

Joint Area North Committee – 25th February 2009

10. Langport Local Information Centre and Community Office – (Update Report)

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Purpose of the Report

To update members on the current operating position of the Langport Community Office & Information Centre, following a short-term financial contribution from SSDC to meet the current shortfall in revenue, while a longer term solution is developed.

Recommendation(s)

That Members note and comment on the report.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Langport Community Office, was officially opened in April 2004, as a valuable new focal point for both residents and visitors to the area. The Langport Area Development Trust holds a lease until October 2009, with options to renew or revise from a local landlord.
- 1.2 Situated in a prime location in Bow Street, the office provides a base for the networked Local Information Centre (LIC), and the Links Community Transport Service.
- 1.3 In November 2008, following an application for financial support for the office due to the precarious financial position of the Langport Area Development Trust, the Area North Committee awarded a grant of £4,000. This was subject to a set of special conditions, placing the control of the office budget in the hands of joint working group, including the two local councils, and a ward member, (Cllr Tony Canvin). These conditions were accepted by LADT.
- 1.4 Previous awards to this project included £5,000 per annum for the first three years of LADT's development (2003-05); which included a contribution to the opening of the Community Office, and the employment of a full-time project officer, and a further £4,264 to meet the shortfall in running costs of the community office in December 2006.
- 1.5 Members will also be aware that in June 2008, SSDC Area North entered into a three-year funding agreement (£5,000 pa) with the South Somerset Voluntary and Community Action, for the provision of the LINKS service and therefore has a direct interest in the Community Office and its future.
- 1.6 As a networked Local Information Centre, SSDC tourism service provides a grant of £500 per annum to LADT, under a service level agreement for visitor services.
- 1.7 The Langport Area Development Trust is also one of two members of the Warehouse Trust which owns and operates the Great Bow Wharf, and appoints two of four directors to the board.

2 Progress since October 2008

- 2.1 From the award of the grant, the lead officer has focussed on the need to secure a viable budget for the current financial year, and to project this forward into 2009-10, to buy time for detailed consideration of the need for, benefits of, and potential operating model for a community office. Without this, developing a longer term partnership would have been fruitless.
- 2.2 At the time of writing, the working group has not met, due to a lack of up to date budgetary information from which to work with. However a number of developments have taken place, which are outlined below, and a further update will be outlined at the meeting. **No payments have been made to date, until authorised by the working group.**
- 2.3 The timescale has slipped largely because the resources required to complete the outstanding grants claims to secure a significant expected income, was underestimated. This work has been completed in house by SSDC on behalf of LADT, - following detailed audit requirements set by the funder. (The Leader+ programme, under European regulations).
- 2.4 The projected budget for 2008-09 and 2009-10, presented in October 2008, has been updated to reflect a number of factors, and is summarised below. (This has yet to be reviewed and agreed by the working group, and as a result no payments have been made to date from the SSDC grant awarded.)
 - a. Langport Town Council agreed to increase a planned grant of £200, for 2008-09 to £500. It has also pledged £1000 for 2009-10.
 - b. Huish Episcopi Parish Council has increased their grant from £600 for 2008-09 to £2,000 for 2009-10.
 - c. On making further enquiries, the service level agreement with SSDC for the provision of visitor services had not been completed. This is in hand.
 - d. The final claims for the Leader+ grant were overestimated in the October budget, however the claims were successfully completed and the correct payment has been received.
 - e. LADT have also informed the lead officer of additional liabilities, which may affect the residual cash contribution to the operating budget for the office.
 - f. Prior to accepting the SSDC grant offer, LADT agreed to relinquish the upper floor of the premises back to the landlord, and have agreed a reduced monthly payment. The conversion may affect access to the office, and will limit space, however the impact of this is not fully assessed at present.
 - g. A number of other discussions are taking place in Langport regarding the future of different community buildings, and accommodation for the variety of community activities, and this is to be welcomed. Notably Langport Town Council is taking an active interest in securing the best option for the local community office, and have considered taking over the lease if the business case is strong.

3. Revised Operating budget for 2008-09 (and projection for 2009/10)

Estimated outturn 08-09	
Costs	-10,395
Income from grants and rent	6,462
LADT funds <i>(may be increased)</i>	1,000
Revised deficit 08-09 (Feb 09)	-2,933
SSDC grant - up to:-	4,000
Balance SSDC c/f to 09-10	1,067
Projected deficit 09-10	-2,486
Less SSDC B/F	1,067
Estimated deficit still to be found	-1,419

4. Conclusions

- 4.1. The conditions applied to the grant awarded in Oct 08, were accepted by LADT. Due to the delay in establishing the working group, most conditions have not been fulfilled. All conditions are still relevant and will be used by the working group as a clear reference point.
- 4.2. The project and its financial position have not changed substantially since October, however the actual financial position of both the Community Office and the Langport Area Development Trust are clearer. Whilst some current issues may affect the long-term prospects for the Community Office, there appears to be a reasonable chance of creating a successful business model for the long term.
- 4.3. The working group may also wish to consider the future of the Langport Community Office in the light of the current SCC review of its support for Council Information Points and the provision of customer services at Old Kelways, by SSDC. This issue will be further considered in the report due in March 2009, regarding SSDC provision of community office services.
- 4.4. Local views of the value of the facility are generally highly supportive. In addition there is clear potential to explore the benefits of a greater SSDC presence in the town centre, as previously indicated by members of the Area Committee.

Implications for Corporate Priorities

The provision of a local community office will support the following key target area of the SSDC Corporate Plan:

- 5.1 – Enable the continued development of multi-service hubs (one stop shops) across South Somerset.

Other implications

The provision of visitor services support SSDC aims to promote sustainable tourism, and in particular the regeneration of market towns and rural areas.

The Langport Community Office also hosts the Somerton & Langport Links service, which is also supported financially by SSDC.

Background Papers: *Grant report to Area North Committee – November 2008*
 Grants report to Area North Committee, December 2006
 Grants file for this application.
