

8 January 2008

Ripon City Council Meeting 7/1/8 – ‘Save-Our-Spa’ Report

The meeting, which packed the Council Chamber, was held in public and served both to inform the people of Ripon of the HBC proposals for the Spa Baths and to consider the response of Ripon City Council.

The evening proceeded in three stages:

- 1 A presentation by HBC of the options considered as part of a Cultural Services Review.
- 2 An opportunity for members of the public to raise questions or comment.
- 3 Council consideration of:
 - Which option to support
 - What action to take with HBC.

To summarise the HBC presentation:

The Spa Baths issue should be placed in the context of the Cultural Services 2007 review. This showed a requirement of £6M to remedy the declining quality of buildings in the district.

Four options were considered for swimming facilities in Ripon:

- 1 Short term repairs to the Spa Baths (£750k for a 5 year extension).
- 2 Retain Spa Baths frontage and build new pool at the rear. (£1,325k)
- 3 Provide a new pool at a different location (£3,125k)
- 4 Do nothing (discounted)

Options 1 and 2 involve long closures of the pool (9 months +). Option 3 would enable continuous swimming in Ripon. The stated benefits of Option 3 were:

- A capital receipt from the sale of the Spa Baths (assumed to be £1M).
- Lower operating costs if the new pool is integrated with the Leisure Centre.
- Improved sustainability.

*SOS Comment: Option 3 is not just any ‘different’ location it is quite specific, adjoins the leisure centre and involves loss of playing fields.
It was not clear that the £3.125m for option 3 included the costs of upkeep to the Spa Baths while the new project is completed.
Does lower operating cost mean redundancies?
The sub-text for ‘sustainability’ is that HBC can offload responsibility for care of an important listed building.
Conversion of the Spa Baths site for housing has been assumed as the only viable solution although this is not explicitly stated.*

HBC raised two planning issues

- A new Local Development Framework that comes into effect in October 2008 which will replace the existing Local Plan. *Comment: The effects of this were not made clear.*
- Need to submit planning application under current policy to maximise capital receipt for housing. *Comment: This opaque statement is a very important piece of officialese. The need apparently arises because the economic case for Option 3 depends on development of the Baths as ‘luxury’ housing. New rules will require allocation of space for ‘affordable’ housing, decreasing the value of the site. £0.5M is at risk. These rules change very soon and this means that a planning application will have to be submitted before the end of February.*

Finally, three financial points were raised:

- The need to optimise the VAT position.
- The preference for Option 3 as the most cost efficient over the life of the project (40 yrs)
- Capital receipt is vital.

Comment: The Spa Baths has been operating for 103 years.

Why does the capital injection need to come from the sale of the Spa Baths?

The 50 or so members of the public present were given half an hour to raise points at the meeting. With apologies for any omissions or misrepresentations these included:

- 1 What are the Council's proposals for the listed building – only affordable housing has been mentioned.
- 2 What are the alternative viable uses for the building?
- 3 How will access be arranged when the only apparent route is through the Spa Gardens? [The HBC official stated that access is available without confirming how]
- 4 From the perspective of Ripon's swimming community what is needed is a facility with a 25m pool, a splash pool for small children, viewing gallery and parking. A new site is necessary to meet these goals.
- 5 Being adjacent to the community hospital the Spa baths site represents a prime opportunity for the Primary Care Trust (PCT) to develop health care facilities in Ripon. This possibility should not be ignored.
- 6 It is extraordinary that a proposal as important as this is being pushed through because of an imminent change in statutory regulations.
- 7 Is there a hidden agenda to dispose of the hospital as well for housing? [denied]
- 8 A plea was made for retention of the playing field space that would have to be sacrificed for this project.
- 9 Parking and access at the new location is also difficult.
- 10 Will the facilities at the new pool match those at the old (sauna etc)? [no reply]
- 11 Why does option 3 necessarily mean selling the baths for housing? Visitors are crucial to the economic future of the city – we need more amenities not fewer.

After the public session the Council meeting proper was held. There were two motions:

- 1 Does the Council support option 1, 2 or 3?

Councillors made the following statements:

- Has there been any consultation on this proposal yet? [Answer: No]
- What other sites have been considered? [2 or 3 others apparently, but none survived HBC consideration]
- Has PFI been considered? [Apparently not]
- Will the parking difficulties at the leisure centre be solved?
- The current Local Plan requires the retention of all existing green space. This does not square with this plan. [HBC say no other suitable land available]
- In a new pool we should aim for a top class facility with 6 lanes, a diving capability etc. This would expand the user base to the benefit of the community. This proposal should be driven solely by financial considerations.

The Mayor made the following concluding remarks:

- Politics is the art of the possible – expectations have to be realistic.
- Ripon should be a hub for the surrounding area; we need good facilities to achieve this.
- Ripon should be a centre for tourism, not retirement.
- A new pool would be an attraction for the children (keep the kids off the streets)

- The current baths is dilapidated and a disgrace. *[Comment: And whose fault is that?]*

A motion to support Option 3 was carried 14:1.

The second motion concerned the future of the Spa Baths building.

Most councillors did not actively support the change of use to housing. Statements included:

- This would be an ideal site for a cinema or some similar civic entertainment centre. *[Comment: What happened to the cinema in the Market West development?]*
- Other uses must be considered. This is a prime site for the NHS. We should encourage the PCT to work with HBC to develop the site. Housing is a no go.
- With its situation next to the hospital and surgeries the building should be developed as a health site. Housing is not a good option. Ripon Council should continue discussion along these lines with HBC and support more public consultation.
- The site should not be used for housing.

One councillor took the pragmatic view that a new pool may not be possible without disposal of the Spa Baths for housing.

The following motion was carried *nem con*:

“This City Council must have detailed discussion with the Borough Council and other interested organisations to ensure that the future of the facade and pump room of the Spa Baths is secured, and that any redevelopment to the site is both sympathetic and in keeping with the architecture and general ambience of the immediate area, and that there is full consultation with this Council and the citizens of Ripon.”

Comment: This is a pusillanimous resolution. It is regrettable that the majority did not have the courage of their convictions to register a formal objection to development of the Spa Baths for housing. A successful planning application for housing will set Ripon on a course which will not be easy to change. In this writer's view the rush to a planning decision because of legislative changes is not a proper basis for long term planning of the future of our city.

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