

Agenda Item:

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Services

Date: 19th March 2007

Report from: Scrutiny Review Team

Title of report: **VOLUNTARY SECTOR ACCOMMODATION SCRUTINY REVIEW**

Purpose of report: To provide the background and history of proposals to establish a Community Base for voluntary sector agencies in Hastings

To provide a summary of a recent survey into the level of interest in a Community Base and examine the challenges facing the future development of the project.

To propose the next action to be taken.

Recommendations: **The Committee agree the report and forward it on for Cabinet discussion.**

1. Scope of the Review

- 1.1 In September 2006 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Services commenced a review of progress on the future provision of accommodation for voluntary sector organisations in Hastings.
- 1.2 Concern has been expressed at where voluntary sector organisations, currently based in the town centre will be accommodated once planned developments begin in the Priory Quarter. The agencies directly affected by the Priory Quarter development are Hastings and Rother Citizens Advice Bureau, Hastings and Rother Money Advice, Hastings Community Housing Association, Hastings Rainbow Alliance, Hastings Voluntary Action, In Touch, Xtrax, Tressell Training and Ark of Hope,

2. Background

- 2.1 The development of a community base to house voluntary sector agencies in Hastings has been an aspiration of the voluntary sector for some years. The community base initiative was developed by a number of key voluntary organisations in an attempt to secure suitable, long-term, accessible accommodation within the Town Centre. Early discussions between voluntary organisations had identified the following issues:
 - § Town Centre accommodation for voluntary organisations was generally of a “poor” quality and was limited in offering a conducive environment for service-users and staff alike.
 - § Current accommodation did not offer long-term security of tenure for local organisations.
 - § Accommodation did not provide good access for those with disabilities and was unlikely to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.
 - § Town Centre accommodation for voluntary organisations was fragmented which sometimes made referrals and “joint working” more difficult to achieve.
 - § The image of the voluntary sector would continue to suffer if services were offered in accommodation that was unsuitable or of poor quality.
 - § Potential benefits were identified in terms of “shared space” such as meeting rooms, training facilities and possibly shared services like IT, Payroll, reprographics and other support facilities (to achieve a project which was “greater than the sum of its parts”).

3. History

- 3.1 In 1999 a voluntary sector steering group was formed to bring forward a practical assessment of space and other requirements. Funding was

obtained to commission a brief feasibility study this was published in January 2000 and subsequently updated in the summer of 2001.

3.2 At this stage it was recognised that to take the project forward some technical advice was needed in the form of architectural and surveying services to evaluate possible buildings and sites and produce an outline scheme for further consideration. SRB funding was used to commission further work and in March 2002 a detailed appraisal was undertaken as follows:

- A review of available premises in Hastings Town Centre that met the requirements of the project feasibility study.
- To provide a report to the Community Base Steering Group for consideration.
- To agree with the Steering Group a “shortlist” of 1 or 2 sites for further detailed appraisal.
- To bring forward detailed architectural plans to the Steering Group for further consideration and approval.

3.3 A project proposal (focussing on the “gap site” in Havelock Road) was brought forward and discussed which, at that time, contained the following elements:

- The Community Base Project
- The Primary Care Medical Centre
- Hastings Borough Council Housing Advice Centre
- Accommodation units for “key-workers”

3.4 From the perspective of the voluntary sector the scale of the project created a practical difficulty insofar as none of the partner organisations were in a position to enter into the long-term lease arrangements that would be necessary with a development project of this type – due to the short-term nature of their funding.

3.5 The Borough Council agreed to examine what kind of “enabling” role it might be in a position to play either by acting as the main development partner or securing a position that could offset the risk that might be created if a partner from the voluntary sector fulfilled this position. These discussions, in May 2004, also identified the possibility of seeking Objective II funding which might support the implementation of the project.

3.6 Since that time progress has been more limited. The Primary Care Trust, concluded that the “gap site” proposal would not be appropriate to their needs. The Borough Council Housing Advice Centre is now to be centred on the Christchurch redevelopment in St Leonards.

4. Research

- 4.1 The review team decided to survey the voluntary sector agencies based in central Hastings to update their views on the proposal. A questionnaire (Appendix 1) was sent out to 44 voluntary sector agencies based in central Hastings and 18 completed questionnaires were received.
- 4.2 The proposal for a community base was well supported by respondents with 17 out of 18 thinking it a good idea. 12 organisations thought their organisation would be interested in being permanently based in a new community base, 2 were unsure and 4 said they would not be interested in a permanent base. However 5 out these 6 felt they would use a community base if it had meeting rooms and other such facilities. The respondents can be divided into two groups, the definitely interested or “champions” (12) and the less interested “supporters” (6).
- 4.3 The “champions” employ 37 full time and 46 part time paid staff and work with 132 volunteers. The total area occupied by these organisations is around 1300 square metres. This group spend just under £63K pa on rent and other services but are exempt from non domestic rates. 11 out of 12 buildings are not DDA compliant .
- 4.4 The “supporters” employ 43 full time and 39 part time staff and work with 75 volunteers. 2 buildings are non DDA compliant and 4 are compliant in part.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 The concept of a community base is well supported and a core of agencies appear willing to be part of a voluntary sector base .
- 5.2 These core agencies already pay significant rents (£63K per annum) that could begin to make an economic case for the project.
- 5.3 Hastings Trust has experience of similar developments and may be interested in taking a leadership role.
- 5.4 The regeneration of the Priory Quarter and the lack of DDA compliance in existing buildings appear to be adding a sense of urgency to a project, seen by some as long awaited.

6. Challenges facing the project

- 6.1 Whilst recent research has confirmed both the need for more satisfactory accommodation and the support for the development of a community base, discussions have highlighted the need for the voluntary sector to lead any future development of the project. There remain three major challenges to be addressed:-
- The identification of suitable premises in central Hastings or St Leonards (around 1500 square metres is likely to be required).

- The establishment of a project management team and company structure (e.g. Charity, Limited company, company limited by guarantee etc) with the capability to harness the contribution of a range of stakeholders
- The securing of significant funding, both capital and revenue , from a range of potential sources e.g. regeneration and/or EU grants, lottery funding, matched funding, support in kind (e.g. long lease) etc.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 The review team recommend that strategic discussions be held between the relevant HBC Corporate Director, the lead member, scrutiny committee members, Seaspace and the voluntary sector (represented by HVA and Hastings Trust) to identify a way forward and clarify how HBC can perform an enabling role in support of voluntary sector leadership on this issue.
- 7.2 It is further recommended that an action plan resulting from this strategic discussion be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Services in six months time (September 2007).

8. Policy implications

Equalities & Community Cohesiveness	x
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	
Risk Management	
Environmental issues	
Economic / Financial implications	
Human Rights Act	
Organisational Consequences	

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Please provide a brief description of the premises (e.g. modern, terraced, number of floors etc.)

What is the total floor area currently occupies in square meters?

What are the current costs of occupying these premises?

Mortgage/ rent	
Service charges	
Other costs	
Council Tax	
Water rates	

Please indicate your level of satisfaction with your current premises:

Very satisfied	Quite satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Quite dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied

Are your current offices DDA compliant?

	Yes		No
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4. Legal information and governance

What is the legal status of your organisation?

When was the organisation established?

Do you have a Committee/ Board of Management?
 Are you a registered charity or have charity status?
 Are you part of a larger organisation?

Yes	No

5. Financial Information (If possible can we have a copy of your current years budget?)

What is your budgeted income for 2006/07?

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Please identify the principle sources of this income?

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What is your budgeted expenditure for 2006/07?

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What is the budgeted expenditure on your offices for the year 2006/07?

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6. Administrative arrangements

What are your opening hours?

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What computer systems do you currently use?

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Do you have a photocopier?

What parking arrangements do you currently observe?

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Do you operate a reception system for your clients?

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7. The proposal for a “Community Base”

Do you think the proposal for a Community Base is a good idea?

Yes

No

Do you think your organisation would be interested in being permanently housed, with other voluntary organisations, in a new Community Base?

Yes

No

If your organisation is not interested, do you think you would use the facilities of a community base?

	Yes	No
Meeting Room		
Photocopying		
IT Access		
Library		
Other		

Please can you give any comments which you think are important to be considered in developing the idea (type and location of premises, type of organisations participating, confidentiality, identity, etc)

Please indicate the importance of each of the following facilities or services for your organisation in a future Community Base. 1 very important 5 not required.

	1	2	3	4	5
A meeting room (for how many people? _____)					
Training room					
Shared reception					
Central information library					
Permanent office space					
Interview rooms					
Computer support					
Computer network					
Internet access					
Equipment					
Photocopier					
Document scanner					
Telephone message service during normal working hours					
Hot desking facility					

8. Do you have any other comments on the proposal for a community base?

Please return to: Peter Wigglesworth, HBC, Community Partnership Officer, 38-41 Wellington Square, Hastings TN34 1PP in the reply paid envelope.