of State had revealed that considerations were ongoing as to whether further interventions were required to slow the commercialisation trend in Local Government. He considered this was rank hypocrisy from a Government who had left Local Councils no choice and more often than not encouraged such actions. He said it was important that the petition before the Council was not simply viewed as a debate on theatre provision in the town centre, but a specific theatre on the Mecca Bingo site. Therefore he considered making reference to other provision at other sites lacked adequacy of response. He said he had recently written to the Leader to voice his concern that the residents of the town centre had in many ways been excluded from actively taking part in consultations on how the Mecca Bingo site might be utilised and he said it would be a wasted opportunity to not once again highlight the composition of the Ashford Town Centre Place Making Board, which contained more Members from the rural areas than urban ones and the two Ward Members had been actively prevented from membership of that Board or any development of the proposals. Whilst the majority of Members may be quick to say there had been a Town Centre Consultation, in a view he shared with many, the consultation focussed on a variety of aspects about the town and lacked focus on the subject of this petition. The Town Centre Conference provided an opportunity for residents to be lectured by various speakers, but did little to allow residents to articulate suggestions despite best efforts. Arguably there was already an outdoor performance space at the Bandstand, and a small intimate space at Revelation St Mary's as well as a proposal for a temporary event space in the Commercial Quarter. Surely the suggested way forward would replicate that offer. The proposals as they stood had been developed from a brief with little Member, let alone public, input and he understood that only one option was being pursued. Whilst outdoor spaces provided a great venue for particular events, during the summer months, even the current proposals could not guarantee year-round sunshine. He welcomed the change to the proposals in that some of the original building would be retained, but in his view this presented a wasted opportunity to assist the late night economy further – a sector that until very recently had had little positive intervention from this Administration. While he appreciated some may be enthused by the central tenant of this project being opening up the view of the Church, this ignored other factors. The Vicarage Lane Car Park was a lifeline to the Lower High Street and its popularity should not be overlooked in suggesting that a multi-storey car park outside the ring road would be a like-for-like replacement. A key tenant of the newly announced competitive funding stream for improving high streets was community buy-in as the Government itself had stated that residents needed to have bought in to a proposal, rather than just being treated as commentators. In many ways he considered the people of Ashford had barely been observers.

Councillor Chilton said he first wanted to congratulate the organisers of the petition. It was not easy to pull together a petition on such a scale and it was rare for the Council to receive something like this so they could have a discussion on something that was clearly important to so many people. The Mecca Bingo site was a landmark historical and architectural site in Ashford and for many brought back memories of family nights out and unfortunately that had now gone, therefore there was a need to look at what was going to be done with the site. Ashford's growth in housing and urban development also demanded cultural growth, which all were in agreement with. The question before the Council was how to proceed and there was no doubt that there was support across the Council for some sort of theatre/arts centre/conference venue/gallery, but he thought it was important to go back to residents and ask them what they wanted. The consultants' report made reference to what could happen, but there was an element of 'jumping the gun'. He thought what really mattered to residents was to be consulted from the outset, rather than having proposals put to them. There was a large and very vibrant set of theatre, dance and youth/community groups across the Borough which currently did not have a home and if they wanted that talent to develop and grow they had to ensure they had their own space. He said he was pleased to hear that there were considerations being made but he thought they should be doing more. The Labour Group entirely supported the principle of an arts centre/theatre/conference space/gallery, but considered this should be a shared space that was accessible and open to all. In some circumstances, some theatres could be quite grand and elitist and not open to all and sometimes people could be priced out, so going forward, they favoured a model that was inclusive and allowed everyone regardless of their background to enjoy the experience. He referred to the letter tabled from the CTA which he considered was very important and he hoped all Members had read it in full and took cognisance of the points made in this evening's debate. He said that as Ashford grew, the people of Ashford deserved more than just barbers, nail bars and estate agents in the town centre.

Councillor Chilton proposed, in light of the petition received and what had been said at the meeting so far, "that the Council halt current plans for the Mecca Bingo/Vicarage Lane development and goes back to a full, open and public consultation with residents and stakeholders across the Borough and ask them what they want for this site. There should also be full publication of any minutes of meetings that had taken place regarding this site that were not already in the public domain".

This was seconded by Councillor Farrell.

Councillor Koowaree said he was all for the idea of having a theatre in Ashford. This had first been debated by the Council about 25 years ago and at that time the company who had carried out the feasibility study concluded that it would not be sustainable without a catchment area of about one million people. With Canterbury, Maidstone, Hastings, Tunbridge Wells and Eastbourne all close by, feasibility would still be an issue and it would be very important to get the type and size of facility provided right. To make it sustainable you would need to attract big names and shows from London and get buy in that local people would regularly use the theatre. With the increasing population perhaps Ashford would be ready for a theatre in the next five years and he hoped that would be the case, but it would have to be done properly.

Councillor Galpin said that in response to some of the points made by previous speakers, firstly the town centre consultation that had taken place had been dismissed,

but in fact the Institute of Place Management, who had carried out the consultation, were the foremost authority on consultation for town centre place making so their findings were extremely relevant. The Ashford Town Centre Place Making Board had also been mentioned and the opinion that it was populated by Members that did not live in the town centre, but he said it was important to note that all Elected Members were representative of the whole of Ashford and there should not be a schism between Members who represented urban and rural areas. He said that you would not find a greater advocate of Ashford town centre than himself. Talk about the night time economy had interested him and mentions that nothing had been done to promote the town when in fact the Council had supported and helped finance the new cinema at Elwick Place. It was also interesting to him that there was a suggestion that the 3000 people who had signed the petition would all regularly use such a theatre. Some of the signatures had been from Russia and Australia and he thought it was therefore doubtful. Mention had also been made of barbers and nail bars in a derogatory way, but he said that one of the main reasons these were so popular was because these were services you could not get via the internet. People worked hard to earn a living in such businesses and he believed trivialising those services was not particularly fair. The way people shopped had changed and in a climate where less and less people visited traditional high street shops, Ashford had actually bucked the trend and seen a 4% increase in footfall of people actually coming in to the town, compared to a 3% fall nationally. In conclusion, Councillor Galpin said that paragraph 17 of the report actually already stated that there would be an open consultation on the issue of a performance space in Ashford going forward, and, if the proposal to demolish the Mecca Bingo hall was taken forward, there would also be considerable consultation on that through the planning process.

Councillor Bartlett said he also wanted to thank Mr Morris-Kelso for his time and effort in putting this petition together. With regard to the recommendation in the Fourth Street report, a 250-300 seat mixed use venue offering music, comedy, spoken word and event cinema, he considered this would be in direct competition to the Picturehouse Cinema and Revelation St Mary's, so he was not sure this was the way forward. In inviting developers in to Ashford, this Council had always made the strong case for holding masterplanning events and this generally happened and in this case both sides of the debate seemed like minded in what they wanted and there was a good opportunity to move forward towards the same goal. There was a call for more consultation with town centre residents, but he also wanted to reference paragraph 17 of the report which referenced exactly that.

Councillor Miss Martin said that she had listened very closely to the points made so far. She said that the Leader of the Council had made some very good points about the lead in times for such a venue and she also wanted to thank Mr Morris-Kelso for taking the time to put the petition together. The key point for her had been made by Councillors Chilton and Farrell in that the Council had to ask itself whether they really had consulted with the public as much as they could have. She was sure that there were people across the Borough who would be excited to be involved in such discussions and often felt quite disengaged over what was happening in Ashford. The Borough was a fantastic place, but she believed the Council needed to work harder to involve everyone in its development going forward.

Councillor Bell thanked Mr Morris-Kelso for the petition and said that the time and effort taken underlined the interest and support for the concept of a theatre in Ashford. He also thanked the Members whose comments in support of a theatre were genuinely heartfelt

and were not clouded by politics. He said he opposed the motion on the table because he considered it a distraction from the supportive work for a theatre that was already happening and he wanted to make two clear points. Firstly the Ashford Town Centre Place Making Board was open to everyone and whilst he had seen a number of Members present, he had not seen the Members who had proposed and seconded the motion. All were welcome and a number of debates on this issue had been undertaken at these meetings and it was unfortunate that the Members in question had not taken part as a number of pertinent points had been made. In fact, if they had they would have known that this Council was hugely behind a theatre in Ashford, but they wanted not just an excellent theatre, but also a multi-purpose facility. The second point was that with regard to the call for consultation, paragraph 17 of the report made the point clearly – “the next steps will be guided by the full public debate and consultation held over this summer into the future of our town centre. All this activity will be pulled together in Spring 2019 into an action plan which will be reported to Members, widely promoted and shared.” Therefore there would be all the consultation, transparency and sharing that one could wish for.

Councillor Waters said that firstly he wanted to thank Councillors Chilton and Farrell for their performances this evening and he was sure that their equity cards would arrive in time for them to take up comedy slots at the new facility once it was open! He said that his more serious point was a financial one and it was important to note that the cost of such an establishment would require further consultation with residents because it would need considerable financial support and Council Tax payers needed to be clear on the level of support they would be expected to contribute should they wish this sort of facility to go ahead.

Councillor Suddards said that he wanted to support Councillor Chilton’s motion and a halt to demolition of the Mecca/Odeon building and properties on Vicarage Lane and for there to be a full consultation including potential users of such a facility. Despite what had been said, and although not invited, both Councillor Farrell and himself had attended Ashford Town Centre Place Making Board meetings as observers, and the points made about the voting Members on that Board were well made. With regard to the principle of a theatre itself, he would generally agree that they should perhaps be looking at a more multi-functional facility than just a theatre, but he would support proper public consultation over the Vicarage Lane site itself, rather than another site. Ashford’s urban population was now bigger than Canterbury’s so could sustain a theatre.

The Leader of the Council said that he would like to speak on the motion and make a couple of points. Firstly, as Councillor Bartlett had said there was a need to take into account competing facilities and the mention of a 250-300 seat facility in the consultant’s report did not really sit well with that. The report did go on to say – “the emerging conclusions of the study can help to inform the debate on the future of the Mecca building. In summary the consultants concluded that a theatre seating 250-300 people is likely to be the best combination of meeting demand in the area whilst also being a potentially realistic capital and ongoing revenue subsidy cost. The consultants emphasise however that as the town continues to grow the judgement of how ambitious to be in terms of theatre size depends heavily on political ambition.” He said that this Council had a lot of political ambition and you could clearly see that from what was already happening in Ashford, so whilst he noted what the consultants were saying about 300 seats, he wanted to see a significantly larger theatre. As a growing international town, work should begin now on how to deliver a theatre with 750 to 1250

seats with the flexibility to incorporate other uses, but it would take time and would not happen overnight. With regard to the Ashford Town Centre Place Making Board, this had been set up precisely to deliver projects as the Strategic Delivery Board had done with the Big 8 Projects. One of the key working groups had been named the 'impatience group' and was tasked to make sure that the things which needed doing in and around the town continued now, whilst also planning for the future. Another of the work streams was purely on consultation so this was taken very seriously. With regard to not being able to speak at meetings, he said he did not know of any meeting that he chaired where he did not allow any Member present to speak. He would even be happy to change the times of meetings if Members could not make them due to work commitments. He did not however have a crystal ball so people needed to indicate to him or speak up. The Leader said that he did not therefore agree that everything should be halted for consultation because consultation was already happening and so much was in train and the Council was actually getting on with the job and delivering development on sites that had lain idle for years. He therefore did not support the motion on the table.

Councillor Wedgbury said that he also had concerns over finances. Theatres lost money hand over fist and in his research he had not been able to find a single theatre in the country that made a profit. On average throughout the year, theatres only filled 49% of their seats with paying customers. There was already a theatre in the Borough that nobody had yet mentioned – the Sinden Theatre in Tenterden, which recently held a show that did not attract a single paying customer. Yet 1700 residents of the Borough had signed a petition saying they wanted a theatre and he wondered why they were not attending a theatre that already existed. With regard to funding, the average loss a theatre would make was about £500,000 per year and that was a subsidy that would have to be met by the tax payer. It would be important for residents to understand this and that their Council Tax would have to rise substantially to support such a theatre. The comments that certain Members had made about the town centre concerned him and he wondered if they ever actually attended the town. He was regularly in the town in the evenings and it was busy, car parks were full and it was being used. Another consideration was global warming and the need to provide carbon neutral buildings. It would cost millions of pounds on top of other refurbishment costs to make the existing building carbon neutral, so if the public and the Council did end up supporting the principle of a theatre, it would be far better to provide a new, modern, carbon neutral building.

Councillor White thanked the petitioner for his hard work. He said many would know that he was previously a County Councillor in Hertfordshire and he had ended up as Chairman of the Group that oversaw the running of the theatres and the build of a new theatre in Bishop's Stortford – The Rhodes Museum and Theatre. That had opened as a 250 seater and was heavily subsidised each year by both the County Council and District Council. He did have some sympathy with the points made about the potential for the building with its beautiful façade, but the back of the building and the building as a whole was not suitable. One example he would like to see followed was the Gordon Craig Theatre in Stevenage, a two floor building with a theatre at the top and a music venue/arts gallery on the bottom floor. It was a very modern building and he believed this was the route Ashford should take.

Councillor Shorter said that whilst culture and the arts were not something he was a master of, as the debate had started to mention financial viability this was his Portfolio. As colleagues would know he had routinely spoken about the mechanics of managing

the Council's finances and the value of worth as opposed to money spent in pounds and pence. So he understood why some Councillors had focused on the finances, but it was almost certain that when Ashford had a theatre it would not be financially viable and there would be a requirement for some kind of support funding through a mechanism - that was well understood. The way that would be done would be to continue the policy of this Authority of having a commercial and aspirational outlook with its budget, to own their own money to become self-sufficient and have a balanced budget. A theatre would have to be as viable as possible and a modern multi-functional theatre facility of the type they all wanted would not be able to be provided in a 1920s building such as Mecca. He believed that the process that was ongoing had been right and proper, there had been consultation and he believed there would be a lot more before they arrived at a final product in the future. He thanked the petitioner and said that it was vital for the Council to have these types of debates and for the public to exercise their rights more often.

Councillor Farrell had reserved the right to come back as seconder of the motion. For clarity he wanted to repeat his earlier words as he had not dismissed the town centre consultation. He had said that "the Town Centre Conference provided an opportunity for residents to be lectured by various speakers, but did little to allow residents to articulate suggestions despite best efforts." In reference to other points made, he had indeed attended Ashford Town Centre Place Making Board meetings and he had read the restricted papers for those meetings. He thanked the Leader for the invitation to speak at future meetings, something he had not mentioned to him before in the lengthy emails he had sent him on other subjects. He thought that all Members would have welcomed the politically charged debate they had taken part in this evening, he certainly did, and considered that such democratic scrutiny was right and proper. There had been a lot of talk about viability and how a theatre would be viable in five years' time, but if these proposals were taken forward the opportunity to use this existing site would be lost forever to a square of concrete and blocks of flats. Reflecting on the debate, he considered it disappointing that a majority of Members did not feel the need to engage in the consultation on this specific site and he welcomed discussion on the proposed theatre/conference centre/art gallery, but did not think they should be writing off the Mecca Bingo site for this purpose at this time.

Councillor Chilton summed up as mover of the motion. He said he thought it was good that the Council had had this discussion this evening. The definition of a petition by their very nature were that they were submitted because residents were not satisfied with something – be that a process, a policy or a position. A total of more than 3000 people had signed this petition because they were not happy with the current stance. All that his motion was calling for was a halt and a rethink and an examination by way of a wider consultation. It was not a controversial motion and he would ask everyone that supported the idea of a theatre, and wanted to listen to residents, to support the motion.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 15.4 the Leader asked that a recorded vote be taken on this motion.

This was supported by at least six other Members (i.e. a total of at least seven) who showed their support by standing.

A recorded vote was then taken on the motion and the Members voted as follows: -

For: Councillors Chilton, Farrell, Howard-Smith, Miss Martin, Suddards.

Votes For 5

Against: Councillors Adby, Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Bell, Bennett, Mrs Blanford, Bradford, Buchanan, Burgess, Clarkson, Clokie, Dehnel, Feacey, Galpin, Heyes, Hicks, W Howard, Knowles, Krause, Link, Macpherson, Michael, Murphy, Pickering, Shorter, Waters, Mrs Webb, Wedgbury, White.

Votes Against 29

Abstentions: Councillor Koowaree

Abstentions 1

This motion was lost.

The Leader of the Council said he was delighted to acknowledge the petition and the debate that it had generated. He moved that “the petition be received and welcomed and that it would help to inform the Council’s views on the subject of a theatre in Ashford as they continued through further public consultation for the town centre.”

This was seconded by Councillor W Howard

A vote was then taken on this motion whereby it was:

Resolved:

That the petition be received and welcomed and that it would help to inform the Council’s views on the subject of a theatre in Ashford as they continued through further public consultation for the town centre.

(DS)