

**Report of the Director of City Development**

**Report to Executive Board**

**Date: 25<sup>th</sup> June 2014**

**Subject: West Park Centre Users Update**

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s): Weetwood	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

**Summary of main issues**

1. The Best Council Plan 2013-17 sets a best Council objective of promoting sustainable and economic growth with a 2014-15 priority of maximising the impact of our cultural infrastructure and also a value of working with communities. The West Park Centre was used by a number of cultural organisations, particularly those involved in dance and music. This report sets out how the former users of the centre have relocated to other facilities in Leeds.
2. In taking the decision to permanently close West Park Centre in July 2013, Executive Board requested that an update report be submitted to a future meeting in respect of progress being made to accommodate all relevant users of the centre.
3. Five user groups were particularly highlighted to Executive Board in July as still encountering accommodation issues. The current status of these five is:
  - West Riding Opera – Moved to St Chad’s Parish Centre. They have confirmed that the space in the parish centre meets their needs both now and in the long term;
  - Leeds Symphony Orchestra and Leeds Festival Chorus – both moved to St Chad’s Church. Their view is that the church is draughty and lacks storage. However, the Parochial Council is investigating options to limit draughts and make a storage facility available in the grounds. It may be that a request is

made for funding from the Council towards the storage facility, but costs are as yet unknown;

- Leeds Talking Newspaper – the newspaper has not been produced since the closure. Options are still being investigated (including the scope to update to new technology), although given subscriber numbers had significantly reduced prior to the closure, it is not known whether or not they would restart even if a suitable venue could be found;
  - Yorkshire Association for Music and Special Educational Needs (YAMSEN) – Moved to various locations. They have been provided with office space alongside Artforms at City of Leeds School which includes some limited storage. West Park United Reformed Church is the best compromise found to date for their large Friday morning events.
4. The West Park Centre Campaign Group has a long term ambition to establish a new arts centre in Leeds and is actively seeking premises and funding opportunities.
  5. A complaint about the nature of the closure of the centre was submitted to the Local Government Ombudsman towards the end of 2013. The Ombudsman has now reported back and has found that the Council's actions in closing the centre were not affected by fault.

### **Recommendations**

6. Executive Board is asked to note the contents of this report.

## **1 Purpose of this report**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Executive Board in respect of progress being made to accommodate all relevant users of the West Park Centre following permanent closure of the centre.

## **2 Background information**

- 2.1 The West Park Centre was temporarily closed on health and safety grounds on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2012 which displaced the many user groups from the building. After evaluation of a number of options, Executive Board decided to close the centre permanently on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2013. As part of that resolution, Executive Board requested that an update report be submitted to a future board meeting in respect of progress being made to accommodate all relevant users of the West Park Centre.
- 2.2 The July 2013 decision included that *“the Council makes available up to £0.8m of capital, financed from the receipt from the sale of the West Park Centre site, should it be required, to deliver solutions to meet the needs of the former users as identified within paragraph 3.26 of the submitted report, which may include the provision of a new build community facility or investment in an existing community building in the area, with the Executive Member for Digital & Creative Technologies, Culture and Skills taking the lead role in the accompanying consultation process”*. The £0.8m will be injected into the capital programme once the site has been sold and made available, either in whole or in part, should a suitable scheme be brought forward.
- 2.3 Demolition works have now been completed. A planning statement is being prepared which will set out acceptable uses and outline the development principles that a developer would be expected to satisfy including reference to design, layout, materials, ecology and landscaping, access and parking and planning obligations in terms of affordable housing, greenspace, education and public transport contributions. Officers are aware of the strong local interest in the site and have already been contacted by the West Park Residents Association to discuss its future use. Officers will consult the Ward Members on the contents of the planning statement and undertake any further consultation appropriate before being considered by the Chief Planning Officer in September. The site will be put on the market for sale immediately thereafter.
- 2.4 Some of the centre’s users felt particularly disappointed about the closure. This resulted in a formal complaint which went through the Council’s complaints procedure and was escalated to the Local Government Ombudsman. The Ombudsman’s decision was published on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

## **3 Main issues**

- 3.1 The report submitted to July’s Executive Board set out that five former user groups were still encountering accommodation issues and included an appendix setting out the situation for all other external users. All users have ultimately

found alternative premises with the exception of a yoga class which no longer operates in the area.

3.2 The five groups reported as still encountering issues were: West Riding Opera; Leeds Symphony Orchestra; Leeds Festival Chorus; Leeds Talking Newspaper, and; Yorkshire Association for Music and Special Educational Needs (YAMSEN). These groups formed the core of the West Park Centre Campaign Group whose aim was to lobby for the reopening of the West Park Centre. The current position with these groups' accommodation is set out below.

### 3.3 West Riding Opera

As with the other groups listed here, West Riding Opera were disappointed with the closure of the West Park Centre and wanted the building to be reopened. They have been using St Chad's Parish Centre for rehearsals since West Park Centre closed. They have confirmed that the space in the centre meets their needs both now and in the long term. There is less storage available than there was at West Park but they have adjusted and are able to rehearse satisfactorily, although they miss being based in a place with other musical groups.

### 3.4 Leeds Symphony Orchestra and Leeds Festival Chorus

These two groups both rehearse in St Chad's Parish Church. Although the church is large, well located and has ample parking there are some issues that the groups would ideally like to see resolved, these being temperature in the coldest winter evenings and a lack of storage. The church's Parochial Council has advised that the cause of low temperatures is draughts rather than an insufficient heating system. There is one particular area on the western wall where draughts entered the building through a door and window. Draught exclusion measures have been carried out in this area and the situation has improved.

3.5 Leeds Symphony Orchestra stores four large timpani drums in the lady chapel. The drums take up a significant amount of space and are too large to be transported for each rehearsal. Ideally the orchestra would like additional storage on site for other instruments and for staging but there is nowhere within the church that this can be provided. Leeds Festival Chorus also have a storage requirement, although theirs is more limited and would mainly be for their music library. The parochial council is investigating the feasibility of erecting a small building on site to allow the groups to store their items.

3.6 Both groups miss being based in a centre with other cultural organisations and particularly the benefits of rehearsing in the same venue at similar times to other groups.

3.7 Although there have been one or two minor issues such as the space taken up by the timpani drums and damage to furniture, St Chad's Church are happy to accommodate these groups. They bring the church building into regular use and the income from lettings has enabled the church to employ a custodian.

### 3.8 Leeds Talking Newspaper

Leeds Talking Newspaper has not been produced since the closure. Discussions have been ongoing with the organisation to try and identify a suitable alternative venue, although this has been particularly challenging because they need dedicated space within an office environment for their IT and recording equipment but only have a severely restricted budget to pay for space. They still manually record editions onto cassette tapes which requires bulky equipment that must be left in situ.

- 3.9 Discussions are ongoing to see if space for Leeds Talking Newspaper could be accommodated as part of a proposal for the local Neighbourhood Network to move into the former Queenswood Drive Day Centre. However, circulation numbers had been falling and in the years prior to closure had dropped to less than 100. It is therefore not certain that even if a suitable venue could be identified that the newspaper would start circulation again. It is likely that they would need to investigate a more modern method of recording and distribution if they were to restart publishing.

3.10 Yorkshire Association for Music and Special Educational Needs (YAMSEN)

YAMSEN provides services to both young people and adults with special needs. They were based at the West Park Centre with offices, therapy space and access to the rehearsal and performance rooms as well as storage. Therefore the closure had a significant impact on their organisation. They no longer have one location to work from and have been delivering services from a variety of facilities in North West Leeds. They have worked without any office space and their volunteers have stored office equipment and instruments in their houses. However, following the recent relocation of Artforms to City of Leeds School agreement has been reached for office space to be made available for YAMSEN as well as some, albeit limited, space for storage. Storage is still an issue for the group, although the offer of space at Domestic Street is still open. However, Domestic Street is not an ideal location being in a different part of the city to their service delivery.

- 3.11 The main issue for YAMSEN is now a suitable location for the large events they hold each Friday morning. They require a large hall suitable for accommodating around 70 adults with special needs with space for movement. They have been hiring West Park United Reformed Church as a temporary measure. The church is a compromise, especially in terms of availability of rooms for one to one interaction, general access and parking for minibuses. Alternative locations have been investigated, the best of which was the sports hall at the new Holt Park Leisure Centre. Holt Park offers services to YAMSEN's client group already, including a hydrotherapy pool and was designed to be fully accessible. However, YAMSEN have decided that West Park United Reformed Church offers the best compromise and they intend to continue operating their Friday morning events from there.

- 3.12 YAMSEN's service users used to particularly benefit from being based in a centre alongside mainstream cultural activity. It offered them an opportunity to mix with people in a safe, culturally based environment.

## West Park Centre Campaign Group

3.13 One feature that has been lost following the closure of the West Park Centre is the benefit of many musical and dance based users forming something of an arts hub. Now that users are spread out across the city they no longer benefit from the shared sense of belonging. The West Park Centre Campaign Group, which was originally formed by users to lobby for the re-opening of the West Park Centre following the initial closure, is now investigating the possibility of raising funds to create a new arts centre in Leeds. However, any such proposal would be a long term ambition. Work has started with the group, led by Executive Member for Digital & Creative Technologies, Culture and Skills and the Chief Culture and Sport Officer, to identify a suitable venue and consider funding options. This work to create a new arts centre is different to the work that the £0.8m was made available for, which was to deliver solutions to meet former users' needs. These needs have largely been met, as set out in this report. However, should a proposal be brought forward, Executive Board will have the opportunity to consider it at that time.

## 3.14 Ombudsman's Report

The complainant complained that the Council's actions in taking a decision to close a centre used by several community groups including a group she works with, was flawed. In particular she complained that:

- the consultation process was inadequate;
- the group was given insufficient notice to vacate the premises;
- the reason for closure was given in November 2012 as faulty electrics yet there had been no change since a previous report was produced in 2009;
- the closure was pre-meditated on financial grounds and the Council allowed the building to fall into decline over a number of years in order to achieve its aim of demolition.

3.15 The Ombudsman's report (attached at Appendix 1) sets out the findings and concludes with the view that *"While acknowledging the upset and inconvenience caused to users of the Centre by the decisions made about its closure, for the reasons I have set out my decision is that the Council's actions in this matter were not affected by fault."*

## **4 Corporate Considerations**

### **4.1 Consultation and Engagement**

4.1.1 Consultation took place with users and the local community as part of the options appraisal, beginning in October 2011. Following the initial closure in November 2012 discussions were ongoing with users, including meetings between individual user groups and the Executive Member for Transport and Economy.

4.1.2 User groups have been contacted regularly to update them on the position of the centre and to ascertain any needs arising from the closure. The five groups

individually identified in paragraph 3 have each been met to help identify a suitable way forwards. In addition, consultation has taken place with the parochial council of St Chad's Church to ascertain their position.

## **4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration**

4.2.1 An equality and diversity / cohesion and integration impact assessment has been considered for this report and is attached at Appendix 2. The assessment found that although some users, including those made up of faith and disability groups, had been negatively impacted by the closure initially, they have now found satisfactory alternative accommodation. However, there have been some negative consequences such as the impacts on YAMSEN's service users, in terms of their interaction with people from mainstream cultural activity.

## **4.3 Council policies and City Priorities**

4.3.1 The Best Council Plan 2013-17 sets a best Council objective of promoting sustainable and economic growth with a 2014-15 priority of maximising the impact of our cultural infrastructure and also a value of working with communities. The West Park Centre was used by a number of cultural organisations, particularly those involved in dance and music. This report sets out how the former users of the centre have relocated to other facilities in Leeds.

## **4.4 Resources and value for money**

4.4.1 Although the decision to close the centre was not taken for financial reasons, there was a value for money assessment considered. As part of the final decision, Executive Board resolved in July 2013 that the Council made available up to £0.8m of capital, financed from the receipt from the sale of the West Park Centre site, should it be required, to deliver solutions to meet the needs of the former users identified in paragraph 3.26 of that report, which may include the provision of a new build community facility or investment in an existing community building in the area.

4.4.2 At present the only request for any of that funding has been from St Chad's Church who have identified that they may request funding from the Council towards costs associated with including a storage facility on site. The costs of this are unknown at this stage. A formal request will likely be submitted once costs are known and subject to the required permission from the diocese.

4.4.3 The West Park Centre Campaign Group is continuing to try and find suitable premises for a new arts centre in the area. It is likely any property found will need a level of capital investment to make it suitable for us as an arts centre.

## **4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In**

4.5.1 There are no legal implications or access to information issues.

4.5.2 The report is eligible for Call In.

## **4.6 Risk Management**

4.6.1 The report contains no risk management implications.

## **5 Conclusions**

- 5.1 The closure of the West Park Centre disappointed many of the building's users. However, it is clear that the majority of users have been able to find suitable alternative premises to continue their service delivery from. Some groups have had to compromise when facilities are compared to what was available at the West Park Centre and this is particularly true for storage, where groups have struggled to find the ample, free storage that was provided at West Park Centre.
- 5.2 Leeds Symphony Orchestra and Leeds Festival Chorus have relocated to St Chad's Church. They have issues with the temperature and storage. Officers have met with the church's parochial council and are discussing solutions to those issues, which may result in a request for some financial support.
- 5.3 Leeds Talking Newspaper has been unable to find alternative premises and has not published an edition since West Park Centre closed. However, their circulation had been falling in recent years and they have asked that we do nothing proactive to assist them for the time being.
- 5.4 There is a long term ambition from the West Park Centre Campaign Group to create an arts centre in Leeds that could provide a purpose built venue for music and dance rehearsals and performances. Any such facility would be owned and financed by a voluntary cultural organisation.
- 5.5 The Local Government Ombudsman has found that the Council's actions in the matter of the closure of the West Park Centre were not affected by fault.

## **6 Recommendations**

- 6.1 Executive Board is requested to note the contents of this report.

## **7 Background documents<sup>1</sup>**

- 7.1 None.

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<sup>1</sup> The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.