

# **Strategic Recommendations on the Walsall Illuminations**

A final report to Walsall MBC

20 July 2006



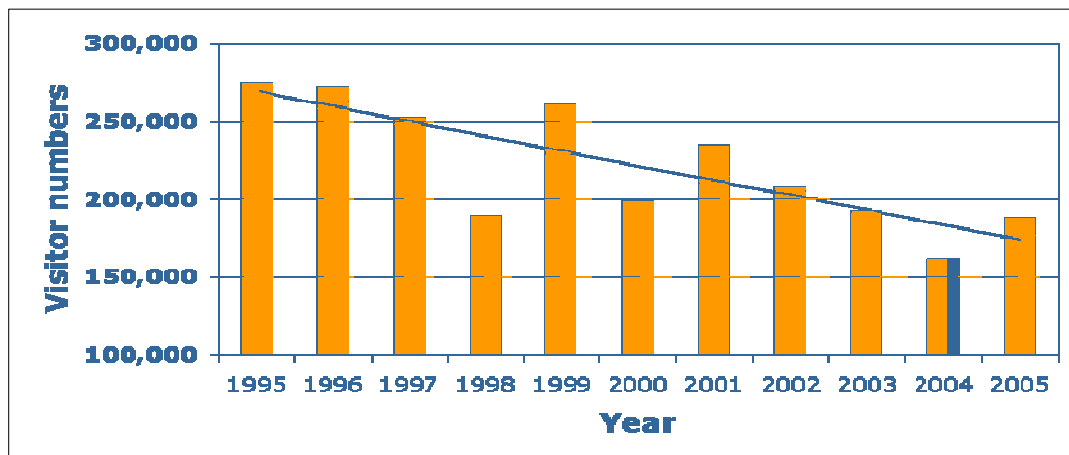


# 1: Introduction

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## Background and context

- 1.1 The Walsall Illuminations has been held at the Arboretum in Walsall for over 50 years. Running over a six-week period, the event has, in the past, attracted upwards of 250,000 visitors per annum, making it one of the Black Country's most successful visitor attractions.
- 1.2 However, there is widespread acknowledgement among stakeholders that the Illuminations is an event in slow decline. This is, in part, reflected by the steady reduction in visitor numbers to the event, shown in Figure 1-1. From a peak of over quarter of a million visitors in 1995, the Illuminations attracted only 160,000 people in 2004. While it should be acknowledged that year-to-year the weather has a significant influence on visitor numbers, the average trend is a downward one.
- 1.3 Figure 1-1 – Visitor numbers to the Walsall Illuminations



- 1.4 The Illuminations essentially 'pays for itself', using visitor gate receipts and concessions rentals to cover the cost of running and developing the event. However, the natural consequence of declining attendance levels is that in 2005 the Illuminations only just broke even, with no funds generated for reinvestment into the event for future years. Even when surplus occur, as for example in 2006 with a surplus of £39k, reinvestment does not happen.
- 1.5 Year-on-year, there are limited monies available to develop new light tableaux and fund special features, serving only to maintain the *status quo* rather than pushing the event forward. From a visitor perspective, the Illuminations' offer is now beginning to feel a little tired and in need of investment; if the event is to attract new visitors, or even retain existing numbers, change is needed.
- 1.6 This report comprises the final recommendations of work undertaken by SQW Ltd (SQW) and The Tourism Company to develop a vision and way forward for the Walsall Illuminations. A full report of our findings is available from Walsall MBC and this document serves only to report on the visioning workshop held in May 2006 and to provide a précis of our recommendations for taking the Walsall Illuminations event forward. A second

consultancy firm, Vision XS, was commissioned to conduct a Visitor Experience Analysis of the event and also to make recommendations on developing the Illuminations event. This report should therefore also be read in conjunction with the Vision XS 'Experience Analysis Report'.

## Structure of this report

1.7 The remainder of this report is set out as follows:

- Section 2 – Strategic direction, vision and objectives for the Illuminations
- Section 3 – Recommendations for developing the event
- Section 4 – Final thoughts.

## 2: Strategic Direction, Vision and Objectives for the Illuminations

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- 2.1 In this Section, we set out our ideas for the future strategic direction of the Illuminations, based on the work from our Phase 1 report and the partner workshop.

### Strategic direction for the Illuminations

- 2.2 In May 2006, SQW and The Tourism Company hosted a stakeholder workshop to feedback their findings and, more importantly, to provoke fresh thinking on a Vision and strategic direction for the Illuminations.

- 2.3 The workshop generated much interesting debate and numerous ideas and thoughts about the Illuminations. Combining this thinking with the findings from Phase 1 of our work, which assessed the economic impact and strategic position of the event, we have developed a number of strategic messages for the Illuminations management team to go forward with. These include:

- ***The need for investment in the event*** – Without investment, the Illuminations will struggle to sustain existing visitor numbers. The fabric of the Illuminations is declining and further investment ‘is crucial to the future of the event’ according to one workshop attendee. The Illuminations ‘core product’ within the Arboretum should be the focus of any initial investment, following which other concepts e.g. links with the Town Centre should be explored
- ***The event requires backing at a political and strategic level*** – For any real change to occur, the Walsall Illuminations needs political and strategic backing from within Walsall MBC. While the event will never realistically be a top priority for the Council, we believe with more backing and strategic guidance the event’s decline could be reversed
- ***Let’s celebrate and demonstrate innovation*** - The event’s critics and even some of the event’s strongest supporters see the Illuminations as being old fashioned and dated. Moving forward, the event needs to develop innovative and modern forms of entertainment, embracing and demonstrating new technologies in the fields of theme park-style entertainment, visitor management, light-based technologies and interpretative techniques
- ***The event should be retained at the Arboretum*** – There is little appetite for the suggestion that the event should be held away from Walsall Arboretum. The Illuminations is synonymous with the Arboretum and gives the Illuminations its ‘unique feel’. However, the event could do much more to link up with the Town Centre, e.g. by developing an Illuminations Gateway to link the Arboretum and the Town Centre

- ***A move towards Christmas may be beneficial*** – Tying in the Illuminations more closely with Christmas could do much to boost the event. The main concerns voiced about running the Illuminations later in the year were around the underfoot conditions and the event competing for visitor spend, rather than any explicit objections to the event being diminished by a Christmas tie in. Given the Illuminations iconic status in Walsall, such a change would not be without risks. There may be potential to float the idea of using Walsall’s new Citizens’ Panel or perhaps a poll in the local press
- ***Families should remain the main focus of the event*** – The Illuminations should retain ‘the family’ as its core target audience. However, the event’s appeal needs to be broadened beyond the very young age groups currently targeted. Vision XS reiterated this point, noting that the lack of pull of the Illuminations for groups other than the very young detracted significantly the overall event experience
- ***The Illuminations needs a more commercial focus*** – To ensure the event is sustainable, it should develop a more commercial focus, but with the strong caveat that any monies made by the event should be re-invested in the Illuminations. However, we would urge caution against any major price rises, unless the visitor experience is radically improved. Much more could and should be done to work with local businesses to secure sponsorship for the event.

## Vision

- 2.4 Based on the work undertaken to date and the views of the many stakeholders canvassed during the study, we think an appropriate vision for the Illuminations event is as follows:

*‘By 2012, Walsall Illuminations will be a modern, interactive visitor attraction that appeals to adults and children alike and draws in large numbers of visitors from Walsall and across the Midlands. The event will continue to celebrate the culture and heritage of Walsall, but will also showcase the innovative and creative side of the town.’*

## Objectives

- 2.5 Against this vision, for the next three to five years, the objectives for the Illuminations management team should be to:
- Secure the investment required to develop the event into a modern visitor experience
  - Develop the Illuminations into an event that reflects not only the history and culture of Walsall, but also presents a dynamic and progressive image of the Town
  - Enhance the status of the Illuminations as one of the Black Country’s most popular visitor attractions, by growing local and regional visitor numbers year-on-year
  - Double the economic impact of the Walsall Illuminations by making much stronger links between the Arboretum and the Town and its traders and attracting increasing numbers of visitors from outside the Town.

## 3: Recommendations for developing the event

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- 3.1 In this Section, we make some practical recommendations and comment about how the Illuminations event should be developed.

### Vision XS' proposals

- 3.2 As was noted in the introduction, in addition to the SQW/Tourism Company teams, Vision XS was employed to look specifically at the quality of the visitor experience at the Illuminations. While not the specific remit of the SQW and Tourism Company's commission, it is helpful to pass comment briefly on the proposals made by Vision XS on developing the event.
- 3.3 Vision XS' final report to Walsall MBC notes that, as currently configured, the Illuminations is a relatively tame attraction, with little in the way of signature experiences. Broadly, they argued making the light-based tableaux, currently the main focus of the event, a backdrop for a more engaging and interactive experience based around four specific Zones – a History Zone, an Art Zone, a Business and Craft Zone and a Youth/Sport Zone. Vision XS further suggested positioning the event as a Black Country Festival, with the emphasis moving away from a specifically light-based event to a cultural event celebrating the sub-region.
- 3.4 We believe many of Vision XS' ideas outlined for the four Zones are genuinely innovative and if implemented would do much to improve the visitor experience at the Illuminations. However, we make the following comments on their proposals:
- The 'Walsall Illuminations' is a strong brand that resonates with visitors both within and outside the Borough. Vision XS' proposal for developing a new Black Country Festival image for the event is a high-risk strategy
  - It is also our view that while the current light-based exhibits are beginning to look tired, the Illuminations should retain its overall light theme. Indeed, much more could be done around the light theme, for example:
    - **As a subject of discovery:** Using the event to explore the science of light (e.g. an undercover hands-on science centre exhibit which teaches people about the properties of light)
    - **Light as Art:** Many artists working in the UK and abroad use light as their medium. Commissioning artworks of appropriate scale could communicate the creative possibilities of the medium and add to the visitor experience
    - **Light as a way to showcase nature:** There are an increasing numbers of events that have used lighting effects to encourage people to see natural settings in a different way
    - **Light as a way to communicate energy efficiency:** The Illuminations event is a major consumer of electricity, but the event could seek to use this position

to communicate messages about energy conservation and management. (e.g. Greenpeace's solar trucks could be brought into the event to power some of the light displays, the displays could communicate messages about energy conservation and generation, and the Illuminations could source all its electricity from renewable resources)

- **Light as play:** The Vision XS report talks of floodlighting the existing children's play area. This idea could be taken a stage further by commissioning the design of a playground that is specifically designed to be illuminated through the use of special materials.
- If the decision were taken that 'light' should no longer be the key focus of the event, consideration should be given as to whether the event should experiment with opening during daytimes, at weekends and school holiday periods. Opening in the daytime, may increase the numbers of Illuminations' visitors choosing to visit the town centre.
- Re-branding the event to The Black Country Festival, as Vision XS proposes, may serve to limit the event's appeal to visitors from further afield, potentially reducing the economic impact of the event.

## Funding the event

- 3.5 Our view is that, in the short to medium terms, revenue and capital investment will be needed to improve the event's infrastructure, before the Illuminations will be able to attract greater numbers of higher paying visitors. In its report, Vision XS proposes that the event takes out a £1.6 million loan to redevelop the event infrastructure. We believe this proposal to be overly ambitious, relying on apparent tripling of turnover in two years in order to service the loan.
- 3.6 In conversations with the Walsall MBC team, it is clear that relying on a significant cash injection from the Council is also unrealistic at a time when costs are being cut across the local authority. However, there are a number of actions the Illuminations team could implement to help secure external funding for the event:
- Approach **Walsall MBC's External Funding Team** which will have significant expertise in generating funding for Council events and departments
  - Appoint a **part-time commercial manager** to develop business sponsorship revenues
  - Approach the **Tourism and Leisure Cluster Manager at AWM**. While AWM are unlikely to put money into any event until the launch of their events strategy later in the year, the Tourism team should have a wealth of ideas about developing/funding the event
  - Apply for **grant funding** to develop the event. Some sources of funding will not be open to Local Authorities. However, there are still some potential sources of external funding e.g. large organisations such as the Arts Council West Midlands, ERDF funding, The Big Lottery Fund or niche funding pots such as the Museums, Libraries



and Archives Development Fund (this would need to be in conjunction with the museums service).

## Increasing the economic impact

- 3.7 As was highlighted in our Phase 1 report, the Illuminations event currently generates around £500k of additional economic impact in the local Walsall economy. Given the event, in effect, costs the Council nothing, this is a reasonable level of impact.
- 3.8 However, the event could do much more to contribute to the local economy. Prime mechanisms to increase the economic impact will be raising off-site spending by event visitors from its current level of 10% and attracting more visitors from outside Walsall. Our interim report provided some preliminary suggestions as to how this might be achieved, but below we make some concrete recommendations on how this could be carried forward:
- ***Better physical linkage between the Arboretum and the town centre*** - Walsall Regeneration Company is developing plans to improve the built environment in Walsall. Their area of operation does not take in the Arboretum but does reach right up to the roundabout adjacent to the Arboretum's Clock Tower. Discussions should be had with the Company to see if proposals could be brought forward to improve the links between the Town Centre and the Arboretum
  - ***Town centre-based attraction*** - Identify and develop a town centre, indoor, light-based attraction for which Illuminations ticket holders would qualify for discounted or free entrance. The attraction should operate during the daytime and evening and could use a shop unit as its base
  - ***Vouchers*** - Those purchasing tickets in advance should be sent vouchers offering added-value or price discount offers on goods and services available in Walsall town centre. These vouchers could be time limited to a few days either side of a person's visit to the Illuminations. Meal/restaurant deals might be particularly suited to this promotion
  - ***A targeted marketing campaign at non-local visitors*** – The Illuminations are very well known within Walsall and as such should only require a limited marketing push to attract local visitors. To try and maximize the numbers of visitors from outside the Town, a greater proportion of the marketing budget should be focused on areas outside on the wider Black Country and the West Midlands.

## Phasing

- 3.9 The Vision XS report identified an 18 month period to deliver a revitalised event. This delivery period was to commence in February 2006 and culminate with the launch of the new style event in 2007.
- 3.10 We believe these timescales are highly ambitious. Indeed, since the production of the Vision XS report, a number of factors have led to a delay in the commencement of this delivery period, not least the need to secure capital investment to develop the event's infrastructure.

3.11 Given the above, we outline three alternative options which could allow for a phased introduction of the new Vision. Pursuing any of these options will require a reworking of the figures contained in the Vision XS report in order to assess their impact.

- **Option 1: Phased introduction of product improvements** - This would see a phased introduction of new elements as part of the 2007, 2008 and 2009 events, for example:
  - In 2007, introduce elements contained in the Vision XS report which are sited within the existing Illuminations site. It may also be prudent to include the funfair, which is earmarked to move to the Arboretum extension in the new plans
  - In 2008, introduce the elements that are to be sited in the Arboretum extension. This would also be the time to open up the second entrance to the event
  - In 2009, develop complementary activities designed to stimulate off-site spending (e.g. town centre indoor light-based attraction, voucher schemes).
- **Option 2: Launch the 'new' event in 2008 rather than 2007** - This would allow more time to raise the necessary finance to fund improvements. It would also allow the contents of this and the Vision XS report to be widely circulated both within and outside the council in order to secure backing for the event's redevelopment. There is a risk of delay associated with this option, but with focussed management, this could be avoided
- **Option 3: Skip the Illuminations for a year** - If raising finances proves to be a major problem, it might be necessary to consider not holding the event in 2007 and carrying forward the savings made to the 2008 event. This is, however, a high risk strategy not least because it is unclear whether the council's revenue funding for the 2007 event would be forthcoming if the event were not held and also whether, with the event not held, this money could be invested in development of the new vision. The risks associated with this option are the discontinuity for audiences, the perceptions of the beginning of a slippery slope, and justifying salary costs for the fallow period of some £150k.

## Management

3.12 It is important that the momentum that has been built up over the consultancy period is sustained. We also think that it is important that the very real pressures of delivering the event do not mean that the requirement to implement changes to the event is sidelined. To this end, we recommend the following:

- Setting up a **Walsall Illuminations Development Committee**. This would perhaps be chaired by a councillor to champion the event with a range of stakeholders including officers, park user groups and town centre traders. Membership could be drawn from the workshop attendees

- Employing a *full time member of staff* employed by Walsall MBC tasked with developing the event. The current part-time arrangement leaves very little time for any real strategic or proactive thinking.

## Branding/Name

- 3.13 Decisions need to be taken with regard to the name and branding of the event. There are those that advocate change. For instance, Vision XS suggested changing the event's name to the Black Country Festival whilst our consultation highlighted a view amongst some that the term 'illuminations' was old fashioned. On the other hand, Walsall Illuminations is a strong and widely recognised brand, so an alternative course of action might be to refresh the brand rather than implement a name change.
- 3.14 However, before any decisions are made about the name, there is a need to resolve a number of outstanding issues that relate to the vision of the event. Specifically:
- To what extent will the theme of light continue to be part of the event?
  - Will the event move to become a Christmas event?
  - Is there agreement around the Black Country Festival vision and product concepts?
- 3.15 Once the vision for the event has been decided upon, progress should be made on agreeing a name and brand. In order to ensure an effective brand is developed but at low cost, it might be worth seeking sponsorship in kind from a local branding agency to develop the name and brand for the event.

## 4: Final thoughts

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- 4.1 In an increasingly competitive market for the tourist pound, the Illuminations is beginning to feel tired as a visitor attraction. Without radical change, the Illuminations will struggle to maintain, much less grow, visitor numbers to the event. Vision XS events' experts take a similar view on the need for change.
- 4.2 However, set against this rather downbeat prognosis is the knowledge that the Illuminations is an event which engenders a huge amount of local support and affection, is one of the Black Country's most popular visitor attractions, and requires no external subsidies to break even. It could be left as it is, giving some pleasure but to an ever-diminishing audience with the likelihood of a growing annual deficit.
- 4.3 Developing the event will not be a short-term fix and will require commitment and buy-in from a wide range of parties. Crucially, for the Illuminations to develop into a modern 21<sup>st</sup> Century visitor attraction three critical issues need tackling:
- **Strategic support** – At a political and strategic level within Walsall MBC, there needs to be greater acknowledgement of the current and potential value of the Illuminations.
  - **Funding** – The event is in need of a capital injection, without which it will continue to decline as a visitor attraction. Funding is unlikely to come from commercial sources and it is unclear, as yet, whether the council would be willing to back any of the proposals made.
  - **A coherent view on the event's direction** - For the most part, there is agreement on the broad direction for the event, but moving forward there will very likely be traditionalists who want the Illuminations 'kept the same'. It is our belief that more of the same is not a realistic option.