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MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Thursday, 25th February, 2016 at 2.00 pm

PRESENT: County Councillor S. Howarth (Chairman)
County Councillor V. Smith (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Dovey, A. Easson, S. Jones, A. Webb and S. White

Also in attendance County Councillor P. Murphy (Cabinet Member).
Mr. H. Cullen-Jones – Bridges Community Centre
Mr. M. Walton - Bridges Community Centre

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Hazel Ilett	Scrutiny Manager
Debra Hill-Howells	Head of Community Led Delivery
Ben Winstanley	Estates Manager
Richard Williams	Democratic Services Officer

APOLOGIES:

County Councillor K. Williams and Mr. R. Hoggins.

1. Declarations of Interest

County Councillor S. White declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest regarding agenda item 4 – Community Asset Transfer request for Drybridge House, Monmouth as she is a trustee of Drybridge House.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting held on 28th January 2016 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman. In doing so, it was noted that the Committee had discussed other methods of recycling and that officers would investigate alternative options with a view to bringing such options to a future meeting of the Select Committee. The Chair stated that he would raise these issues at the next Cabinet meeting.

3. Community Asset Transfer Request for Drybridge House, Monmouth

Context:

To consider a request from Bridges Community Centre to undertake a Community Asset Transfer of Drybridge House on the basis of a 99 year lease.

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Key Issues:

Bridges Community Centre occupies Drybridge House on the basis of a 25 year lease granted on 7th March 2000. A rental fee of £1 per annum is payable with no provision for review. As a condition of the lease, Bridges undertook a number of refurbishment works funded by Heritage Lottery.

In March 2011, Cabinet agreed to grant a 25 year lease to Bridges Community Centre to enable them to install photovoltaic panels. The new lease would be granted in accordance with the Council's Concessionary Rental Policy which requires the occupier to pay a minimum 5% of the rental value of the property. To date, the new lease has not been entered into. However, the photovoltaic panels have been installed.

In December 2015, a Community Asset Transfer application was made by Bridges Community Centre on the basis of a 99 year leasehold interest. This request was declined on the basis that it did not meet the eligibility criteria as outlined in the Council's Community Asset Transfer Policy. This was on the basis that the asset is considered to hold significant development value in the event that the building ceased to be used as a community centre and that a 25 year lease had already been agreed and was available for Bridges Community Centre to enter into.

Within their application, Bridges Community Centre has identified that its proposal for a 99 year lease is predicated on its desire to apply for Big Lottery's Community Asset Transfer Funding, albeit that this funding pot is currently closed. Other funding streams require a minimum of 25 years unexpired at the point of any grant award. As advised, a 25 year lease has already been made available to Bridges Community Centre, but to date has not been taken forward by the Trustees.

Bridges Community Centre's Case to the Strong Communities Select Committee:

- Bridges Community Centre has been in occupation of Drybridge House since 2000 on a 25 year lease from Monmouthshire County Council. It has contributed in excess of £2,000,000 in conserving the house and continues to spend about £50,000 year on year to maintain it. This does not include the vital contribution made by volunteers.
- Monmouthshire County Council has laid down the Asset Transfer procedure, in line with Welsh Government Policy, which is currently being implemented in respect of a number of buildings in Monmouthshire. Bridges Community Centre saw this as an important opportunity to secure its future at Drybridge House.
- Bridges Community Centre submitted its application for a leasehold asset transfer on 16th November 2015 with a detailed business plan demonstrating its viability.
- Bridges Community Centre has been told by Council officers that the request would not be granted due to the perceived value to the Council of the building as an asset. However, Bridges Community Centre has never been given a clear indication of what its value might be.

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- Conditions for major grant applications now require at least a 20 year term after completion of a particular project. A longer lease would remove the need to revisit the lease every two or three years for an extension.
- There is a sense of urgency about this request due to the opportunity for Bridges Community Centre to apply for the final tranche of the Big Lottery Fund Community Asset Transfer programme which will open in May 2016 with an application deadline of September 2016. This could potentially bring up to £1,000,000 of new money into Monmouthshire.
- An agreement in principle that Monmouthshire County Council would be prepared to grant Bridges Community Centre a 99 year lease, or if this is not feasible, a 50 year lease, would enable Bridges Community Centre to proceed with this application.

Bridges Community Centre asked the following questions:

- What is the financial value of Drybridge House to Monmouthshire County Council?
- Why would a long leasehold transfer reduce the value of Bridges Community Centre as an asset to the Council?
- Why would Monmouthshire County Council want to reject the opportunity of applying for major external funding which would highlight the strength of the partnership between statutory and voluntary sectors and be recognised as a beacon of good practice?
- Does Monmouthshire County Council have plans for the alternative use or sale of Drybridge house?

Member Scrutiny:

- Monmouthshire County Council was committed to supporting Bridges Community Centre.
- The Concessionary Lettings Policy 2003 removed the peppercorn rent. The three year rent review is to reflect any changes for the tenant. Tenants are expected to be able to fund at least 5% of the rent.
- Bridges Community Centre considers that in order to apply for grant funding, security of tenure was required.
- Bridges Community Centre is working hard to generate new sources of income with new potential income streams being investigated.
- Bridges Community Centre was working with Monmouthshire County Council's Social Services Department.

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- Voluntary support was important.
- Concern was expressed regarding the amount of work needed to be undertaken to the building and whether there was grant funding available to address this issue.
- It was noted that important services were provided from Drybridge House and the building had been well maintained.
- The valuation of Drybridge House was estimated to be in excess of £500,000.
- In response to a Select Committee Member's question, it was noted that Drybridge House was located on a floodplain but was protected by flood defences.
- A new 25 year lease has been available from 2011 for Bridges Community Centre to sign, but has not taken up the offer. A 50 year lease would not be in accordance with the County Council's rental policy.
- In order to support Bridges Community Centre's request, the current County Council policy would have to be changed.
- Some Select Committee Members considered that Bridges Community Centre's request was an exceptional case and that perhaps a caveat could be looked at so that this matter might be considered at Full Council. However, any other community group that applies for Community Asset Transfer (CAT) funding by September 2016 could be in the same position as Bridges Community Centre if a caveat was put in place via Full Council.

Committee's Recommendation:

That the Policy be revisited to include an opportunity for groups to apply for Big Lottery Funding and that Officers and the Cabinet Member explore this matter and bring to Cabinet and Full Council at the earliest opportunity.

4.Revenue and Capital Monitoring 2015/16 Month 9 Outturn Forecast Statement

We resolved to defer consideration of this item as there was no officer representation available to present the report and answer Members' questions.

5.Select Committee Work Programme

We received the Strong Communities Select Committee Work Programme. In doing so, the following points were noted:

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- A special meeting of the Strong Communities Select Committee would be held on 17th March 2016 at 10.00am (A pre-meeting for Select Committee Members would commence at 9.30am). The agenda items for this meeting will be:
 - Month 9 Budget Monitoring.
 - A County that Serves.
 - Strategic and Equality Plan Monitoring Report.

We resolved to receive the report and noted its content.

6. Select Committee Action List

We noted the Strong Communities Select Committee action list.

7. Cabinet and Council forward planner

We resolved to receive and note the Cabinet and Council Forward Planner.

8. Next meeting

We resolved that the following Strong Communities Select Committee meetings be held on the following dates:

- Special meeting – 17th March 2016 at 10.00am.
- Ordinary meeting - 28th April 2016 at 10.00am.

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