

Report of: The Neighbourhood Renewal Business Manager

To: Executive Board
Community Scrutiny (Oct 3rd), Cowley Area Committee (Oct 4th),

Date: 9 October 2006

Item No:

Title of Report : Options regarding the development of a Community
Resource Centre for Lye Valley Ward with respect to the closure of the
Horspath Road Resource Centre

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To outline the current situation facing the Horspath Road Resource Centre and provide an update on the current situation and progress being towards finding a solution

Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Stephen Tall – Portfolio Holder Finance

Scrutiny Responsibility: Community Scrutiny

Ward(s) affected: Lye Valley

Report Approved by

Portfolio Holder: Approved

Legal: Stephen Smith, Legal and Democratic Services

Finance: Sarah Fogden, Finance and Asset Management

Strategic Director: Michael Lawrence, Strategic Director

Policy Framework: 'The Oxford Plan'; The Council's Vision Statement (3.1.2)
"have sound financial management"

Recommendation(s):

To note the progress being made and support in principal the approach being advocated subject to a satisfactory feasibility study
For Cowley Area Committee and Community Scrutiny to comment on the report prior to it being taken to Executive Board on the 9th

1: Background

The Horspath Road Resource Centre shut at the end of July, with the centre Manager having secured alternative employment, and its future funding seemingly unresolved. The Centre had been financed predominantly through a Big Lottery Community Fund grant which was a time expiry award, and had elapsed. Oxford City Council had made a discretionary award of £20,000 to maintain the centre as operational in the understanding that future bids were being prepared. This award was insufficient however to cover the period between bid preparation, submission and decision, and a further request for 'gap' finance was made.

- 2 An initial evaluation of three bids was made it was felt that they fell short of both the respective funders aspirations, and demonstrating the required level of evidence and core competence necessary to suggest that they were likely to succeed. Concerns were noted with regards to the cash flow situation being experienced by the centre, the outstanding arrears owed by them to Oxford City Council, and the timescales for a decision regarding future funding decisions.
- 3 After having taken the comments of Executive Board, Cowley Area Committee, and the Strategic Management Board into consideration a solution was sought that aspired to maintain the service in the area. The closure therefore presented an opportunity for reflection, consultation and evaluation in order to take stock of the Centres services, business management issues and to further explore, various options, in line with better finances and 'value'. We now believe that we have achieved this in principal and would like to outline the following for comment by way of a proposed solution that we feel meets the objectives outlined to us.

Evaluation

- 4 Although it was envisaged that additional functions would be run from the Horspath Road Centre in line with a much more comprehensive 'community resource centre' these largely failed to materialise for various reasons. A closer evaluation of the service revealed that the principal benefit and usage pattern revolved around the IT facility. The proposal being outlined in this report should be able to re-introduce some of the original aspirations, as well as restoring an enhanced IT facility and as such it might be helpful to think of it as 'IT plus'. The following emerged as the predominant functions that the Horspath Road Centre was fulfilling.

- An IT learning hub (structured training, casual community use and after school use)
 - Distribution point for Oxford City Council 'green bags' in line with the promotion of good environmental practice.
 - Councillor surgeries, and discreet meeting area
 - Distribution point for Council information
- 5 The broad proposal involves relocating this 'lost' capacity in the County Council's 'Shotover Day Care Centre' (SDCC). The SDCC is approximately 75 metres away from the existing Horspath Road Centre, and still located on the Horspath Road itself. The SDCC is much larger, and has much more space, that is capable of being utilised to support a wider variety of activities. It already has an established client user group and has an existing staff and management structure, and budget. In addition to these operational advantages, it benefits from a higher visible profile and is a historically more established facility in the local community. The County Council also has a policy commitment to better integrate their day care centre provision with the wider community. The SDCC management are particularly keen to deliver on this strategic objective

The IT facility

- 6 As mentioned, the SDCC is more or less adjacent to the now closed Horspath Road Centre, and no more than an easy 1 minute walk away. It too is located on Horspath Road and served by a bus service that stops immediately outside the SDCC. The SDCC already has some limited IT provision, and has two existing rooms with appropriate trunking and lighting that are currently under used. At present they have 5 PC's in total. The task of moving the 5 PC's from Horspath to the SDCC, although technical in terms of networking them, is relatively straight-forward in capable hands, and can be achieved quite quickly. The County Council who own the current PC's in the Horspath Centre are taking steps to facilitate this. There are some additional benefits for doing this as well
- The SDCC stays open longer than the Horspath Road Centre did (includes Friday afternoons) and the IT function can also be dovetailed with the existing 'Saturday School' facility, which operates from the SDCC. Precise opening hours have yet to be finalised, particularly with regard to evening use, seasonal patterns, and any training/ supervisory support. The core client group usually leave the centre between 3.00 – 3.30pm which means that the management of any after school activity would be easier to facilitate.
 - The existence of two discreet rooms allows a greater flexible use pattern in terms of the range of IT applications that could be run simultaneously. Formal training could therefore co-exist alongside casual use

- Tuition is currently provided by volunteers which has obvious limitations in terms of structuring support. Although no wage costs are now being incurred, we would seek to remedy this provision by submitting a bid at a later date that will permit us to employ such an individual. In the meantime, the County Council are exploring the scope for providing Adult Learning Support either from existing resource or in a partnership arrangement. It would be unreasonable to expect the capable 'caring' staff to undertake any IT support role.

7 The 'Green Bags'

Further discussions indicate that the Ward will shortly be moving towards a 'wheelie bin' refuse collection service. With this in mind, the Green bag distribution service is probably not the issue that it was originally presented as. The SDCC can undertake this function, although the local shop combined with the school, might be a more appropriate and educative alternative provided they are receptive to the idea.

8 A meeting area

The SDCC has number of rooms, some of which are broadly 'communal' where as others are more discreet and capable of being used for one to one sessions such as Councillor's surgeries. Again this facility can be extended to Councillors and or Community Groups, once a sense of demarcation has been resolved in line with the centres operational management.

9 Distribution of Council information

In reality this was not found to be a particularly important function of the Horspath Road Centre, and would simply just involve transferring the literature to a venue that is after all, of higher profile and used more widely by a typically more appropriate client base.

10 Additional possibilities

The following areas have been discussed between the City Council, the County Council and the SDCC Management at a meeting on September 4th 2006. Provided satisfactory management and building alterations can be achieved there appears to be no obvious reason why these additional services cannot be delivered.

- A dedicated advice function
- Lunch club

11 The first of these would involve delivering a service directly into the community. At the time of writing it is not clear whether the staff resource exists, and as such we would probably anticipate using

existing voluntary groups in neighbouring areas to fulfil the function on a part time/ limited hours basis. The types of areas likely to be covered typically involve things such as housing, personal finance and dealings with statutory organisations. The physical room to accommodate the service within the SDCC already exists, and will not impact therefore, upon the delivery of any IT activity.

- 12 The SDCC currently has a fully equipped kitchen in accordance with their catering needs and the distribution of meals to clients not actually using the centre. The canteen area is informal and could be laid out to accommodate something that is akin to a Community cafeteria. In addition to this there are a number of smaller kitchens that can serve hot drinks and snacks in support of a wider community meeting area.
- 13 There would also appear to be the potential to run additional services from the SDCC and opinions are welcomed thus.
- 14 The final area that Oxford City Council might like to consider concerns the 'release' of the Horspath retail unit previously used for the resource centre. In the fullness of time this might start to generate a revenue stream, and dependent on its eventual use could also been seen as something that adds to the service provision in the area. We are not aware of any expression of interest in these premises, or any plans for their use thus, and as such this presents a possible opportunity to explore.

Implications/ Feasibility

- 15 The principal areas that need to be resolved appear to involve;
 - SDCC management
 - Premises adaptation
 - Timescales
 - Promotion of the facility
- 16 SDCC Management

There are a number of operational and practical issues that the management will need to take on in order to accommodate the service. These relate to user numbers, staffing issues and the interaction between the core client group and the new intake of potential users from the wider community. The SDCC management have a strategic commitment to better integrate their facilities with the host community and have re-affirmed that this remains an objective that they wish to deliver on.
- 17 The SDCC management are shortly going to be instigating an internal feasibility study to address the operational demands involved with taking on these new services. This will cover a number of areas;

- Confirmation of hours of access and usage
- Entry to the premises in line with security and DDA requirements
- Internal circulation of users within the building
- The safe and secure integration of public use with the mobility and other needs of current users/ clients
- Precise allocation of public use spaces/ rooms (dedicated or shared communal)
- The use and access of common area
- Vehicle parking
- The reassurance for current users/ clients who may feel threatened by, or even opposed to a wider public/ community use.
- Reassurance for staff who may regard a wider public use as an additional responsibility/ burden
- The scope for necessary building alterations or adaptations in line with this feasibility study
- New staff resource that may be required to service the additional responsibilities

It is envisaged that this study will be completed by the end of October 2006, but until this exercise is completed it is very difficult to be definitive as regards staff and financial implications ahead of this. We might however, be able make some broad assumptions based on our initial understanding of how the proposal will work. It appears at this stage that it is not unreasonable for us to expect there to be no onerous financial commitments, above an obligation to promote and publicise the service once it's been accommodated and its activities focused. This would still constitute a substantial reduction in terms of spend compared to the previous arrangement. Any staffing resource implications will largely be informed by the feasibility study, in the medium term might be met through a Big Lottery bid. The principal area of interest that has been communicated to us so far concerns some advice provision with a 'housing' slant. This might be delivered from existing resource where the scheduling of sessions becomes a management issue. It would also be conceivable that provision could be made using the voluntary sector to deliver this.

18 Premises alterations

After having appraised the issues based around capacity and operational functioning it is anticipated that a number of minor premises alterations will need to be undertaken involving things such as 'control access doors', the possible need for partitions in order to facilitate internal circulation and a clearer demarcation of which rooms are best used and for what purposes, and when. Since the building is currently owned by the County Council, the City Council is unlikely to be able to fund anything of a capital nature. No substantial alterations are envisaged.

19 Timescales

As there is an inherent 'rolling development' involved with the proposal it appears to be both desirable and practical to introduce aspects on a phased basis. In broad terms transferring the functions of the Horspath Road Centre appears to be the easiest to resolve as the technical infrastructure already exists and the space is seemingly available to use the computers currently located across the road in the redundant centre. This is seemingly capable of being done within a matter of a week dependent on technical staff availability. The same applies to the surgery, green bag and information distribution point.

- 20 The new additional services are likely to be introduced at a later date once a better understanding of user patterns based around a community consultation exercise are understood and evaluated. This is also likely to inform any building alterations. We would also envisage submitting a 'Big Lottery' bid in support of staff salaries and possible training to support things such as the provision of a part time advice facility, and dedicated IT training support. We would anticipate this involving a six month lead time from submission to a decision, once adopted.

21 Promotion of the facility

It is likely that this is where Oxford City Councils principal financial input will come from, as we would seek to promote the services availability to the City residents in the area. This could be done through existing media and outlets, but might require the production and distribution of some dedicated literature. This is unlikely to be an onerous burden and should be capable of being met from existing provision.

- 22 The first phase of this can seemingly be completed within a matter of two weeks once the feasibility exercise has been completed, however the computers will be moved as a matter of security urgency before then. The user demand and mandate largely carries over from the Horspath Road Centre and so this presents less of an issue. The second phase concerns the new additional services that can be delivered from the SDCC and this can be delivered in line with the findings of the feasibility study, the necessary building remediation works, and any bidding round. A target date of full operational transfer of this enhanced service might be set for March 2007.

