

Transforming Neighbourhood Services: West area

Community event at the BRITE Centre 28 July, 6.30-8pm

This is a summary of the points made and responses.

Questions and points made by the public are highlighted in bold. Cllr Russell's responses follow.

Introduction

A brief introduction by Cllr Russell:

We are here to discuss the proposals that the council has drawn up following the first round of consultation/focus groups etc that were held in the spring. We have listened to what people said was important and aimed to reflect people's views and suggestions in the proposals.

This stage of consultation runs til 8 August. The final proposals will go to scrutiny and the council executive for a decision in mid-September.

Offered to summarise the proposals but no one felt this was necessary.

Questions and discussion

Where has the council got the figures for the numbers of people using community centres? They don't seem right for Cort Crescent – people are there every day.

Cllr Russell: Groups gave us the information themselves so we have to go with what they submitted.

Has the decision already been made? Are these proposals final?

Cllr Russell: No. Absolutely not. This is the chance for everyone to tell us what they think of the proposals and give us other suggestions.

What support is being given to local groups to take on and run buildings?

Cllr Russell: We are working with a national organisation called Locality. They are independent and will come in to offer expert advice to any groups who are interested in finding out more. Groups don't have to make any commitment at all.

There is pressure on B-inspired – who feel like they're expected to do that work for the smaller groups.

No – that's why we have got Locality involved.

This all goes against the talk about Big Society. It's contradictory. Where has the money gone? These centres are working fine. Why do they have to close?

We do not want to close centres. But we have been clear about this from the very start: no change is not an option. The government has cut our funding so severely that we have got to make savings. But we are trying to do it in a way that keeps services running because we know they are important.

Has the council looked at the cost of anti-social behaviour and damage to buildings once they are closed?

We do not want these buildings to close. We think they can stay open and continue to operate in a different way. Look at the successful example of the West End Neighbourhood Centre. This is now leased to the Leicestershire Centre for Integrated Living and continues to offer a big range of activities, not just services for disabled people.

We don't know where we stand because there are still too many options and unknowns. We don't know if we need to gather our troops to fight this.

We can't tell you exactly what will happen as this is still an open consultation and we need to listen before we make any decisions.

Newfoundpool – we need to ask ourselves, “why would we run it ourselves if the council is looking after us better”?

Good question. Need to look at the different types of lease. It can be exclusive or run as a shared community centre. And the council is not just going to walk away and leave groups to it – this would go against everything.

So there's no time limit on how much support the council will offer?

No. We are not walking away completely. We want to make sure that the groups can manage and we will offer ongoing support.

Are you prepared to do work on the centres to improve them? Eg. Some have small kitchens.

We will look at each one on a case by case basis and see what is required by different groups.

What about access for smaller groups when the lease is held by a larger organisation? And finances: at the moment the council charges different rates for different groups. Will these still stand? There is a risk that we could be priced out.

Response by Woodgate Resource Centre: we are independently managed and offer two different rates for commercial and voluntary groups.

It would be unwise for a local organisation running a centre to price other groups out. They will want the rooms to be used. It's hard to get it right – the council knows this – we've experienced it ourselves, when you put the rates up and people stop coming and you have to revise them.

Discussion about groups and the possible need to relocate.

Adrian Wills (head of libraries): we have said that we will work with groups to help them find the best location for their needs – if they need to move at all.

But where would you move the Cort groups to?

And why should they move when they're doing so well?

Why isn't it viable to keep it open under council management?

The council isn't the best at getting groups in. Voluntary groups can run things differently, get volunteers in and also access grants that the council can't.

Councils all over the country have just announced closures of libraries and community centres: that's it. Final. We wanted to do it differently and work with communities to protect the services that they want and need.

We want to run the building but not do it as an asset transfer. Why can't we come to an arrangement where the council keeps the building but we do the cleaning for example? What's the difference?

It's about the costs associated with the building. And it's about long-term stability – we're talking about sustainability and five years time.

It would be ok if Peter Soulsby didn't waste money and give the council staff pay rises all the time.

Council staff have had many years of pay freezes with just one small rise.

Put forward options in detail for what you want to do and we will look at it.

To be able to do that we need information on costs. The information on the packs is not consistent.

We can provide up to date information on request – get in touch with us.

The BRITE Centre- what about this place? It's not being touched.

[Discussion about history of the centre and funding]

We have looked at the core services that we need to provide to a local community. Free access to computers is essential because all the benefits and housing systems are going online – and we can provide these through our libraries.

We were told by the council that LCC would help find other premises if Oak closed.

But we've already had expressions of interest in running the Oak and Newfoundpool. Can't say who from at this stage. Also can't make decisions, guarantees or promises during a consultation period. We are only asking for views on these proposals.

What about schools and businesses? The local community will suffer when these things close.

We need clear information and communications – otherwise it just gets to be Chinese whispers that everything is closing. Email not replied to and some people not invited to meetings.

Sorry if something has been missed. We have offered to come and meet groups separately to discuss options and will do so. There's no commitment and there will be no deals done in advance – when the time comes we will properly advertise for expressions of interest.

Groups should remember that they don't necessarily have to go it alone and take on a lease. The way forward is to come together and form a new group/social enterprise involving all the groups in a centre.

This is a confusing exercise of smoke and mirrors. There are 11 premises on the list. Three contain libraries and two are already on long leases. That leaves six which are to be offered a new way of owning the building. But look at what happened with the old Aylestone Library – groups there were interested but they were offered unacceptable terms. What happens to those six buildings if no one wants to take them on?

In Aylestone, after long discussion the community decided they could not make the building work, partly due to its facilities and partly due to the amount of volunteer commitment needed. And these were not well established groups.

As I've said, we have already had expressions of interest in running the centres so we do not expect them to close. But here is a response on each of those six buildings IF no one comes forward to run them.

1. Manor – this is not up for asset transfer as the costs are too high. It would be a liability and too expensive for groups to run.
2. Oak – children's services are transferring anyway. It's a really good centre which will be sustainable. If no one comes forward we will keep it running and continue to try to find someone who will.
3. Cort Crescent – we have already had expressions of interest so I do not expect this to happen. But as it's a smaller centre, if there was no interest in asset transfer, there is an option to turn it into affordable housing.

Why not use as an old people's home?

That is one option but there is also a real need for housing in the area.

Who will decide which groups get the leases? Councillors or council staff?

What about the views of local people?

If there are concerns in the area we could look at a panel of local people. But we'd need to look at whether that was realistic and how we would make it representative.

4. Grove – we will continue to run as a youth facility.
5. Winstanley – there is an obvious group which could manage this centre.
6. Newfoundpool – again, we've had some interest already and I'm very confident that an organisation will take this on. It's a well used centre and we will keep it going until we can negotiate an agreement.

So are we talking about transferring the freeholds of buildings for £1?

No. The council keeps the freehold. We're talking about long term leases.

We need to know the specifics of the lease, insurance etc. Then people know what they're being offered.

The Oak is closed every day. Why not just close it?

It's open every night – which is when the groups want it.

Remember when there was so much going on at the Oak: bingo, armchair aerobics, hot dinners.

And that's exactly the kind of thing that we want to see. But all the groups have got to be sustainable.

Every neighbourhood centre is underused. Why? Because there are no community development officers.

We appointed community development officers several months ago – and they're already supporting groups and starting to have a positive affect.

But you can't really say underused. At Woodgate we have three rooms. It's not realistic to fill them all from 10am to 9pm. That doesn't mean it's underused. Also I can say that voluntary groups can tap into other sources of funding. Over the years we have received £100,000 that we would not have got if we'd been managed by the council.

I accept that no change is not an option. But make sure that all the places are accessible, affordable and offer a high quality service.

Some people here have the experience and capability of taking on a lease. Why don't you run a day seminar to give advice?

Yes, you missed what we said at the start – an organisation called Locality will be doing this work.

Cllr Russell ran through the timescale for the rest of the process: consultation finishes 8 August. Final proposals to scrutiny and council executive in early-September. Decision mid-September.

Gave examples of south: proposals are taking about 12 months from decision to completion.

How much does it cost to run Manor every year?

All the figures are on the website.

Please keep us informed all the way through. Some people who came to the focus groups in spring were not told about later meetings. Need to keep email addresses.

[At end of meeting Caroline took email addresses of all who wanted to be added to distribution list]

Will the council make any improvements to the buildings?

Cllr Russell explained about the council's pot of money for 'transformation' which is used for all the change programmes underway eg. neighbourhoods, social care. We will have to bid for this money to fund the changes, moves, improvement works etc.

Where is the long-term view? There could be a change of government.

We have to be realistic and it is sadly unlikely that a change of government would see a significant change in the cuts already made to local government.

Why haven't you posted leaflets to every house in Braunstone?

Because it isn't just Braunstone. This part of the consultation is over four wards: Fosse, Westcotes and Western Park. The cost would be so massive, we could use it to run a centre for a year.

You do it for elections.

That's paid for by other organisations, not the council.

It would be helpful to have certain information before the 8 August when consultation ends: market value of properties with their current use and market value with planning permission.

I haven't seen any figures on this and I wouldn't be allowed to share it even if I had, for commercial reasons. It would undermine any future sale.