

POLICY DEVELOPMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18th September 2006

Present: Councillor Derbyshire (Chair)
Councillor P Mortimer (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Greenslade, Mahmood, McGovern and Mrs Punter

Also present: 25 Members of the public

The Service Manager invited those present to join a tour of the Colosseum to look at the current condition and to become more familiar with the building.

PDS22 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**
06/07

Apologies were received from Councillor Khan.

PDS23 **DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS**
06/07

There were no disclosures of interest.

PDS24 **RESPONSE TO THE TRANSPORT (BUS) SCRUTINY REVIEW**
06/07

The Chair invited the Portfolio Holder for Transport and the Transport and Projects Officer to introduce the draft action plan in response to the Transport (Bus) Scrutiny Review. The Portfolio Holder said that they had met with Hertfordshire County Council in order to review services and gather information in order to move forward with the plan.

The Transport and Projects Officer presented the report and said that a lot of the recommendations would be covered by the establishment of a Network Review Group. The first meeting had been scheduled for 4 October 2006.

One Member asked how the Network Review Group would get people engaged. The Transport and Projects Officer said that at this stage it would be at a more strategic level, although when proposals for changes of services were being considered there would be more public consultation. She explained that there were currently no terms of reference as the group had not yet met, but that these could be given to the Committee once agreed. It was also recommended that the progress of the Network Review Group be monitored.

A Member asked how consultations would be carried out with residents as bus services had been changed without consultation in the past. The Portfolio Holder for Transport said that there had been situations where services had been changed with little or no notice and that there was a need to work with Hertfordshire County Council and the Passenger Transport Unit to develop links and ensure a good flow of information.

The Chair asked about the Hertfordshire County Council/District Local Transport Plan meeting. The Transport and Projects Officer said that there were two or three meetings per year and that the group had representatives from 10 Councils, with two Watford Members. She said that the meetings this year had clashed with other meetings, so the Watford Members had not yet been able to attend.

The Chair noted that the list of schools without travel plans would be circulated to Members. Another Member said that even if school travel plans were in place, unless the infrastructure was in place, parents would still use their cars. The Transport and Projects Officer said that the plans needed to be in place first in order then to look at the next stage.

The Chair invited two representatives from Arriva to give their feedback on the draft action plan. They said that one school travel plan in particular had been very successful by making a minor amendment to a service. They looked forward to being involved with more. They said they were very keen to work with the Council and welcomed the Network Review Group. They said that their usage figures were available monthly and that they welcomed the recommendations as a structured approach to bus transport in Watford and South West Herts.

The Chair thanked the officer, Portfolio Holder for Transport and the representatives from Arriva for their work and attendance.

PDS25
06/07

COLOSSEUM REVIEW

The Chair welcomed the public, the Portfolio Holder for Leisure, the Head of Leisure and Community Services, the Service Manager and the Principal Accountant to the meeting. The Chair explained that the purpose of this meeting was for Members of the Committee to ask questions of the Portfolio Holder and officers. The main opportunity to get the opinions of the public would be at the meeting on the 23 October. However, the Chair said he would also give the public some chance to ask questions and give opinions at this meeting also.

The Chair asked the Portfolio Holder for Leisure what her vision was for the Colosseum. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure said that she was keen to hear the views of the people of Watford. She said that any vision would be limited by financial constraints and value for money and said that she was pleased that the Committee had chosen to look at this topic.

The Chair commented that the previous management company had folded in the summer of 2004 and asked what the timescale was to move forward as at present, the asset was underused. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure stated that the BBC contract ran until April 2008 and that there were two aspects to look at; what did people want to see at the Colosseum and how much did the Council need and have to spend. She said that the Executive had planned to look at this matter at the end of 2006/beginning of 2007 as until now, the leisure centres had been the main priority. They were now coming to the stage where they would need to see business options to be able to form opinions and make a decision on the future of the Colosseum.

The Chair asked what had been done since the results of the consultants' report. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure said that only minor health and safety issues and minor improvements had been made. There had been no other progress with the report. Another Member asked why nothing had been done and said that there had been no work looking at risk management in terms of the risk of lack of use or a major problem with the building occurring. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure said that risk management had been looked at and some work had been carried out.

Another Member asked about the option from the consultants report to do nothing with the Colosseum. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure said that this option would cost closer to £200,000 per year if the Council did not have a contract with the BBC and she thought that the majority of opinion would be to keep it open.

The Chair invited Members of the public to ask questions of the Portfolio Holder for Leisure. One member of the public asked if the Council had looked into other funding such as BBC restoration grants or lottery grants. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure said that the Council was limited to what it could do as a local authority but that the Watford Musical Heritage Trust was putting together a bid for external funding.

Another member of the public commented that the building was not designed originally purely for entertainment but for multi purposes and that the public relied on Councillors who were better informed to reach sensible conclusions. Another member of the public said that the unique asset of the Colosseum was the sound quality, but that it was impossible for people to use it as there was no advertising facility or box office.

The Chair then invited questions from Members of the Committee to the officers. The Chair asked the Head of Leisure and Community Services what she saw as the main challenges in moving the Colosseum to a multi-use venue. The Head of Leisure and Community Services said that the state of the building would need updating to bring it up to the standard of other venues but that the constraints would be capital availability and how the priority for work to the Colosseum fitted in with the Medium Term Plan. In terms of the Cultural Strategy, the Colosseum could come under two strands; people participating in local activities and for people to be audience at high quality events.

Another Member questioned whether the development of the two leisure centres would leave any capital for any development of the Colosseum. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure said that it was not necessarily the case that there was no capital, but that until they knew what was left from the contingency fund for the leisure centre developments, it was impossible to know the amount. She said that they would know more once the developments were underway.

Another Member asked if it was possible to take a more organic approach to building up usage and have a box office. The Head of Leisure and Community Services said that a box office could be considered as an interim arrangement and that the BBC's contract ran until 2008. Any further extension of contract could be renegotiated and agreed by Cabinet.

The Chair commented that one of the objectives of One Watford was a town to be proud of, but could the town be proud without a fully operational multi-purpose venue. Other nearby towns seemed to be able to run successful venues. The Head of Leisure and Community Services said that a balance was needed between the aspiration and what was realistic in terms of available funds and other priorities. The Chair said that the aspiration would be for a fully functioning multi purpose venue with a box office. However, it seemed that the current situation was being driven by the BBC contract.

One Member asked about the utilisation figures of the Colosseum. The Service Manager explained that in 2005/06, the Colosseum was available for 335 days of the year, due to some closure following the liquidation. Of those 335 days, 47% of days were used. From bookings to date, 2006/07 had a potential usage of 77% which equated to approximately only one in five days with nothing booked. He said it would be useful to learn the usage of other venues from the planned visits and that they would struggle to cope with any further usage with the current staffing levels. The Member asked if the usage was already that high, what benefit refurbishment would bring. The Service Manager stated that if refurbishment was essential to bring the building up to modern standards. Roof repairs, for example, would be carried out. He said that they had issued a tender to a property services company to carry out a stock condition survey and until they had the outcome of this, it was impossible to know any specifics.

One Member questioned if the Colosseum was worthwhile as local people could not use it. Another Member said that as a small borough, the tax payer could not be expected to fund the Colosseum and that the Council had managed to run the building when consultants said it was not possible. He said that the building looked better than it had done for a long time but felt that to move forward they would need to think outside the box and was keen to get the opinions of the members of the public.

The Chair commented that the Council was currently subsidising the running of the Colosseum and asked if the officers had considered reviewing the BBC contract in order to minimise this subsidy. The Head of Leisure and Community Services explained that the one year extension until 2008 had been part of the original contract at a fixed rate, but that any further extension would be negotiated. The Service Manager explained that an internal charge was made when the Council used the venue.

The Chair then invited comments and questions from the public.

One person said that the venue should be used for the community with resources to promote young artists and musicians. He said that a café or bar could also be opened up draw in the public. Another member of the public said that there was a perceived local apathy as it was generally thought that the venue had been shut. One person suggested that a box office could be run through an external agent. A further comment was made that the Council could look at and learn from other venues which were run successfully. The Chair explained that two visits to other venues were planned with a potential third visit to look at venues which were run by a Council, contracted to a commercial agent and run by a not for profit organisation.

A member of the public said that the Colosseum had amazing acoustics and that the BBC was getting value for money as there were very few venues as acoustically good. He said there was an opportunity to put Watford on the cultural map and that it should therefore, not be closed down.

Another member of the public said that knowledge of the financial situation was necessary in order to look at possible future options. The capital expenditure needed to be considered in relation to the revenue expenditure. He said that the dream was for more opportunities to be available and used for a wide range of performances and purposes. He said that a successfully run Colosseum could increase the business coming into the town. He also felt that the Colosseum was an inappropriate name for the venue and denoted failure. He said that a full clear policy on where the Colosseum was heading was necessary.

One Member said that when the Council took over the running of the venue, a pre booked comedy performance was honoured and was successful. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure said that at the time, there would have been a lot of costs associated with running the venue commercially, but that they were now at the stage where this option could be viable. The Head of Leisure and Community Services pointed out that a few non-commercial events were held at the Colosseum. Another Member questioned the design of the brochure and commented that it was not very inspiring.

The Chair reminded everyone that the next meeting would be on the 23rd October and that all public would again be welcome to come and share ideas and opinions. He also thanked the public, officers and Portfolio Holder for their attendance and contributions.

Chair
Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

The meeting began at 7.00 pm
and finished 9.30 pm.

F – 9/10 (LJ)