

Bentley Wildfowl and Motor Museum

Consultation meeting with tenants

Wednesday 11 Feb 2004

A List of issues, concerns and suggestions regarding the future of Bentley.

Issues & Concerns

Decision Making

- This action should have been taken last September or October before preparations for the new season and to give people much more warning. General feeling that the notice period is very short.
- Great uncertainty continues due to the lack of a decision regarding opening for the season.
- Disappointment that tenants learned about the possible closure and the impending council decision through the media rather than a direct communication from the County Council.
- The County Council is not taking a long term view.
- Perhaps the Council shouldn't have accepted Bentley as a gift in 1978.
- The Council needs to be sure it is meeting any conditions attached to the original gift.
- Interested parties must be informed as soon as possible after the decision on 9 March.
- The Council should be consistent in it's treatment of it's county parks e.g. Seven Sisters.
- Doesn't the County Council have a statutory obligation regarding its country parks?
- The Council must be clear about what it wants to achieve and the criteria against which alternatives will be considered.

Operational

- That Bentley is in this situation because the county has never invested sufficient effort in making it a success.
- The timing of the announcement has the following implications:
 - a) people have stock ready for the season
 - b) money has been spent on advertising
 - c) tenants have lost money due to the February closure.
 - d) even if decision is made at the next Cabinet meeting to open for the season, damage has been done by the negative press coverage.
 - e) Easter trade is hugely important and time is needed to prepare for opening.
- Bentley should be viewed as a 'going concern.'
- The closure of Bentley is a loss to the people of East Sussex , it should be a jewel in the county.
- Bentley is important in rural economy, providing workshops for small businesses and giving good disabled access.
- Consideration needs to be given to the major events such as WoodFair and FoodFair.

Assets & Property

- Other organisations and businesses will be deterred from entering into a commercial arrangement to acquire Bentley because of the flying freehold arrangements.
- Any attempt to sell or leave Bentley to commercial organisations will take considerable time and will, surely incur additional costs
- The Council should consider factors other than simply the best price if it decides to sell Bentley

Financial

- The Council should be aware that it may receive claims for compensation to recover advertising costs, rent etc already incurred.

Suggestions

- Look at increasing the number of businesses, workshops and industry on the site.
- Look at diversifying in the same way that farms do. Are there businesses or interest groups that could be brought on to the site?
- Increase the entry price.
- Hold more and better events.
- Sell a painting or some other asset from the house and use the proceeds to keep it open for another year while the future is settled.
- As Bentley has an educational role, a part to play in sustainability and in the rural economy could the budget not be spread over several departments?
- The council should look into leasing the site so that tenants could perhaps negotiate with new owners.
- Could the County Council give the asset to Wealden DC to add to their leisure facilities.
- Look at minimizing staffing levels and costs.
- Value the assets in the house and consider redevelopment as offices.

Consultation meeting with wider stakeholder group including representatives from the Friends of Bentley

Monday 16 Feb 2004

A List of issues, concerns & suggestions regarding the future of Bentley.

Issues & Concerns

Decision Making

- The case is not being presented in a way to allow others to influence decisions.
- Difficult to ask members to make decisions with the current information.
- Wealden District Council has not been directly consulted yet must have an interest as this is major tourist attraction in the district. It might be beneficial to contact Wealden District Council.
- The lack of consultation with the local district council is unacceptable.
- If the County Council is making decisions on behalf of people it should provide the financial information on which those decisions are based.
- The Council will need to be certain it acts in accordance with the legal agreement signed when the gift was made.
- A decision must be made against clear objectives & criteria.
- Councillors must be made aware of exactly what decisions they are expected to make on 9 March.
- The information available to Cabinet will need to be presented in a way which is easy to analyse.
- The review over the last 18 months should have been a public review as should the review by the joint Board of Scrutiny and Executive (it should be available on the internet), and any reports by officers.
- The same level of scrutiny should be applied to all other Council assets e.g. Ashdown Forest.

Operational

- The County Council has already lost income by missing trade fairs, publicity and bookings. Distribution of the brochure has been suspended.
- It's regrettable that decisions were not made at end of last season.
- Bentley should be kept open as a going concern.
- Staff do a fantastic job. Surprise that there are 6 permanent members of staff, what jobs are they?
- Council risks losing those key members of staff. They will be key people for anyone taking over the facility.
- East Sussex Archaeology and Museums Project (ESAMP) has been at Bentley for 8 years. They have done documentary work, Time Team have visited, they have links with 2 universities and have £30,000 assets permanently fixed in the ground. They are a self-funding body.
- The Council must keep the birds for summer because the nesting is just starting and then the birds will be moulting. As they must be cared for it would be as well to open for visitors for the season.
- The Council must currently have staff skilled in looking after birds who are in danger of being lost as they must be marketable to other wildlife organisations
- The Council is taking a short sighted approach by not opening for the season when Bentley has been supported through the winter.

- The current uncertainty will encourage people to withdraw. The Council should consider keeping Bentley open for the summer season.
- As Woodfair is the biggest attraction, surely the Council should want to keep running it and look for other venues if necessary.
- The Council has contractual arrangements for this year, and must surely incur costs if those commitments are not met.
- The Council obviously has a liability with regard to staff and it seems may prefer to pass this liability over to another organisation.
- Many tenants have medium to long term business plans and the council is likely to receive claims for damages from those directly affected.

Assets & Property

- Presumably the Council will consider factors other than getting the best price for Bentley.
- Any offers of interest the council receives should be registered.
- The Council should consider giving back the property to the family who gifted it.
- Bentley should be considered by the Council as a whole rather than a collection of separate assets which could be sold separately.
- The Council could consider selling some of the assets to improve the financial viability.
- Copies of inventories currently with the Council's Head of Property will need to be made available to interested parties.
- Skilful work by staff have given us one of the most comprehensive collection of birds in Europe with a great value. It is an important collection which perhaps the Council doesn't appreciate or account for.
- The Council should think very carefully before considering breaking the bird collection up.

Financial

- Commercial value will drop if Bentley is not opened
- Any commercial decision would be adversely affected if Bentley remains closed.
- Surely the financial risks are greater if Bentley is not opened for the season.
- Surprised how little financial and other information is available to consultees.
- No doubt, if the annual loss could be reduced the County Council would be willing to continue to own and run Bentley.
- There are ways of reducing the annual investment and these should have been considered.
- How is the £150,000 loss made up and is it a true financial picture?

Visitor

- Season ticket holders have been affected.
- There are not many suitable venues anymore for school field trips and this will be a loss of a further one.
- If the proportion of schools in East Sussex visiting Bentley each year is low, surely there must be some way of increasing that number.
- Compensation will surely be due to season ticket holders and life members as a result of the closure.

Suggestions

- Educational use of Bentley supports a core priority. County wide there is a lack of places to do field studies. Bentley could contribute to raising standards in schools.
- In 1987 the “Living World” at Seven Sisters Country Park had 8,000 children visit. There ought to be scope for improving the number of educational visits at Bentley. It has suffered from the lack of an education officer now for a couple of years.
- The Sussex Heritage Trust has expressed their interest in general terms and are concerned at the potential loss of an amenity. The wildfowl collection is world renowned and key in this country for public enjoyment and research. The house is also lovely. Some existing amenities, however, are not so good e.g. the gardens need a significant investment and the motor museum is very cramped. Similarly the Sussex barn is in need of significant capital investment to repair it. Overall Bentley is an important site.
- Has the Council considered establishing a “Community Interest Company” which would represent all interests in a not for profit company. The Council could retain an interest, the motor museum could be improved and visitor numbers increased. Woodland research trusts could enter a partnership arrangement as could Action for Rural Sussex and the District Council. Workshops could be developed, not on commercial basis but this would sit well with a not for profit organisation.