

UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL SCRUTINY

Report and Recommendations of Uttlesford Scrutiny Member task group on Day Centres

October 2010

Introduction

- 1 A task group of Members from the Scrutiny Committee has completed a review of the operation of day centres in the district. The task group comprised Councillors Chambers, Mrs C M Dean, Jones and Rolfe. The task group consulted the Management Committees of the five day centres in the district located respectively in Dunmow, Saffron Walden, Stansted Mountfitchet, Takeley and Thaxted, and visited the centres to observe activities. Representatives of the Management Committees have attended meetings of the Scrutiny Committee at which progress of the review was discussed. Essex Social Services and Age Concern and other bodies were consulted during the course of the investigation. The task group also met with key officers from the council involved in day centres.
- 2 The research carried out as part of the review included case studies of other day centres. Very few authorities run lunch clubs similar to those in Uttlesford. A large number of authorities run day centres in partnership with social services and voluntary sector organisations, but the users in the majority of cases are referred by social services and they are not open to the general public aged over 55. A number of councils have either severely reduced or terminated their lunch clubs provision.
- 3 This report summarises the task group's findings and recommendations to the council and day centre management committees for improving the viability of day centres for future years.

Management Committee responsibilities

- 4 The current core purposes of day centres are to promote the welfare of senior citizens (those aged 55 and over) and those people registered as having disabilities in a manner which is deemed in law to be charitable, in collaboration with the district council, by providing and maintaining a day centre for the purpose of recreation or other leisure time occupation in the interests of social welfare and with the object of improving their conditions of life; and providing meals and refreshment of eligible persons attending the centre.
- 5 In principle, there is a clear distinction between the respective roles of management committees and the district council. Except in Stansted Mountfitchet, the district council both owns and maintains the premises, and the management committees manage the operation of the centres.

See paragraphs 7-8, which deal with specific issues concerning the Stansted centre. In some centres the district council employs the cook.

- 6 The management committees are made up of volunteers, who participate in the social life of the centres and welcome and look after the senior citizens. It is this side of the work of the centres that volunteers seem to find particularly worthwhile. The volunteers tend to show a strong disinclination to become involved in other aspects of the running of day centres such as health and safety risk assessments, fire safety, administration and other essential tasks, despite these being key elements of a management committee's responsibilities. Management committees administer lettings to third parties and, apart from at Stansted, where a pilot is running, they submit 50% of lettings income to the district council.

Stansted Day Centre

- 7 The Stansted Day Centre is legally owned by Stansted Mountfitchet Parish Council, though this situation only came to light during the review and is an anomaly. The centre was built by the district council on parish council land. It is understood that title was intended to be transferred to Uttlesford but transfer was never carried out.
- 8 Stansted currently retains 100% of lettings income under a pilot scheme introduced some two years ago. The purpose was to allow the Stansted centre to employ a day centre manager, partly paid by the retained additional lettings income. This employee has taken on the organisation of the centre and lifted a significant burden of the duties that form an integral part of managing a centre from volunteers. Recruitment of volunteers has been boosted. The manager shops for food and raises money from lotteries, sale of cards and applying for grants. The management committee for the Stansted centre has recommended its arrangements as a way that other centres could be organised to achieve similar benefits.

Findings

- 9 The task group has found the day centres to be valued by users, providing freshly cooked meals and offering the opportunity for a chat. The combination of staff and volunteers is at the heart of the ethos of the centres, but finding and retaining volunteers to serve on the management committees and/ or look after the senior citizens is becoming more difficult.
- 10 The management committees are responsible for the operation of the centres under written agreements with the district council. There are inconsistencies amongst the centres' agreements. The responsibilities of the management committees are becoming more onerous, especially owing to increased legislation and regulation and the age profile of their members perhaps underlies their lack of enthusiasm for

the some of the tasks that have to be done to ensure the safety of the users of the centres, some of whom are quite vulnerable. The role of the management committees would be eased if all centres had regular support by a coordinator or manager responsible to the committees, such as is now provided at Stansted.

- 11 None of the centres is used to capacity, with the exception of Saffron Walden. The highest lettings income is achieved by the Dunmow centre. The responsiveness of each centre to the needs of its local community and the profile of the users each attracts are strengths of the diverse approaches adopted by the different management committees.

Financial Context

- 12 The task group acknowledges that the council faces budgetary constraints, and increases in utility bills for day centres. The management committees face increased costs of food ingredients. The council's tenant participation officer has been providing valued support to management committees, though there is no long-term commitment that this support will continue and the role is primarily to represent the district council as landlord. If the council were to fund fully a coordinator or manager to support day centres, the additional cost to the council would be approximately £27,500, bringing the total costs of day centres to £57,770 in 2010/11. If a manager or coordinator were employed directly by the day centres, the cost may be less and the accountability to the day centre management committees would be more direct. Table 1 below shows current lettings income for each centre. Table 2 below shows possible sources of new income to pay for a coordinator or centre manager.

Table 1: Lettings income per day centre

Centre location	50% centre lettings income submitted to the district council for 2009/10
Dunmow	£3814.75
Saffron Walden	£1062.00
Takeley	£540.00
Thaxted	£97.25
Stansted (*)	£0.00

(* This is retained at Stansted under a trial to fund the centre manager.)

- 13 Full information of the financial status of all the day centres was not available to the task group. The working group has considered options for increasing revenue at the centres through increased lettings and grant funding. An indicative business plan is set out in Table 2.

Table 2: Indicative business plan for extra income

Existing and potential sources of income	Potential value
Current 50% lettings income	£5,000 (excludes Stansted)
Additional lettings income	£8,000
Sale of goods	£3,000
Lotteries	£2,000
Grants	£2,000
Sale of meals	£4,000
TOTAL	£24,000

Options for the way ahead

14 The task group has considered the following options:

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
No changes to current arrangements	Diversity of approaches enables centres to respond to local issues in their communities.	<p>The band of volunteers on whom the centres depend will probably continue to dwindle as existing organisers and helpers themselves grow older and less able.</p> <p>Lack of clarity over respective roles of the committees and the council because of anomalies and blurred boundaries.</p> <p>The tenant participation officer cannot continue to support day centres without dropping some other aspects of her role.</p> <p>Key management tasks may not be covered.</p>

<p>Close some centres and focus on the more popular</p>	<p>Financial savings in running and maintaining centres.</p> <p>Savings could be used to offset additional costs in providing professional support to day centres</p>	<p>Most users would be unable or unwilling to travel from their local communities to the remaining centres</p>
<p>Develop partnership arrangements with social services and third sector organisations</p>	<p>Costs could be shared with other partners</p>	<p>Service would be focused on those users with particular needs referred by and funded by social services. Character of centres would change.</p> <p>Little interest from ECC social services or organisations like Age Concern to expand into new partnerships providing day care for elderly residents.</p>
<p>Discontinue involvement in day centres or transfer service and assets to local councils</p>	<p>Stansted Mountfitchet Day and Community Centre operates on this basis with retention of 100% of its lettings income to assist with the associated costs. (The district council maintains the premises.)</p>	<p>Willingness of local councils not known</p> <p>Risk that centres may cease to operate and elderly residents are unable to access a centre</p> <p>Limits opportunity for shared resource to support network of centres</p>
<p>District council takes over management of centres as well as providing and maintaining the accommodation</p>	<p>Responsibility for centres clear.</p> <p>Volunteers could still act as hosts and look after centre users</p>	<p>Additional staff costs in managing centres</p> <p>People may be less inclined to volunteer to work in council run centres.</p>

Management committees jointly employ centre coordinator to support them funded by keeping all income from lettings	Affordable for the district council	Management committees not confident that lettings income will be sufficient to enable the full time coordinator they seek.
District Council employs full time coordinator to support management committees	Favoured option of management committees Voluntary sector remains in control of centres Management committees have access to the advice support and capacity they feel that they need.	Budgetary implication for the council: £27,500 a year for staff costs.

Conclusions

15 The Member task group has concluded and recommends that:

A. Management committees remaining responsible for running day centres represents the best fit with past practice and the present Big Society concept, which essentially sees communities being responsible for deciding their own needs, but supported as necessary by local government. The council should make sure that the centre committees are enabled to continue to provide the valued service they offer to elderly residents, some of whom are quite vulnerable, and to attract new volunteers;

B1. The group's favoured approach is a partnership arrangement whereby the district council initially funds a coordinator/manager post for two years to support day centres until centre income increases; the coordinator/manager would be employed by the council, though preferably not also represent the council as landlord; OR

B2. Alternatively, the coordinator/manager could be employed directly by the management committees with a grant from the council for two years or tapered over three years. This arrangement could mirror the present setup at Stansted and would establish a longer-term arrangement in readiness for when the management committees assume total financial responsibility.

C. Day centres should be helped by the coordinator to become more enterprising and to share best practice; the role of the coordinator would be to advise and support the management committees in

fulfilling, but not to take away their responsibilities. The image, and even the name, of day centres may need to be changed to meet contemporary expectations to achieve best success;

D. Closure of any of the five day centres should not be considered;

E. The respective management agreements should be amended to reflect any modifications necessary to ensure that each centre can effectively deliver on its core purpose, taking into account the centre's local circumstances but removing anomalies and any lack of clarity as to the respective responsibilities of the district council and the management committees.

Acknowledgements

- 16 The working group would like to thank all those people from the council and the day centre management committees who took part in the review and provided their advice to the Scrutiny Committee. Their help was invaluable.

RECOMMENDED that:

1. The Scrutiny Committee recommends that the Community and Housing Committee fully funds a coordinator/manager as a council employee (distinct from the council's landlord role), or alternatively by grant to day centre committees so they can employ the coordinator/manager themselves, at an estimated maximum cost of £27,000 a year for 2 years from April 2011 if the post is full time (pro rate reduction for a part time post). The role of this person would be to support the day centre management committees with a view to developing additional income streams during this period, so enabling the management committees to fund the post fully themselves by becoming financially and organisationally sustainable.
2. Management agreements should be reviewed and that status of the ownership of the Stansted centre should be regularised.
3. Other findings of the task group be addressed, as appropriate, respectively by the council and/or the management committees.