

LORD FALCONER
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Introduction

I am very grateful to the Society of Construction Law who have been kind enough to invite me here today.

Background

Reading the national press over the past few weeks, and indeed today, you may be under a mistaken impression about the Millennium Dome.

Like any new visitor attraction, there are things which we could improve, ways we could do things better.

Despite some glitches, we should not underestimate what we have achieved. The Dome is something we can all be proud of. It has contributed to the regeneration of East London; it has brought a derelict, brownfield site back into use; it has led to the development of a new transport system for the centre and east of London; it has led to the creation of the Greenwich Millennium Village and despite what you've read in the Daily Mail this morning, it has done all of this without using a penny of taxpayer's money.

But most importantly of all, visitors like the Dome. All the evidence we have so far shows that we have created a visitor attraction which people enjoy. Polls of visitors by the Sunday Times, The Mirror, ITN and The Independent have shown that, on average, over 80% of people enjoyed their visit to the Dome. Most said they would recommend it to others. The Good Britain Guide judged it the best value for money visitor attraction in the whole country.

The fact that we achieved this in such a short timescale is in itself an impressive achievement. It is easy to forget that construction on the Dome did not start until 1997. And we had it all ready by 31 December for a party which, obvious problems aside, thousands of people enjoyed.

The Impact of the Dome

The Dome is a hugely innovative public sector enterprise, harnessing private sector money. It is a project which will be a model, I believe, for future regeneration schemes without the expenditure of a penny of taxpayers' money and with a record breaking £160 million of private sector sponsorship secured.

We should also be proud of its economic impact:

- £300m worth of construction contracts have been awarded as a result of the Dome. The vast majority of these to UK companies.
- 13,000 employees have gained work in construction and operation of projects on the Greenwich Peninsula.
- An estimated 25,000 jobs will be created in Greenwich over the next 7 years.
- An estimated £1bn boost to the UK economy from foreign visitors in 2000, which will benefit the whole country.
- and, through the Children's Promise, the Dome has raised millions of pounds to tackle child poverty and neglect.

And I think that's not a poor list of achievements if you're looking for justification of the lottery money that's gone into it.

Construction

The Dome is also a great construction achievement. It is the most famous and distinctive Millennium building in the world.

A triumph of British engineering, the Dome is the largest suspended net structure anywhere, with a floor equivalent of 12 ½ football pitches. It has been constructed in less than a year, using the skill and ingenuity of British businesses. One of the first contracts we let was to Keller's of Coventry, for the provision of piling. Scores of other UK firms have used their skill, ingenuity and ability in getting the Dome ready.

The Dome is unique in terms of design and construction. I am extraordinarily proud that the engineers Buro Happold have won The Royal Academy of Engineering MacRobert Award 1999 - Britain's premier prize for engineering. Particularly since it is only the second time that a construction project has won this award.

Content

The contents in the Dome will be open to the public throughout the year 2000.

They are a varied exhibition of all aspects of life in the UK at the start of the third millennium. They make you think – like Faith Zone. They make you laugh – like the Brain room in the Body Zone, or the Blackadder film. They stir your emotions – like the Millennium show. They make you think what it means to be British - like the Self-Portrait zone.

Britain has so many leading lights in so many fields of creative endeavour. Just think of the British architects, fashion designers, movie stars, music, films, artists, authors, actors admired the world over. A few years ago, it seemed hard to believe that there would be so many leading British chefs, or that there would be Brits heading Paris fashion houses. The Dome is a celebration of

this creativity. Don't expect Disneyland. Don't expect a museum. Expect a unique day out which will completely grip you.

As you might imagine, I have personally spent a lot of time at the Dome during these early days, talking to the people who are among its first visitors. Most of them have told me that they like it, that the Dome has exceeded their expectations, that they intend to come again.

Three years on from the Dome's conception, it is clear that the impact of the Dome is being felt far beyond its immediate neighbourhood. The Dome presents an opportunity for the UK to demonstrate that it continues to lead the world in both traditional and cutting edge fields. It will showcase the work of our manufacturing industries alongside the creative industries, and provide the opportunity for the tourism industry to highlight both our rich cultural heritage and more contemporary attractions. I believe the Dome is already a national asset for UK Plc.

Legacy

The Dome will only be open in its current form until 31 December 2000. Already we are looking to the future.

In March of last year, we launched a competition to find a commercially viable, sustainable long-term use for the Dome site after the Millennium Experience closes at the end of 2000. After more than seventy initial approaches, there were twenty-two formal expressions of interest. Ten outline proposals were submitted, and on 17 January the Government announced that six proposals should go forward to the next stage.

These proposals are a variety of ideas, including a centre for sport, one involving high tech industry and a centre for creative industries. The high quality of all of the bids reflects the weight which the market attaches to this opportunity. The competition has clearly fired the imagination of major developers and operators, both in the United Kingdom and internationally. The

response to the competition and the make-up of the shortlist shows that the Dome is permanent and has a commercially sustainable future. We hope to announce the winning proposal in the Summer.

However, we are not just focussing on the northern end of the Greenwich peninsula where the Dome is. The Dome has been instrumental in targeting regeneration on the Greenwich Peninsula and the Thames Gateway. The legacy competition, together with the work of English Partnerships and the transport infrastructure already in place, will ensure that this regeneration continues.

I believe that the Dome has been a tremendous achievement for this country. We need to look, if we can, beyond the press deluge. This has been a collective achievement - by the New Millennium Experience Company, by designers, by engineers, by the construction industry, by artists, perhaps even by lawyers!

As the years go on I believe people will be increasingly proud of the Dome. I feel genuinely privileged to have played a part in its creation.