

SCRUTINY COMMISSION FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES	Agenda Item No. 5
15 JULY 2013	Public Report

Report of the Head of Neighbourhood Services

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SUPPORT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY CENTRES AND VILLAGE HALLS IN RURAL AREAS

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 This report explores the support available for the development of community centres and village halls in rural areas, and sets out an overall direction of travel for further work throughout the year.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The Commission is asked:

- To agree to further, focussed work being carried out over the next few months, as set out in section 4, to ensure that the specific issues and opportunities relating to rural community assets are fully explored, and that a report is brought back to the Commission at a future date during the municipal year
- To ask the Parish Liaison Committee to include a session on community assets in rural areas at this year's Parish Conference event.

3. LINKS TO THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

- 3.1 Community based assets, including village halls, community centres and public open space, add value to a neighbourhood and often act as a catalyst for community involvement and participation. When managed well, they act as a focal point for bringing communities together and have huge potential to act as a base for services to be delivered from.
- 3.2 Given this, well managed, vibrant and sustainable community assets contribute to priorities across the entire Sustainable Community Strategy, but especially to the priority to create strong and supportive communities.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 Peterborough benefits from a rich, varied and diverse mix of community based assets, including village halls, community centres and public parks. Many are in public ownership, whilst others are owned by parish councils or by private sector organisations. One common theme though, regardless of ownership, is that they rely on active citizenship to help them to thrive.
- 4.2 In Peterborough, community centres and village halls in public ownership are managed by volunteers who give their time generously and freely to provide a local facility.

- 4.3 The importance of community assets such as this is significant. They often help to define a community and bring people together helping to build pride and a sense of place. The notion of asset-based community development is well tested elsewhere in the world, and is emerging more and more as a UK method of empowering, developing and sometime regenerating a community. Assets in this context include physical buildings as well as the collective skills and experiences of residents.
- 4.4 A programme of work is underway which sets out to ensure the city's community assets are supported, developed and sustainable. This programme includes:
- reviewing the Council's approach to asset management to ensure that it is fully aligned across the organisation
 - exploring all aspects of the Localism Act to ensure that opportunities created from it are maximised
 - working closely with the Peterborough Council for Voluntary Service who have been externally funded to support community associations and community centres to thrive and become sustainable
 - working with the Parish Liaison Committee to ensure the role of parish councils is fully understood and all opportunities for diversification and growth are taken
- 4.5 This overarching work programme is already closely aligned, although its various components are being taken forward separately. It is recommended that those aspects of the programme that relate to the development of village halls and community centres in rural areas be combined and a resultant report and recommendations be prepared for presentation back to the Scrutiny Commission later in this municipal year.

5. KEY ISSUES

- 5.1 Despite the work programme being taken forward, it is still helpful for the Commission to understand the broader context within which we operate, and some of the emerging and existing pressures we face. This will help to shape our collective thinking when considering how best to support the development and sustainability of village halls and community centres.
- 5.2 The Council is working closely with parish councils, through our relationship with the Peterborough Association of Local Councils and the refocused Parish Liaison Committee, to support parish councils in both rural and urban communities. This support is being developed in full recognition of the important role that parish councils play in helping to resolve local issues, to inform and engage with local people, and to represent communities in important processes.
- 5.3 The policy context within which our collaboration with parish councils is being taken forward includes the Localism Act. As a principle, Localism is a way of ensuring that services are designed, investments made and decisions taken that best fit local need, whether local is defined as Peterborough as a whole or a specific street or community. The Localism Act in turn sets out legislative rights to enable this way of working to be realised.
- 5.4 In autumn 2012 the Council and parish councils in Peterborough came together at an inaugural Parish Conference to begin the exploration of Localism in the context of parish councils. The conference looked at ways of using Localism to support and sustain the role of parish councils, including how services could be delivered locally, how community assets could be used more creatively, and how parish councils could reduce overheads through collaborative working with other parish councils.
- 5.5 A second conference is now being planned for later this year, and we are currently seeking input from parish councils about the subject matters that they would find most interesting and beneficial. It is suggested that the Scrutiny Commission may wish to ask the Parish Liaison Committee, who are organising the conference, to include a more in-depth look at how community assets in rural areas can be best supported and developed.

- 5.6 Alongside this collaboration with parish councils, we are facing unprecedented levels of budget reductions and need to be innovative and forward thinking in our approach to delivering these savings. It is widely recognised that an approach which seeks to prevent issues from arising, as opposed to dealing with them once they have happened, is often better value for money in the longer term. It is also widely recognised that an approach that works in full partnership with other agencies and organisations, and that engages effectively with residents, is far more likely to deliver the most appropriate savings and have the least impact.
- 5.7 Our developing relationship with parish councils will help to innovate and identify new ideas to achieve efficiencies whilst maintaining, or even improving, services. One of these ideas is to examine the ways in which community assets might be developed and utilised to help deliver the more preventative focus of service delivery, in turn making longer term improvements that last. For example, alongside the Localism principles providing opportunities for parish councils to deliver services, village halls could become host to a range of service providers keen to reach local people and to address the issues that really affect them.
- 5.8 We're also currently working hard to identify, manage and mitigate the risks and unintended consequences of the reform of the welfare benefits system. We recognise the value that accredited, quality debt advice brings to help people better manage their finances before debt itself becomes a way of life. We are working with a range of voluntary sector providers to understand the issues that people face and offer practical solutions to deal with crisis situations and prevent their reoccurrence. However, we are already seeing a significant increase in the number of people trying to access debt and other financial advice through agencies in Peterborough, who, at the moment, are finding it more and more difficult to meet demand. To address this, we are working with the Citizens Advice Bureau to increase the provision of accredited, quality debt advice not only in the city centre, but within neighbourhoods and rural locations.
- 5.9 This would see the availability of debt advice and other advice and information services delivered from village halls and community centres. This will provide an opportunity for people to access help in a more familiar environment at a time which is convenient for them. In turn, it will help further develop the role of parish councils, village halls and community centres leading to further options for diversification and development. This work forms a key strand of our preventative agenda.
- 5.10 Although some general themes to support the development of village halls and community centres in rural areas have been referenced in this report, the work being carried out to deliver a Localism-focussed approach, our growing collaboration with parish councils through the Parish Liaison Committee, and the driver for us to deliver even more efficient service delivery will lead to a more defined identity and role for community assets across Peterborough.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 At this stage, direct financial, legal or other implications are not known.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The programmes of work identified in section 4 draw together relevant stakeholders as necessary.

8. NEXT STEPS

- 8.1 If the approach set out in this report is endorsed by the Commission, officers will ensure that there is proper recognition of the role and needs of village halls and community centres in rural areas in the various programmes of work, and will draw together the various outcomes of those programmes relating to rural community assets for discussion and debate at a future Commission meeting.

9. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

9.1 None

10. APPENDICES

10.1 None