

WALSALL
ILLUMINATIONS

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Neighbourhood & Performance Scrutiny Panel – December 7th 2006
&
Cabinet – December 20th 2006

1. The Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel has considered the contents of the SWQ Ltd and Vision XS reports and a copy of the views of the Panel is shown as Appendix 1.
2. Vision XS, experts in visitor attraction development, have proposed thematic development and new visitor zones for the event. Their report identifies the need for signature experiences to enable more engaging and interactive activities, as Appendix 2.
3. A copy of the SQW Ltd report on the Strategic Recommendations on the Walsall Illuminations is shown as Appendix 3.

Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel recommendations

31/2006 FEEDBACK FROM WORK GROUP

Illuminations workshop, 22 September 2006

Councillor Towe stated that the event had been very productive and the minutes reflected the majority of the outcomes of the meeting. However, it felt that the panel's discussion around early opening times and dates should be reflected in the report and that the input of Councillor Harris regarding commercial issues, should also be fed into the report.

Stuart Bentley thanked the panel for their added input and agreed to amend the minutes of the working group accordingly and, further, to assist in feeding the views of scrutiny into a subsequent cabinet report.

Councillor Towe asked when the report would be presented to Cabinet.

Stuart Bentley replied that it was likely that the report would now go to cabinet in December 2006.

Councillors Towe and Burley asked that the panel have a further opportunity to comment on the report before it submitted to cabinet.

Stuart Bentley replied that this would be possible, but that it may impact on the reporting timescales, i.e. it might be that the report would have to be delayed until the New Year.

There was general agreement that this was unacceptable.

Stuart Bentley replied that he would investigate the procedure and endeavour to have the report reported to the December Cabinet meeting.

Councillor Burley raised the issue of unlicensed traders outside the Arboretum.

Tim Challans agreed that there were issues around unlicensed traders but highlighted that the council had no enforcement powers. The council had to rely on the police, but it was evident that no-one had tried to move these traders on this year.

There was general agreement that the issue needed to be addressed.

AGREED

- That a draft cabinet report be presented to the panel at its next standard meeting, 7 December 2006 and that the report, subject to the

panel's amendments and agreements, be presented to cabinet at its meeting of 20 December 2006.

3/2006. SITUATION ANALYSIS AND WAY FORWARD FOR WALSALL ILLUMINATIONS

Councillor Towe led a debate on the specifics of the recommendations outlined in the final report.

AGREED

That the illuminations working group;

Re: Strategic Direction;

- Recognise the need for investment, both in infrastructure and technology. The Illuminations 'core product' within the Arboretum should be the focus of any initial investment'.
- Believe that political backing and strategic guidance for the illuminations was important in order to reverse the event's decline.
- Believe that the Arboretum site be retained as the central site for the illuminations as the Illuminations are synonymous with the Arboretum and gives the Illuminations its 'unique feel'. However, the group also believed that the event could benefit from a link up with the Town Centre.
- Recognise that tying in the Illuminations more closely with Christmas could do much to boost the event by avoiding Ramadan and by encompassing Halloween, Diwali and November 5. The group also felt that the underfoot conditions would not be a major factor, although concerns over high winds were voiced. Further, they suggested that some form of public consultation should be undertaken, possibly through the local press, in order to gauge the views of the populous.
- Felt that The Illuminations should retain 'the family' as its core target audience.
- Understood that The Illuminations needed a more commercial focus to ensure the event was sustainable. Further that any profits made by the illuminations should be ring-fenced in order to re-invest into the illuminations and that value for money be one of the core principals of the event.

Re: Proposed Vision;

- Amend the proposed vision statement to the following:
 - "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 and its districts, but will also showcase the innovative and creative side of the borough."

Re: Proposed Core Objectives;

- Recognised that the investment required to develop the event into a modern visitor experience needed to be secured.
- Recommend the Development of the Illuminations into an event that reflects not only the history and culture of Walsall in its districts, but also presents a dynamic and progressive image of the borough.
- Recommend that the status of the Illuminations be enhanced, as one of the regions most popular visitor attractions, by growing local and regional visitor numbers year-on-year.
- Recommend that economic impact of the Walsall Illuminations be doubled by making much stronger links between the Arboretum and the town and its traders and attracting increasing numbers of visitors from outside the town. However, it was stated that any developed link with the town should not be detrimental to the core offer within the Arboretum.

Re: Development of the event content

- Recommend that light based themes be retained and developed and that the suggested light themes of; As a subject of discovery, Light as Art, Light as a way to showcase nature, Light as a way to communicate energy efficiency and Light as play, be endorsed and further investigated; with an emphasis on securing relevant sponsorship for each theme.

Re: Funding the event

- Recommend the appointment of a part-time commercial manager to develop business sponsorship revenues with the post subject to performance related pay and levels of investment. Further, there was a strong feeling that the post should not be filled by any form of consultant and that other options around obtaining commercial expertise, perhaps by giving further support to the existing staff, should be explored before committing to a job description.
- Recommend that the event apply for grant funding, although the exact geographic extent of the event should be ascertained in order not to be seen to be applying for the same grant monies twice under two separate bids, e.g. lottery funding for both the Arboretum and the Illuminations.

Re: Increasing the economic impact

- Further express the view that a better physical linkage between the Arboretum and the town centre was desirable insofar as any town centre attraction was not detrimental to the core offer of the illuminations and that the newly appointed town centre manager be involved in any development plans.
- Recommend that town centre-based attractions be developed for which Illuminations ticket holders would qualify for discounted or free

entrance. It was felt that this could form part of a full Walsall visitor's package, which could include the Leather Museum, the Art Gallery and the Market amongst others.

- Recommend that idea of vouchers offering added-value or price discount offers on goods and services available in Walsall town centre be further investigated. Further, the group suggested that subsidised travel arrangements to and from the districts should be investigated in order to make the illuminations more accessible to the residents of the more deprived areas of the borough.

Re: Phasing

- Endorsed Option I: Phased introduction of product improvements - a phased introduction of new elements as part of the 2007, 2008 and 2009 events.

Management

- Recommend setting up a Walsall Illuminations Development Committee. Further, they suggested that the members of the illuminations working group form the core of the committee with further members being co-opted from representatives of the ethnic communities within the borough.
- Agreed, in principal, that a full time member of staff be employed, tasked with developing the event. Further, that is post be separate to that of the commercial manager. However, they suggested that this post be held in obeisance until the impact of the commercial manager, on the available funding, could be assessed.

Branding/Name

- Stated, vehemently, that the event should not be renamed the "Black Country Festival". They felt that the current brand was well known and renowned and that renaming the event would loose not only the brand image, built up over 5 decades, but would loose the local connection to Walsall itself. The group re-iterated that the event should retain the name of Walsall illuminations with possible added by-line of "a festival of lights".

Other comments received to Cllr Towe, Chair of the Neighbourhood Scrutiny & Performance Panel:-

WALSALL ILLUMINATIONS

The issue of a Business Manager was raised by the Group and as the Illuminations are held only for a part of the year, it follows that a manager would only be required on a part-time basis.

The cost of such a person would be based on a basic salary coupled to output results such as sponsorship, promotions and sourcing investment.

Recommend the Group look at the availability of a possible candidate and salary expectations, with a clear job description and advertised through the Leisure Industry Publications advertisement sector.

Other proposals:-

- 1) The moving of the Illuminations dates will have a positive impact on attendances, rather than the decline the event is having at the moment.
- 2) The pricing has got to be more user friendly as we are competing with other attractions such as Blackpool.

Current visitor experiences and their proposals for modernisation

Vision XS ~ Walsall Illuminations: Situation Analysis and Way Forward

Background

Vision XS has undertaken an analysis of Walsall Illuminations using their unique X-Mod experience modelling tool, which enables an analysis of the quality and quantity of experience given to visitors to an attraction.

The model is able to assist attraction operators in decision making in the following areas: capacity, marketing, operations, investment, staffing levels, experience quality, learning accessibility, space planning, visitor flow, secondary spend capacity and amenity planning.

The Brief

Vision XS were appointed to draw up development proposals for Walsall Illuminations, using their X-Mod analysis and their extensive experience of visitor attractions worldwide. Specifically, this involved:

- Setting achievable visitor number targets
- Setting income (linked to the new experience value) and expenditure budgets
- Definition and specification writing of new components to improve the experience quality and quantity
- Setting experience goals
- Working with Walsall Council, the local community and the wider consultant group to develop a vision for the Illuminations which meets the needs of the local and wider West Midlands population
- Developing a marketing plan to ensure that future marketing campaigns maximise the pulling power of the event

Summary of Experience Model Analysis from 2005 Walsall Illuminations

- The event offers a good level of active time but offers too many experiences of the same type. Visitors need slowing down.
- The mix of attractions needs to broaden to include more activities, walk throughs and shows.
- The event needs high capacity rides as part of the admission price.
- Several major experiences are needed to lift the visitors at certain points in their journey through the Illuminations, one of which needs to be near to the end of the visitor route.
- The experience quality is poor across all age groups and needs many new, more modern elements to widen the event's appeal to different age groups and different demographics.

- Some of the child content needs replacing with 'all family can do' content.
- Much more indoor capacity is needed.
- More play capacity is needed.
- The level of additional spend items on the site is too high due to the fairground and needs reducing.
- The event needs much more repeatable capacity to ensure people come back each year.
- There is not enough seating capacity for the food offering, which also needs to be more spread out around the event.
- The capacity for the selling of balloons and novelties is too high and needs reducing.
- Another toilet block is needed.
- The event is marginally good value for children and very poor value for adults. This is a major barrier in going forward.
- The event's exhibits have poor market appeal; hence the dangerous reliance on children's brands, which in turn limits the age appeal / market size of the event.

Other Observations made by Vision XS

- The current reliance on obtaining the latest children's brand to market the event is a risky one. The event should be a strong enough experience to drive attendance and the use of brands limited to specific age groups when available, in order to drive the last few percent of visitors.
- The contract for the operation of the children's rides forms part of a long term agreement which may need to be renegotiated if there is an opportunity to expand the fairground area with a few rides to appeal to teenagers and adults.
- The catering offer is limited and does not reflect the ethnic diversity of food eaten in the area. This should be changed to celebrate the best of local food eaten. The food concessions need renegotiating to a 15% turnover rent also. The current estimated catering spend, including sweet food, is £1.50 per head generating £300,000 turnover for the operators. The income from these concessions should be in the order of £45,000.
- It is not possible for event goers to purchase any branded goods based on the Illuminations. This should be generating around £1.00 per head turnover and with a standard 50% margin contributing another £100,000 turnover.
- In marketing terms, Walsall Illuminations is seen as the poorer cousin of Blackpool Illuminations despite arguably offering a much better family experience. A re-focusing of the event on regional business, craft, art, sport and history will redefine it as something different and enable the marketing of the event to reach many new potential customers.

Recommendations of Vision XS

The New Vision

The new vision for the event will see a change in emphasis from being a light based walkthrough into a festival celebrating all aspects, past and present, of the region using the Arboretum and lights as a backdrop.

The traffic congestion in the town will be reduced through reducing the need for the park and ride system as the expanded event will have a second entrance from the main parking area. The existing entrance will be modified to allow the main circulation route around the lake. Bringing people in at two points will partly reduce the current bottleneck and improve the flow providing that there is at least 1.5 hours experience between each entrance. As the event grows, an out of town park and ride will be needed, which can be delivered to the existing entrance to the event.

The new master plan sees the event split into the following four zones. Investment into the new equipment has been carefully considered to allow the town to run other events in the Arboretum throughout the year.

History Zone

A look at the history of the area through various rides, shows and displays. For visitors who use the old entrance, this zone represents a 'high' at the beginning and end of their journey, and a mid-visit 'high' for the car park end entrants. A working group of local and regional historians should be assembled to work on the historical messages and content put across in this zone. *Major components include Boat Ride on the lake, light displays, Dark Ride and Panto Theatre.*

Art Zone

A zone with a vibrant link to the community through art competitions in a gallery that also displays and sells local artists work, together with a talent stage that highlights local entertainers, performers and theatre groups along with running a community X-Factor for local school children. This area will also contain a raised walkway through trees that will re-use some of the old techniques of lighting up the Arboretum to create an enchanting walkthrough. *Major components include Fantasy Wood, Light Tunnel, light displays, Light Workshop, Talent Theatre and Gallery.*

Business and Craft Zone

A zone which celebrates the traditional industry of the area along with the industries that drive the economy today and maybe tomorrow. This zone contains a large actor driven walkthrough adventure, a fantasy land train ride that features many of the local and branded characters associated with the industries of the area and a giant craft hall that entertains as well as presents local crafts. *Major components include Character Ride, Craft Zone, Play Area and Adventure Walkthrough.*

Youth and Sport Zone

A zone where the youth of the region can feel at home through features that relate to their world. A separate large venue will enable children, youth and adults to try certain aspects of many sports and positive lifestyle activities. Details should be made available of local clubs and organisations for visitors to follow up the activities they have experienced so that the event becomes a catalyst for new activity. *Major components include Sports Hall, Extreme Arena and larger rides.*

Delivery Team

The current team will need expanding to deliver the event. In particular, a commercial manager will need to be appointed to attract the levels of sponsorship required, to renegotiate catering concessions, expand the ticketing network and set up the much needed and lucrative event branded shop.