

Executive report

28 May 2010



Report of Head of Economy, Leisure and Property

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Author: Toby Warren

Telephone: 01235 547695

Textphone: 18001 01235 547695

E-mail: toby.warren@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

Wards affected: Faringdon and the Coxwells

Executive member responsible: Cllr Richard Gibson

Tel: 01235 559850

E-mail: richard.gibson@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

To: EXECUTIVE

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Forward-funding SEEDA projects in Faringdon

Recommendations

The executive agrees:

- (a) that the council acts as the accountable body for SEEDA-funded projects in Faringdon.
- (b) to a forward-funding facility for SEEDA-funded projects in Faringdon, as set out in Appendix 1 of this report.

Purpose of Report

1. This report outlines the reasons why an accountable body and a forward-funding facility are required for three South East England Development Agency (SEEDA)-funded projects in Faringdon. The SEEDA funding has to be claimed retrospectively and the organisations hoping to secure funding do not have sufficient funds of their own to make the initial spend. If they had, then they would be unlikely to secure the funding in the first place.

Strategic Objectives

2. This report contributes to the council's strategic priority '**work in partnership to sustain vibrant market towns**'.

Background

3. Three projects in Faringdon have been recommended for SEEDA Small Rural Towns' (SRT) funding by the Oxfordshire Market Towns Forum:
 - renovation of the Folly Tower – funding of £25,000
 - a skate park for Faringdon – funding of £21,000
 - a new community bus for Faringdon – funding of £15,000.
4. The application to fund the three projects was made by Faringdon Joint Economic Forum (JEF) and SEEDA requires that there is an accountable body that is responsible for the delivery of its funding. To date, Faringdon JEF has only been responsible for managing a relatively small amount of funding (its accounts balance as of 30 September 2009 was £2,729.84) and, therefore, it has been appropriate for an honorary treasurer to manage JEF's funding.
5. The council has the necessary systems and expertise to act as the accountable body for the delivery of funding of £61,000.
6. The projects will be subject to a detailed appraisal by SEEDA to make sure that they are deliverable. If the appraisal is satisfactory, then a contract would be drawn up between SEEDA and the council for the delivery of the funds. The council can then reclaim expenditure from SEEDA. If the appraisal is unsatisfactory the council will not act as the accountable body for these projects.
7. The council would need to operate a short term forward-funding facility to the organisations leading the projects because they do not have sufficient funds of their own to make the initial spend. However, this facility would be of minimal risk, as funding would have been committed via a contract with SEEDA. SRT is an existing funding programme with a committed budget, so it is less likely to be affected by any reductions in SEEDA's overall budget following the general election.
8. Monthly claims would be submitted to SEEDA who by the terms of its contract will reimburse the council within 30 days. The projects would probably claim their funding over a period of several months, but the council could reclaim the funding that it has paid out on a monthly basis. This would reduce the impact on the council.

Options

9. The council does not have to offer a forward-funding facility, but if a forward-funding facility is not offered then the organisations hoping to secure funding will not be able to proceed with their projects, because they do not have sufficient funds of their own to bankroll the period between project expenditure and reimbursement. Faringdon Town Council does not have the necessary systems and expertise to provide a forward-funding facility.

Financial implications

13. The council would be making payments before funds are received from SEEDA. Any financial risks will be minimised through the use of a monthly monitoring and claiming process. Each project will be managed by a project delivery agent that is acceptable to SEEDA and the council will not be liable for any project overspends.

Legal implications

14. Provided the council complies with the contractual arrangements instituted between SEEDA and the council, then there should be no legal implications.
15. Projects are required to submit evidence of eligible expenditure, which is reimbursed by the council and subsequently reclaimed from SEEDA. Providing all expenditure and subsequent reclaiming is in line with the terms of the contract, then there should be no legal implications.

Conclusion

16. If the executive agrees that the council can act as the accountable body and provide a forward funding facility, then it will facilitate the completion of three projects that were shown by the 'Faringdon Healthcheck' to be priorities for the residents of Faringdon.

Background Papers

None

Appendix

Details of the SEEDA-funded projects in Faringdon

SEEDA-funded projects in Faringdon

1. The Folly Tower

What?

The Folly Tower is one of the most recognisable historic features of Faringdon, not least because it is the last folly to be built in England and offers views over five counties. It was gifted to the town and is now some eighty years old. Unfortunately, the ability of this structure to continue as a visitor attraction is in jeopardy unless some core maintenance can be funded.

Repairs to the roof and the electrics are essential works and are the first stage in the development of this resource as a more sustainable local and visitor attraction. The aspiration is to incorporate works to the inside of the tower and works to the outside space around the structure, enabling it to improve its capability as a venue and to offer a longer visitor experience. This project seeks support for the essential works to the roof and the electrics. These works will ensure that the structure is water-tight and compatible with current legislation to allow visitors. There is also an innovative element to the suggested works schedule – a telescopic project, that is not essential in type, but essential in timescale as works to the roof provide a timely opportunity.

A professional works programme has been compiled for the Folly Tower that will enable financial supporters to be comfortable with cost estimates, necessity of works and priority order. The Folly Tower is in the process of applying for Southern Oxfordshire Leader Funding as a tourism attraction

Evidence of need

The Folly Tower is the cornerstone of Faringdon's visual heritage. It is also the gateway to its inclusion in the tourism/visitor mainstream through such avenues as the Tourist Information Centre network. Together with the land around the base, the potential for this resource to be established as a local icon and visitor reference point is significant.

The top priority in the recent Faringdon Healthcheck was:

“To build upon Faringdon's rich cultural heritage and community spirit to revitalise the local economy and to promote and develop a vibrant market town with good quality training and educational, and employment opportunities.”

The Folly Tower project is Faringdon's number one cultural attraction and a key draw for tourists, visitors to the town and residents. However the Folly Tower is a trust and entry charges are very low. This means that the Trust's own reserves are fairly limited. The Trust is working on a business plan to increase future revenues – from visitors and individuals or groups who wish to use the 3 renovated meeting rooms - and this will mean that the future sustainability of the Folly Tower alongside necessary capital investment will be secure.

Results of a resident and visitor survey undertaken in January 2010 highlight the importance of the Folly Tower and the Woodland to the town. In this survey, the Folly Tower and Woodland were ranked as **the most important** historic place for

Faringdon and the Folly Tower meeting rooms (Belvedere, Lantern and Entrance) needed to be used more.

This project will ensure that the structure is water-tight and compatible with current legislation to allow visitors to continue to visit. In addition the Folly Tower Trustees – through the production of a Business Plan – are becoming more commercially aware. They have developed a marketing strategy that will:

- promote the Folly Tower as a visitor attraction and this, combined with increased opening times, will result in a significant increase in visitor numbers (10 per cent each year.)
- promote the Folly Tower as a community resource – this will increase the usage of the three Folly Tower meeting rooms as a community venue, specifically for gatherings, music recitals, parties and for use by the schools.

Ability to do either of these has, to date, been limited by the deficiencies in the structure of the building.

Costs

£71,000 in total.

£25,000 from SEEDA.

Deliverables:

- a) new roof
- b) new electrics
- c) new attraction/feature
- d) three new meeting rooms for community (live music, orchestra, parties and weddings), schools and business use
- e) increased visitor usage from 1,230 paying visitors in 2008/09 to 2,500 by 2011/12.
- f) increased tourism expenditure within the town.

2. Skate park

What?

This proposal by SK8 (a constituted community group) seeks support for the installation of the finished Skate and BMX facility, following the completion of the foundation works. The finished installation will cater for both skateboarders and BMX users and will ensure a refined concrete finish to the benefit of both users and ambient noise levels.

SK8 has identified a location, (a site adjacent to the cricket and rugby pitches at the top of Folly Park), a potential local design and construction company (subject to successful tender) and a design endorsed by the end-user i.e. the young people of Faringdon and its hinterland. The location is perfect as it is walking (or rather skating) distance of the young people in Faringdon – this is extremely important in terms of environmental sustainability and in maximising usage. The location - which is adjacent to the cricket pavillion and rugby pitches – will also facilitate the creation of a 'leisure cluster' within the town allow facilities to share amenities such as lighting and car parking etc.

Evidence of need

The aspiration for a skate park in Faringdon has persisted through lengthy debate, through financial struggle and through changes in local advocate. This has proven the merits of such a project and its long term sustainability as a resource for subsequent generations of local young people.

The Faringdon Healthcheck identified that: "*There is a lack of cultural and leisure facilities in Faringdon, particularly for young people.*" And there was a specific priority in relation to the skate park to: "*Develop the skate park as a priority.*"

There is also a proven ability of the community (through the activities of SK8) to raise match-funding, and a commitment through the planning process (S106) to pay for the foundations and address the on-going maintenance of the facility. The provision of the skate park base is to be agreed as part of a timetable for works that Bloor Homes will submit when it hands-over the Folly Park extension to the council. Bloor Homes has agreed to build the skate-park base and pay the council £30,000 as a commuted sum for maintenance - the council will maintain the skate park as part of the play equipment provision for the site. A meeting with Bloor Homes is arranged in March to discuss the exact timetabling of the works; however, it expects the skate park base construction to begin in Autumn 2010, with a view to completion by the beginning of 2011. It is now imperative that funding is secured to allow the project to commence and see it through to its successful conclusion.

If the quest for funding can finally come to an end, energies can be transferred to the more productive debates concerning skate park design and construction, community management, creative engagement and social inclusion. As part of the Community Healthcheck process, young people were consulted about their own priorities for Faringdon and highlighted their desire for a skate park. Initial ideas on the features that young people would like to see in their skate-park were formulated in 2007/08

However, now that budgets are known with greater accuracy and to capture the views of the current skate-boarding fraternity (time has marched on!), we will hold another consultation event that will be arranged by the SK8 project team in conjunction with the Vale Council at Faringdon Community College in April or May 2010. This will include the steering group, project manager, local community police officer and we are confident this event will be attended by over 100 young people. The purpose of this meeting will be to work on the details of the features that are to be included in the skatepark designs and to bring together the project enablers (steering group, project manager and skate park design & build companies).

We have also begun to seek the views of skate park design and build companies such as Bendcrete skate ramps, UK Skate Parks, Wheelscape Skateparks, Rhino Ramps and Graffiti. Whilst we would go to competitive tender to achieve best value, we would make it a stipulation of the contract that the skate park design and build company would be involved at the consultation event.

Costs

£82,000 in total (which includes £30,000 commuted sum for ongoing maintenance).
£21,000 from SEEDA.

Deliverables:

Skate park:

- new community infrastructure (200m² skate-park) by end March 2012.
- local and wider usage 2,000 persons annually.
- reduction in crime and vandalism by youths.

3. Community bus

What?

Faringdon Community Bus Ltd is a not-for-profit company. The community bus initiative is a vastly successful initiative that provides a lifeline to many in the community who would otherwise be left at home. The community bus initiative operates two distinct services - a timetabled service in the mornings and a destination service in the afternoons and at weekends. Not only does it increase the accessibility of local services and venues to those who are less-mobile, it also provides a critical social opportunity to those at risk of social exclusion. Some passengers stay on the bus longer than their planned trips just to talk to friends.

The success is greatly attributable to the reliability and frequency of service. Passenger numbers are strong at 11,300 each year, with a safe prediction that these will further increase in line with current monthly trends.

The Faringdon Community Bus initiative is going from strength to strength and will have a new business plan in place very soon. It is now seeking to secure funding from a range of sources to replace the existing coach-built bus (16 seats plus driver) for a new modern equivalent.

Evidence of need

The vehicle used by Faringdon Community Bus Ltd will reach its ten-year landmark next year (2010). The aspiration to replace the vehicle is based on sound business fundamentals regarding depreciating assets - increasing maintenance costs, longer off-road servicing requirements and a requirement to offset some of the replacement costs through the residual value of the old asset.

The bus is extremely well used and valued by the community, with some 11,300 passengers every year. Passenger numbers are growing.

The Faringdon Community Healthcheck uncovered two main issues relating to the community bus. A key issue identified "The coverage of the community bus was found not to be particularly extensive" and there was also a need to "improve public transport links between Faringdon and its hinterlands".

Costs

£60,000 in total for the new bus.
£15,000 from SEEDA.

Outputs

New community infrastructure:

- new bus
- increased usage
- reduced maintenance liability.