

Saffire Funding

IT Working Group, item

Committee: IT Working Group

Agenda Item

Date: 12 June 2006

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Title: Saffire Funding

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Summary

1. This report outlines the history of the Saffire community website and seeks Members views on the way forward.

Background

2. In December 2003 the E-Government Task Group recommended that a 3 year financial support contract for Saffire, in the sum of £6,500 per annum, was approved by Resources Committee. This was agreed and the contract commenced on 1 December 2003.
3. Prior to this contract, since 1997, the council had supported Saffire on an on-going basis in the sum of £10,000 per annum.
4. The Saffire website was set up, initially on a voluntary basis, in 1995 by Dr Stephen Willoughby. It was the first community website in the UK. It now provides information on a range of subjects connected to the Uttlesford area, including business, clubs and societies, tourism, travel, what's on and news. It has also promoted discussion on local issues such as housing, history and the expansion of Stansted Airport. The website has won national awards for its community content and has been well used by the public.
5. In 1997, the Council agreed a grant to Dr Willoughby in return for a commitment to support and develop the site and meet the associated running costs. Originally, the site content was restricted to the Saffron Walden area. However, a condition of grant aid was that the site should be extended to cover the whole Uttlesford district.
6. The original website included a large number of items of interest, such as tourism, what's on and clubs and societies information. As part of the 2003 contract it was agreed that these would transfer to the Uttlesford website and Saffire would be revamped to include new areas such as:
 - a) Car share scheme – the use of interactive databases to match those offering journeys to those seeking them.
 - b) Improved business directory – the introduction of search facilities and electronic access to businesses in the directory.
 - c) Supporting home workers (teleworkers) – provide online facilities to enable local home workers to get in contact with each other and form teleworking groups (to overcome the isolation often felt by lone workers).
 - d) LETS (Local Exchange Trading Schemes) and Time Bank schemes – LETS use a system of community credits, so that direct exchanges do not have to be made. People earn LETS credits by providing a service, and

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can then spend the credits on whatever is offered by others on the scheme: for example childcare, transport, food, home repairs or the hire of tools and equipment. Time Banks are similar to LETS: Such schemes can be managed through a website, such as Saffire.

- e) Citizen's Initiatives – Extending the use of Saffire to promote community initiatives through the use of message boards, polls, surveys, closed user groups and file sharing.
7. Attached as Appendix one is a report from Dr Willoughby on the activities of the website during the contract period. Dr Willoughby has also requested that the council continues to support the website by awarding a new 3 year contract in the sum of £6,500 per annum.

Options for consideration

Option 1 - Cease to provide support to Saffire

8. Dr Willoughby has indicated that Saffire would probably cease operating if funding is withdrawn. An analysis of the content of Saffire has identified that the majority of areas now covered by Saffire would be lost, as they are unlikely to be replicated, at least immediately, on the council website.

Option 2 - Continue to provide support to Saffire

9. Discussions have been held with Dr Willoughby regarding the possible future of Saffire. He has indicated that the continued funding, in the sum of £6,500 would enable the following to be achieved:
 - a. Continue to monitor the activity on Saffireweb's forums and respond as necessary
 - b. Continue the administration of membership (manual processing of accounts, forgotten account details, fielding general enquiries)
 - c. Respond to requests to set up additional Projects & Initiatives
 - d. Expand the Skills Exchange network to include people who have difficulty using the Internet. This requires offering a brokering service by telephone, post and possibly SMS text
 - e. Research, update and expand the Trading and Organisations directories
 - f. Monitor the integrity of links to external sites and research additional ones
 - g. Sustain existing publicity materials and launch additional campaigns as required
 - h. Research items to supplement the Virtual Skip
 - i. Develop a robust newsletter facility to keep members better informed of developments on the site
10. Any new contract would commence from 1 April 2007 to align with the council financial year. To enable this to happen, Members would be required to agree to a four month extension of the existing contract. There is sufficient budget available to meet the cost of the extension.

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Recommendations

The views of the Working Group are therefore sought on the options identified. These views will then be forwarded to the Operations Committee for consideration as part of the 2007/08 budget setting process.

Should Members decide on the option to award a new support contract, it is recommended that the current contract is extended until 31 March 2007 to align the new contract with the council financial year.

Background Papers

None

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Appendix One – Saffireweb report by Dr Stephen Willoughby

Introduction

Saffireweb is a community networking website that serves the Uttlesford district. Saffireweb arose out of its award-winning predecessor, Saffire, which ran from 1996-2004 and became obsolete as local government, business and NGOs developed their own websites. The new site, which was launched in January 2005, has a different emphasis which aims to stimulate the formation and aid the functioning of a number of community networking schemes.

This report briefly describes these schemes and their activities to date.

Usage

The general information on Saffireweb is available to anyone, whereas participation in the networking schemes requires users to be registered as members. Membership is open to anyone who lives or works in Uttlesford.

- There are currently 351 members across the entire district.
- The site attracts an average of around 500 non-registered visitors and 15,000 page requests per week.
- Member activity in each networking scheme is detailed below

Virtual Skip

Purpose: To provide a simple recycling facility whereby members can offer / request goods that would otherwise be discarded – a “virtual skip”. The aim is to avoid articles being discarded to landfill when they could be of use to someone else.

This has been very well used, with typically 100-150 items wanted or on offer at any one time.

Some of the more unusual items on offer include oxygenating pond weed (difficult to source locally via commercial outlets), gluts of fresh herbs and vegetables, and unwanted building materials. The site administrator often supplements members’ contributions with items that he considers will be of interest to members sourced from the local press and elsewhere.

Skills Exchange

Purpose: To encourage the exchange of knowledge and skills which are not always readily available in the market place and to maximise the social capital available in the area. Members of Skills Exchange are able to trade using time as currency: in effect it is a time bank.

Skills exchange has received a moderate level of use with 170 members having signed up. Some 70 hours of skills have been traded since the scheme was launched, but there is some evidence that members are exchanging

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favours without bothering to do the accounting. This practice is not detrimental to the scheme at all.

Interesting examples of skills traded include:

- A student who needed to learn Swahili before going on a “gap” year in Tanzania found a member who was able to give him some lessons
- A member was able to borrow a mobility scooter for her elderly mother from another member over the Christmas period
- A member with knowledge of local government was able to help with submitting a planning application
- A local harpsichordist helped a member who needed an accompanist for a music exam

Trading which involves computing and website skills are common, as are gardening, cleaning and general labour.

There is some evidence that there is a potential demand for Skills Exchange amongst those who do not readily have access to the Internet e.g. elderly people and those with inadequate computer skills. It is therefore planned to introduce systems that will allow this group to participate by post, telephone and SMS.

Lift Share

Purpose: To contribute to traffic reduction and provide more badly-needed transport options in the area.

In common with other lift sharing schemes in the country, the take-up of this scheme by members has been quite low. Even an inducement by a local company to offer a prize of £150 for the individual who registered the greatest number of journeys during a period of time failed to stimulate much activity. However, one member who is used to lift sharing commented at the time of the threatened People’s Fuel Lobby protest last year: “The Lift Share network got together and we worked out that, between us, we could manage our commuting for several weeks by making a few adjustments to our journeys. We were able to avoid the dog-eat-dog scenario of queuing for hours to get supplies.”

There is little doubt that lift sharing will become more popular as fuel costs rise and government incentives, e.g. priority lanes for multiple occupancy, are introduced. Saffireweb’s lift share scheme adds no overhead to the general running costs of the site, and it is recommended that it is kept in place in readiness for such a time.

Homeworkers’ Network

Purpose: To enable networking among local self-employed people who work from home to their mutual benefit. (The UDC Local Plan recognises the benefits to the district of home working).

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Initial take-up of this scheme was slow, so it was decided to expand it to include small businesses. The number of registrations in the scheme is now steadily growing.

Projects & Initiatives

Purpose: In conjunction with the Ideas Forum, offers a platform for members to discuss ideas for community projects and a space where they can be developed.

Current active projects include:

- The Sustainable Homes Network for Uttlesford
- Dunmow Town Strategy Group
- Saffron Walden Initiative
- Saffron Walden Business Forum
- Integrated Public Transport Plan
- Friends of the Earth Reports

Reports from projects that have finished (e.g. Residents' Air Quality Survey, Traffic Survey) are also archived in this section.

Ideas under discussion in the Ideas Forum include a radio station for the area, music festival, food network and bio fuel distribution.

Trading and Societies Directories

Purpose: These directories of trading and non-trading organisations are maintained to complement the other information services on Saffireweb. They are widely used by members and visitors alike.