

THE FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF BLACKFIELD NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE, HEATHER ROAD**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 In September 2006 the Housing Portfolio Holder agreed to interim arrangements for the management of Blackfield Neighbourhood Centre following difficulties with the previous management arrangements.
- 1.2 The decision of the Portfolio Holder was subject to discussions with partners on the future management arrangements and a report to Cabinet once those discussions had been concluded.
- 1.3 This report sets out the results of the discussions and proposes arrangements for the future management of the Centre.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In 1996 New Forest District Council granted a 10 year lease of the Blackfield Community Centre to the Blackfield Neighbourhood Centre Committee, a community based group set up solely to run the building.
- 2.2 The premises were built as part of a joint redevelopment of the Heather Road estate by Western Challenge and Swaythling Housing Society and is owned wholly by New Forest District Council. Both Western Challenge and Swaythling HS have been part of discussions to ensure the Centre can remain open and have indicated their continuing support for the scheme.
- 2.3 The original lease provided that the initial rent should be at a nominal £1 per annum this was increased in 2001 to £25 per annum and has remained at that level since.
- 2.4 Although the tenants were responsible for repairing and insuring the building, New Forest District Council has assisted with repairing the premise in the past on an ad hoc basis due to funding difficulties reported by the Community Centre. Expenditure of over £1,000 has been incurred during the past 5 years in dealing with emergency repairs to the building. In addition there is concern that the current tenants were not capable of fulfilling their responsibilities should more major or planned repairs be required to the building. Because of the lack of understanding by tenants of their responsibilities under the terms of the lease Council Officers have needed to provide a high level of input and support.
- 2.5 As mentioned above although the original lease put the responsibility for repairs and maintenance on the Trustees the reality is that they have never been able to fully take on those responsibilities. No major repairs or redecoration works have been carried out and the building now has a significant backlog of works required to bring it back to a good condition. A full survey has been carried out and expenditure of nearly £18,000 is required over the next three years to rectify this position.

3. CURRENT POSITION

- 3.1 The original 10 year lease expired on 12th September 2006 and would under normal circumstances have been automatically renewed with the existing tenant.
- 3.2 Unfortunately one of the trustees was under a criminal investigation on fraud charges relating to the possible theft of Community centres finances and other funds raised to build a new children's play area adjacent to the centre. The remaining trustees also discovered they had an individual liability for certain other contracts about which they had no knowledge.
- 3.3 Understandably under these circumstances the trustees questioned their continuing involvement with the group and following an emergency general meeting before the end of November they agreed to disband.

4. LOCAL NEED

- 4.1 The local area is one of very high social need and the loss of the centre would be unfortunate. The Neighbourhood Centre provides an important facility to families living on the estate including a toddler's play group, youth club, children and adult education and housing drop in surgery.

5. INTERIM MEASURES

- 5.1 Forest First Children's Centre had been assisting the trustees in recent months and they were keen that the building remained open. This organisation is funded and supported by Totton College and have shown themselves to be capable of effectively managing the Centre on a day to day basis.
- 5.2 Following the Housing Portfolio Holder's decision in September Officers negotiated with the Children's Centre an agreement to manage the building as an interim measure until long term arrangements could be established for a more permanent arrangement to manage the Centre.

6. PROPOSALS

- 6.1 Discussions have been held with Forest First Children's Centre together with Western Challenge HA and Swaythling HS regarding the future arrangements for managing the building and ensuring the maximum amount of community use continues.
- 6.2 As a result of the discussions and the recent history with the Centre, Officers believe that the Council should keep responsibility for managing the building and thus protect the Council's asset but to delegate the day to day running of the Centre to the Children's Centre. This proposal is supported by all partners.
- 6.3 It is proposed that an agreement for the day to day management of the centre be drawn up with Totton College at a peppercorn rent with all income generated by the letting of the building to community groups being used to fund day to day costs, i.e. cleaning utility bills, etc.

- 6.4 All costs relating to the maintenance and repair of the building would propose to be met by the Council.
- 6.5 The arrangements described above would ensure that the Centre could continue to operate and would not leave any onerous liabilities on the Children's Centre or any other neighbourhood group which historically has given rise to the previous difficulties.

7. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 This is an area of high social need and the building has been subjected to random attack of vandalism in the past. If the building were to close and remain vacant for any period of time it is inevitable the incidents of vandalism will increase.
- 7.2 Conversely in remaining open the services provided by the centre provide an important local resource and clearly help to reduce the incidence of crime and disorder in the area.

8. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Failure to ensure the on-going viability and continued use of Blackfield Neighbourhood Centre could have a detrimental affect upon the surrounding environment. Currently the usage of the centre ensures that many groups of young people are involved in useful activities and therefore not left with little to do in the immediate area which would otherwise be the case. Whilst it would be difficult to draw a direct link with the closure of the centre and an increase in anti-social behaviour like graffiti and litter it would not be unreasonable to expect this to be an environmental impact should the centre not be there.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS.

- 9.1 The costs incurred by the Council in meeting both the day to day and ongoing repair and maintenance liabilities are estimated at £18,000 to 2010. These costs fall to the Housing Revenue Account. Whilst no specific budget allocation has been made for these costs it is considered that sufficient funds will be available within the HRA Planned Maintenance budget to meet that expenditure.

10. TENANT COMMENTS

- 10.1 To follow

11. HOUSING PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S COMMENTS

11. This centre has become an important part of the community. I consider that NFDC have to support the activities and groups that depend on the building for their activities. These groups provide a valuable service for the local community and I consider that the financial resources need to keep the building operational are a modest price for the benefits to the local community. I agree the recommendations.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 12.1 That the proposals for the future management of the Blackfield Neighbourhood Centre be agreed.

For Further Information please contact

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Background Papers

Copy of Lease