

Recommendation from the South East Area Committee – 3 March 2008

The Board is asked to respond to recommendation (6) concerning welfare advice provision.

- (6) To inform the Executive Board that there was a need for a sustainable future strategy for Advice Centres within the City; and to ask that a 10 year plan for Advice Centres be drawn up, including a rolling programme for funding to enable the Advice Centres to plan properly for their future, and giving full consideration to issues such as proper housing, staffing and training for them;

Councillor Altaf Khan (Portfolio Holder for a Safer City) has indicated that he will respond at the meeting.

The full Area Committee minute is set out below to provide context.

198 WELFARE ADVICE PROVISION

An invitation to attend was issued to the Agnes Smith and Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centres, as requested at the last meeting. Councillor Bance explained that she had requested this item be added to the agenda as she believed that the process of grant commissioning had not worked as well as originally hoped. She had concerns about social inclusion in the south east area, and wanted to hear about future prospects for this as well as the progress being made by the advice centres. Councillor Bance clarified that the figure for unallocated money within the budget was not £35, 000 as originally thought, but was actually closer to £20,000.

1. Agnes Smith Advice Centre

The Committee welcomed Fran Bennett from the Agnes Smith Advice Centre, who made the following points:-

- (a) The Centre, which began in 1977, gives advice and information; it also provides an advocacy service for clients. Main issues dealt with related to benefit and debt problems, the latter having increased over the past few years.
- (b) The draft budget for the Centre shows a funding requirement of £45,000.
- (c) Funding is obtained from local authorities, some charitable trusts and via the Centre's own fundraising. The Centre was very grateful to the City Council for the money that it provided.
- (d) It might be necessary for the Centre to find new premises within the next few months. It had been based in a

portakabin, but this had been intended as a temporary measure, and it was possible that planning permission would not be granted for a further stay. Negotiations with the PCT for use of the old Blackbird Leys Health Centre were ongoing, but even if they succeeded, the rent would increase by £12,000 per annum. This was an additional need, to be added to the £45,000 shortfall already identified.

- (e) The Centre appreciated all the help given to it by its funders, but it had to be noted that outside funding was considerably easier to attract if local funding had already been agreed.
- (f) The Agnes Smith Centre had a good relationship with the local Parish Council, which had in turn given it a grant. The Centre was also investigating working with the local Rotary Club.

2 Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre.

The Committee welcomed Carol Roberts from the Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre, who made the following points:-

- (a) The Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre had a large and varied catchment area including Greater Leys, Littlemore, Iffley, Minchery far, Donnington Bridge and so forth. The Centre also provided weekly outreach sessions in Donnington and Littlemore.
- (b) Problems presented to the Centre varied. There was now less benefit work and more debt counselling, and this was very worrying. Clients were presenting themselves with average debts of around £17, 000 to £20,000 each. The Centre had also noticed a rising number of mortgage problems, and had concerns about child poverty in the area.
- (c) At present the Centre existed on a year-to-year basis. It was very busy and finding itself increasingly pressed for space. It was facing a funding shortfall of £22, 500 from April 2008.
- (d) Although efforts were put into fundraising, the Centre was finding that outside agencies wanted to support brand new projects rather than putting money into existing schemes. Filling in applications forms was very time consuming, especially for staff who were either part-time or volunteers, but if funding could not be found then staff hours might have to be cut, or members of staff lost completely. This would have a negative impact on the service that could be offered to clients.

- (e) It should be noted that every £1 given by the City Council brought in an additional £2 for clients of the Centre.
- (f) The Centre had not approached Littlemore Parish Council for grant aid, but intended to do so. However, such funding might be fairly limited.

The Chair thanked both Carol Roberts and Fran Bennett for their attendance and useful presentations.

Resolved:-

- (1) To note all comments made and information presented;
- (2) That the Area Committee wished to offer support to the Agnes Smith and the Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centres, in recognition of the good work that they did, and that the Area Co-ordinator was asked to arrange for a small group of Councillors to meet and examine means by which this might be done;
- (3) To ask the Agnes Smith Advice Centre to liaise with the Area Co-ordinator to explore the capital costs of the proposed move, and the revenue funding for the forthcoming year;
- (4) To ask the Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre to liaise with the Area Co-ordinator concerning the relocation of this Centre in order to explore alternative homes for it;
- (5) To suggest that both Advice Centres canvass other Area Committees for support, with particular focus on Cowley Area Committee;
- (6) To inform the Executive Board that there was a need for a sustainable future strategy for Advice Centres within the City; and to ask that a 10 year plan for Advice Centres be drawn up, including a rolling programme for funding to enable the Advice Centres to plan properly for their future, and giving full consideration to issues such as proper housing, staffing and training for them;
- (7) To note that there should also be liaison with Oxfordshire County Council concerning this issue;
- (8) To thank the Rose Hill and Donnington and Agnes Smith Advice Centres for the valuable work that they carry out.