

Sir Steve Bullock
Mayor of Lewisham

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Tim Walder
Save the Face of Forest Hill



Dear Mr Walder

I refer to your "open" letter to me of 31 August 2008.

It is my unshakeable belief that the people of Forest Hill and the surrounding area, particularly young people, are entitled to first class, modern leisure facilities. Where these can be delivered using existing buildings of architectural merit it is right to do so. The recent refurbishment of Forest Hill Library that improved both the fabric of the building and the facilities in the library is a good example of this.

My personal preference would almost always be to retain and refurbish old buildings rather than build new – however good the quality of design. However my job as mayor is not to impose my personal preferences on the borough regardless of cost or consequence – my job is to secure the services and facilities that the people of the borough require in as timely and economical way as is consistent with good practice and the law.

In the case of Forest Hill Pools I allowed my personal preferences to influence my decision making up to the point where the weight of evidence dictated an alternative course must be taken. The survey work undertaken during 2007 with the aim of finding a way to refurbish the building and pools was at my insistence. It can be argued that by so doing I delayed the re-provision of leisure facilities and while I cannot avoid this charge I can claim that I was listening to those who argued for both the historical and architectural merit of Forest Hill Pool. Like them I wanted the building to survive.

The outcome of those surveys were, however, clear – it was neither technically sensible nor economical to attempt a refurbishment. To have continued at that point and committed a very large sum of public funding to a project that had little or no chance of success would have been a dereliction of duty.

I therefore put in place a process of consultation with the intention of pressing ahead with a new build leisure centre on the site of Forest Hill Pools and the redundant

Louise House. Within that context I sought to rule as little as possible in or out and asked that the option of providing housing on part of the site to generate further funding that could be ploughed back into better facilities also be examined.

That consultation has now concluded and it is essential that progress is made on developing an affordable and financially viable scheme as quickly as possible. I believe that we could have seen a building that contained good facilities including two pools and of good quality design open within a couple of years. The impact of the credit crunch would have had to be addressed but the current problems in the London housing market will not last forever and the demand for housing will not disappear.

I now come to the listing of Louise House. Let me be clear that I consider the decision by English Heritage to list this building to be misguided. I cannot comment on the way in which they reached the decision, as they did not have to courtesy to speak to me about it at any point. I intend to instruct council officers to move as quickly as possible to work up ways of delivering the leisure facilities on the rest of the site within the financial resources already earmarked for the project.

The consequences of the listing of Louise House all appear negative. It may undermine the financial viability of any scheme completely or at best limit the facilities that can be provided. The council has no use for the building and it is unlikely that it can be incorporated economically into the development even if the problems caused by the listing could be overcome. There is a very high risk that any development will be delayed and also that the ability to put up an attractive modern building will be compromised by the continuing presence of Louise House.

No amount of wishing, hoping or tilting at windmills will change the facts and I do not intend to be responsible for further delays in giving local people the leisure facilities they want at a price they can afford. I have complete confidence in the councillors and officials who are dealing with this matter. The Stakeholder Group, chaired by Cllr Chris Best, will continue to meet to discuss the arrangements for the leisure facilities on the site. I cannot see how involving myself in a meeting with just one interested party will assist in meeting that objective and I therefore must decline your request for a meeting. Neither am I prepared to give the specific undertakings you request not least because they would tend to pre-empt the proper process of decision making which I have to undertake. Neither will I rule out a scheme that retains some or all of the frontage providing it is practical and affordable and architecturally appropriate.

Finally I should make clear however I am prepared to meet anyone who has both positive proposals about what can be done with Louise House and the resources to effect those proposals.

Yours sincerely,



Sir Steve Bullock
Mayor of Lewisham