

Central Bedfordshire Council

08 February 2022

Executive

Houghton Regis Community Centre (Bedford Square) Consultation

Report of:

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Responsible Director:

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This report relates to a decision that is Key

Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is:-

- (i) To share the findings of the public consultation that was carried out from the 13th October 2021 to the 8th December 2021.
- (ii) To approve the future operating model for Houghton Regis Community Centre (Bedford Square).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive is asked to:

1. **note the consultation report (Appendix 1); and**
2. **approve that Houghton Regis Community Centre (Bedford Square) have continued dual education and community use on a permanent ongoing basis.**

Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations

1. The report was considered at Corporate Resources OSC on 27th January, a verbal update will be provided.

Executive Summary

2. During the summer 2021, the Council made an urgent decision to temporarily accommodate the post 16 alternative education provision in Houghton Regis Community Centre (Bedford Square) until July 2022. This was due to a previous education provider going into administration over the summer, leaving vulnerable learners without a place to learn.
3. The Council committed to undertake a public consultation about the future long-term use of Houghton Regis Community Centre (Bedford Square).
4. The consultation was launched on 13th October 2021 and ran for 8 weeks concluding on 8th December 2021. During this time local residents were encouraged to “have your say” by completing a short online survey. The consultation was promoted via various means including social media as well as multiple targeted emails to ‘Bedford Square users’, Houghton Regis Ward Members and Town Councillors. Email bulletins were sent to subscribers of mailing lists for ‘Current online consultations’ and ‘News Central - South’. There were c21,000 recipients of the email bulletins of which c6,000 of the emails were opened resulting in c75 people clicking through to the consultation survey. Additionally, 250 printed copies of the survey were provided to the community of which two were returned.
5. The Council proposed that the Community Centre would continue to operate a dual use (education and community) on a permanent ongoing basis; providing education support for young people with special educational needs during weekdays in term time and be available for community use in the evenings, weekends and school holidays.
6. There were 130 responses to the consultation and these were finely balanced between those in favor (57 responses) and those against (62 responses).
7. The Council has a duty to consider overall value including economic, environmental and social value; balancing the needs of different residents and Centre users.
8. Executive are asked to note the consultation responses, and the mixed comments received supporting both provision of Community Space; as well as comments prioritising use of Bedford Square to support children/vulnerable groups. This report notes the significant investment the Council is making to provide new community space and amenities in Houghton Regis; and that there has been no evidence any existing Community groups have been unable to access community space.
9. It is recommended to Executive that Bedford Square Community Centre have continued dual education and community use on a permanent ongoing basis.

Consultation feedback

10. This consultation saw 130 responses, and over two-thirds had used the centre for service/classes. Of these users, 50% used the centre at least once a month.
11. 48% of respondents disagreed with the proposal for the centre (62 responses) and 44% of respondents agreed with the proposals (57 responses). Users of the centre were more likely to disagree with the proposal, and non-users were more likely to agree.
12. Of those that disagreed with the proposal, respondents were most likely to make comments about it being a community centre and should therefore be available for the community/Houghton Regis to use at all times. They also identified that many of the users are older or vulnerable and as such would want to use the centre during the day time and not in evenings or at night.
13. In terms of those supporting the proposal, they were pleased to see the building being used, appreciated the dual use proposals and supported the centre being used for children/vulnerable groups and that they should get priority.
14. The demographic analysis shows that men (30% of responses were from men), and those under 30 are also less likely to respond. Older age groups (particularly people aged 60-74) were more likely to respond as were people with a disability (29% of respondents). The ethnicity breakdown is broadly representative of the Central Bedfordshire population.
15. Due to the small numbers of responses from some of the age groups, we cannot determine whether there are significant differences in the levels of support for the proposal across them. Those with disabilities were slightly more likely to support the proposal (50%), compared to those without disabilities (40%).
16. Those that were disabled were more likely to make comments about it being for the community (80%) compared to those not disabled (66%). However, these are based on relatively small numbers of responses (15 disabled and 38 not disabled) so caution should be used when looking at this data.
17. Those that were under 65 were more likely to make comments about the need for it to remain as a community centre (87% of respondents, compared to 75% of those over 65).
18. When asked about the top priorities for a community centre, respondents were most likely to select to be on a public transport route (48%), available during the daytime on weekdays (41%) and available in the evenings (29%).
19. When asked about suitability of alternative venues, all of the venues received mixed feedback. A summary is provided in the consultation report. A variety of reasons were provided for each venue not being deemed suitable. However, the mixed feedback demonstrates that different venues suit different activities more adequately than others.

Proposed future arrangements

20. Having considered the feedback received during the consultation from the local community alongside the financial viability and operational management of the building, it is proposed that the dual education and community use continues on a permanent ongoing basis.
21. In practical terms, the proposed arrangements for the centre are as follows:
 - i. During term time between 8am-5pm – sole use by the College as Post 16 education support for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
 - ii. During term time in evenings (from 5.30pm) and weekends (8am-12am) – centre available to hire by community groups and individuals
 - iii. During school holidays; weekdays, evenings and weekends (8am-12am) – centre available to hire by community groups and individuals
22. This arrangement would provide continuity and consistency for the young people, their parents and carers who had to adapt quickly to Houghton Regis Community Centre (Bedford Square) as a new venue when the previous provider went into administration, and is proving to be successful and popular. The perspective of Central Bedfordshire College is at Appendix 2.
23. It is envisaged that the College would manage bookings for the Centre when available for use by the community and individuals. The charges for hiring the venue during these times would be subject to review through the Council's normal fees and charges setting process.

Reason/s for decision

24. The Council has a duty to consider overall value including economic, environmental and social value; balancing the needs of different residents and Centre users.
25. The response to the consultation was finely balanced between those in favor and those against.
26. There has been significant Council investment in Houghton Regis. The All Saints View development has been designed to create significant new community space to be enjoyed by all residents of Houghton Regis. The Council has also been successful securing £20M Levelling Up Funding (LUF) which is being used to provide a new leisure and community centre on the Kingsland Campus. This has been designed to complement the new Houston Secondary School, as well as providing additional amenities.
27. There is no evidence through the consultation or other engagement the Council has had with the local community that any Community Groups have been unable to access community space due to the dual use to date.

28. The Community Centre is a publicly funded building that wasn't being used to its full capacity. The Council has to ensure value for money in all that it does. Increasing the use of the building will help cover its running costs.

Council priorities

Enhancing Central Bedfordshire

29. Providing services for members of the community and maximising the use of the Centre.

Great Resident services

30. Providing a high quality, accessible Centre for all members of the community by providing a dual education and community use.

Improving education and skills

31. Provide a stable venue for post 16 education support for young people with special educational needs and disability.

Protecting the vulnerable; improving wellbeing

32. Creating a dual venue for both education and community use.

Creating stronger communities

33. Providing space for residents with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities whilst also maintaining a community centre.

A more efficient and responsive Council.

34. Better use of the Council's asset by using the Centre as a dual facility.

Corporate Implications

Legal Implications

35. The general principles derived from case law as to how consultations should be conducted, known as the "Gunning principles" are: consultation should occur when proposals are at a formative stage; consultations should give sufficient reasons for any proposal to permit intelligent consideration; consultations should allow adequate time for consideration and response. ***There must be clear evidence that the decision maker has considered the consultation responses, or a summary of them, before taking its decision.***

36. In the Supreme Court case of **R (Moseley) v LB Haringey (2014)**, the Supreme Court endorsed the Gunning principles and added two further general principles: the degree of specificity regarding the consultation should be influenced by those who are being consulted; and the demands of fairness are likely to be higher when the consultation relates to a decision which is likely to deprive someone of an existing benefit.
37. For present purpose, it is important that the Committee give due regard to the attached Consultation Report and the precise of the findings of that Report set out above when forming its decision on whether to approve the recommendations as drafted. It is equally important that the Executive, when making the final decision, can demonstrate that it has considered the consultation responses, or a summary of them, before coming to that decision.

Financial and Risk Implications

38. There are no increased financial implications by adopting this approach.
39. The service will recover Rent and Service charges from the College.
40. The room hire charge will be reviewed in line with the Council's fees and charges process.

Equalities Implications

41. Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty (i.e. public sector equality duty – PSED) to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics: age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
42. The consultation shows a division in views about the proposal to maintain the Centre's dual use. There isn't a clear majority supporting or opposing the proposal. It could possibly be said that there are positive outcomes from proposals in terms of equality in that vulnerable SEND young people have been found a suitable education provision and that a number of other groups are able to access the Centre at evenings and weekends or have been happy with alternative provision.
43. However it is clear that for some disabled and older people there is a need to be able to access a community venue during week days and that a number of the alternative venues we suggested were not deemed suitable with cost and public transport routes being an issue. All Saints looks like a possible good alternative but because it isn't open yet people aren't sure and would need reassurance about availability and cost.
44. The Town Council have made some points in their letter about this being a deprived area and that the Community Centre should be seen as more of an asset and Central Bedfordshire Council and other agencies should be using it more to work with the local community.

45. In satisfying the PSED it is important that due regard is given, in so far as it is relevant, to all the protected groups. With this in mind, an Equalities Impact Assessment has been drafted by the Community Intelligence Team (Appendix 3). It is important that any findings/outcomes resulting from the Equality Impact Assessment are placed before the decision maker before any decision is made, to recommend to the Executive for approval any specific use of the Community Centre.

Sustainability Implications

46. Maximising the use of this facility for the benefit of all members of the community could help support community cohesion and resilience, which in turn has a positive role to play with respect to some of the broad aspects of sustainability such as building sustainable communities.
47. Dual use of the Centre provides an opportunity to maximise use of available space and provides a sustainable approach as previously the building was operated for long periods of time with no users.
48. The Council will continue to undertake condition surveys of the Centre and make recommendation for improvements in due course if required.

Conclusion and next Steps

49. Following the consultation and review of the economic, environmental and social value; balancing the needs of different residents and providing SEND provision, it is recommended that the Centre remains dual education and community use.
50. If the recommendation is agreed, a longer-term arrangement will be put in place with Central Bedfordshire College for continued use of Houghton Regis Community Centre (Bedford Square).
51. If the recommendation is not agreed, Bedford Square Community Centre will no longer be used to support education provision when the arrangement with Central Bedfordshire College expires in July 2022, and the College will need to secure an alternative suitable venue.

Appendices

- Appendix 1: Future of Houghton Regis Community Centre (Bedford Square)
Consultation results
- Appendix 2: Central Bedfordshire College perspective
- Appendix 3: Equality Impact Assessment

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