

Appendix D: Feedback from public meetings

2pm, 2nd December

Introduction

There were 68 attendees at the first public consultation meeting about the future of adult learning in Merton. The meeting took place at 2pm on the 2nd December in Merton's Council Chamber. In attendance was the Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Martin Whelton and the Director of Community and Housing, Simon Williams.

The following note captures the questions raised and the answers provided. It is a summary rather than a transcript but hopefully captures the points being made by the individuals involved and the responses by Councillor Whelton and Mr Williams.

Presentation

Cllr Whelton introduced the topic presenting the slides available here <http://www.merton.gov.uk/learning/adulted/mertonadulthoodeducationfaqs.htm> and then invited the audience to raise any questions. These were as follows:

Questions and comments

Q: There are some classes that it would not be possible to move from Whatley Avenue to another provider; the classes meet multiple needs and would an increase in council tax be a better alternative?

A: Which ever process is taken forward appropriate venues would need to be secured but the consultation is about adult education not Whatley Avenue. We recognise the value of the services and want it to continue to meet those needs. The administration stood for election in May on a manifesto of a freeze in council tax and this commitment will be met.

Q: Savings of £176k are not sufficient to justify the discontent and distress that this is causing.
A To reach the overall savings target of £32m lots of smaller, difficult decisions will need to be taken. There is no silver bullet to make these savings. The prospect of higher deficits in future years also needs to be considered.

Q: Why has there not been an Equalities Impact Assessment

A: The assessment will inform the final decision in January

Q: Whatley Avenue saves money by engaging disabled users

A: Any new model would also need to engage disabled users, be accessible and appropriate for vulnerable users.

Q: Recent investment in Whatley Avenue will be wasted if the site is closed. Will other facilities match these standards?

A: There remains a maintenance backlog to address. Any other provider would need to offer appropriate facilities.

Q: Could Merton follow the SCOLA model with no council funding and a separate governing body?

A: SCOLA is based on a much larger level of activity making it more sustainable. This is not possible to achieve with MAE.

Q: MAE offers a safe place for older people. Could Merton tap into growing market for older people?

A: Any new provider would also need to be successful at attracting older people.

Q: Arts and crafts generates 60% of fees currently, could these be expanded?

A: It would be in the interest of any provider to expand successful courses and we would work with providers to shape the services offered.

Q: Are projected SFA cuts real and what is the cost of a commissioning model?

A: Cuts have been made over the last 4 years and are expected to continue with the government department – BIS – being asked to make a further cut of 60%. Lots of boroughs use a commissioning model, these do incur small costs but pass the risk of further grant reductions from the Council to the provider.

Q: Adults First is concerned about the loss of the friendly and welcoming atmosphere used by 300-400 learners with learning disabilities. This will be made worse by any reduction in day centre provision.

A: Whatever model is used a suitable provider and venue for those with learning disabilities would be found and support would continue.

Q: Previous sites, including some in the East of the borough have been closed and left vacant, will the same happen to Whatley Avenue?

A: Other sites may be empty briefly but are put to other use or disposed of as quickly as possible.

Q: The value of the current services is important, will exactly the same provision be replaced elsewhere?

A: We can't promise it will be exactly the same as the service will always change over time.

Q: There is a level of diversity at MAE that contributes to community cohesion and is not achieved at other sites due to the mix of users.

A: 70% of learners are from the west of the borough so more could be done to support the employability and skills of those in the East. ESOL will remain an essential element whichever model or provider is used.

Q: What safeguards are in place for Joseph Hood Primary School?

A: We take the needs of our schools very seriously and these will be fully considered.

Q: Why is the council not using reserves to protect the services and instead spending them on capital projects like Morden Park Pool and new CCTV?

A: Morden Park pool is in need of replacement otherwise it would close and was a manifesto commitment. This is coming from capital spending not revenue and the reserves are ring-fenced and not spare cash.

Q: Why does commissioning another provider involve the closing of Whatley Avenue?

A: Under commissioning we would work with a new provider to identify appropriate sites to be used.

Q: Why is commissioning the preferred option?

A: Commissioning is the best way of protecting the financial sustainability of the services as the other partnership models does not remove the financial risks to the council.

Q: What are the plans for Whatley Avenue and has the cost of relocating services to another site been considered?

A: The consultation is about the future of the service not the future of the site. If Whatley Avenue is no longer used for adult education services then we would need to consider what other uses there might be. Costs of any relocation would vary depending on capacity within other providers. There is capacity with other providers, for example South Thames College could accommodate 75% if

current MAE activity. This would be a short term cost but could over long term financial sustainability.

Q: Could MAE be expanded to solve the costs issue and run on a more independent model?

A: We have pursued an expansion strategy in recent years and this has not been enough to mitigate against the financial risks.

Q: The staff at Whatley Avenue have been kind and helpful, as they understand learners needs so should not lose their job. It is more difficult for those with learning disabilities to adjust to change.

A: If alternative venues are needed then we would make sure they are appropriate for learners with disabilities.

Q: What else could be cut instead of MAE to avoid the distress to users?

A: We are looking at all services to make savings but based on our manifesto commitments and our 'July Principles' to protect the vulnerable.

Q: The plans and the consultation have been rushed through and should be extended for more people to have their say

A: The decision needs to be made by cabinet at their meeting in January and there has been plenty of time for people to get involved. Simon Williams also offered to meet with any groups that wished to do so.

Q: What are the costs of commissioning the service?

A: We have lots of examples of successful commissioning, such as the leisure services. Costs and risks of change vary and are being considered, both in terms of financial and human impacts. Any cost of commissioning will be short term and one off.

Q: Why was this not mentioned in My Merton?

A: It is not possible to include everything in My Merton.

Q: When will paper copies of the survey be available?

A: Paper copies were delivered to Whatley Avenue on 1 December with more being delivered on 3 December. A simplified version of the survey for ESOL/LD learners was also available at Whatley Avenue and more will be provided as needed. Due to the Christmas post copies returned after 4 January will continue to be processed.

Q: Will commissioning lead to a loss of control in terms of the fees charged to students?

A: It will be in the interest of any provider to set fees at a level that encourages take up of the courses.

Cllr Whelton thanked those who had attended and encouraged everyone to respond to the consultation. He then closed the meeting.

7pm, 2nd December

Introduction

There were 29 attendees at the second public consultation meeting about the future of adult learning in Merton. The meeting took place at 7pm on the 2nd December in Merton's Council Chamber.

The following note captures the questions raised and the answers provided. It is a summary rather than a transcript but hopefully captures the points being made by the individuals involved.

Presentation

Cllr Whelton introduced the topic presenting the slides available here (*insert link*) and then invited the audience to raise any questions. These were as follows:

Questions

Q: Who are the local providers and where are they located?

A: Providers include:

South Thames College (STC) – which is the biggest provider in the Borough - and many other smaller providers (voluntary sector) – an example would be Grenfell.

Q: Can you explain some more about the nature of the term 'provider' – does this include private companies and what are the restrictions on them? The concern is that there aren't enough facilities in the Borough for these courses and that people will have to travel further for them.

A: We would commission from all sectors – this would include public, private and voluntary sector providers. All learning would be regulated by Ofsted and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and we would be accountable to them for this.

We would look to have facilities that are suitable for the learning needed. STC, for example, have capacity for 75% of the learning and other providers already have space in which they provide learning. We would look for the best space to accommodate the learning.

Q: The council hopes to keep similar provision – what about courses that need special facilities such as pottery, stained glass and upholstery.

A: We would look to commission these popular courses and do some work to see who could provide them. We would work closely with other providers to provide them.

Q: Has there been a space and use analysis of Whatley Avenue. Will the new provision match this?

A: We would look to match the current provision through the commissioning model. As part of the review we looked at the quantity of learning that goes on, where it happens and in what facilities and are confident that this can be re-provided.

Q: We would like some more information on the government funding that is provided for Adult Education. My concern is that the funding for provision of creative arts courses would suffer in any new model. The current range of courses is unique in Merton.

A: We currently receive funding in two pots – Adult Skills Budget and Community Learning. The Community Learning pot is available to be spent on creative arts and as long as the funding continues from the SFA in this way then we would be able to spend it on those subjects. If the rules of the grant change then we would have to adjust our provision to match this.

This would be the case regardless of the model chosen.

Q: Will Whatley Avenue still be available for adult learning? And are there any other plans for the site?

A: A new provider may wish to use the site but also may not and currently there are no plans to do anything specific with the site should it be surplus to requirements.

Q: How would stained glass / pottery classes be accommodated if the facilities elsewhere in the Borough are already full?

A: We would have the conversation with providers to make sure the facilities existed – we would either look to commission the service in existing facilities or give providers funding certainty to enable them to invest in the infrastructure – such as kilns.

Q: In the paper it says that the service costs £2.6m but what is the target for reducing the funding of Adult Education. Wouldn't any commissioning model end up costing more due to providers pricing in risk and trying to make a profit?

A: A large part of the budget comes from the SFA – The intention would be to manage the service within the SFA funding, whilst reducing the risk to the future of the service.

Commissioning would be aimed to ensure value for money and whilst some providers would seek to make money we would manage that rate of return. Many providers, such as current FE providers, cannot make a profit and would not seek to do so.

Q: Where does the saving come from?

A: The running costs of the service are high and this would be reduced.

Q: If we go down the commissioning road does this mean that the existing teaching staff would lose their job?

A: Under TUPE the tutors would be transferred to another provider.

Q: Where does the £379k backlog maintenance come from?

A: This is an estimate provided by the facilities team for work that is needed.

Q: Isn't it more expensive to provide services 'here, there and everywhere'? Isn't this just about selling Whatley Avenue?

A: We are focusing on the future of service provision at the moment – we are not planning to sell off the site as part of this consultation. We are focused on the future of adult learning.

Q: The decision is to be taken in 6 weeks – how will an EA be delivered in advance of that decision?

A: An EA will be derived from the consultation and other research and presented to Cabinet at the time of the decision.

Q: Can I ask about the tutors who are highly regarded. Do we know if the tutors would be interested in going?

A: Technically it is up to the tutors. We see the tutors as the asset to the service and the lifeblood of the service and we believe that new providers would want the tutors and that learners would want to follow their tutors. It is up to the tutors to decide where they will go – our aim would be to work with the tutors to ensure continuity of learning.

Q: Is this the same consultation for staff?

A: We have separate consultations with staff. If tutors want a further opportunity to input we will endeavour to make sure that can happen.

Q: What do we have to do to get you to cancel this decision? Especially as the money involved is very small

A: The financial constraints have already been outlined and are detailed in the presentation. We have to make savings and the process of doing so isn't going to get any easier. We value the consultation; we want to talk to learners and staff and come to a decision in the New Year.

Q: Why would other providers want to take on additional staff if the funding is unstable?

A: Many other councils provide successful commissioning models and this is working ok. Colleges are keen to take on these services because they match with the facilities they currently have.

Q: If you want to redress the balance of services across the Borough then isn't there is a risk that you stop using Whatley Avenue as much and that would increase the costs of Whatley.

A: There would be a range of locations and this may or may not include Whatley Avenue – there is a real need in the east of the borough which we want to meet.

Q: Why was Cobham Court and Canons House closed when they are in the East of the Borough?

A: Buildings in the east of the borough were closed due to savings from previous years. We do make use of other locations in the east of the borough – such as Pollards Hill libraries and other shared facilities.

Q: You don't appreciate the uniqueness of the Whatley Avenue – an unusual, unique and important place. How much will you save from this decision – we can't make decisions without knowing how much you would help to save

A: This would save about £300,000 as currently constructed (including the council contribution and our overspend). We are also doing this based on financial risk – the SFA would have less money and would demand more for that money. Any saving of £32m would require lots of small savings.

Q: Why couldn't the council put a capital amount into Whatley Avenue and then commission the whole service and the site?

A: This would be a risky option for any provider – and we need to ask whether a provider want to invest in a service that has risky funding and currently requires a subsidy?

Q: If you sold the site to a developer they would build flats; these would attract families with children that would cost us more in other services than keeping the existing facility. I live in the area and don't want more housing.

A: We are focused on adult learning at the moment and have no plans to build housing on the site.

Q: How much has been spent on updating the site in the previous year?

A: I can provide the exact figures but we can't let previous investments prevent us from ever making any changes to provision. We need to make investments at a moment in time and we can't stop investing in case we need to make a decision in the future. Likewise, we can't ignore options just because we have invested in the past.

Q: Could the site become a shared facility with the local primary school? Would this allow the facility to be kept?

A: We could look at this in the future but we are looking at the structure of the service first

Q: I have concerns that the provision will become really disparate if it is split over multiple sites rather than lifted and placed on another site.

A: We will consider this as part of the consultation.

Q: Question about day centres and the linkage between mainstream community facilities, such as adult learning, and wellbeing for older people.

A: We agree with the general statement as learning is important for wellbeing but do not believe that this can't be delivered on a different site.

Q: Being a good provider for those with Learning Disabilities is about far more than just facilities and is instead about a broader range of provision – such as nurturing environment.

A: We recognise this and would look to commission these services in a way that provided the environment as well as the learning.

Q: The centre provides a facility for a wide range of people – couldn't we have more vision for using the facilities to deliver a wider range of services and serve the community in a wider way? Can't we have more vision for the site?

A: We have a diverse range of services at Whatley Avenue and that is a credit to the service.

We want a sustainable future for adult education and how it should be provided in the Borough. The site is very good and lots of good effort has been made. Despite this the financials are still not sustainable.

We're more interested in a vision for adult learning than a vision for a site. We want excellent providers and to spend any funding we can attain to make that happen. We will look at all the facilities etc to make this happen.

Q: Why can't we be the same as SCOLA?

A: We are smaller than SCOLA and face different challenges

Q: If the services are outsourced where is the accountability?

A: We would be accountable to both the SFA and Ofsted. As a local authority we would have a duty to achieve value for money and monitor the quality of the education.

Q: Would you be relinquishing responsibility for monitoring the quality of the education?

A: No, we would be duty bound to monitor the quality of the teaching. If there are issues with the provider these are managed by the council and we would be responsible for them.

Q: How do you propose to manage the timeframe of the commissioning process which would need to start in January / February?

A: This is why we are planning to make a decision in January

Q: If we can hold the Olympics in Wimbledon why can't we keep the college open?

A: The panel felt this is not a like for like comparison.

Q: This is a short consultation period – the feedback seems to be quite resistant to keeping MAE open. I would urge you to consider delaying the decision for a year and make the decision a year later to give everyone a chance to contribute even more.

A: Thank you for your comment

Cllr Whelton thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting.