

POLICY DEVELOPMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

23rd OCTOBER 2006

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

Also Present: Councillor Counter (Portfolio Holder for Leisure)
Councillors Baddeley, I Brown, Crout and L Scudder

Approximately 40 members of the public

PD26- **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**
06/07

There were no apologies for absence.

PD27- **DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST**
06/07

There were no disclosures of interest.

PD28- **MINUTES**
06/07

Due to unforeseen circumstances, the minutes of the meeting held on 18th September were not available for signing. This would be done at the next meeting.

PD29- **COLOSSEUM REVIEW - EVIDENCE FROM PUBLIC**
06/07

The Chair outlined that the scope of the Committee's review of the Colosseum was to look at its future and options for the long-term operational management of the building. He explained that the main purpose of this meeting was to gather evidence from stakeholders and the public.

The Chair invited Mr Gordon Higham, Chairman of the Watford Philharmonic Society, to speak. Mr Higham said that the Colosseum was an internationally renowned concert hall, with one of the best acoustics in the country. He said that the Society held four concerts per year at the Colosseum and attracted an overall audience of 2000 people. He said that although they did not require the full audience space the Colosseum provided, it was the only local venue which had a stage big enough to accommodate both a choir and an orchestra. Nevertheless, the Society still had to spend £1000 per concert for installation of temporary staging for the choir as the Colosseum's fixed choir staging had been removed in 1994. They also had to spend an additional £300 at each concert for an extension to provide extra room at the front of the stage.

Mr Higham said he saw three possible options for the future of the Colosseum: leasing it to a private contractor – which, given the failure of the previous

contractor, he did not see as a viable option; continued operation by Watford Borough Council - which was his preferred option as he felt it was run very well currently; or management by an external trust. He said that a trust would need to be widely based and represent all types of entertainment. He added that the status of the last contractor as a tenant had fettered the Council in having any influence in the running of the venue. He said that the building needed refurbishment to make a better quality experience back stage for artists as well front of house as for the audience. He said that the Town Hall car park was confusing and that access from the car park to the Colosseum entrance was through dark alleyways. He pointed out that there was no drop off point at the front for disabled people. Mr Higham also said that the name of the venue should be changed back to "Watford Town Hall". Finally he stressed the importance of the continued operation of venues like the Colosseum for the future of live music.

In response to a question from a Member, Mr Higham said that about 60% of ticket sales for Society concerts were to Watford residents. The Chair asked Mr Higham if the Watford Philharmonic Society would be willing to pay higher hire charges if the Colosseum was returned to full operation. Mr Higham said that if the Society were relieved of having to pay the additional £1300 per concert staging costs, then they would be able to pay more for the hire of the venue.

The Chair invited Mr Jonathan Brett, a concert promoter from Classics Concert Trust, to speak. He said he had used the Colosseum from 1994 until full operation ceased in 2005. Mr Brett said that although he found nothing special about the visual impact of the building either inside or out, the acoustics were very rare and special and beyond price. He said the building was an excellent concert hall. In his view, the report of the consultants commissioned by the Council had looked at the Colosseum too scientifically, and not sufficiently appreciated the importance of its acoustics. Mr Brett felt the best way to exploit the asset was to develop it as a concert hall and music education centre. He recognised that this would be expensive but instanced the Barbican in Basingstoke and the Sage in Gateshead as being successful models for this type of venture. He said that the consultants had identified that 2 million people lived within a 12-mile radius of the Colosseum. There was therefore a potential annual audience of at least 615,000 people. He said that people travelled up to 26 miles for concerts and so the 615,000 figure could be doubled.

Mr Brett said that to sell the Colosseum site to a commercial developer for redevelopment was unthinkable. He also felt that every system of management had the potential to fail or to succeed and that before deciding the method there was a need to establish clear objectives and priorities for what should be achieved. In Mr Brett's opinion, however, the trust idea was likely to be the most productive solution. He also thought that commercial management was extremely undesirable as in most cases it provided an expensive and inadequate solution, since a profit was needed for the operating company. He suggested that direct management was conceivably possible but the flexibility of independent management with charitable status was much greater and hence this option was likely to bring the greatest benefits within the lowest costs. Finally he said that in his view £12 million would be needed to be spent on renovation, and that this was now was an opportunity to develop a world class music venue.

The Chair asked what Mr Brett felt were the main deficiencies of the Colosseum as a concert venue. Mr Brett said that the stage was not big enough. The installation of an opera pit would also help to attract large audiences. He said that the seats needed improvement, although an acoustic expert should be consulted when making any changes. He said that two floors could be built above the small hall, with the large hall sealed so that more than one thing could go on at once when recordings were taking place. In response to a question from a Member, Mr Brett said that without a fully functioning box office, it was very difficult for promoters to get an audience sufficient to fill the venue.

The Chair invited Mr Norman Tyrwhitt of the Watford Musical Heritage Trust to speak. Mr Tyrwhitt referred to the aim for Watford “to be a town to be proud of”. He said three major venues made it that: the Palace Theatre, the Colosseum and the Museum. He said that like many public leisure activities, they did not make money but were important to the life of the town. Mr Tyrwhitt said that one option for the future management of the Colosseum was to give it to a Trust, which could then apply for funding from other sources. He gave as an example the financial support of the Arts Council for the refurbishment of the Palace Theatre. He mentioned the need for a box office for the Colosseum and the expense of these services. He suggested a joint operation of the box office in partnership with the Palace Theatre as a way of keeping costs down.

The Chair asked about the status of the Watford Musical Heritage Trust. Mr Tyrwhitt said that it was a registered company limited by guarantee and also had charitable status. A Member asked about the new facility for the Watford Music School on the site of Watford Boys Grammar School. Mr Tyrwhitt said that it would have a lot of rehearsal rooms as well as a small concert hall for an audience of about 300 people. He saw this as complementary to the Colosseum. In answer to another Member, Mr Tyrwhitt said that he saw a Trust working with the Council to encourage community events as well as concerts and other multipurpose uses. He also understood the commercial need to hire the venue out for events such as large weddings and said that the kitchens may need renovating to develop more of this and other similar uses. He said that community use always involved some form of subsidy.

The Chair invited three people from the Musician’s Union to speak: Mr Nigel McEwan, Head of Media; Mr Alex Mann, Officer for the South region; and Mr Pete Tomms, Sessions Organiser. Mr McEwan said that there were now only two studios in London suitable for large-scale orchestral film and CD recordings – AIR studio and Abbey Road. (One in Soho closed recently for land redevelopment and another in Wembley closed because of the Wembley Stadium redevelopment). The remaining two could not meet the demand from the film and recording industries and so business was being lost to other places in Europe. Mr McEwan said that the Colosseum had a reputation for having been used for high profile film recordings such as *The Lord of the Rings* and that it had a huge income generation potential if it was marketed properly. He said that UK Trade and Investment were making a big push overseas about the use of UK recording facilities, but the two existing London studios for large film/orchestral recordings were fully booked for two years in advance. Mr Tomms said that there were a lot of people in Hollywood who loved working in the UK because many of the best musicians were in the UK, but they were being forced by lack of recording studio availability to go elsewhere, such as to

Eastern Europe. Mr Mann said that there was a huge demand for recording facilities in the UK and there was very good long term potential.

A Member asked why two studios had closed down if there was so much demand. Mr McEwan said that one studio had been forced to close down because of the redevelopment of Wembley Stadium. In the other case the lease on the premises had run out and the landowner decided to take advantage of the redevelopment potential of the site in the West End. He said that the two remaining studios were booked for two years and that this demonstrated the demand. He said that the Musician's Union had excellent relations with fixers who booked recording sessions and that the Union would be willing to work with the Council to market the Colosseum as a recording facility. He said that they could put a questionnaire to the fixers on the Council's behalf and then help put some bespoke publicity together. In response to a question from another Member, Mr McEwan said that the Musician's Union had members from all sections of the music industry from pop musicians to classical orchestral players.

The Chair invited Mr Graham Mordue, also of the Watford Musical Heritage Trust to speak. Mr Mordue said that the Colosseum had been built as a multipurpose venue and that was where its future lay. He said the issues were around the finances and the way it would be managed in the future. Mr Mordue felt that it would be better run by a Trust than the Council itself because of the financial and other constraints of in-house Council management. A Trust would have greater potential to take initiatives forward and it would be easier for a Trust to attract specialised high quality personnel. Mr Mordue said that if a Trust were to be successful, it would need a clear lead, support and policy direction from the Council.

The Chair then invited comments from other members of the Public present at the meeting.

A member of the public said that the acoustics of the building were a miracle and should not be put in danger. He said that he had booked the Colosseum for a performer who had said that he had never played anywhere with such outstanding acoustic qualities.

Another person said that the Colosseum should be used for more than music. She said that it had in the past been used for bazaars, antique shows and boxing as well as music and other community uses. She said if it had been successful before and it could be successful again.

One person said that the Sage in Gateshead and the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester had both intended to house resident classical orchestras. Both venues, however, had come to realise that they could not survive on classical concerts alone and had developed excellent profiles in jazz, folk and pop music. He said that the age profile of audiences was changing and that people now expected good facilities.

One Member said that classical music would need underpinning and that the Council needed to look at broader programming options financially. She said

that visits to other venues had showed that the backstage facilities generally were no better than at the Colosseum.

Mr Andrew Collier, General Manager of the BBC Concert Orchestra introduced himself. He said that the Colosseum suited the Orchestra and they were happy to be there for 90 days per year. He said the BBC was looking at other long-term options for a home for the Orchestra but that no decision had yet been made. He said that if high profile solo artists were to be persuaded to perform at the Colosseum, there would need to be better dressing-room facilities since the existing facilities were not of an acceptable standard for top performers. He said the BBC Concert Orchestra would do more public performances at the Colosseum if the back-stage facilities for top-name solo artists were improved.

One member of the public said that the Colosseum was a potential venue for exhibitions, but that the car parking arrangements were poor. Another member of the public agreed and said that the Council's car park was full of Councillors and employees' cars during the day so that and that there was nowhere for the public to park when there were day time events in the Colosseum.

The Chair agreed said that parking was a problem. He said that the issue was currently being addressed in the context of the development of the building of the new leisure centre on the Central Baths site. Another Member drew attention to the availability of town centre parking and said that a lot of town centre venues like the Palace Theatre did not have their own parking facilities.

Several members of the public felt that the Colosseum should be used as a multipurpose venue, but that its focus should be as a concert hall.

There was general agreement when a member of the public said that the name of the venue should be changed back to "Watford Town Hall".

A member of the public felt that a big weakness of the Colosseum was the lack of publicity for events and said that proper publicity was essential if the venue was to be a success.

Another person said that the audience chairs were not comfortable and that the experience was not great. Another member of the public - a recording engineer, said that fixed seating should not be considered as it would change the acoustics and removable seating was needed to allow for recordings in the centre of the hall.

Another person said that they had been involved in a recording of a choir and orchestra at the Colosseum, generating £20,000 income for the town from fees for hiring of the hall and overnight accommodation in the town.

Another member of the public said that a joint town box office should be considered, which would help promote the excellent reputation for culture that attracted people to the town.

A Member said that the Committee understood the value of the asset, but that the Council had to work out how to fund its operation from a relatively small council tax base. He said it was encouraging to see so much interest in the

Colosseum and that the Committee would work through all the advice it was being given.

Another Member said that everyone had a nostalgic view of the Colosseum and that the Council needed to be very careful regarding the level of any subsidy allocated to the Colosseum.

The Chair thanked everybody for taking time to attend the meeting and for all the contributions made. He said that the Committee would fully consider all the evidence and take it into account when writing its report. He invited members of the public to leave their contact details if they wished to receive a copy of the report when finalised.

Chair
Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

The meeting started at 7.00 p.m.
and ended at 9.20 p.m.