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# REPORT

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**Cllr John Cole-Morgan Portfolio Holder for Community and Housing**

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## Developing a more strategic approach to Social Inclusion

### 1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is:
  1. to consider the development of a more coherent and systematic approach to improving social inclusion in South Wiltshire in the medium term.
  2. to obtain approval to re-allocate resources within the Community Initiatives Unit to enable the Council to continue with its commitment to improving social inclusion and delivering key services to residents in its most deprived wards.
  3. to consider a request from the Bemerton Heath Residents Association for a contribution of £8,000 per annum towards the running of a Community Centre

### 2. Developing a Strategic Approach

- 2.1 In the CPA Inspection report, the Audit Commission identified some weaknesses in the Council's ambition stating: *"There are areas where the Council does not demonstrate high ambition. While the Council aims for 'equality of opportunity for all' and 'supports the disadvantaged', the council's leadership and commitment to community cohesion objectives are not clear..... Although the Council has social inclusion and diversity policies it is not possible to be sure that the council's ambitions in these areas are concrete or that it is systematically addressing them."* .....The CPA assessors also stated that our Social Inclusion Policy *'lacks SMART targets'*.
- 2.2 The CPA assessors did however recognise the contribution that the Council and its partners were making to both improve anti-social behaviour and provide activities to positively engage children and young people in the Bemerton Ward most of which has emanated from the Bemerton Heath Neighbourhood Centre.
- 2.3 If the Council is to achieve its objective of becoming an excellent authority it must develop a more coherent and systematic approach to social inclusion in South Wiltshire. In line with the Improvement Plan adopted by the Cabinet following the CPA it is proposed that the existing Social Inclusion Policy be reviewed and that an action plan be produced by a Task and Finish Group that would report back to Cabinet by March 2005.
- 2.4 The revised Social Inclusion Policy and Action Plan would set out the Council's strategic approach to social inclusion and identify specific measures and targets to reduce social exclusion. It would draw on best practice and the lessons learnt from the development of services in the Bemerton Ward and in particular the success of the Bemerton Heath Neighbourhood Centre. For example we could focus future development at the Friary and Amesbury (the second and third most deprived wards after Bemerton)

### **3. Sustaining Community Services in the Bemerton Ward that address Social Inclusion**

- 3.1 Bemerton Heath is the largest estate in the city with 6288 residents in 2495 households. The Bemerton Ward has the highest level of deprivation in the District. (source: National Indices of Deprivation)
- 3.2 In 2000 the Bemerton Heath Neighbourhood Centre (BHNC) was opened in response to local research, which identified two key factors in South Wiltshire – low income and isolated communities without local service provision. In combination these factors serve to limit choice for individuals. The BHNC was setup to try to resolve this cycle of exclusion and meet the immediate needs of the community by providing, advice and information, opportunities to learn new skills for life and work. It also facilitates delivery of local services that meet local needs, achieved through a partnership between statutory and local voluntary and community groups and individuals.
- 3.3 The BHNC and the community development work emanating from it has been highly successful both in terms of projects and activities delivered e.g. Radio Bemerton, the home work club and the development of local community groups, examples of which include the establishment of the Residents Association and re-establishment of the local Inter-Agency Group.
- 3.4 Looking to the future there is now a need to look at the service provided in a more corporate context. The objective is to establish an approach to delivering the services that address social inclusion in a way that could be adapted to for use in other priority areas within the District.
- 3.5 Among the lessons learnt from the first three years is that when services are provided in this way priority needs to be given to community engagement and development. To achieve this it is necessary:
  1. to develop a three-year strategic plan.
  2. to consult with both community representatives and partners and
  3. to combine this with a comprehensive community profile.
- 3.6 The expectation and almost inevitable is the development of new projects and services, a prime example being a community / youth centre which is a key ambition of the Residents' Association.
- 3.7 The BHNC Partnership recognised that there is already a capacity issue with regards to the current service provision and thought it prudent to undertake an 'Operational Review' before looking into the future.
- 3.8 The conclusion of the Operational Review is that the BHNC is not yet at capacity and there is still a substantial amount of developmental work to be done in the community. The review has identified that the success of the BHNC and the developmental work has increased the operational commitment required to provide the service. The review assessed the resources that are put into providing the service and found that the human resource is insufficient to sustain the current level of service let alone develop further services. For example with just one Officer managing the service there is no cover for him when he is out of the Centre on duty, training, on annual leave or ill. This results in partial closure or reduction in service.
- 3.9 In order to overcome these problems it is proposed that resources currently committed to the management and development of the Wise Card Scheme be

reallocated to support both the BHNC and the community development work undertaken in the Bemerton Ward.

- 3.10 This can be achieved by reviewing the role of the Discount Development Manager (see section 4) and for that Officer to be based at the BHNC and managed by the manager of the BHNC. The Officer will still retain responsibility for the administration of the Wisecard scheme, however, he will also take an active role in assisting with the day-to-day management of the Centre. This will enable the manager to delegate some operational tasks thus allowing far more strategic approach to be taken to developing services in the Bemerton Ward and eventually other priority wards
- 3.11 For the Council, the residents of the Bemerton ward and the BHNC the benefits of this proposal are:
1. It would enable more strategic work to be undertaken in the local community with 50% of the manager's time being prioritised to community engagement and developmental work
  2. There would be the capacity to ensure that all community development work/initiatives in the ward where the Council has an input are managed and co-ordinated by the Manager of the BHNC.
  3. It would enable support to be given to the Residents Association to achieve its objective to provide a community / youth centre
  4. The current operational deficiencies at the BHNC would be addressed, Performance Indicators and a marketing strategy developed.
  5. There would be the opportunity to assess how the service could be replicated in other priority wards
  6. The BHNC would benefit from the skills, knowledge and experience of the Discount Development Manager who has recently gained a HND in Marketing and Business Studies
  7. The Council is able to continue with its commitment to the Wisecard Scheme and run it more economically

#### **4. Impact on the Wisecard Scheme**

- 4.1 Since it was introduced in 2003 the Wisecard has made a significant contribution to meeting the Council's Social Inclusion Policy by providing discounts for materially and socially disadvantaged groups. The provision of a safety net for low-income groups allows the Council to levy the appropriate market rate charges for services, and targets those people most in need of discounts.
- 4.2 The scheme has been successfully managed and developed by the Discount Development Manager and now has an annual membership exceeding 1000. However, since the Cabinet considered a report concerning the implementation and expansion of the scheme on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2004 the role of the manager has shifted. With all the systems in place, a marketing strategy, setup application forms standardised and operational manuals issued etc there is very little opportunity for the further development of the scheme apart from a 'residents card' that has been put on hold. The role is, therefore, becoming much more administrative.
- 4.3 With the shift in emphasis of the post from developmental to administrative it is recognised that the Discount Development Manager will have some spare time. It is proposed that this spare time be used to support the Manager of the BHNC to address the issues referred to in section three of this report.
- 4.4 From a social inclusion perspective there is already a lot of synergy between the work that the Discount Development Manager does and the needs of the majority of local residents in the Bemerton Ward. Fewer than two percent of the Ward's population are

Wisecard holders so there is a real opportunity to promote the scheme and increase the membership. This proposal would enable the Council to be seen to be taking a much more pro-active approach to social inclusion in the context of prioritising key services in the most deprived Wards.

**5. Bemerton Heath Residents' Association's request for funding towards a Community Centre**

- 5.1 The Residents' Association has for sometime been seeking a suitable venue in the Bemerton Ward for a community centre / youth club and the opportunity has arisen to lease a large hall and associated meeting rooms from St Michaels Church.
- 5.2 The premises are currently vacant and on the market on a commercial basis for an annual lease of £8,000 excl. bills. The Church has indicated that it is willing to negotiate on the figure if the lessee is promoting a worthwhile project of the type proposed and it is anticipated that agreement could be reached on a sum in the region of £8,000 that includes all bills etc.
- 5.3 The Residents' Association is requesting an annual grant from the Council of £8,000 to cover the cost of the lease.
- 5.4 The opportunity to rent premises of this size on Bemerton is unlikely to occur again for some years, and offers the chance for the Council to act as a catalyst to promote active social inclusion measures in the most deprived part of the District.
- 5.5 The Residents' Association is relatively new and recognises that this is a major challenge for them, but it is one that they are seeking. It will need the support of the Council and other key partners if it is to succeed.
- 5.6 Members will be aware that the Council has signed up to developing the Wiltshire Compact and agreed that it will create more consistency and be more open in its funding processes. This will be the first request of this nature that the Cabinet has had to consider. Looked at in isolation acceding to this request would go against everything that the Compact is striving to achieve. It would set a precedence that could have far reaching implications, leaving the Council open to criticism and scrutiny from other community sector groups.
- 5.7 Should Members consider that the Council should take this opportunity to assist in the opening of a Community Centre on Bemerton Heath by approving a grant of £8,000 and thus be proactive in supporting this deprived estate it is suggested that the making of the grant is conditional on the following:
  - the Residents' Association satisfy the criteria for groups able to apply for grants as set out in Salisbury District Grants Directory.
  - the Manager of the BHNC being satisfied that the Residents Association is able to develop and deliver a Youth Club and that they are able to meet all of the responsibilities with regard to issues such as trained staff (including child protection training and CRB checks) management of budgets including revenue and capital, funding streams; Health and safety; insurance liabilities, etc
  - that this is the Council's only financial commitment in this project and that that the Residents' Association take full responsibility for the running of the Centre and any further revenue and capital costs.
  - the manager of the BHNC is the conduit between the Council and the Residents Association on both this and any future community development projects in the Ward

- that the proposals in paragraphs 3 and 4 above are approved so that spare capacity is available to support the Residents' Association. If they are not approved it is unlikely that adequate support could be given.

5.8 Although time is of an essence, the Church has assured the Residents Association that it will be given 'first refusal' if there is interest shown from another organisation. This should enable the Residents Association to undertake all of the groundwork prior to the grant being approved. If this is not achieved then there is the risk that the Council will be committing itself to a project that is not sustainable

## 6. Recommendations

- 6.1 Cabinet commissions a review of the Social Inclusion Policy by a Task and Finish Group with a report on an updated Policy and action plan in March 2005.
- 6.2 That approval is given to re-allocate resources within the Community Initiatives Unit to enable the Council to continue with its commitment to addressing social inclusion and delivering key services to residents in its most deprived wards.
- 6.3 That consideration is given to the request from the Bemerton Heath Residents Association for an annual contribution of £8,000 towards the running of a Community Centre to be divided equally between the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account

## 7. Implications

- **Financial:** There is currently no budgetary provision in the General Fund or the Housing Revenue Account in 2004/05 to fund this scheme. Should members agree under 6.3 that further consideration be given to this project then a bid for £8,000 will need to be made through the portfolio planning and budget setting process for 2005/06.
- **Legal:** The Council is able to make a grant from the General Fund (GF) to the Residents' Association in the same way it does so for other groups and associations. The Local Government and Housing Act 1989 provides that where facilities serving the community as a whole are provided by a local housing authority the contribution made by an account other than the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) must properly reflect the community's share of the benefits of the amenity. Therefore when any grant is apportioned between the GF and HRA the council must ensure that the HRA contributes no more than relates to the use of the facility by its tenants.
- **Human Rights:** None.
- **Personnel:** If changes are made to the duties and responsibilities of the post of Bemerton Heath Neighbourhood Manager and the Discount Development Manager the posts may need to be re-evaluated under the Council's Job Review scheme, which could lead to an increase or decrease in the salaries.
- **Community Safety:** Contained in the report
- **Environmental:** None
- **Council's Core Value:** Providing excellent Service; Being fair and equitable; Supporting the disadvantaged; Meeting the financial challenge; Improving the performance of the Council; Building the capacity of the Council
- **Wards affected:** All