

POLICY DEVELOPMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7th November 2006

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

PDS22- APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP
06/07

There were no apologies or change of Membership.

PDS23- DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS
06/07

There were no disclosures of interest.

PDS24- MINUTES
06/07

The minutes of the meetings held on 4th and 18th September were submitted and signed.

PDS25- WATFORD MUSICAL HERITAGE TRUST PRESENTATION
06/07

The Chair invited Mr Mordue to make a short presentation on how Trust status for the Colosseum might work and the potential benefits.

Mr Mordue said although he was a member of the Watford Musical Heritage Trust, he was speaking on behalf of himself rather than the Trust. He explained that he had been an active Member of Westminster Council and was on the board of the Halls and Baths Association. He had been part of the process leading to the closure of a major hall. He said the association had well established links with Westminster Arts Council.

Mr Mordue felt that developing the Colosseum would be consistent with the Council's cultural strategy and that, since the collapse of Watford Colosseum Ltd in 2004, many people had been concerned over the venue's future. He thought that since 2004, the Council had managed the Colosseum successfully with a small budget. Mr Mordue explained however, that a long term policy would be needed. The first item to consider would be a major refurbishment which would be necessary for any purpose. He felt that the Colosseum should be used as a multipurpose venue which included musical performances.

Mr Mordue said he felt a Trust would be the best way for the Colosseum to be managed. With particular regard to the Watford Musical Heritage Trust, he said that it had broad terms of reference that would encourage a wide variety of uses if it was chosen to manage the venue. He said the Council would need to engage in substantial negotiations with a Trust as to the objectives of and budget for the operation of the venue. Mr Mordue felt that local authorities were

not best suited to run cultural activities directly themselves, although they should have a close link to the managing organisation. He said that a professional full-time manager would need to be appointed and that it would be essential that the Council put its weight behind the Colosseum in order for it to succeed.

PDS26-
06/07 **REVIEW OF THE 2004 CONSULTANT'S REPORT**

The chair opened the discussion on the four options identified in the Consultant's report with regard to the capital expenditure. He said he felt that the Colosseum could be made fit for purpose at the lower end of the scale. The Chair explained that motorised collapsible seating had been installed at both the venues already visited, namely Cambridge and Southampton. Both venues had been very satisfied with the seating and said that it had added to the audience experience. The Chair felt that this would be a necessary asset for the Colosseum and said it had cost the other venues around £125,000.

One Member asked how much was available to spend on the Colosseum. The Chair explained that there was no budget currently allocated. It would be up to Cabinet to decide, taking into account the evidence taken and conclusions reached by this Committee. Another Member said that at an earlier meeting the Portfolio Holder for Leisure had said the amount available for the Colosseum would depend on the amount spent on the new leisure centre developments. The Member said she felt it was difficult to consider the issue when there was no lead from the Cabinet member.

A Member said there were some anomalies in the table of capital expenditures proposed by the consultants. However the Member agreed that the motorised seating would be essential. Another Member asked why the renovations at Cambridge had cost £4 million. The Chair said that the Corn Exchange in Cambridge was an older building (19th century) than the Colosseum and this could well be the reason for the high cost of renovation.

PDS27-
06/07 **CONSIDERATION OF OPTIONS FOR THE COLOSSEUM**

The Chair invited Members to look at the first draft of the Committee's report of the Colosseum review. He said an introduction would be added outlining a short history of the management and operation of the Colosseum.

The Chair said he would ask the officers to try and arrange a third visit - to a local authority funded venue run by a Trust - in order to complete the picture of options for type of operational management.

With regard to the notes of the meeting from 18th September 2006, a Member said there was an outstanding question for the Portfolio Holder for Leisure as to why no action was taken following the consultant's report and added that it was important that the recommendations of this Committee would not be ignored. The Chair said that the Portfolio holder had made it clear that the fortunate arrival of the BBC contract for substantial temporary use of the Colosseum had

enabled the Council to leave the Colosseum issue on the back burner whilst all efforts had been focused on the leisure centres projects. She had indicated that now the planning for the leisure centre projects was almost complete the next major issue for the Leisure portfolio would be the Colosseum.

The Chair said all the evidence from the Committee visits and the public sessions was that a successful venue needed a fully functioning box office. Another Member said that Cambridge Council consulted with people outside of the City as they had a database of people who had bought tickets. She suggested that a recommendation be included regarding consulting people outside of the Borough who would be potential users of the Colosseum.

The Chair invited comments on the notes of the Committee meeting held on 23rd October to take evidence from members of the public. One Member commented that there had been a lot of opinion on the name of the Colosseum. Another Member said that changing the name back to the Town Hall would help build the Town Hall brand which would be clearer. Another Member expressed concern that people would be unable to distinguish from the main Town Hall building. The Chair cited a recent article from a national newspaper which had referred to the venue as the Town Hall and said that it is still known as that in many people's minds.

The Chair mentioned that the General Manager of the BBC Concert Orchestra had said that the backstage facilities needed improvement to attract top name artists to perform at the venue. A Member said that the dressing room facilities at Cambridge had been worse than the Colosseum and felt that the backstage areas needed a face lift only rather than large investment.

One Member said that as the consultant's report had been written in 2004, the £1.5 million suggested as one of the options was likely to be more than that now due to inflation. She agreed with public opinion that the venue should be used primarily for music, with an organic approach to multipurpose uses. The Member agreed that a box office would be crucial and that links to the Palace Theatre box office seemed logical. She felt that refurbishment should be carried out on a make and mend approach.

The Chair stated that the operating cost to Cambridge Council of running the Corn Exchange was significantly greater than that to Southampton of running The Guildhall. He felt that the fact that The Corn Exchange was run directly in-house by the Council was a significant cost factor. In discussing the report on the visit to the Corn Exchange in Cambridge, one Member said that Cambridge also had very restricted unloading facilities and that they had no parking facilities at all other than the main town centre parking. Another Member pointed out that although Cambridge Council ran the Corn Exchange, they contracted out the running of the Café/Bar. He felt the location of the Colosseum would be conducive to a similar facility.

Members discussed possible funding from organisations such as the Arts Council. The Chair said his understanding was that the Arts Council funded artists and artistic activities rather than the operation of venues. A Member asked if further clarity could be sought for the next meeting.

The Chair invited comments on the report regarding the visit to The Guildhall, Southampton. He said their main driver behind Southampton Council's decision to contract with a private operator for the management of The Guildhall venue had been to keep the venue fully operational as a multi-purpose performing venue whilst at the same time capping the Council's subsidy for its operation. They did not want to carry any commercial box office risk and so this was transferred to the commercial operator. He said that both parties seemed very satisfied with the arrangement. The other Member who had been on the visit agreed. She referred to the wide-ranging programme of events offered by the venue which seemed to offer something for all members of the community. She said a principal factor in the success of the venue seemed to be the very good working relationship between the Council and the private operator.

The Chair said that as part of the deal, the operator had agreed to make available some capital expenditure to get the venue up and running. The manager of the commercial operator said that a substantial part of their income stream came from the running of the bar which also added to customer satisfaction.

The Chair asked Members to discuss the options available for the Colosseum.

Members agreed that "mothballing" the Colosseum was not a viable option and had no public support. A Member said that whatever option was taken, the Committee should have regard to the silent majority of council tax payers. Another Member mentioned the need to also consult with people outside of the Watford area. The Chair mentioned the possibility of approaching neighbouring authorities with a view to seeking a contribution towards the budget for subsidising the cost of running the venue.

The second approach listed in the consultants report was to continue with the low-level current operation of the Colosseum. The Chair felt that this would waste a very valuable asset. One Member pointed out that there were numerous competing venues in London, but other Members felt that people in the Watford area often preferred not to have to travel to London for their entertainment and cultural activities. A Member said most people were not currently aware that the Colosseum was available to hire and the marketing had not been a huge success. He felt that there were areas for improvement there. The Chair pointed out that it was still costing the Council £60,000 a year to fund the Colosseum at its current low level of operation. A Member said the Colosseum had many unique selling points and felt that there would be merit in restoring the organ in the venue. Whilst understanding the ideals of this suggestion, other Members felt that it was perhaps unrealistic and would not be value for money.

The Chair then asked Members to comment on the option of a functioning multipurpose venue through an in-house operation as in the Cambridge model. Members were concerned at the high level of Council subsidy from Cambridge Council and were doubtful that this option would be sustainable. The Chair said in 1994 the Council chose to outsource the running of the venue because it could not sustain the expense of operating the venue in-house. He was of the opinion that local government terms and conditions of employment did not lend

themselves to the flexibility of staff operation required for a public performance venue.

Members felt that an entrepreneurial edge was needed for the management of a successful venue and this was unlikely to be achieved with an in house operation.

It was agreed to discuss the remaining options at a future meeting.

The Chair asked if any members of the public present wanted to speak. One person said that people wanted confidence restored in the future of the Colosseum. Another person said that the figures from Cambridge and Southampton did not tell the full picture and that comparing those venues with the Colosseum was not comparing like with like. Another member of the public said the refurbishment of the Palace Theatre had been carried out with funding from the Arts Council.

The Chair thanked everyone for their attendance.

RESOLVED –

1. that the Scrutiny Manager would arrange a visit to a venue run by a Trust
2. that the second draft of the Committee's report reflects conclusions reached at this meeting.

Chair
Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

The meeting began at 7.00 pm
and finished 9.35 pm.

F – 22/11 (LJ)