

REPORT TO: Urban Renewal Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 21 November 2007

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Environment

SUBJECT: Fireworks Festival 2008

WARDS: Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 This report sets out proposals to relocate Halton's Fireworks Festival from its current site, adjacent to the Silver Jubilee Bridge, to the Heath Park football fields in Runcorn, commencing in November 2008. The report is also being presented to the Safer Halton Policy and Performance Board on 20 November, 2007, at the request of the Executive Board Member for Planning Transportation, Regeneration and Renewal.

2.0 RECOMMENDED: That

- (1) The Policy and Performance Board comments on the conclusions in the report**
- (2) The report and the comments of the Policy and Performance Board be forwarded for consideration and decision by the Executive Board at the next available meeting**

3.0 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 A number of years ago, the two firework displays in Halton were merged on efficiency grounds. They were originally held in the Runcorn Town Hall grounds and at Spike Island, Widnes. A new venue was chosen on the River Mersey gantry wall, which enabled viewing from both sides of the river.
- 3.2 Over the past five years there has been a steady increase in the popularity of the event, and it now attracts some 45,000 people who take up vantage points on either side of the river and from various other points, including Weston Road, Pickerings Pasture and Wigg Island. The Catalyst Science Discovery centre also host a hot pot supper for paying guests from the vantage point at the top of the building.
- 3.3 The increase in numbers attending have given rise to concerns about traffic congestion, crowd control and health and safety and it is now considered appropriate to review the current arrangements,

4.0 THE ISSUES

Car Parking

- 4.1 The **West Bank** area is not designed to accommodate large volumes of traffic. Visiting cars are accommodated in the side streets around the industrial estates and on Spike Island (weather permitting). However, the mass exodus of traffic and pedestrians after the event has been an increasing cause for concern, despite the traffic management arrangements, with resulting traffic congestion taking more than hour to dissipate.
- 4.2 In **Runcorn**, whilst the old town car parks can accommodate a reasonable number of vehicles, the demand for parking is so great that roads soon become congested. The problem is compounded when people are leaving the event, due to the flow of two way traffic being impeded, on some roads, due to parked vehicles.
- 4.3 Given the increasing numbers of people attending the event, the problems are likely to get worse when work starts on the Canal Quarter in Runcorn and the Mersey Gateway in Widnes, both of which are likely to result in a decrease in parking provision.
- 4.4 A park and ride scheme has been looked into, but due to the large number of people leaving the event at same time, it was considered unworkable.

Crowd Safety

- 4.5 Large crowds of people congregating in confined spaces generates potential hazards and risks - both for spectators and staff employed at the event. Because of the limited space available, spectators try to secure positions where they will have the best vantage point. This leads to overcrowding in certain areas and results in stewards occasionally coming into conflict with people when they try to limit numbers in certain areas or request that people move away from areas that are becoming too congested.
- 4.6 There is only one route into West Bank from the areas used for car parking. This results in pedestrians having to negotiate their way around moving vehicles, as they exit.
- 4.7 A one-way system is operated from King Street into Mersey Road, Runcorn via a ramp. Prior to the event, the ramp is down only, after the event, it is up only. Despite efforts by stewards, the congestion caused by people trying to get up the ramp is a major concern. The ramp has been closed in the past to alleviate the problem, however, some people will still try use the ramp regardless. This has led to further conflict between stewards and police with spectators, which only serves to undermine the enjoyment of the event for the majority.

- 4.8 The emergency services and first aid staff have indicated that they find it extremely difficult to respond to incidents effectively, due to the numbers of people attending the event. Fortunately, no serious injuries have occurred to date. Injuries people have sustained have generally been as a result of tripping over kerbs or falling down steps that are not always visible when there are large crowds of people.

5.0 THE OPTIONS

Keep it as it is:

- 5.1 The event could continue at its present site, however, this would require additional investment by the Council. It is estimated that a further £15,000 would be required to cover the costs of additional stewards to supervise areas not currently covered and also to expand the first aid provision, so that they can react more effectively to incidents, if and when they occur. It would also cover the extra costs of policing and additional barrier systems to control crowds.
- 5.2 This option would not, however, resolve the car parking and traffic congestion issues, or aid egress from the event by pedestrians.

Spilt the event over 2 sites:

- 5.3 Return to having two events in the borough. This would add costs amounting to some £30,000 if the displays were to stay the same as at present.
- 5.4 The choice of venue would also need to be considered. In Widnes the only viable option is Victoria Park, using the surrounding roads and schools for parking. In Runcorn, either a return to the Town Hall or The Heath Park are the only venues that could accommodate parking on the scale required.

Move the event to an alternative single site:

- 5.5 **Spike Island:** Traditionally the home of major outdoor events in Halton, however, the impending work on Widnes Waterfront which will effectively remove the event car parking from Spike Island and the congestion already in the West Bank area during the fireworks make a move to Spike Island an unsuitable alternative.
- 5.6 **Victoria Park:** The venue for the Vintage Rally, it can host the crowd within the park boundary, however, the on-street parking arrangements would prove unworkable. The schools and surrounding streets would be seriously congested and the impact on local residents would be unacceptable.
- 5.7 **The Town Park:** As a venue the Town Park could accommodate an event of this type, however, there is no parking on hard standing available. Parking on grass would be the only alternative. In bad weather,

this would prove unsatisfactory and would require remedial action to reinstate the area, adding to the overall cost of the event.

5.8 **Wilmere Lane/ Prescott Road Playing Fields:** Both these sites lack adequate parking provision. They are also on the periphery of Widnes, making public transport to the venue difficult.

5.9 **The Heath Park Football Fields:** This site could accommodate the event and accommodate parking at the adjacent Heath Business and Technical Park.

5.10 The use of the football pitches for viewing could have an impact on the football pitches that would require some remedial work to reinstate them. Traffic would not be allowed onto the pitches, only spectators.

5.11 The use of the area would also allow the installation of improved facilities such as toilets and possibly a stage for entertainment purposes, that would add value to the existing offer.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

6.1 The growth in the Fireworks Festival popularity has led to a significant increase in spectator attendances in recent years. This has resulted in serious traffic congestion and concerns about crowd safety, which cannot now be managed safely and effectively within the current budget for the event.

6.2 Having considered the alternatives, it is proposed that the Fireworks Festival be transferred to The Heath Park Football Fields site from November 2008. This option would be both cost effective and solve most, if not all, of the concerns about crowd safety and traffic congestion at the event.

7.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The Halton Economic Development and Tourism Strategy has specific policies on tourism which states that Halton will develop the tourism offer of the Borough to support the Liverpool City Region, and other brands as advised by the North West Development Agency, and in so doing ...

“will place the emphasis on investment in quality attractions which make a positive contribution to the overall quality of life and opportunities for employment for residents, potential new residents, and visitors ...”

8.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no other implications arising from this report.

9.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

9.1 **Children and Young People in Halton**

There are no implications arising from this report.

9.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

There are no implications arising from this report.

9.3 A Healthy Halton

There are no implications arising from this report.

9.4 A Safer Halton

Relocating the Fireworks Festival to Heath Park will assist in reducing the risks arising from overcrowding and traffic congestion for those attending the event.

9.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

The promotion of tourism activity will contribute to the continued diversification of the local economy.

10.0 RISK ANALYSIS

10.1 The concerns about health and safety issues have been set out in the report. The risks can be mitigated by either increasing the budget for the event to cover the additional costs of stewards, first aid provision, policing etc, or by re-locating the event to a single site.

11.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

11.1 There are no equality or diversity issues arising from this report.

12.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

12.1 There are no background documents under the meaning of this Act.