

Area North Committee - 19 December 2012

11. Langport and River Parrett Visitor Centre – Update Report

Strategic Director: Rina Singh, Place and Performance
Assistant Directors: Helen Rutter/Kim Close, Communities
Service Manager: Charlotte Jones, Area Development (North)
Lead Officers: Charlotte Jones, Area Development Manager (North)
Diane Layzell Senior Land and Property Officer
Contact Details: charlotte.jones@southsomerset.gov.uk or (01935) 462252
diane.layzell@southsomerset.gov.uk (01935 462058)

Purpose of the Report

To provide an update to the Area Committee on re-use of the Langport Visitor Centre.

A further verbal update will be made at the meeting by the Area Development Manager (North)

Public Interest

The Langport and River Parrett Visitor Centre is owned by SSDC and is currently unoccupied, following the retirement of the former tenant.

The premises are being marketed by the council's commercial agent with a view to re-letting.

Recommendation

Councillors are asked to note and comment on the report and presentation.

Background

The Langport and River Parrett Visitor Centre was built and opened by SSDC in 1998. The centre adjoins the River Parrett and was originally designed to act as a hub for visitors to the Levels and Moors, specifically the River Parrett Trail – a 50 mile network of footpaths following river from 'source to mouth'.

The former tenant and manager of the centre – Bow Bridge Cycles – retired in November and the future use of the property is being reviewed.

The SSDC Countryside Service has relinquished management of the Centre (insert link to PH report) responsibility transferred to Property Services.

The Area Development Manager (North) and Senior Land and Property Officer are undertake a review including local consultation, to secure alternative arrangements for the occupation and management of the property which suit current needs and circumstances – including value for money.

Work completed (co-ordinated by the Area Development Manager (North) and Senior Land and Property Officer) in the light of current changes to occupation and management include:-

- Consultation with local councillors and community groups to consider and establish current needs and opportunities to continue to use the premises to add value to the local economy provide educational services and promote access to the countryside.
- SSDC property agent marketing the premises to seek expressions of interest from potential businesses / other organisations.
- Pre-application planning advice provided in the event of new uses requiring planning consent
- Indicative valuations and assessment of current / local rents, a review of operating costs and future budget requirements
- Review of contents relating to the visitors centre to re-locate as required (including temporary re-locations).

Feedback from consultation and advice to date (December 2012)

- The location has good links with the surrounding network of pathways and waterways – which are valued as a key part of long term regeneration for the area – future use which exploits this is wanted.
- Recognise changes to ways visitors access information about the locality and environment (eg on-line), however the River Parrett Trail and the area generally still require marketing, and the centre's potential role in this needs to be understood.
- SSDC should not miss an opportunity to help grow small businesses, particularly those with links to local culture and heritage.
- The longer term maintenance costs of the centre need to be factored in alongside potential rental income.
- The various displays and artefacts could be moved, but this depends on the future use. Some displays would need refreshing if retained.
- Alternative business uses (other than residential) could be considered under current planning policies.

A verbal update will be given on the above at the meeting, with any further views and questions from members of Area North Committee invited.

Financial Implications

None from this report.

Council Plan Implications

Focus One – Jobs:

- Provide targeted support for start-ups and small businesses and those with an aspiration to expand
- Work in partnership to deliver investment and development that local people value...
- Enhance the vitality of town centres

Focus Four: Health and Communities:

- ...align council resources to deliver projects to address local [health and well-being] needs.
- Maintain and enhance the [district's] network of leisure and cultural facilities optimising opportunities for external funding to promote healthy living.

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

The energy performance of the Langport Visitor Centre is monitored by Property Services, and will be considered as part of this review.

Equality and Diversity Implications

The building is accessible including toilets and pathways and is well-connected to the town centre via the Cocklemoor Bridge and pathways. Future proposals for use / management will be assessed for their equalities impact.

Background Papers: *Portfolio Holder report - Changes to the future management of the Langport and River Parrett Visitor Centre, Langport 12th October 2012*
Report to Area North Committee – 24 October 2012
