

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-089-2008/09
Date of meeting: 2 February 2009



Portfolio: Community Wellbeing
Corporate Support and ICT Services

Subject: Furniture Exchange Scheme - Use of Premises at Waltham Abbey

Responsible Officer: Chris Overend (01992 564247).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations:

- (1) That the Cabinet support the establishment of a furniture exchange scheme by Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) to assist people at an economic disadvantage to procure good quality furniture;
- (2) That, in the event of VAEF successfully bidding for the tenancy of 15 Market Square, Waltham Abbey, that £14,250 of the CSB budget identified to cover the annual charges and service charges of the previous scheme at Town Mead Depot, now be provisionally allocated to cover the annual rental costs of the new premises, subject to the submission and agreement of an appropriate grant application; and
- (3) That the trading position of the Furniture Exchange Scheme be kept under annual review, with a view to the Council's subsidy being reduced as the scheme moves towards financial self-sustainability.

Executive Summary:

A furniture exchange/recycling scheme for the District ran for the period between February 2007 and July 2008, operating from an outlet at the District Council's depot in Town Mead, Waltham Abbey. The scheme was run in partnership with the Lighthouse Project, 'a not for profit' organisation which had experience of running a similar scheme in Brentwood. The scheme proved successful and the service was continuing to expand at the time of closure.

Conscious that a clear need for the operation of a furniture exchange scheme, or similar, has been demonstrated, the partner organisations have continued to look at the various options available. VAEF has put together a business plan for a new scheme and a potential opportunity has arisen for the use of District Council owned (HRA) shop premises in Waltham Abbey suitable for the scheme to operate from.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

Through the scheme, disadvantaged people are able to source good quality essential furniture at minimal cost. The improved quality of life they can enjoy can contribute directly to an increase in self-esteem, family harmony, integration with the local community and improved prospects of training and employment. The scheme also offers people who wish to

dispose of unwanted furniture, the opportunity to contribute positively to the local community by enhancing the quality of life of others and improving the environment by reducing the amount of waste destined directly for landfill, thus helping to meet recycling targets. Moreover, it provides an excellent job opportunity for those with learning disabilities, or other specialist employment needs associated with health or social problems.

The scheme is good value for money. The cost of sourcing, collecting, supplying and delivering furniture to each household requesting assistance is an average of £100, although it is recognised that current operational costs are minimal. This figure excludes reconditioned white goods. Given this sum to spend, households would be able to source, through the second-hand market, only a fraction of the items supplied through the scheme.

In terms of potential demand in the District, the indications are that approximately 300 residents each year move into its accommodation, seeking furniture, because they have become homeless, are fleeing domestic violence or are allocated a home for the first time.

There is a recognised need for a Furniture Recycling Scheme in the District. It could bring substantial benefits in terms of job creation (particularly for those with learning disabilities), skills training, disadvantaged people being able to access good quality furniture at minimal costs, a positive contribution to the environment and helping the Council meet its recycling targets. Schemes have operated successfully in the District and elsewhere in Essex for many years. The scheme is tried and tested and would bring considerable benefits.

Other Options for Action:

The only other option would be refuse the reallocation of the budget to cover the rental costs in respect of the potential new site identified for the scheme. This would mean a missed opportunity for the District Council and its partners in terms of their roles in community wellbeing and environmental protection, and for the operation of a much needed and highly regarded scheme.

Report:

1. The closure of the original scheme came about as a consequence of a number of safety issues on site, primarily concerned with vehicular movements and public access. Attempts were made by the various partners involved, including the Lighthouse Project, Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) and the District Council, to resolve the issues concerned but ultimately a decision was taken to close the facility. This was effected through a Portfolio Holder decision by the Corporate Support Services and ICT Portfolio Holder, dated 21 July 2008, terminating the lease to the Lighthouse Furniture Project Limited for the use of the buildings at the depot. The Portfolio decision also acknowledged the success of the scheme.

2. To assist in the establishment of the scheme, the Cabinet, at its meeting on 20 December 2004 (Minute 98 refers), had approved the waiving of the annual charges and service charges arising in respect of the use of the spaces at the Town Mead. A CSB growth item was included within the 2005/06 budget and the amount set aside for this purpose in the 2008/09 budget is £16,830. The premises remain vacant and hard to let. As such this amount remains a 'notional' rent. New premises have been identified for the project.

3. At the time the decision was taken, in December 2004, to waive the annual and service charges, the responsibility for estate management, whose remit this issue falls within, was with the Finance and Performance Management Portfolio. It has now been transferred to the Corporate Services and ICT Portfolio, although the budget is contained within the Community Wellbeing Portfolio.

4. The annual rental costs for the use of these premises at 15 Market Square, Waltham Abbey will be £14,250 in 2009/10. The premise has been openly marketed and at this stage there are no other suitable expressions of interest.

5. In anticipation the VAEF bid being successful, it is recommended that an amount of £14,250 from within the CSB originally identified to cover the annual charges and service charges for the use of spaces at Town Mead Depot for the Furniture Exchange Scheme, now be allocated to cover the annual rental costs for the use of shop premises for the scheme in Waltham Abbey. It is envisaged that over a period of time the scheme will become self-financing. It is therefore recommended that the trading position of the scheme be kept under annual review, with a view to the Council's subsidy being reduced as the scheme moves towards financial self-sustainability.

6. There are a number of issues to be finalised by VAEF, including the securing of funding for other aspects of the scheme. However, it is anticipated a suitable bid can be put together and approved.

Resource Implications:

There will be no additional costs arising. The budget includes a sum of £17,250 for 2009/10 coupled with a CSB saving of £3,000 reflecting the reduction in costs to the Council.

Legal and Governance Implications:

Services and ICT budget will be required.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

Environmental benefits of recycling.

Consultation Undertaken:

Discussions involving VAEF and District Council Members and Officers.

Background Papers:

Correspondence and other papers in respect of previous and proposed schemes.

Impact Assessments:

These and risk assessments will be undertaken prior to any funding bid being submitted.