

# **REGENERATION, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**29 JANUARY 2015**

## **PROVISION OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD COMMUNITY HUB IN TWYDALL**

Report from: Richard Hicks, Deputy Director, Customer Contact,  
Leisure, Culture, Democracy and Governance

### **Summary**

This Report outlines the indicative plans for a Community Hub facility at Twydall, together with an update on the proposed funding for this project.

### **1. Background**

- 1.1 Our Community Hub programme is our strategic approach to developing our libraries as a highly valued public service, widening the offer available by establishing a gateway to Council services such as Planning, Housing, Benefits and environmental services and using flexible space to enable other public service agencies to operate from under the same roof on a surgery basis, for example Health, Police and Debt Advice.
- 1.2 Community Hubs have been successfully established in Gillingham, Rochester and Chatham, and a new Community Hub will be opened in Strood in early March. Building upon the success of the Community Hub programme across Medway, the potential to establish Neighbourhood Community Hubs in other areas has been explored and Twydall has been identified as a key location, given such a facility would directly benefit council tenants and former council tenants who have exercised the right to buy. It will be a point at which people can access the welfare services they need, e.g. get housing benefit advice and debt counselling, get other forms of housing advice, pay bills, raise repair or adaptation requests, ask about right to buy and consider all their housing options. The Medway Tenant Forum representative was consulted and is supportive of the proposal.
- 1.3 Funding for this project has been clearly identified from the HRA credit balance, albeit the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has requested more details from us about the use of this funding. We have responded fully to these requests.
- 1.4 Members of the Committee have asked for an update on the scheme, and this Report has been produced in response to that request.

## 2. Overview of the Scheme

- 2.1 This proposal will entail the expansion of the existing Twydall Library into the neighbouring vacant shop next to the current location. This will enable the new Neighbourhood Community Hub to offer a wider range of services to residents within the area, including the establishment of surgeries to provide Housing advice, benefits advice and debt counselling, and also afford the opportunity to access a wider range of council services.
- 2.2 Indicative plans have been drawn up for this project, with estimated costs of £500,000, and estimated timescales for completion at 6 months. Final draft plans will be shared with Members and residents through a consultation process, as part of the initial stages of the project.

## 3. Advice and analysis

- 3.1 As previously stated, funding for this project is to be provided from the HRA credit balance, albeit that more information about our use of this funding was requested by the Department for Communities and Local Government. Whilst we have responded comprehensively to CLG's queries, and to further repetitious enquiries from the Department, we are unable to progress this scheme further until we are able to assess the risks to securing the funding. Once we have ascertained that the risk has passed, we will seek to progress the scheme and will ensure that information on the project is communicated to Members and our customers.
- 3.2 A full DIA will be undertaken as part of the planning process for this project, ensuring that the new facility meets our customers' accessibility requirements. This will assist the Council to comply with its equality duties in section 149 Equality Act 2010.

## 4. Risk Management

- 4.1 Risk management is an integral part of good governance. The Council has a responsibility to identify and manage threats and risks to achieve its strategic objectives and enhance the value of services it provides to the community.

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Action to avoid or mitigate risk</b>	<b>Risk rating</b>
Funding for the project	Enquiries raised by the Department for Communities and Local Government over the use of the HRA credit balance for this project.	Comprehensive responses have been provided to the Department, and the rationale for the scheme is clear	B2

## **5. Consultation**

- 5.1 The final draft plans for the Neighbourhood Community Hub will be shared with Members and customers for their views and comments in the initial stages of the project.

## **6. Financial and Legal implications**

- 6.1 The project cannot be progressed at this stage because there is a risk that the Department for Communities and Local Government will exercise the rights that they claim give them the power to reverse the transfer or direct money to be paid into the HRA. The Council disputes CLG's ability to do this.
- 6.2 The Council transferred the HRA credit balance using the powers that existed at that time contained in paragraph 2 of Part 3 of Schedule 4 to Local Government and Housing Act 1989: "A local housing authority to whom no Housing Revenue Account subsidy is payable for any year may carry the whole or part of any credit balance shown in their Housing Revenue Account for that year to the credit of some other revenue account of theirs."

## **7. Conclusions**

- 7.1 The establishment of a Neighbourhood Community Hub in Twydall will bring undoubted benefits to the community it will serve, not least:
- A new facility, offering a wider range of services and an extended Library for our customers in Twydall
  - The ability for Ward Councillors to use the new facility for surgeries and housing surgeries for residents
  - A boost for Twydall, creating a modern and vibrant location for community use.

## **8. Recommendations**

- 8.1 Members are asked to note the current position with the project to establish a Neighbourhood Community Hub in Twydall.

### **Lead officer contact**

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### **Background papers**

None.