

Stakeholder meeting for use of Imperial and Montpellier Gardens

Date: Thursday, 13 January 2011
Venue: Town Hall
Start Time: 6:00 pm
End Time: 7:25 pm

Attendees: Cllr Roger Whyborn (Chair) – Cabinet Member for Sustainability
 Cllr John Rawson – Cabinet Member for Built Environment
 Cllr John Webster – Cabinet Member for Finance & Community Development
 Councillor Barbara Driver) Lansdown Ward
 Councillor Diggory Seacome) Councillors

Grahame Lewis – Strategic Director (CBC)
 Adam Reynolds – Green Space Development Manager (CBC)

Michele Beint – Capability Design
 Stephen Clarke – Chairman – Cheltenham Civic Society
 Dr Christine Facer Hoffman – Facerhoffman Landscape Design
 Fiona Wild - Flowerbed Petition
 Dr Brian Bracegirdle – Friends of Montpellier Bandstand & Gardens
 Dr Diane Lewis – Cheltenham Civic Society
 Christine Ryder – Cheltenham in Bloom
 David Richards – Cheltenham in Bloom/Cheltenham Horticultural Society
 David Stennett – Friends of Imperial Square & Garden
 Bob Keevil – Friends of Imperial Square & Garden

Donna Renney – Chief Executive (Cheltenham Festivals)
 Adrian Hensley – Production Manager (Cheltenham Festivals)

Sandra West – note taker

Item	Comment	Action by
1.	Apologies – Cllr Andrew McKinlay (Cabinet Member for Sport & Culture), Susan Blanchfield (FoMBaG) and Jeremy Williamson (MD – Cheltenham Development Task Force)	
2.	<p>Welcome / introduction</p> <p>Cllr Roger Whyborn gave a potted history from around 1948 of how both the Gardens and Festivals had evolved, culminating in the sale of 175,000 tickets for the festivals in 2010, the vast majority of which being the Literature Festival, which generated 129 jobs. He stressed how both the festivals and Imperial Gardens play an important and iconic part of Cheltenham's internationally renowned culture witnessed by many visiting the Cotswolds.</p> <p>Due to expansion of Cheltenham Festivals there was need to consider a new landscape for both Imperial and Montpellier Gardens, to make them less prone to damage from use during the festivals.</p> <p>The purpose of the meeting therefore was to hear what those present wished to say about the issue, and how to assist the Council in knowing</p>	

	what to promote and propose based on finances available.	
3.	<p>Cheltenham Festivals - the future</p> <p>Donna Renney explained how positive she felt about the potential to expand Cheltenham Festivals and wanted to make sure that those present were aware how valued the festivals are considered outside Cheltenham. Having recently attended Will Hutton's successful programme in London entitled 'Money Talks', she had been overwhelmed by his compliments made in eminent company, about the fact that she didn't appreciate what potential Cheltenham Festivals has on the cultural world. She then added that an invitation had been received from Washington DC for her to do a talk on Cheltenham Festivals 'Gold Standard' approach, and stressed that Cheltenham Festivals are held as 'Gold Standard' on an international basis.</p> <p>Donna Renney fully anticipated Cheltenham Festivals having to be self sustaining without grant from the Council in due course. The reduction of grant over the next 3 years would create further pressure to expand commercially to avoid loss of revenue from festivals selling out. Donna confirmed that Cheltenham Festivals was not yet out of a loss making situation, so the option to remain 'status quo' was not feasible. She believed the situation could be reversed if she didn't have to turn sponsors away due to lack of space and not being able to cope with sponsors' needs. The 'diamond model' which Cheltenham Festivals runs provides the best collaborations for both artists and audiences; a model that is very much valued.</p> <p>Cheltenham Festivals were currently conducting a feasibility study for using an out of town venue, which would have a massive impact on Town Hall and the town itself, as festivals provide £5.2 million direct spend into the local economy, which is not an insignificant figure. Having festivals in town means the whole town is involved in the experience, so hopes a plan can be developed to meet the needs of both Festivals and Gardens. Hopefully there might be a way to re-design the gardens so they become more of a talking point and provide creative energy.</p>	
4.	<p>Friends of Montpellier Gardens - the future of Montpellier Gardens</p> <p>Dr Brian Bracegirdle explained having set up FoMBaG in the early 90's to restore the bandstand with money from the Heritage Fund. He was unclear however whether the terms for funding included a tented village as recently mentioned in the media. He stressed that FoMBaG acknowledged the festivals as a good thing, but was concerned about the mess left behind in Imperial Gardens afterwards and the duration of time the festivals take up the gardens. He felt the tented accommodation left the gardens looking rough and did not want to see that perpetrated in Montpellier Gardens. He highlighted that these views were very widely felt.</p>	
5.	<p>Friends of Imperial Gardens - the future</p> <p>David Stennett (Friends of Imperial Square & Garden) felt Donna Renney had been vague about her vision for the future for Cheltenham Festivals, and was still not clear about the repercussions for Imperial Gardens. He highlighted that after the 22 festival days the gardens had been left in a dreadful state (<i>Editor's note: the approx use of gardens in total was 107 days for 30 days of actual festivals</i>). He suggested Donna Renney consider setting up a Town Hall and Imperial Gardens type location as a festivals headquarters to avoid further deterioration of the existing gardens and enable Cheltenham's open space to have it's own identity. A resident of Imperial Gardens had recently pushed a note through his</p>	

	<p>door which highlighted the frustration felt in the Square from the loss of flower beds and deterioration of the gardens after this year's festivals. They believed Cheltenham must have been ashamed.</p>	
	<p>David Stennett insisted that Codes of Conduct must be imposed as too many false promises had been given and responsibilities ignored.</p> <p>Bob Keevil (Vice Chair of FoIS&G) described Imperial Gardens as Cheltenham's 'Jewel in the Crown' and stressed that future development of the festivals should ensure the gardens are well maintained to enhance both their quality and colour. He wanted to see flowerbeds which had been removed, replaced and the footpaths sympathetically maintained – he felt black tarmac on red was a shabby way to treat Cheltenham's 'Jewel in the Crown'. Recognition should also be given to the tent capacity having been reached and there being insufficient recovery time for the lawns. Utilising the gardens as an additional site should not be at the expense of flower borders.</p>	
6.	<p>Opening of debate by Chairman</p> <p>Cllr Roger Whyborn asked where, from Cheltenham Festivals' perspective did they see need for expansion of the Gardens, highlighting that the red line on the map that went to Council, showed the upper tier of Imperial Gardens substantially untouched, confining expansion only to the lower tier. He questioned what Cheltenham Festivals themselves saw as the extent of expansion, based upon comments of capacity and the fact that both Montpellier Gardens and The Everyman would not be available venues for the Festivals in 2011.</p> <p>Donna Renney confirmed that to be to be sustainable Cheltenham Festivals need to use the whole of Imperial Gardens.</p> <p>David Richards had spoken to many who support Cheltenham Festivals, but at a meeting last month not one person supported the idea of the festivals utilising more land within Imperial Gardens, and they want to see flowerbeds reinstated. He quoted figures published by the RHS that week, stating that 50% of Cheltenham's population visit open space per week and upto 10% daily. Of those people 91% felt that open space improves their quality of life and that Imperial Gardens are considered one of the finest floral sites in the UK. Any further use of marquees in the gardens would be a disadvantage to both the town centre and those visiting the floral displays.</p> <p>Stephen Clarke's view was that both the Festivals and Parks & Gardens are valued, but festivals have got stronger and gardens have declined in strength, so no longer the 'Jewel in the Crown' they used to be. That did not reflect on staff but how funding was being reduced. A good solution could not be reached with such an unbalanced negotiating group. He questioned how, in the long term, the Council could improve the status of the gardens to overcome the problem. The current design was tired and battered. It needed to be designed to self grow in the 21st century. The design needs to retain colour, maybe a gravel base surrounded by trees. He suggested gravel would be less arduous to maintain than grass.</p> <p>He commented that Imperial Gardens is a colourful and restful place to be, but as the Skillicorne garden was now locked-up, he could see no reason why it could not be used to allow more space. Whilst he understood Friends of Imperial Gardens' concern they need to consider change. A balance needs to be found through a consultative committee between the Festivals and Gardens. There needs to be a sounding board for these two groups to work together.</p>	

Christine Ryder stressed the view of Cheltenham in Bloom was that colour is paramount in both Gardens and would therefore like to see some form of bedding retained. She stressed that sustainable planning needs to be maintained as regularly as any other garden and asked if Cheltenham Festivals paid a bond for damage - like in other areas? Donna Renney confirmed that Cheltenham Festivals always paid to repair damage caused by the festivals, but had never been aware of a bond agreement.

As a personal view Chris Ryder also believed colour to be paramount and mentioned an idea that had come from a past employee of the Council, which was to have another statue of a famous person perhaps, with colourful bedding planted around, which the Friends Group could hopefully find funding for.

Fiona Wild was a member of the Festivals so certainly not anti-festivals, but couldn't see why the Centaur wasn't used more. She didn't think the Festivals should become a Colossus as there are people here all year that don't go to the festivals. Flowers provide a pleasant background, flowerbeds feed into the local economy and help the Festivals, so we want a view point and colour; Montpellier Gardens are different. At one time there had been 30 gardeners in Cheltenham, so reducing the gardens could result in a gardener being sacked – though she hoped not. She highlighted the strength of feeling behind the 'flowerbed petition' that 934 people had signed, and she believed there would have been more.

Cllr Roger Whyborn explained that in 2010 there had been a situation where the shortage of gardeners had affected services, but believed that was now under control.

Michele Beint had previously carried out an exercise in Warwickshire where the cost of a floral island had been costed at £2,500 per annum, against £300 per annum if a sustainable approach had been taken, concluding that sustainable planting works. Cllr Barbara Driver commented that she did not think sustainable planting worked in gardens.

Dr Diane Lewis questioned the economic soundness of Donna Renney's earlier remarks (Item 3 para 2) and questioned why on the first Saturday morning of the Festival this year she had attended the event in the Town Hall by General Sir Richard Dannatt and the venue was only half-full. She noted from the brochure that four other events were being held during that same time slot, so wanted to know if events were being filled, and how did that equate in percentage terms? Donna Renney explained that there had been 100 sold out events; therefore 25% of all events sold out, which she felt was good. Originally they had programmed Richard Dannatt's event for a different venue but swapped it to the Town Hall where there are 1,000 seats. She stressed that it's difficult to fill more than half that venue on a Saturday morning.

David Stennett said he had found Donna Renney's earlier comments threatening, but was assured by Donna that it was not intended. In response to his query regarding the amount Cheltenham Festivals paid for the use of the Town Hall, she advised that a cash contribution of approximately £100,000 per annum was made. (*Post meeting note, the figure of £79,680 for the Town Hall has been advised by Cheltenham Festivals, Imperial Gardens are provided on an in-kind basis.*) In reply to his further query as to how Cheltenham Festivals proposed to expand if they had no money to do so, she said they would be able to do so if she didn't have to turn down sponsorship deals worth £50,000.

David Stennett stressed how incensed the residents had been this last year because damage caused by the festivals had not been repaired afterwards. Adam Reynolds explained that the weather conditions had not been favourable at times when access was allowed between festivals and to drill seed they need descent weather. This was mooted as 'a lame excuse' by David Stennett.

Dr Christine Facer Hoffman queried whether repair work was just to the grass, and reinforced the maintenance advantages of using some gravelled areas in Imperial Gardens. Though she recognised the need to do more in terms of restoration work with Cheltenham Festivals, the key would be to reduce occupancy time if all the grass was to be retained.

Donna Renney handed over to Adrian Hensley who explained how he uses a small local Gloucestershire marquee company, but that there are other challenges to contend with which add to the time a festival site is occupied. He stressed that everything cannot be done overnight. He admitted that a mistake had been made last year in leaving a tent up to avoid dismantling it for a short period between use. He explained that the site has access limitations which have to be scheduled into the equation. He tries to minimise noise and parking access to the Town Hall car park, but accepts they need to look at the occupancy issue. They work very closely with Adam Reynolds regarding design and as Festivals have grown more building work has been entailed. It takes a week to build the basic structure, then further time to fit it out with seating, lighting etc.

Having read an article in Cotswold Life about Donna Renney proposing to move into Montpellier Gardens, Rob Keevil asked if Cheltenham Festivals could possibly use other open space to avoid all borders being destroyed?

Donna Renney explained that it's about giving sponsors the right footfall – a discussion on which was currently taking place she stated. A certain critical mass has to be reached before being able to afford the investment to move into Montpellier Gardens. To take the Science Festival up to Montpellier needs rapid growth; it's a big space, but Cheltenham Festivals did want more stands and activities in that area.

Stephen Clarke felt that the current arrangement for the Festivals in Imperial Gardens was an odd plan, when Imperial Gardens had originally been designed for something different, and asked how many venues Donna Renney wanted, and whether other sites within the town had been considered?

Cllr John Rawson stated that there would come a point when it would be necessary to consider what we want out of this process, and if there is a creative solution. Without question there is a straightforward clash of interest. It might be possible to re-design the gardens to meet both needs, and stated Cheltenham Festivals may relocate out of town (though he didn't want to see that). He suggested there be a strand of work established to come up with a strategy to mitigate damage when Imperial Gardens is used. He believed certain things could be done, though there may be a clash that can't be solved. However he believed we owe it to the town as Stephen Clarke suggested, to modify the gardens to accommodate both interests.

Cllr Roger Whyborn highlighted being on record for saying that flower beds would be kept in Imperial Gardens and that not all planting would be sustainable. The cost would be debated elsewhere.

	<p>David Stennett acknowledged that everyone had different views, and that Stephen Clarke made a good point, but that a person living in the Square had pointed out that the festivals were taking over, so we need to get around that problem somehow.</p> <p>David Richards stressed how difficult it is to keep high quality standards of maintenance when often you can hardly see grass for people. You can't just put sustainable plants in as it needs a lot of work to look good, and it's not cost free.</p> <p>Cllr Barbara Driver felt a re-design of the gardens, but keeping colour was the answer and requested the Police be involved in designing out anti-social behaviour problems previously experienced. Cllr Roger Whyborn confirming not having invited either the Police or Press to the meeting as it was inappropriate.</p> <p>Michele Beint agreed with Cllr Rawson and Stephen Clarke and agreed a creative solution was needed as there were two different attitudes to Gardens. As a Garden Designer she believed sustainable planting was worth looking at as it does reduce costs. A fresh approach was needed as it was now 2011, not the 1950's. Hay on Wye turned festivals out of town and they are now on a green field site; disastrous for the town.</p> <p>Dr Christine Facer Hoffman explained how she used sustainable planting to reduce costs at her Regent Park property in London, and that cutting beds out and filling them with garish coloured plants was both very expensive and went out of vogue after the First World War. She effectively saw the garden as being a dated Victorian site, now both tired and labour intensive. Residents of Imperial Gardens confirmed that during the summer months the gardens have to be watered upto three times per day, replanting twice a year, and maintenance is obviously continuous. A creative solution would be to design a contemporary style of planting to reflect the interesting surrounding buildings, colourful but low maintenance keeping some grass with possibly small scale structures / statues themed for the festivals. The design should be for long term co-existence and be of interest to both horticulturalists and visitors to the festivals. She already had two potential sponsors.</p> <p>Christine Ryder was frustrated with the implication that things were already 'done and dusted'. She was also upset by Michele Beint's comparison of the gardens to a floral island. Christine would insist that colour was still required, and would make an issue if things really were 'done and dusted' when residents should be involved in the decisions being made.</p>	
<p>7.</p>	<p>Council / Overview & Scrutiny involvement</p> <p>Cllr Roger Whyborn explained that the next stage was to work out with the Council how to take this forward. He anticipated taking a report to Overview & Scrutiny during February/March and to Cabinet in March.</p> <p>Potential design solutions needed to be explored, and any support for that would be valued, but need to remain open-minded. It would then go out for public consultation.</p> <p>He foresaw both Imperial Gardens and the Long Gardens keeping their bedding plants, and stressed that it's about doing a few things well in a reduced number of spaces. He did not want festivals to go out of town.</p>	

	<p>Grahame Lewis questioned further about setting up a consultation group, and how it would be formulated / constituted, but Cllr Roger Whyborn did not wish to set hares running at this point, but suggested that if such a consultancy group was set up it would be made up of many of those around the table.</p> <p>Cllr Whyborn thanked everyone for attending the meeting in good spirit.</p>	
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Revised as per Cllr Whyborn's email to Stakeholders dated 9 February 2011