

CABINET

26th February 2007

Present: Mayor Thornhill (Chair)
Councillor D Scudder (Vice Chair)
Councillors Counter, Sharpe and Wylie

Also present: Councillors Derbyshire and A Mortimer

C56
06/07

APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

C57
06/07

DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

C58
06/07

MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 22nd January 2007 were submitted and signed.

C59
06/07

THE FUTURE OF THE COLOSSEUM

Following consultation across the Council, the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee agreed in July 2006 to undertake a review of the future of the Colosseum. The review was to focus on the use of the Colosseum and feasible options for its future management. The report presented the finding of the review.

The report was presented by Councillor Derbyshire, Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee. He explained that the review had generated an extensive amount of public interest and that all the evidence gathered had demonstrated an overwhelming feeling that the Colosseum should be restored into a fully functioning public performance venue with a wide range of programming to suit all tastes. The Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee said the Committee had concluded that such a restoration would be a tangible asset to the manifestation of the Council's Policy for a family friendly town centre.

The Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee explained that the venue would not be sustained without some form of financial subsidy from the Council. He explained that a clear distinction between subsidising the operation of the venue and subsidising the programming should be considered separately. The Committee's research had indicated that the amount that different Councils subsidised venues differed greatly. The Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee explained that the Committee had looked at

three models of operation; in-house, a commercial operator and a trust run operation. He said the model run by a trust which the Committee had investigated, subsidised the venue the most, followed by the model run in-house. The venue run by a commercial operator was subsidised the least by the Council who capped the financial support given to the venue. The Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee said the Committee had drawn up advantages and disadvantages of each model, but had not come to a decision as to which model would be most appropriate, although it had dismissed the in-house model as it was too expensive and inflexible.

The Mayor thanked everyone who took part in the review which was a positive example of scrutiny informing policy decisions before they were made.

The Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Community said she had been inspired by the level of public enthusiasm in the review. She asked how the Committee had concluded that £1.5 million would be sufficient to restore the Colosseum. The Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee said this had been based on what they had seen at other venues compared with the current state of the Colosseum and that research had shown that motorised retractable seating would be beneficial. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Community asked if the Committee had felt the motorised retractable seating should be installed even if it was to the detriment of the acoustics of the venue. The Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee said the Committee had been clear the Colosseum should not solely be a commercial recording studio and that although a balance would be needed; the seating should be installed to enhance the audience experience.

The Mayor asked about the Committee's view on the existing BBC contract as handing it over to a new operator could be detrimental to their running the venue. The Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee said the Committee felt the BBC contract should not delay any work on the Colosseum. The Mayor also said she was concerned that the public had not realised the venue was still open and both she and the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Community asked if the Committee felt there would be value in carrying out some remedial works before any major restoration. The Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee said the venue did hold some public performances now but it would be difficult to attract further performances without a functioning box office and marketing. He was not persuaded that works such as improvement to backstage facilities would be worthwhile as an interim measure.

A Member asked about the importance of daytime programming. The Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee said the schedule of programming could allow for both daytime and evening events. Another Member asked if the Committee had considered the small hall being used for complementary events. The Chair of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee said any professional operator would seek to use the small and large hall simultaneously.

The Managing Director stated the East of England Agency had been set up to look at economic regeneration. He said the agency had agreed to carry out a study looking at the town centre's cultural needs in relation to the civic quarter which would be carried out in the near future. He considered that the Council should take account of the study in finalising plans for the Colosseum.

The Mayor said she hoped this review would help bring to an end any feelings that the Colosseum would be closed. She said Cabinet agreed that the Colosseum could help achieve a family friendly town centre but felt there would be difficult choices to be made and a balance on what was desired would not be easy to achieve. The Mayor said the big issue would be financing the venue. As the Council had pledged for Council Tax to be increased at a lower rate than inflation, the Mayor said any subsidy given to the Colosseum could have an effect on other services and would involve tough choices. The Mayor said residents would be involved in looking into revenue implications.

Members felt it was right to dismiss the in-house model of operation and the Mayor said that before the financial implications could be considered, a business case would need to be devised for the remaining two operational options. The Mayor also noted the Committee's view on interim management but was concerned that the Council looked at other marketing tools to make people aware the Colosseum was open. The Mayor said she agreed that the Colosseum would need re-naming as part of the re-launch, but did not agree that it should be renamed without involving the new operator in the decision.

It was agreed that officers would carry out further work on the future of the Colosseum, including a timeline and would report back to Cabinet at its June meeting. Members agreed to the Committee's recommendations with an amendment to the second regarding the name of the venue.

RESOLVED

1. that officers carry out further work and report back to Cabinet at its June meeting.
2. that the Committee's recommendations be agreed with an amendment as follows:
 - a. That the restoration as soon as possible of the Colosseum venue as a fully operational public performance venue with a regular wide-ranging programme of events be adopted as a significant element of the Council's cultural policy.
 - b. That a new name be adopted for the re-launch.
 - c. That the options to be considered for the management and operation of the venue when re-launched should be the Southampton and Basingstoke models and that value for money and mitigation of risk should be significant considerations.

ACTION: Scrutiny Manager and Corporate Director, Better Watford

Cabinet received an update of the latest position (as at 31st January 2007) on the Council's budgets for the current financial year. It showed the latest position for the General Fund, Housing Revenue Account, Capital and Efficiency Gains.

The report was submitted late due to timings of Cabinet meetings in relation to period end budget reporting timetable. The decision had been taken by the Finance department to supply Cabinet with an up to date report, rather than period 9 information to the end of December 2006.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance introduced the report. He said monitoring was an important process and that the report showed they were managing the budget responsibly and not being over confident. The Portfolio Holder also pointed out that the report showed they were comfortably meeting the annual efficiency savings targets.

The Director of Finance said they took professional advice on how interest rates were predicted to move and made their budget estimations based on that advice.

RESOLVED

1. that the position as at 31st January 2007 (Month 10) on the General Fund, Housing Revenue Account and Capital be noted.
2. that the position as at 31st January 2007 on the Annual Efficiency Statement for 2006/07 be noted.

ACTION: Head of Finance

C61
06/07

ASSET MANAGEMENT PLAN (FORWARD PLAN REF:PD/56)

The Council was required to prepare an Asset Management Plan to demonstrate the effective use of its property assets and to set out how the Council was prepared and organised to contribute to the achievement of the established corporate objectives.

The plan also summarised the actions taken since the last asset management plan was approved on 23rd June 2003 and achieved a "good" rating. The key actions and targets for delivery for the next three years and how these would contribute to delivering the Council's Vision were outlined in the report. The plan built upon earlier asset management plans. It formed part of the Council's Resource Planning process and had been developed to reflect the Council's Capital Strategy as it evolved.

The Mayor thanked the officers for their work. She said it was very important to manage it well as it was a vital tool in realising funds for the Council's ambitions and aspirations.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance added that asset management planning implications were highlighted in reports which was a good discipline in order to keep consistency in the way assets were assessed. He said the Council had

shown its commitment to this by providing for an enhanced planned maintenance programme in the budget.

Another Member commented on the good work with respect to disposals. He said the Council had disposed of a number of properties which were an eyesore, allowing funds to be released for other services and the sites to be improved.

RESOLVED

that the Asset Management Plan 2006-2009 as set out in the attached report be approved.

ACTION: Property Manager

C62
06/07

LEASING OF COUNCIL OWNED PROPERTIES TO NOT FOR PROFIT ORGANISATIONS (FORWARD PLAN REF:PD/62)

Cabinet received a report setting out the response from not for profit organisations to the proposals Members agreed in October 2006 for consultation to ensure that the Council's best interests were protected and any support given to organisations in respect to property was transparent and supported the Council's priorities.

The report also gave details of the impact assessment carried out by Watford Council for Voluntary Service (WCVS) on the Council's proposals.

The recommendations in the report took into account the report from WCVS and subsequent discussion between the Council and WCVS.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance introduced the report. He said the purpose of the report was to clear up inconsistencies in the rents of Council owned land as some organisations were only charged a nominal rent. The Portfolio Holder said groups would still be able to apply for grants in line with the Council's objectives and priorities, but that this would make clear what was a grant and what was rent. He said all organisations paying nominal rents would be informed of phasing arrangements to help in the transitional period. The Portfolio Holder said the report also addressed the issue of external repairs to properties which would come into the Council's responsibility as leases expired. The report would also standardise the Council's position on discretionary rate relief.

The Mayor said she would prefer the term market rent, as commercial rent could imply an over charge. She said groups would be able to look at the Council's priorities and apply for grants and that would make the process transparent.

RESOLVED

that the following proposals be agreed:

- a) Voluntary sector organisations, uniformed groups and allotment societies not paying full market rent

The function of grant aid and landlord should be kept separate. A grant should be awardable for the provision of services and every organisation should be expected to make its own arrangements to pay its landlord.

Organisations not paying market rent should be informed that from April 2008 the Council will expect payment of market rent when either the current lease expires or when there is an opportunity for a rent review within the existing lease. They will be advised that if they meet the Council's priorities and criteria for funding they can apply for grant aid. In matters of hardship where a grant is not awarded any increase will be phased in over a period of 12 months.

A lease should be put in place for the one organisation which currently has no lease as a matter of urgency.

- b) Sports organisations

The draft Green Spaces Strategy suggests that we look at developing partnerships with sports clubs where they could be responsible for grounds maintenance. Any such arrangement would need to consider which sports, if any, the Council wishes to subsidise and the rent paid for premises as part of a partnership agreement, which would be worked on by officers from Leisure and Community Services and Property Management.

Should any sports organisation not be paying a market rent, they be treated in the same manner as (a) above.

- c) Full repairing leases

Current not for profit organisations should be granted a lease that excludes external repairs and maintenance when their current lease expires except where the organisation has been complying with the terms of a full repairing lease.

New not for profit organisation tenants should be granted a lease that excludes external repairs.

The Council should allocate a budget for those buildings where the Council maintains responsibility of external repairs and maintenance.

- d) Discretionary Rate Relief

Leisure and Community Services should work with Revenues and Benefits, taking in to account the Internal Audit recommendation, to

devise a policy on discretionary rate relief based on government guidelines and reflecting the Council's funding priorities.

ACTION: Corporate Director, Better Watford

C63
06/07

TAKING FORWARD THE DACORUM, THREE RIVERS AND WATFORD SHARED SERVICES PROGRAMME (FORWARD PLAN REF:CM/1)

Cabinet received a report seeking approval to continue to participate in the shared services programme with Dacorum Borough Council and Three Rivers District Council, and to proceed to the next stage of the programme on the basis of the conclusions of the Strategic Business case, attached to the report. This also meant agreeing to commit the necessary resources in 2007/08 to take the programme forward.

The Mayor invited the Corporate Director, Better Council to introduce the programme. The Corporate Director outlined the background to the work. She explained that the decision not to share the procurement service had been based on a large potential risk with little potential gain, although a joint work programme would be developed to enable all three councils to obtain greater benefits from sharing contracts. The Corporate Director said, as well as the financial savings, the shared services concept would provide more resilience, through sharing staff resources and specialist expertise. She said they were seeking advice as well as funding support from the Regional Centre of Excellence and Building Capacity East as they were aiming to set up a scheme encouraged by Government that other Councils would either want to join or replicate.

A Member said this was a positive way forward in achieving a robust structure for delivering services whilst maintaining democratic identity. Another Member commented on how far Watford Borough Council had come in that other Councils were now keen to work in collaboration. The Mayor agreed and said it would be challenging but would have rewards for both residents and services.

RESOLVED

1. that the Council continues to participate in the shared services programme with Dacorum Borough Council and Three Rivers District Council
2. that Cabinet agrees to the principle of establishing shared services for finance, human resources, IT and the "back office" of the revenues and benefits service.
3. that officers, through the Shared Services Programme Board, proceed to finalise the business case and produce an implementation plan by November 2007, to inform the 2008/09 budget process
4. that Cabinet agrees to develop a joint procurement work programme and to formalise collaborative working for this function.

5. that Cabinet agrees to contribute £100,000 of revenue funding and £57,000 in capital funding to the programme in 2007/08.
6. that the Council continues to seek support from the Regional Centre of Excellence and Building Capacity East for the programme.
7. that a joint working agreement be entered into with Three Rivers District Council and Dacorum Borough Council and be signed on behalf of the Council to protect the interests of all parties to the programme and to enable operational decisions to be taken to support the overall objectives of the programme.
8. that officers carry out a soft market test of the strategic business case in the next stage of the programme, to ascertain whether there are potential private sector partners to whom the shared services could be outsourced.

ACTION: Corporate Director, Better Council

Mayor

The meeting started at 7.30 p.m.
and finished at 8.55 p.m.