

AT A MEETING
of the
**SPECIAL COMMUNITY
ORGANISATION, LEISURE AND
CULTURE SCRUTINY PANEL -
ILLUMINATIONS WORKSHOP** held at
The Council House, Walsall on **Monday
10 April 2006** at 6.00pm

PRESENT

Councillor Towe (Chairman)
Councillor Ault
Councillor Beeley
Councillor Beilby
Councillor Burley
Councillor Bott

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Twedde
Mr Charles Machin (Arboretum User Group)
Mr John Llewellyn (Arboretum User Group)
Mr Barry Jenkins (Arboretum User Group)
Mr. W.Jones (Trader)
Mrs. S.Jones (Trader)
Mrs. P.Humphreys (Trader)
Mr. P.Gooch (Trader)

OFFICERS

Mike Parrott Events and Festivals
Stuart Bentley Scrutiny Officer

APOLOGIES

Apologies for non attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillors Arif, Phillips and Woodruff.

SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions identified at this meeting.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest identified or party whip at this meeting.

SITUATION ANALYSIS AND WAY FORWARD FOR WALSALL ILLUMINATIONS

Councillor Towe welcomed everyone to the meeting and asked Mike Parrott to give an overview of the current situation.

Mike Parrott spoke to the briefing note (previously circulated) and highlighted that the council were still very much at the stage of assessing the current position before looking at ways forward for the illuminations.

(annexed)

He then stated that that the report by Vision XS (previously circulated) was a research document and would be part of a larger body of research that would inform any development plans for the illuminations. SQW would be adding to the report at a later date and this would be followed by a stakeholder's conference that would aim to arrive at a vision for Walsall illuminations. He further stated that the illuminations were a beacon for the area and, following from the definition of the vision, the development of the event would be a technical exercise.

(annexed)

Councillor Burley asked if the conference would define a vision for 5 years hence and if so, did this mean that there would be no effect on this years event.

Mike Parrott replied that there would be little effect on this year's event but changes would be introduced incrementally from then on.

Councillor Burley stated that there was a feeling, from previous meetings, that something should be done this year so as not to lose momentum.

Mike Parrott agreed that the desire for change should be maintained but, due to issues such as licensing, even short term changes had a lead-in time of up to 1 year.

Councillor Towe asked if the illuminations were self financing.

Mike Parrott confirmed that they were.

Councillor Towe replied that he was pleased and that it meant that the Council could concentrate on ensuring that the event was what was wanted.

Councillor Ault stated that there was a need to move forward but there was also a need to remember why the event was started. The event was essentially for Children and this should not be forgotten.

Councillor Towe agreed with Councillor Ault but further stated that the event must be targeting the right audience as it was self funding.

Councillor Burley asked if staffing costs were including in the calculations when assessing the cost of the illuminations.

Mike Parrott replied that they substantially were, with only a limited amount of back office cover, such as marketing, not included as this was essentially part of the day to day activity of those functions.

Councillor Burley then asked, in order to maintain the momentum, if the suggested amendments to seating capacity, number of toilet blocks and the provision of balloons stalls could be addressed this year as these should not be subject to the long lead times mentioned earlier.

Mike Parrott noted the concerns. He also agreed that the family ethos of the event was important and the stepwise approach to change should ensure that the good things about the event were not lost.

Mr. Jenkins stated that the event no longer catered for the poor, as originally designed, and he was sceptical that the event was self funding. He had asked for the relevant financial data from the last 2 years events, under the Freedom of Information Act, and he could not see how the figures had been derived. There seem to be a lack of clarity in the finances and he called for a set of transparent figures to be presented to the working group. He further stated that there were question marks around the water retention on the site, as evidenced by the near flood 5 years previously, and this may be aggravated by the number of regeneration projects in and around the area. Further, car parking was no longer adequate and access for larger vehicles was a major issue. He also highlighted concerns over health and safety during the erection of the major attractions and that the arboretum had sustained long term damage from the illuminations which was unlikely to be made good. He further enquired what progress had been made on receiving Heritage lottery funding. Finally he stated that the illuminations had to improve but there needed to be a decision taken as to whether the illuminations were a Walsall or Arboretum event as this would determine the usage profile of the site.

Councillor Towe appreciated the input and replied that many of these issues had already been discussed at previous meetings.

Mike Parrott also welcomed the input and saw those issues as the kind that could be discussed at the consultation event.

Mr. Jenkins then raised concerns over the possible existence of lime workings in the Arboretum as there had been local planning issues as a result of these having been found. He also asked how the status of the Arboretum as a conservation area fitted with the usage of the site for the illuminations.

Mike Parrott noted the concerns over lime workings and that he was aware that the infrastructure for the illuminations was moving to a less invasive profile and a more sensitive use of the area.

Councillor Ault stated that there wasn't room in the town to move the event from the Arboretum and that the event raised the profile of the Arboretum itself.

Councillor Burley replied that, equally, the illuminations could be an attraction to the town centre.

Councillor Ault suggested that a way forward could be to hold weekend street fairs, during the illuminations, in partnership with the traders.

There was general agreement that this could be a possibility.

Mr. Jenkins offered to take Councillors around the Arboretum to give them further insight.

Councillor Towe welcomed the offer and stated that he would take it up. He further stated that it seemed that the stakeholder event would be a welcome and useful event for all concerned.

Councillor Burley stated that it was crucial to have a wide participation in the stakeholder consultation, but she also stated that there was a need to look at the admission price to ensure that it did not escalate too far. She then asked if scrutiny would see the outcomes of the stakeholder conference before a Cabinet decision was made.

Councillor Towe replied that scrutiny would see the outcomes and the briefing note actually confirmed that scrutiny would be an integral part of the process.

Councillor Burley expressed her concerns that Cabinet would just ignore the views of scrutiny.

Councillor Towe replied that scrutiny would have an input and be able to make their views known.

Councillor Burley asked that the highways and transportation service be involved in the stakeholders conference along with the transport providers. She stated that their needed to be a joined up approach over the various components.

Councillor Towe asked if there was a date arranged for the stakeholder conference.

Mike Parrott stated that the council were still negotiating a date with the consultants but it was likely to be some time in May 2006.

Councillor Towe thanked everyone for there attendance and input and stated that the Panel would reconvene after the stakeholder consultation event to take the issues forward.

The panel RESOLVED:

1. That a further Special Community Organisation, Leisure and Culture Scrutiny Panel - Illuminations workshop would be arranged, following the stakeholder consultation event, to further inform the development of a vision for Walsall illuminations.

There being no further business the meeting terminated at 7:00 p.m.