

REPORT TO SCRUTINY BOARD

DEPARTMENT: ENVIRONMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

DATE: 24th JULY 2007

SUBJECT: WYTHYER COMMUNITY CENTRE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report is presented in response to a referral to Environment and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board on 3 April 2008 by Inner West Area Committee. The referral relates to the delays in the closure and demolition of the Wyther Community Centre in Armley.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The report identifies the actions taken to close and demolish the Wyther Community Centre, Armley. It describes the reasons for closure and the approach to finding alternative accommodation for one of the user groups, the Twilight Twirlers.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Wyther Park Community Centre was identified for closure by the City Council in 2004 (Oct 2004 Executive Board) based on low levels of usage and high levels of capital investment required to the facility and the availability of other space in the locality. There were several such alternative venues available such as Wyther Community House and the Lazer Centre as well as several schools such as Hollybush, and local churches such as the Venerable Bede in Armley. Consultation took place with the existing users who were all found alternative accommodation apart from the Twilight Twirlers (TT), a voluntary sector group. Consultation took place with the remaining user, Twilight Twirlers (TT), with the aim of moving them to other community space in the area.
- 2.2 Learning and Leisure declared the building surplus to requirements (Jan 2006) and at the time efforts were made to try and move the remaining user elsewhere.
- 2.3 Consultation took place with the remaining user over a long period of time and this involved Elected Members and Officers from Asset Management, Learning and Leisure and Regeneration. The TT group were offered accommodation at a number of local centres, including Raynville Primary, Hollybush Primary, and the nearby Lazer Centre. These the group refused for a variety of reasons.
- 2.4 Inner West Area Committee therefore agreed at their meeting of 7th December 2006 to go ahead and close the centre without delay. Closure was scheduled for January 26th 2007.

Minute 43 resolution of this committee (c) refers

“It was reported that a recent meeting had taken place between the Twilight Twirler Group, Councillor McKenna - Armley Ward, Steve Crocker, West Area Manager and Hollybush School representatives to discuss plans to assist the Group in relocating to a more viable venue such as Hollybush School, as the ceiling height at this venue was adequate for their purposes. A discussion ensued and it was decided that it was no longer financially viable to keep the Wyther Community Centre open. Councillor McKenna also reported that a charity had recently awarded the Twilight Twirler Group £5,000 towards expenses for taking a group of girls to America as they had been invited to compete in a major twirling competition in Florida. The group needed to raise another £5,000 of match funding for this project and Councillor McKenna gave assurances that Armley Ward Councillors would help them in any way they could. Steve Crocker, West Area Manager informed the meeting that the Twilight Twirler Group had been informed that the Centre would close on 26th January 2007 and that the City Council offer for the group to relocate to Hollybush would remain open to the group. Armley Ward Councillors thanked Steve Crocker and other representatives for their help and support in this matter.”

“RESOLVED - That approval be given for the closure of Wyther Community Centre from 12th January 2007.”

The Twilight Twirlers and their supporters objected to the closure and on 26th January proceeded to illegally occupy the centre, refusing to allow City Council officers into the building. The building was occupied for a period of three weeks from January 26th 2007.

- 2.5 Following the end of the occupation of the building by the group and their supporters meetings to resolve the issue were held in February 2007 between the TT's, the West Leeds Area Manager and the Executive Member for Environment and Neighbourhoods, Cllr Les Carter. In March 2007, a new proposal was drawn up for the group to lease the centre and this was progressed with the understanding that the group would be in a position to manage the facility and pay all running costs estimated at approx £10,000 pa.
- 2.6 The group indicated they had a sponsorship arrangement that would support these costs. An draft lease was drawn up with a private sector sponsor – Stellarbrook Ltd. Following two months of negotiation the private sector sponsor withdrew, the agreement was not signed and the lease arrangements did not materialise. A more straightforward letting was therefore put in place with the group with effect from April 2007 for 12 months and a sum of £1,500 pa was agreed as a contribution from the group towards running costs.
- 2.7 A visit to the centre in June 2007 by City Services staff revealed specific issues with the building, and concerns about alleged inappropriate use by the key holders. Several items of essential repairs and maintenance issues were identified. The total cost was in excess of £20,000. Due to the nature of the issues identified and repairs required the centre was closed and the centre keys were returned by the Twilight Twirlers.
- 2.8 Alternative accommodation was found for the TT at Bramley CC (just under a mile away). These facilities were provided as a formal letting on a temporary basis rent free. The TT used Bramley CC for three weeks only and then due to illness and an accident to one of the key community representatives, the group stopped meeting.

3 MAIN POINTS

- 3.1 The condition of the Wyther Community Centre in June 2007 was poor. City Council staff identified repairs for building works, electrical works and other items e.g. fire extinguishers. These totalled £21,200. These repairs were the minimum required to bring the building back to a usable state and would not necessarily improve the value of the asset. Other funding would have been required to improve the external fabric of the building and the grounds as these are in a poor condition.
- 3.2 Three options were identified and discussed with Officers in the Regeneration Service (the building was on the list to transfer from the former Learning and Leisure portfolio).
- **Option 1:** Do nothing. Save on the building costs but left with an empty building in poor condition and in need of repair. Possible costs incurred with security and vandalism. With this option we would have to assess the response from TT to this option and review accordingly in due course.
 - **Option 2:** Carry out repairs and allow TT access/lease following repairs. Identify budget to complete works and supply replacement furniture and kitchen appliances/utensils. Ensure there are regular monthly health & safety checks made given past alleged incidents/record. This option may not be a sustainable let/lease and further expense may be required in the medium term. Potential income from other external bookings minimal. Budget pressure for service to handle in view of budget pressure in portfolio of centres being transferred.
 - **Option 3:** Dispose of centre as per the original plan, TT offered a long term block booking at Bramley CC or other local community centre, rent payable following the rent free period similar to the agreement at the Wyther Centre. Building disposed of as per original plan. Revenue savings invested in other centres or contribute to efficiency savings required for the portfolio. Capital expenditure savings from not doing maintenance and potential capital receipt for the authority from disposal.

Having discussed these options within the Service and with colleagues in other services, Asset Management agreed on 30 November 2007 to Option 3. Reasons supporting this option were

- The centre was originally earmarked for disposal and had only one group using it
- The centre was in poor state of repair and would require significant capital investment
- There were various spaces in the area which the group can use for their activities
- There were no other active demands for space in this facility that we are aware of
- A similar approach has been adopted with other centres in this position and despite some opposition from any remaining users at the time of closure this is typically short lived and users then settle down with new arrangements
- Securing funding and undertaking the works identified at the centre was likely to take a number of months
- Further backlog maintenance works were likely to be required at the centre beyond those identified e.g. roof repairs
- Officers have expressed concerns that the centre was not run appropriately and not maintained in a reasonable manner by the key holding organisation – there was no indication that this situation would improve if the group moved back into the centre
- There was a risk that if the group moved back in to the centre then breached the terms of the letting agreement they would need to be moved out
- Whilst the group appear to be sustainable in the short term there was no indication of their long term sustainability and it is unlikely that they would have the resources or capacity to manage the centre themselves in the medium term

3.4 Given the history with this centre the actual demolition was handled sensitively. Following discussions with local residents and the TT group the building was eventually demolished on 12 May 2008. The TT group have recently started up again as a group and are once more looking for suitable premises and are in discussion with Head of Hollybush School in Bramley.

4. FINANCE AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Option 3, the demolition of the building, led to an annual revenue saving, avoided the use of resources to undertake backlog maintenance and allowed the site to be disposed of.

4.2 The revenue saving to the Council of demolishing the centre amounts to £21,329 per annum based on the full final year actual figures of 2006/7. The capital saving of non incurred capital costs was a one off total of £21,200 as identified above.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNCIL POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

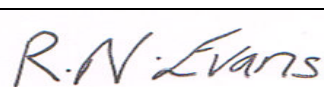
5.1 The approach taken by the City Council supported the policy for community centre provision agreed at Executive Board and referred to in the Departmental Asset Management Plan.

6. SUMMARY

6.1 The City Council expended a significant amount of officer time to find a solution to the problem of the Community User Group in the centre. In the event the conditions of the centre meant that demolition became the preferred option. Given the sensitive community nature of the proposal to close and demolish the centre, the delay whilst other alternatives were examined and exhausted can be seen as appropriate and proportionate.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Scrutiny Board are asked to note and comment on the report on the closure and demolition of Wyther Community Centre.

Signature of Departmental Director	
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