

Community Centre leases and Audit outcomes – Additional information for Equality Analysis
7th March 2016

Options for analysis: -

- Continue as you are –get best terms possible with current occupiers - noting variance to Hall Strategy and liability of the authority for remaining repairs, maintenance etc:
- Resolve that leases are only on a full repairing basis.
- Cease tenancy of current community associations; seek alternative tenants
- Disposal of community sites for other uses – to be explored

The substantial aspect of the potential adverse impact can be categorised as the community considerations. It will impact across the communities. Dependant on the various client base, the impact would be felt across a range of users; varying from young toddlers, parents and the elderly.

Community Centres are primarily run by local volunteers and provide a place for people from the local community to engage in a range of activities. Successful Community centres provide a complementary service to those delivered by statutory functions. Many centres successfully enable third sector organisations to deliver services etc. to a range of people from across the community. The tone of the report states that the relationship between the authority and the named community associations have broken down. This cannot be of benefit to the community that they engage with.

The report acknowledges that the primary purpose of a community centre is to serve the local community. However the operation of the identified centre's, has over time, incurred a considerable use of public funds and will continue to do so.

There is a real need to ensure that the needs of the community are being effectively met and that value for money is pursued.

The proposed closure of the hall will impact the current users. However analysis has shown that sufficient community capacity exists, certainly, in Hitchin, to provide alternative accommodation for those that are displaced. As with other closures, the authority will ensure that alternatives are sought.

Previous reports have stated the closure of Walsworth centre would not impact heavily on the community space available to residents in the Hitchin area. With the imminent opening of the District museum and community facility and the new Westmill Community Centre, there is the potential for an alternative and more flexible provision becoming available.

Previous reports have note that ' there is an overriding responsibility to reduce/remove the financial impacts on the wider taxpayer.' If the cabinet agreed to approve to conclude the best terms possible with the groups, then council tax payers would continue to subsidise the operation of facilities which goes against the council 's agreed strategy for community halls and facilities.' In light of this strategy aim , the council would be better to divert the funds that it currently uses to support these intransigent groups to use more effectively for other vulnerable groups.

The obligation to show due regard, in terms of equalities requires the need to not only to avoid discrimination but to also identify the advancement of equality and foster good relations amongst different community groups. If certain associations are resistant to new ideas, (such as Coombes), then the facilities may only provide services to a limited sections of residents. A change in tenant could potentially increase the opportunities to get involved and build a more resilient community across various demographics in each area.

The report states that the community associations financially operate in a way to 'only break even'. To offer a full repair lease would not be advantageous in these circumstances. This could lead to the failure of the association to the detriment of the community and the use of the asset. Or it has the potential to allow the instatement of new tenants to run the facility in a more financially viable manner and better serve the community in a more realistic manner. If this were to occur then the aspects of the Equality Act - 'to identify advancement of equality and foster good relations' would be better realised.

- Disposal of community sites for other uses – to be explored

The report identifies the significant investment required to sustain the buildings' serviceability over a five year period. This investment does not guarantee the reinvigoration of these facilities for community. In particular, the Walsworth Community Centre has considerable infrastructure issues - a lack of a damp proof membrane/course, a reduced floor flexibility and no onsite parking available. This reduces the accessibility for those that exhibit certain protected characteristics and reduces revenue generation opportunities for potential clients. As already noted there is sufficient community hall provision in Hitchin that could better serve the community requirements. .

Policy Team
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