

# BRIEFING NOTE

**TO: Neighbourhoods Scrutiny & Performance Panel**  
**DATE: 25 November 2008**

**RE: 2008 Walsall Illuminations Update**

## Purpose

To inform the Panel of the outcome of the 2008 Illuminations.

## 2008 Illuminations Update and Interim Position Statement

- The 2008 Walsall Illuminations ran for a 5 week period (26 September to 2 November) in its traditional autumn season. The show was very well received both for its content and presentation by the public, Councillors and the traders. Councillors were offered the opportunity to request a complimentary family ticket to this year's event and 27 tickets were issued.
- Special events and entertainment programme:  
One of the key promotional elements for this year's Illuminations was a high profile programme of live shows (e.g. Bob the Builder and Barney the Dinosaur), special appearances (e.g. Dora the Explorer, Peppa Pig and Noddy) and themed evenings (e.g. Diwali, Halloween, Party Nights). In spite of bad weather, the Diwali evening attracted an audience of over 3500 and Halloween weekend (Friday and Saturday) over 10000. This would confirm the importance of special attractions and events in addition to the traditional formatting of the event.
- Visitor research findings:  
Independent visitor research is commissioned each year to ascertain key visitor reactions to the event. Initial findings indicate that visitors responded positively with 94% of respondents stating that the event met their expectations. Out of a score where 10 is the highest and 1 the lowest, respondents rated the illuminated features at 8.7, the lakeside lasers and projections at 9.0, the live entertainment and shows at 8.5 and the children's rides at 8.6. In terms of value for money, the entrance price received a score of 7.9 with the price of food, rides, and illuminated novelties and balloons all rating between 7.8 and 7.4. 86% of respondents stated that they would visit the Illuminations again next year.
- Marketing:  
The marketing of the 2008 event has used the MOSAIC household information which enabled officers to target the event at its potential customers. Special offers have been successful and the offer of discounts and coach bookings for uniformed groups (such as scouts and guides) were very well used.
- Visitor figures:  
Despite more focussed marketing the final visitor figure for 2008 is 111,000. This represents an average nightly attendance of 2,921, a higher average nightly attendance than 2007 of 2,666 per night, an increase overall of 9.6%. Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and half term week remain the key nights for attendances for

both years. There is no evidence to suggest that the differential pricing for the special events and weekends disadvantaged the attendance figures.

- Weather:  
Unfortunately, the 2008 attendance figure was affected considerably by poor weather during the half-term week. It rained on both Saturdays, two midweek nights and the closing Sunday. Overall, of the 6 Saturday evenings this year, 3 were badly affected by rain. This is however always a major risk of any outdoor event.
- Impact of the national economic downturn:  
Many national attractions and retail industries have shown a reduction in sales and income this year. Undoubtedly, the Illuminations will have been affected by this and, in particular, by the substantial press coverage of bank failures and financial scares at the same time as the opening.
- Estimated outturn:  
The Illuminations has come in under its approved operational expenditure budget of £620,000. The above attendance figures, however, mean that the event will not meet its income target of £670,000, which includes a budgeted surplus of £50,000. Although ticket sales from advance outlets cannot yet be finalised, the estimated income for this year is £490,000. The budget deficit will, therefore, be £117,000 (£167,000 when the budgeted surplus is included).
- Partnership/sponsorship funding:  
The target income from external funding sources was £40,000. There is a shortfall of approximately £27,000 in this income, which largely equates with the reduction of anticipated funding from Black Country Tourism from around £30,000 to £6,000.

## **2009 ~ the year ahead**

The event is scheduled to continue in its present format for 2009. It is hoped that a Stage 2 application to the Big Lottery for £4.8m will be successful enabling the refurbishment and modernisation of the Arboretum. On the assumption that the award is made, it is anticipated that the Arboretum will have to close in phases whilst the refurbishment works are undertaken during 2010 and 2011.

As the attached year on year analysis shows visitor numbers for the Illuminations have dropped steadily in overall terms, with a resultant loss of income. This is not likely to improve in a recession. There are different explanations for this including the weather, the timing, the marketing and the product itself. It is highly unlikely that the Council will be able to make the necessary investment to radically change the Illuminations. However, the refurbishment of the Arboretum offers the opportunity to strategically reposition the Illuminations to be re-launched in 2012 to celebrate its re-opening, if the Council wishes it to continue.

From 2009 any future event will have to be put on against sustainable income generation as well as an awareness of the local economy and sponsorship opportunities. Within this framework officers, will now draw up proposals to achieve this. The Scrutiny panel's observations on the 2008 out-turn and the future of the Illuminations in 2009 and beyond will help influence those proposals

	Attendance Figures	Operational Outturn
2003	193,000*	35,000 surplus
2004	163,000*	51,000 loss
2005	188,500*	40,000 surplus
2006	157,000*	49,000 loss
2007	120,000*	184,000 loss

\*Duration of Walsall Illuminations – 6 weeks

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