

Leith Waterworld no more?



Tomorrow's council meeting has Leith Waterworld back on the agenda for discussion. The proposed sale of the building was delayed until the campaign group, Splashback, had the opportunity to put their revised bid together with some help from council officers. It now seems their efforts may be in vain if the council adopt the recommendations of the report produced for discussion on Thursday.

The council first decided to sell Leith Waterworld in 2005, as they needed to source funds to help refurbish the Royal Commonwealth Pool (RCP). The council say that closure of the flume pool has made savings of over £300,000 and that this figure was calculated into the refurbishment package for the RCP.

The facility was actually then closed in early 2012, despite many protests, and a series of closing dates for offers to acquire the pool, either to buy or lease the building, followed. In August 2012 Splashback put forward what turned out to be the only bid, but this was rejected on the grounds that it did not represent 'best value'. As the plan was only to put the property on the open market for sale in Spring 2013, the council agreed to allow Splashback the time over Christmas to put their final bid together. The council and Port of Leith Housing Association have both helped Splashback in the task.

The new proposal has two options, one of which would run the pool as it stands, and the second includes suggestions that a charitable organisation is set up to run the pool, that additional income would be generated by introducing soft play areas with a community hub project running a cafe and kitchen set up. Additional funds would be applied for in the form of

grant aid from outside bodies, although the report claims it is unclear where the estimated £150,000 to alter the front of the building for soft play would actually be sourced.

Further, the costs of re-commissioning the pool to make it ready for reopening, are estimated at £155,000, and the council claims that the new bid does not say where the money for that would come from either. Another criticism of the figures is that they used 2011 data as a basis for projected visitor numbers when the RCP was closed. It is suggested that the group should have used other years as a basis for their calculations. More criticism is heaped on the proposal by explaining that there is no breakdown of running costs, including essential staff such as cleaners, and that no provision has been made for marketing.

The bid also includes a suggestion that staff would be complemented by volunteers acting as 'spotters' which the report criticises as 'high risk.'

Part of the difficulty is that the group cannot afford to simply buy the building. It appears from the terms of the report that the council would prefer to cash in on their asset, as they had originally intended. The report mentions that an unnamed party has now noted their interest in buying the property from the council, although it is admitted that this is not a concrete offer. Estimates of the price which could be generated have in the past hovered around the £1.5m mark.

The bottom line, according to the council, is that by agreeing to back the Splashback bid it could cost the council as much as £1.1m over the first three years. Although some factors might decrease the overhead, such as the introduction of soft play areas aimed at generating extra income, there appears to the council to be a degree of uncertainty over some of the Splashback figures and calculations. The group do not seem to have factored in insurance costs for example, and the fact

that they would rely on grant funding only adds to the possibility that the council would have to find more to subsidise the running of the pool than they originally thought.

Although there are various trial periods and stages when the group could back out of the running of the facility, the report claims that the financial risk would revert to the council at all times.

To maintain the pool over ten years is estimated to cost around £2.2m. Again the report claims that it is not clear where that money would come from, (although the usual case is that the tenant would lease on a full repairing and insuring basis). In the event that the council just sits on the property they would be increasing their annual costs from around £100,000 to over £150,000, mainly as a result of the increased rates which would be payable for the empty building.

And as for the social impact of reopening the pool? The council answer that claim by saying they have already addressed that by offering all their other leisure facilities run by Edinburgh Leisure.

The Green Group on the council have been constant supporters of Splashback since the campaign to save Leith Waterworld began in late 2011. Splashback have [On their website](#) summarised the key points in their submission as follows:-

“Through running the facility as a community led initiative, we believe we can

- *provide a fun and enjoyable leisure destination for over 150,000 users per annum*
- *reduce the subsidy required from Council for the pool to well under the Scottish average for pools – £260,000*
- *In fact through increased soft play and additional revenue streams, we can bring the subsidy right down to circa £20,000 by year 3*

- *In doing so we would bring potentially approx 60 jobs to the Leith area through direct employment and supply chains*
- *and generate an additional £460,000 for the local Leith economy.*
- *These benefits are in addition to the potential saving to public spending through increased wellbeing in the area.*

So in light of the report issued in advance of the council meeting next Thursday, recommending the sale of the building, you would think there is no hope whatsoever of the flume pool being re-opened.

But Green councillor, Chas Booth, who represents the Leith Ward thinks there is still a chance:-“This narrowly-focused report does not do justice to the huge community, health and social benefits which a revitalised Leith Waterworld will bring. So I still believe that councillors will see the compelling case which the Splashback bid has made, with increased activity and, over time, lower running costs.

“We owe it to the city and the community to make choices based on long term benefits not short term gains.”

The Reporter will be at the council meeting and will be live blogging the proceedings under our [TERLive! Section](#). Please join us there or offer your comments on Twitter #edincouncil.