



REVIEW OF COMMUNITY FACILITIES IN ALTON 2003 FINAL REPORT - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council jointly commissioned North Harbour Consulting to undertake this review of community facilities in Alton to provide information and recommendations that would guide decisions about possible future investment. The brief was to assess the demand for community facilities in the town, to identify options for satisfying this demand, and to make recommendations for the way in which the future needs of the town could be met. North Harbour Consulting Limited was appointed to undertake the review, and work started in April 2003. The main part of the study involved three surveys: (1) of the community facilities that are available in Alton, covering Alton Community Centre as well as other venues; (2) of organisations that are using Alton Community Centre, for their views on the quality of the building and services they receive; and (3) of other organisations to establish their experience of using venues other than the community centre. Consultation has also taken place with individuals representing a number of stakeholders and interested parties.

THE COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN ALTON - FINDINGS

Evidence from the surveys and stakeholder interviews shows that there is an active community and voluntary sector in Alton. There is a high level of participation by the public in clubs, societies and community activities, and a wide range of organisations covering many different issues and interests. The community and voluntary sector is stable with many long-established groups and organisations. Although the existence of some new organisations is reported by Voluntary Action for East Hampshire ('Voluntary Action' – the council of voluntary service covering the whole of East Hampshire District Council) and Alton Town Council (the 'Town Council'), very few respondents to the surveys had been in existence for less than three years. The picture presented by the survey is of a rather static and fragmented voluntary sector whose forum for bringing the sector together is not well attended.

THE GENERAL STANDARD OF COMMUNITY FACILITIES - FINDINGS

- There is wide diversity of facilities available to the community in Alton, but not all these facilities are fit-for-purpose or provide the services that people need.
- There is no directory that lists all the publicly available facilities to act as a guide for people and organisations looking for suitable premises.
- Many of the facilities are located in older buildings, especially those in the Town Centre, and require significant levels of investment to bring them up to modern standards. The community centre is therefore not alone in facing problems resulting from an historic lack of capital investment.
- There are additional problems - the quality of services and equipment available at some of the older venues is basic to poor, and some facilities are not managed to professional standards.

Some community groups that responded to the survey have used more than one venue. A majority said that there was little difference in quality between the premises they mainly use and other premises that they may have tried in the past two years. There are suggestions that investment in organisation, management and equipment is as much a priority as investment in bricks and mortar.

There are good facilities in the town. These tend to be found in premises owned by educational, sporting and commercial organisations. However, there is little evidence that the local community and voluntary sector is using venues such as The Swan Hotel, or Treloar School and College, probably on grounds of cost.

Supply and demand appear to be different for different types of accommodation. The survey figures suggest that there is an unmet demand for function rooms, meeting rooms and activity rooms of different sizes that meet high standards, but the demand for larger auditoria and halls is fairly limited.

There are plans for major investment in new community facilities at the Discovery Centre being built on the library site, at The Maltings, at the Methodist Church, and possibly at a new social services day centre. If they are completed as planned, they are important additions to the range of facilities available in Alton. However, they do not form an alternative to the community centre that already exists and whose future was part of this study. Nevertheless, the development of the Discovery Centre and The Maltings could change perceptions and raise expectations about what constitutes 'desirable community facilities'.

ALTON COMMUNITY CENTRE - FINDINGS

It is in the context of this wider review of community facilities in Alton that the issues arising at the Alton Community Centre have been addressed. An analysis of the community centre's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (a 'SWOT analysis') has been completed and discussed with the community association's management committee. A summary is provided below.

STRENGTHS

- The community centre is widely seen as a valued resource in Alton. It is in a good location with access to parking. It has a wide range of users from the community, voluntary and statutory sectors. The user group is stable, and this seems likely to ensure that current levels of activity and hence income continue in the medium term. Users have reported very positive feedback about the centre's staffing, services and the range of facilities being provided.
- More than eighty groups and organisations use the centre at about fifty percent of its capacity. Closure of the community centre would create a gap in the facilities available in the town centre. It is hard to see how the users could be accommodated elsewhere if the centre were to close.

WEAKNESSES

- The community centre was set up in the 1970s, and was based on a model of provision that is similar to a working men's institute. This model is no longer appropriate in an age when there are many other opportunities for learning, recreation and social interaction.
- There is evidence that the community association is no longer certain what its wider role in the town is. It has fallen back on the relatively easy option of becoming a facilities manager for the building. However, local authorities are no longer keen to fund organisations whose sole purpose is to run a building.
- The community centre is badly in need of repair and modernisation, although some improvements have been made to the main hall and bar area over the summer (2003). It lacks disabled access to the first and second floors, and there are other health and safety issues. The second floor is not used for a community purpose and this represents a wasted asset.
- The community association's income is not sufficient to pay for building maintenance and modernisation. The potential for marketing to increase the number of users appears limited.

- The association has significant responsibilities for maintenance of the building under the terms of the lease that would become liabilities if the building deteriorates further.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Government policy is promoting support for volunteering, active citizenship, and engaged communities.
- The Market Towns Initiative aims to create a role for towns like Alton in promoting the development of services and social infrastructure, and in combating social exclusion in rural areas.
- There is a strong emphasis in national and local government policy on the provision of services by community and voluntary organisations and their involvement in community development and regeneration.
- It has been suggested by respondents to the surveys and some of those interviewed for the research that Alton needs new structures to promote social development in the town, and that there is a need for partnership in the provision of community facilities.
- For all these reasons, this may be a good time to undertake a review of the town's needs and of the community association's role in fulfilling these needs.

THREATS

- The community centre will become increasingly obsolete without major capital investment.
- There are other major developments planned in the town that will provide better facilities, and some existing facilities including the Assembly Rooms may be refurbished, exacerbating the community centre's problems of attracting users into an outdated building.
- There will be increased competition for funding. Funders will expect good quality services for their money, and a contribution to the achievement of their wider social aims.

THE COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION'S RESPONSE

Following presentation of the initial results from this study, the community association's committee of management decided to withdraw its threat of closure while it reviews its future role. The strategic review is not yet concluded, and will be influenced by the findings and conclusions of this study.

CONCLUSIONS

Is all of this – existing facilities and proposals for new facilities - sufficient to meet present and future need in Alton? If the continuation of all the existing provision was assured, then with a process of upgrading existing facilities and the introduction of new ones the totality of community provision might be satisfactory. However, the community centre plays a pivotal role and its future is uncertain. Were the community centre to close, there would be major gaps in provision that other facilities would not be capable of filling without major capital investment. Closing the community centre merely moves the problem of capital investment elsewhere.

A community centre in some form is needed in Alton. This view is supported by a majority of community centre users, by many of the people who were interviewed and by the results of the Town Council's survey of local opinion. The authors also conclude that the present community centre should not be allowed to close until the nature of future provision has been assured in order to avoid disruption to the established patterns of provision in the town.

There appears to be no requirement for more large halls in the centre of Alton once The Maltings is open, and the Assembly Rooms have been refurbished. However, the provision of small to medium sized meeting and activity rooms in the town centre that are well-serviced and equipped is critical. There is also a need for serviced offices for smaller organisations to rent or workstations that are available for hire by the hour. There are additional organisational and management issues that need to be considered.

The fundamental conclusion from this review is that decisions on capital investment in new or upgraded community facilities for Alton cannot be taken separately from a consideration of Alton's changing social needs. The town is expanding, and there are unmet social needs – particularly for young people. Good quality, well-managed community facilities have a role to play in the social development of any community. They help to shape cultural, educational, recreation and leisure-time activity. A discussion of the role of the community and voluntary sector and of the uses of community facilities is therefore critical in developing strategies for Alton's development as a market town.

STRATEGIC OPTIONS

There are two strategic options. The stakeholders could take no action and allow events to run their course, in which case there will continue to be a range of community facilities of varying quality available but the community association will need to limit its risks in some way or wind up. In the authors' view this would be a retrograde step. The gap left by the community centre if it closes would need to be filled elsewhere. Alternatively, the opportunity exists to create a broadly-based community partnership for Alton in which organisations in the town could be brought together in the interests of raising the standard of community facilities and working towards common aims in social development. This would build on the existing voluntary sector interagency forum and similar networks.

RECOMMENDATION 1: The authors commend the concept of a community partnership that brings together all interested parties into an inclusive forum with a brief for social development and for considering ways of improving community facilities, making them a shared resource for the town.

RECOMMENDATION 2: With the support of the local authorities and Voluntary Action for East Hampshire, Alton Town Council should:

- establish an Alton Community Partnership as a vehicle for working towards common aims in social development and improving community facilities;
- within the community partnership, establish a community facilities partnership with two sub-groups – one for the owners and managers of community facilities, the other for users - with the aim of raising the standard of community facilities in the town;
- administer and publish a 'directory of community facilities';
- consider setting up a central booking agency for premises and facilities that are part of the community facilities partnership;
- consider contracting out servicing of the community facilities partnership, operation and management of the directory, and advice and support in the provision and management of community facilities to Alton Community Association or a similar voluntary organisation that is able to access governmental and charitable funds.

ALTON COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

The community association is at a crossroad. Its dilemma is more fundamental than whether it should continue to operate a community centre, and if so, where. Its very purpose is unclear and it appears to lack a vision of how it can assist in meeting the town's wider needs. As a modern community association it could have a role to play in supporting the community and voluntary sector, and in the provision and management of resources that are needed by the sector. The first option is therefore to restructure the community association to play such a role. This would involve changes to its constitution, governance, management, financing and the work it becomes involved with. If this proves impractical, then the second option is to set up a new 'special purpose vehicle' to undertake this role.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Every effort should be made to reach agreement with the Trustees and management committee of Alton Community Association on the need for and nature of a major restructuring so that it plays a more strategic role. It should continue to be active in the fields of adult education, health and social care, recreation and leisure. In partnership with the local authorities, the Town Council, and Voluntary Action for East Hampshire it should also be involved in creating the community facilities partnership, and in the provision of services and 'infrastructure' for smaller groups including property and facilities management, and the provision of equipment and advice.

RECOMMENDATION 4: If Alton Community Association is not restructured or does not wish to take on this wider role, then a new organisation should be created to take on the roles of assisting in the creation of a community facilities partnership, and in the provision of services and 'infrastructure' for smaller groups.

OPTIONS FOR THE COMMUNITY CENTRE

The firm conclusion is that a community centre is needed in Alton. However the existing community centre needs substantial reinvestment or modernisation. There are four options for how this investment could be made.

- Option 1: The existing community centre could be modernised through the refurbishment or redevelopment of the existing building.
- Option 2: The community centre could be moved across the road to a new purpose-built building on what will become vacant land alongside the Discovery Centre.
- Option 3 – The community centre could be rebuilt in part of the car park area alongside the existing building.
- Any one of the first three options would create a 'community facilities zone' in Amery Street, with the Discovery Centre on one side of the road and a community centre alongside it or on the other side of the road.
- Option 4: There could be a 'virtual' community centre in which the community association would operate from an office base located in the Discovery Centre or the Assembly Rooms. It would be responsible for managing a 'virtual' community centre using other available premises in the town that have signed up to a community facilities partnership and a management agreement.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The authors rule out the fourth option – a virtual community centre for the reasons that are given in the body of the report. However, elements of the same line of thinking are present in the other options. Partnership working to share the use of other buildings and especially the Assembly Rooms is needed whichever option is chosen.

In order to make an informed choice between the remaining three options, a full option appraisal incorporating a cost-benefit analysis is required. The main body of the report contains a suggested framework for such an appraisal, with the analysis of some of the elements included.

RECOMMENDATION 6: A working group drawing membership from Hampshire County Council, East Hampshire District Council, Alton Town Council, Voluntary Action for East Hampshire and other stakeholders should be convened as a matter of urgency to report back at an early date with the following terms of reference:

- to prepare an action plan for implementing Recommendations 1 to 4 (community partnership, community facilities partnership and related recommendations);
- to prepare a brief for a centrally-located community centre based on the findings and conclusions of this report which specifies the number and size of meeting rooms, resource rooms, offices (for community association and for other small community organisations some of which may be in the form of serviced workstations rather than complete rooms), toilet, kitchen and/or cafeteria, car parking, disabled access and other facilities;
- to prepare costed sketch schemes for the three possible options for continued provision of community centre facilities put forward in this report;
- to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of the three options, and to prepare a business case for the preferred option;
- to seek approval in principle and funding support from Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council;
- to explore the possibility of funding from other sources including central government funds.

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