

SCRUTINY BOARD (SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY AND CULTURE)

TUESDAY, 6TH AUGUST, 2013

PRESENT: Councillor M Rafique in the Chair

Councillors M Lyons, P Wadsworth,
R Harington, M Ingham, J McKenna,
J Chapman, A Khan, B Anderson, J Jarosz
and G Wilkinson

23 Recording of meeting

The Chair reported that a request had been made by a member of the public to record the meeting.

RESOLVED – That the request be refused but that the member of the public be offered a copy of the council's recording of the meeting.

24 Late Items

There were no late items.

25 Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests declared at the meeting.

26 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor A Castle, with Councillor G Wilkinson in attendance; Councillor D Cohen, with Councillor B Anderson in attendance; and Councillor D Coupar, with Councillor J Jarosz in attendance as substitutes.

27 Call In Briefing Paper

The Board noted the Call In arrangements in accordance with the council's constitution and that the options available to the Board were: to release the decision for implementation; or to recommend that the decision be reconsidered.

28 West Park Centre Options Appraisal & Response to West Park Centre Campaign Group Deputation to Full Council

The report of the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development presented the background papers to a decision which had been Called In in accordance with the council's constitution. The decision was an Executive Board decision on the West Park Centre.

The Chair welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

- Councillor J Chapman – signatory to the Call In
- Victoria Jaquiss – West Park Centre Campaign Group
- Diane Patterson – YAMSEN
- Douglas Kemp – West Park Residents' Association
- Martin Farrington – Director of City Development
- Christine Addison – Chief Asset Management and Regeneration Officer
- Neil Charlesworth – Community Assets Officer.

Councillor Chapman and the community representatives presented the argument for calling in the decision. This included the following points:

- That the estimated sale value of the site quoted in the Executive Board report of £2.9M was not a large sum in the overall scheme of things set against the value of the centre to the community
- There was no single alternative venue available with suitable acoustics, access and facilities for all the musical groups who were based at the West Park Centre
- A new £800k local community facility would not be suitable for the music groups and was potentially not good value for money
- The preference of Weetwood ward councillors for option 1 to be pursued, ie refurbishment and reopening of the West Park Centre
- Concern that some groups had still not been found suitable alternative accommodation, particularly the larger arts organisations
- That some of the alternative venues being used were not suitable in the longer term
- The community value of the centre
- Potential additional uses for a refurbished centre to boost occupation, for example as a youth hub
- That no proper debate by councillors about the future of the centre had taken place
- Questions over the accuracy of the costings provided
- The importance of the inclusive work delivered by YAMSEN
- The time, effort and funds invested by YAMSEN and its supporters in West Park Centre, and the limitations on its current activities
- A lack of evaluation of the viability of the alternative options suggested in the Executive Board report
- The implications of the reference to potential use of the site to meet the need for more school places
- The local need for community facilities
- The potential longer-term financial consequences of the decision.

In response, officers from City Development highlighted the following issues in support of the Executive Board decision:

- That this was a difficult issue and the value of the building to its users and their aspirations to retain it were recognised

- However the future of the centre had to be considered in the wider context of the council's financial positions
- Executive Board had also approved a broader paper on the future management of the council's property portfolio at its July meeting, recognising that the current portfolio was unsustainable
- That the Director had specifically recommended that external advice be taken on the works required and the relevant costings, in order to provide a credible base, and that he had also requested that a range of options be provided for different levels of refurbishment.
- The Director's view that the minimum level of investment set out in the report would have long term financial consequences for maintenance and revenue required, with a need for significant investment in the future
- That the report did set out the advantages of the refurbishment options
- Acknowledgement that the current running costs would reduce if the centre was refurbished
- That the Executive Board had to consider whether the provision of facilities for those users that had not yet found suitable alternative accommodation was a priority call on council funding
- Appendix 2 of the report detailed the current position in relation to each of the users at the time the centre was closed, and paragraphs 3.25 and 3.26 of the main report set out the position for the five remaining groups who were not happy with their current provision
- Clarification that the sum of up to £800k identified in the report was sufficient to build a local community facility if required, but that it may be preferable to apply this funding differently to achieve acceptable solutions in consultation with users, and therefore the report had recommended that it be ring fenced to the project without making a firm decision to build a community centre
- That the Leader and Executive Member had offered to meet with users, and that since the Executive Board decision the Executive Member for Leisure and Skills had begun to meet with users to consult on the way forward.

The main points raised during the Board's discussion were:

- The level of effort expended in helping groups to find suitable alternative accommodation compared to the time spent on the options appraisal
- Confirmation that the alternative accommodation may not be in council buildings and that the financial support available could be used in such cases
- That as long as the West Park Centre building continued to exist there will be some users for whom a return is the preferred outcome
- Issues of parking as a possible factor in ruling out some potential alternative venues and the suggestion that exemptions might be considered if appropriate
- Clarification that the provision of a new large centre had been considered in the February 2013 Executive Board report, at a cost of around £4.5M, but had been ruled out at that stage
- The costs of maintaining vacant buildings

- Queries about the level of support offered to users of the centre and reiteration by officers of offers of support, including confirmation that discussions had included the needs of users with special needs
- Acknowledgement of the shock and disruption caused by the emergency closure of the building last year
- Clarification from the director of the range of works required in the 'red' option and why this work was necessary, in comparison to the lower figure suggested by the campaign group
- The possibility for the £800k funding set aside to include acoustic treatments if appropriate
- A suggestion that the Epiphany Church in Gipton be explored as a potential alternative venue that had good acoustics
- Sympathy for the desire to have a centre that provides for the synergy of the various musical groups, but a concern that this was not a priority use of significant council resources in the current financial situation
- The ongoing discussions and consultation with the 5 user groups still to be found new accommodation, being led by the Executive Member for Leisure and Skills, and a proposal that the Scrutiny Board be kept updated with the progress of the consultation and identification of solutions
- Other council buildings across the city that were also being closed
- The centre's income from groups of approximately £45k per year against running costs of about £335k. Some groups were charged for use and some were not, and the charging rates had not been reviewed recently.
- Confirmation that some groups would be paying higher charges in their new accommodation.

Martin Farrington summed up on behalf of the Executive and Councillor Chapman summed up on behalf of the signatories to the Call In.

(Councillor P Wadsworth left the meeting at 11.25am during discussion of the above item.)

29 Outcome of Call In

Following a vote by members present, it was

RESOLVED – to release the decision for implementation.

(The meeting concluded at 11.40am.)