

## **SCRUTINY PANEL**

### **23 JULY 2013**

- Present :-* Councillor Beverly Davies (Chairman)  
Councillors Nick Cope, Marcus Harrington, Jo Hayes,  
Peter Higgins and Mike Hogg
- Substitute Members :-* Councillor Pauline Hazell for Councillor Kevin Bentley  
Councillor Stephen Ford for Councillor Dave Harris  
Councillor Philip Oxford for Councillor Gerard Oxford
- Also in Attendance :-* Councillor Annie Feltham  
Councillor Anne Turrell  
Councillor Will Quince  
Councillor Brian Jarvis  
Councillor Dennis Willetts  
Councillor Sonia Lewis  
Councillor Martin Hunt  
Councillor Paul Smith  
Councillor Lyn Barton

#### **14. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 July 2013 was confirmed as a correct record subject to the following amendments.

In the Open Discussions within Minute 12, New Housing Arrangements, the questions asked in paragraphs 3 and 5 of the 'Open Discussions' to be attributed to Councillor P. Higgins.

Between paragraphs 5 and 6 and additional paragraph is added to read;

"In response to Councillor Hazell who asked what help will be given to those in receipt of Housing Benefit so as to ensure they make correct payments to their landlord regarding the welfare reform changes, Ms. Loweman reassured members that it was recognised that over a number of years and given the current economic climate that there is a growing number of vulnerable tenants, affecting finance, health and welfare. Recognising this, a small Advisory Team has been set-up to provide advice on welfare issues and money matters, and to help cope with the increased demand in providing the necessary advice. Colchester Borough Homes are also pro-active in monitoring those residents on the housing list prior to entering into a tenancy agreement."

The question asked in paragraph 9 to be attributed to Councillor Harrington.

#### **15. Pre-scrutinise the Cabinet decision 'To Close the Abbots Activity Centre'**

Councillor Davies (in respect of being a trustee of CCVS) and Councillor Hogg (in respect of being the Chairman and Trustee of the St Annes Community Hall Association) both declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5);

The Panel was invited to review the proposal set out in the draft Cabinet report relating to the Closure of the Abbots Activity Centre. The comments of the Panel will be considered by the Cabinet at the meeting on 4 September 2013.

#### Have Your Say – Members of the Public

Mrs. Jo Crawshaw (Councillor Harrington spoke on behalf of Mrs. Crawshaw). Mrs. Crawshaw, who lives in Eight Ash Green, said she was sorry she could not speak for herself, but she had been unable to do so since her stroke in 2006. Mrs. Crawshaw said she visited the Abbots Activity Centre once a week. She is driven there by a CCVS volunteer, who helps her into the Centre. She said once inside, her Stroke Group volunteer Tom helps her. During her session, Mrs. Crawshaw is helped to learn to communicate again. Mrs. Crawshaw said the Centre is a life line to her, giving her hope and companionship. She found the proposal of its possible closure very upsetting and the uncertainty of what might happen in the future very worrying. She added that she would be willing to pay more for her sessions. She asked the Cabinet not to judge Abbots on financial costs alone, but urged them to consider its value which is immeasurable. Mrs. Crawshaw concluded by requesting the Panel to ask Councillor Feltham to keep Abbots Activity Centre open.

Mrs Elaine Rogers addressed the Panel. The first point she raised was that she assured members that stroke survivor members of Abbots are prepared to pay increased membership fees, and also the Stroke Association is expecting an increase in venue charges. Mrs. Rogers asked whether anyone had asked the Abbots Centre Manager, Ms. Debbie Young, whether she could reduce running costs, save money and increase income. Mrs Rogers said that at the June Connect+ACT Conference, an event to tackle loneliness, Norman Lamb stated, 'It is important to end loneliness', and added 'the impact of loneliness on health both physical and mental is profound'. The conference highlighted many points including the need to listen to older people, involve older people and promote dignity and respect. It agreed that more community and public transport and more transport for the mobility impaired is needed. Mrs. Rogers said public transport to and from Abbots was not a problem and the nearest bus stop was a three minute walk. Parking for motorists was close by and a drop off bay was provided. In addition, CCVS transport for the disabled was available from 9 until 4, in line with the opening hours of centre. Mrs. Rogers said the Council should congratulate itself because the Abbots Centre is DDA compliant and totally inclusive. The service is excellent thanks to the work of the Centre Manager, Ms. Debbie Young, so be proud to lead the way, continue to set a good example to the young as you are ahead of new thinking. She asked why destroy it. She wondered why Lion Walk members are against paying more, and said the uncertainty about the future of Abbots has prevented expansion for the stroke group and without expansion it will have to turn clients away!

Regarding the solutions within the report, Mrs Rogers said; i) Evenings are out, ii) CCVS provide no transport then or indeed late enough in the afternoon for many activities, iii) Evening bus services leave the elderly vulnerable, iv) Village bus services leave the elderly waiting either side of activity time, v) There is no room for all; 'The Evergreens' for example have just 6 luncheon spaces free, vi) Home help from Age UK is no substitute and vii) The benefits were of no use to disabled or those unable, not permitted, or discouraged from accessing the premises. The proposal therefore discriminates against the elderly and disabled. Mrs. Rogers concluded by urging the Cabinet not to make a decision to close Abbots, but to go back to the drawing board, consider carefully everything presented and consult with the Centre Manager. She said the outcome could benefit many, no longer discriminate and avoid hidden costs.

Mrs. Paula Webb addressed the Panel saying she believed that closure of Abbots Activity Centre will be in breach of the Equality Act. She said there are significant difficulties in disabled and mobility impaired users accessing Lion Walk which discriminates against these users. These difficulties have been well documented in the press and letters from members. She added that the closure of Abbots will discriminate against the disabled and mobility impaired users given the difficulties that these members would have in evacuating from Lion Walk. Mrs. Webb, a qualified Health and Safety Expert with over ten years experience reviewing risk assessments said she had serious concerns about the adequacy of the fire risk assessment at Lion Walk. She said failure to provide an adequate means of escape for all users is discrimination, and did not believe that the current fire risk assessment is compliant with Fire Safety Regulations. She added that the resultant increase in member numbers if Abbots closes will only exacerbate the problem. Mrs. Webb said the Lion Walk Fire Risk Assessment only has arrangements for the evacuation of three wheelchair users, so in the event of a fire, one wheelchair user would be carried down the stairs by members of staff using an evac-chair. The other two wheelchair users would have to remain in the lobby upstairs until the fire brigade arrived. She said current legislation specifies that evacuation plans should not rely on the fire brigade to make them work. She added that the risk assessment makes no mention of other mobility impaired users who do not use a wheelchair but are unable to escape via the stairs, and there is also no mention of visually or hearing impaired users, bariatric users, or users with cognitive impairments. Mrs. Webb said the risk assessment specifies that up to 100 users can be in the centre at any one time, but if only three people who cannot use the stairs can be evacuated, then when the centre is at capacity, this is only 3% of members. However, in questionnaires to member of Lion Walk, 28% said they had difficulties with activities such as using the stairs and at Abbots it was 70%. Mrs. Webb said the Lion Walk Centre has two escape routes, but those who cannot use the stairs are only able to use one of these. This could result in a situation where more able bodied members are trying to escape via one route and those that cannot use the stairs are trying to escape via another. This could lead to blocked corridors and the potential to hinder everyone's escape. She said that clearly the evacuation procedures are not sufficient and it will only get worse if the Abbots Centre closes and membership numbers at the Lion Walk Centre increases. Mrs. Webb concluded by saying the subsidy costs for Abbots and Lion Walk are almost identical, so why close a centre that has good access for disabled and mobility impaired users and excellent measures for their safe

evacuation, whilst keeping open a centre that has poor access for disabled and mobility impaired users and where the evacuation processes are so poor that in the event of a major fire it is likely there would be fatalities.

Mrs Nicky Hopkins on behalf of Mrs. Hopkins said Colchester Borough Council's Strategic Plan aims to create opportunities for all residents, and give support to vulnerable groups by listening and responding, but the proposed closure of Abbots Activity Centre will destroy a valuable venue which provides stimulating activities and social outlets for many elderly and vulnerable members of Colchester' Society. Mrs. Hopkins said whilst the Abbots Centre may only have 256 members, last year the centre had a footfall of 32,000 of Colchester's 58,000 elderly population. She asked how many of the Council's alternative suggestions can boast such popular use. Mrs. Hopkins said the Councils' Equality and Diversity Policy appears meaningless when considering the proposals made to take the place of Abbots. She said the Lion Walk Centre is not "fit for purpose" if considered on the grounds of accessibility, and believed that if only one centre can stay open, then common sense demands that it is the Abbots Centre, that it could not be faulted. She wondered how the Council could do this to vulnerable members of the community, the very people who the Council promised to serve, listen and respond to. She added that these people had voted and trusted Councillors to work for them, that these members of our society have contributed for years to our community and they continue to do so because their brains have been kept active as a result of their social well-being. Mrs. Hopkins said the members of the Abbots Centre care about each other, they are cared about by people they meet with daily, and if they lose this companionship they are likely to become depressed, sick and in need of care. Some of them are lonely and forgotten, and without this Centre to treat them as part of the community family, they would be lost completely. She concluded by saying it would amount to discrimination against elderly and disabled people to close such a wonderful centre as Abbots in times when we ought to be helping the less fortunate as much as we can.

Mr. Alan Thomas, a volunteer worker at the Lion Walk and Abbots Centres addressed the Panel. Mr. Thomas said the Council is holding this meeting at firstsite, a building that cost the people of Colchester £24m and is now nicknamed by local people as the Golden Banana. This building this remained a sore point with local people, as most did not want it in the first place. Mr. Thomas understood that the firstsite was subsidised by the Council to the tune of £150k per annum, whereas the subsidy to the Abbots Centre was £74k. Mr. Thomas said entry to firstsite was free, but if they were to charge an entrance fee it could generate sufficient income to offset the subsidy to the Abbots Centre. Mr. Thomas said the Council had spent £2m on a bus station. He and his wife use bus transport to travel to the Lion Walk Centre as would others if the Lion Walk Centre became the only Centre available. He said it was well documented that the Abbots Centre was purpose built for wheelchair access and those with mobility impairment. He added that at the bus station buses have to double park because there are too few bus stops, and it is necessary for the bus users to walk between buses to exit the area, a situation that will be impossible for many of the people who would want to switch from the Abbots Centre should it close, to the Lion Walk Centre. He believed

both Centres should remain open, the Abbots Centre for the less able, and the Lion Walk Centre for the more able. Mr. Thomas concluded by urging the Council not to put the Abbots Centre on the scrapheap and look for savings elsewhere.

Mrs Nicky Bailey addressed the Panel, pointing out that there is general confusion surrounding the 'numbers' at Abbots and Lion Walk even though the figures have been used to create a scenario in which Abbots is not popular, is insufficiently used and is unjustifiably expensive. Mrs. Bailey said the figures on the web page, in the consultation letter and in two emails received last week from Colchester Borough Council, and a third email sent to Panel Members today, all the figures are different. She said none of the figures are consistent and none is the same as those from Councillor Tina Dopson on which the Council decided to pull out of Abbots in 2011. She said that if the figures received today are correct, and even the e mail accompanying them suggests they may not be, what they show is a catastrophic decline in membership at Lion Walk since 2004 of over 60% and of 66% since charging was introduced. Charging at Abbots has not resulted in a similar level of decline. Over the same period the level of subsidy has increased by 12.5% at Lion Walk and decreased by 20.9% at Abbots. She believed that calculating the subsidy per member is the wrong measure in any case. What was needed is actual visitor use, and that's how the real world measures operating success and how facilities such as firstsite, Leisure World and probably the new football stadium calculate their level of usage. She said they will count how many people come through the doors and use different services. She believed the correct measure is footfall and the correct calculation to establish how expensive something is to measure subsidy against visitor numbers. She said that if Leisure World for example calculated subsidy against membership the figures would be unacceptably high. However, the Council has only very recently begun to collect usage figures at all, so a measurement method comparable with Leisure World or firstsite just did not exist. Regarding policy and legal duty, Mrs. Bailey said while the council is happy to subsidy Sports visits and Arts Visits it is not willing to apply the same sort of assessment to elderly and elderly disabled mostly female visits, despite having a legal duty to treat people with protected characteristics such as age, disability, and gender just the same as other groups. This, despite having a number of adopted Council policies which state that the Council is committed to treating everyone fairly. Mrs. Bailey said regarding the Equality Impact Assessment, the study within the agenda report purports to say that all negative impacts have been removed or minimised. The report is of very poor quality, contains numerous unsubstantiated assertions and conclusions and is inadequate and unreliable for the Council to rely upon. She added that she had provided detailed comments supporting her reasoning in the report circulated to the Panel in electronic and hard copy form. Regarding the recommendation within the Cabinet report, Mrs. Bailey said if the Council is determined to close one Activity Centre then it must be Lion Walk, a centre with an annual declining membership, annual increasing subsidy costs and a centre that is unable to meet the needs of groups with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. In conclusion, Mrs. Bailey recommended that the Council needs to count usage properly, to an agreed set of criteria, measuring the same things at each of the Activity Centres and it needs to do that for a year. To this end, she said Abbots should remain open using the subsidy agreed by Council of £105,000 in 2012, for 3 years, count usage properly for a year and then review the results. At the same time

she said there was an opportunity to decrease the need for subsidy by decreasing costs and increasing income. She believed there was scope and users there are willing to actively co-operate to achieve this. Then the Council will be in a position to apply the same measuring criteria of subsidy per visit for the Activity Centres as other facilities across the Borough.

Mr. Nick Chilvers addressed the Panel saying that the proposals were short sighted and unnecessary. Mr. Chilvers said the council has some business talent at Head Office, so why hasn't it tasked someone to work with Abbots to improve its finances and potential. He said that no serious forward plan has been tried other than to get it off the books. Mr. Chilvers believed that using membership figures for Abbots is misleading, and a low estimate of the footfall is 650 per week, but this would be more if there was less uncertainty. He said the report alleges the membership represents only 1% of the over 50 population. This again was misleading because most 50 to 60 year olds are working people. He said there are fine words in the Council's Strategic Plan talking about creating opportunities for all residents, supporting vulnerable groups and listening and responding. Its aim was to be a place to where people want to live. Given that the proposal will spoil the lives of all Abbots users, isn't it a case of saying one thing and doing another. He added that surely the council has to evaluate the harm caused by cuts across the board, that where does the Abbots score in relation to other areas of spending, and where is the priority list. It seemed to Mr. Chilvers that if you are feckless and irresponsible, fit and trendy, a cyclist or an art lover, you get plenty of officer time and money. He added that Abbots' users feel they are bottom of the pile. Understandably, they feel aggrieved, their impression is the more you put in over the years with this council, the less you get out. Mr. Chilvers said to save money the Council should slash subsidies to things that cause less harm, and asked whether the Council has checked how safe their tenancy is at the Lion Walk Centre with the new owners of Lion Walk because one day soon they might want the Council out. Mr. Chilvers said the myths that members won't chip in more or adapt to change must be demolished. Most understand a future Abbots will be different to the past and will accept some sensible revision of fee structure. It isn't them who are inflexible. Mr. Chilvers said he had asked fellow members these questions, but Life Opportunities hadn't. In conclusion, Mr. Chilvers asked why doesn't the Council look at options that include fair access for seniors and disabled as well as others, and to work with some of the members and the manager, that with some give and take, you might find it easier than you think to relaunch Abbots. He urged the Council to be constructive, rather than just walking away.

Mr. Galleway spoke on behalf of Mr. Stewart Francis. Mr. Francis said he was someone who has benefited hugely from the support provided by Abbots Activity Centre. Having suffered a stroke in December 2012, and following help from the NHS, it was suggested to Mr. Francis that he should attend the Centre to continue his rehabilitation. For the last three months he has visited the Abbots Centre every Monday morning. Mr. Francis said the support provided here by Mrs Elaine Rogers and her volunteers has been outstanding. He had been given consistent individual help and therapy and the whole atmosphere is supportive and congenial. As a result he had made steady

progress. Indeed, the weekly session is a highlight to him, both therapeutically and socially. He said that Mrs. Rogers is not simply hardworking and committed, but inspired and inspiring. The Abbots Centre also allows him to chat with other sufferers and lets him see how extreme many of their situations are and how much they need the help. It is a thriving place, each day is packed with a variety of activities and the catering staff provides good, low-priced meals. Mr. Francis said the Abbots Centre offers access to wheelchair users. The Lion Walk Centre, suggested as an alternative Centre does not have this, and questions arise about general access and parking. Abbots does not have these problems. Mr. Francis said he was lucky that he was able to send this statement to the Panel, that many of those served by the centre do not have the capacity to do so. He added that many of the possible voices which would protest are unable to, and his own absence from this meeting is because of his stroke that had induced incapacity. He wondered why the Council threatens to close something so flourishing and of such obvious usefulness. The cost of £74,000 is pitifully small compared with the amounts spent by the council in some areas. He added that how could the Council be so lacking in compassion and humanity, and be so mean minded as even to contemplate closing an asset of such value. In conclusion, Mr. Francis said the word consultation is often meaningless nowadays, but he trusted the Council to use the word with honesty, that the consultation is genuine and real.

Mrs. Margaret Bannister addressed the Panel. Mrs. Bannister said she suffers with Bipolar Disorder. She wondered whether anyone had considered alternative income streams such as increased fees or an increase in the Meals on Wheels service. Mrs. Bannister said there appears to be some indication that one of the alternative uses could be clog dancing. An additional income stream could be renting out rooms for example, if someone wished to organise a function for a funeral. Mrs. Bannister said when the new traffic flow and parking arrangements were introduced to the town centre High Street, somebody wrote to Essex County Council to say disabled people are selfish by continually going on about the different places where disabled access is required, and this feeds into a false general belief that all disabled people are selfish. Being Bipolar, Mrs. Bannister said she also suffers from mild paranoia, and was beginning to suspect that the centre's proposed closure was about other reasons that have not been mentioned. It was a very versatile facility and should not be gutted.

Mr. Avery addressed the Panel explaining that he visited the Abbots Centre two to three times weekly, on my own, and it is a wonderful place to visit. Mr. Avery said that it was being suggested that people do not use the Abbots Centre, yet the measured footfall taken over a nine month period averaged 615 per day, rising to a daily maximum of 975. These figures did not strike Mr. Avery of Abbots being a place that was not being used. Mr. Avery said we live in a democratic society, with equality that did not discriminate against age or disability, with a society that looked after the elderly and disabled, yet it felt as though we are being left to just get on with it. Mr. Avery concluded by saying the Council needs to consider it is our money you are spending and we pay your wages.

Mr. Fred Bryant addressed the Panel to say he was here to fight to save the Abbots Centre. Mr. Bryant said he joined the centre in 1989 shortly after retiring. He said that he

had organised the bingo events at the centre for the last fifteen years. He said the centre had many members and a large usage born out by the footfall. Mr. Bryant felt that if the proposed closure was about money why not just increase the fees. He said the centre was purpose built, a fantastic facility with excellent parking and believed if the charges are increased it will go some way to solving quite a few of the problems. In conclusion Mr. Bryant asked the Council to search its conscience and look to find alternative options that will allow the centre to remain open.

Mr. Derek Mead addressed the Panel to say that by closing the Abbots Centre it will deprive wheelchair users of the use of an activity centre. Mr. Mead said from his own experience that wheelchairs were not allowed into the Lion Walk Centre, banned by the Fire Service. Mr. Mead now understood that although wheelchair users are now permitted access to the Lion Walk Centre, by doing so, they are breaking the law.

Tim Oxtan addressed the Panel, saying please do not be fooled by the call to close one centre rather than the other. He said both Abbots and Lion Walk Centres were important to local residents, and the proposal should not be about closing one centre and keeping one centre open. This could lead to the closure of the second centre a year down the line. Mr. Oxtan urged the Council to make every effort to publicise the two centres more widely, especially Abbots, because a great number of local elderly people do not know of either of the centres and the facilities and events they provide. He added that as far as he could see, there were no members from the Fabian Society or the Colchester Pensioners Group present because they would be unaware of both centres existence. Mr. Oxtan said a concerted effort should be made to ensure all retired local people are made aware of the centres. This he said would increase membership, increase revenue, reduce the need for subsidy and avoid the proposal for closure.

Mr. Andy Raison addressed the Panel saying that although he had heard passionate and moving stories this evening, he was sure Members had heard them all before. The proposed closure was nothing new, with closure being considered for many years. Having spoken to Councillor Feltham, Mr. Raison said he was very angry because it was being suggested the proposed closure was a fait accompli. He said in order for proper scrutiny to be undertaken and for members to make an informed judgement they should have all the information that had been provided to him. He added that there is ambiguity about the numbers being provided, though if the centre was going to be closed the evidence and information provided had to support a robust case, that there needed to be some certainty about the accuracy of the information provided. Mr. Raison reiterated these points and urged Members to examine the figures further before making a final decision.

Mr. John Small addressed the Panel. Mr. Small, who worked for the MS Society in Colchester said he thought that as part of the consultation process the MS Society should have been asked to respond. He said the MS Society has never been asked by anyone from Colchester Borough Council to respond and this was wrong. Mr. Small said by not correctly consulting the Council was not getting the correct numbers that



were forming part of the report on which the decision would be made. He said the Council should allow the manager of the Abbots Centre one year to eighteen months to reduce costs and increase revenue, to try to turn a profit, and then decide whether to close the centre. He said he believed this was a far more sensible approach than just closing it now and letting the building fall into disrepair.

### Have Your Say – Visiting Councillors

Councillor Brian Jarvis, Shadow Portfolio Holder for Community and Leisure Services addressed the Panel. Councillor Jarvis said we are told that the Centre currently requires a subsidy of £74,000 per annum which works out at £290 per member. Given that the Centre is not a Statutory Function, that is, one that the Council is obliged to fund, it now considers that the Centre does not reach out to sufficient residents across the borough and therefore no longer justifies the Council's financial support. He said this rather begs the question when allocating funding to non statutory functions what are the criteria that is used, is it numbers or value. Given the budgetary constraints that we currently work under he asked how the Cabinet explains the decision to extend into this year the Locality Budget which last year gave each councillor £2000 each to spend in their ward in celebration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. This was surely a one off gesture to mark an important occasion and not a discretionary "gift" to ward councillors on an annual basis. He said this is a questionable way of spending £120,000, particularly in the light of the closure of Abbots. He suggested to the Panel that the Portfolio Holder's decision on this matter had been reached by looking at the case for the closure of Abbots from a far too narrow perspective, that great emphasis had been placed on the number of members registered at the Centre and the small percentage of the over 50s that they represent within the borough. This is far too simplistic, we are all aware of Fitness Centres for example that boast a membership 1,000 or more but in reality a much smaller number are regular and consistent attendees. Councillor Jarvis said that by contrast, at Abbots in the month of May they had over 1200 members and non-members sign in for activities which not only included popular events such as keep fit, line dancing, carpet bowls and bingo but also therapeutic sessions for stroke and brain damage victims. The benefit from these sessions you cannot put a price on and are simply not available elsewhere. He added that his point is that it is not just the number of people that receive the benefit but the importance and the value of that benefit. You wouldn't for example close the Samaritans simply because it served only a small percentage of the population. Councillor Jarvis said he mentioned at the recent Full Council meeting that he had attended an Old People's Forum organised by Colchester Borough Council which was also attended by a number of local support groups. At this meeting there was a presentation on Mental Health, and it was stressed that this was about mental health not Mental Ill-health which is a completely different subject. During this talk three important facts as they relate to elderly people emerged: i) Loneliness and isolation has a big impact on physical health and mental health, ii) It is important that elderly people feel valued within the local community, and iii) It is important to have links with other people in order to maintain social cohesion. He added that this information comes from an authoritative source and should be recognised when evaluating the merits of keeping this centre open. He said that make no mistake, by closing Abbots the Council will deny the majority of members and non- members this

social inter-action which is so important to their well being. Abbots on the other hand fulfils these requirements for better physical and mental health and it does it in a purpose built centre which is DDA compliant and is easy to access on foot and by transportation. He said it was unlikely Colchester will see another facility like this being built in the foreseeable future. Councillor Jarvis said it has been suggested that when Abbots closes members could use the Activity Centre in Lion Walk which is to remain open at least for the present. For many of Abbots members this is not an option as the Lion Walk Centre is in a pedestrian area and has no direct vehicle access. It is also situated on the first floor thereby making wheelchair access more difficult with the premises not being DDA compliant, and as an activity centre it does not compare to Abbots. Councillor Jarvis reiterated that the Cabinet considers the decision to be about finances and about how limited funds are apportioned. He said he strongly urged that the Cabinet look more closely at their decision and assess Abbots from a much broader aspect taking into consideration the value of the services that it provides and the impact on the quality of people's lives it will have if the centre closes. In conclusion, he said it was not a good decision by the Cabinet and will affect a part of Colchester's society that is most vulnerable and it will also impact on carers, staff and volunteers. He said there are options to the closure, but he didn't believe that that these have been either sought or listened to. Councillor Jarvis said why not allow all interested parties the time to draw up a Business Plan and submit it to the Cabinet before any final decision is made.

Councillor Will Quince addressed the Panel. Councillor Quince agreed with a previous speaker that there is a lot of history to the proposed closure, but was pleased that previous administrations had chosen not to force the closure. He believed there was still a lifeline and that it was important members listened to the speakers, and those making this decision did as asked, search their consciences when making that final decision. Whilst discussions made it feel like it was an Abbots Centre versus the Lion Walk Centre, this was a complete red herring, though as Councillor Quince believed this will be the thin edge of the wedge, leading to the future closure of the Lion Walk Centre, 'a case of watch this space'. Councillor Quince said bringing Lion Walk into the debate was misleading. Both centres are valuable sites, important in their own right, so why should either of them need to close. He said that there are many budgeted items provided that is not a statutory need for the Council to provide. For example, that the Council spends £50k on a one day cycle race is questionable placed in the context of retaining a cycle race or closing an activity centre for vulnerable elderly and disabled residents, most of whom have put more into the 'pot'. Councillor Quince said he understood the importance of cost, but more importantly was the value of the service. He said he would fund the cost of things such as the Castle and the Mercury Theatre because they have a value. He felt though, that by closing the Abbots Centre the Administration know the cost of everything but the value of nothing. Councillor Quince said it was obvious from all the previous speakers that everyone at the centre knew one another and this was enormously important regarding the value of the service, with members provided with the opportunity of friendship and avoid isolation. Councillor Quince, like previous speakers felt the figures on membership were questionable given the numbers now being presented are different to those presented by Councillor Tina Dopson in 2011. The figures on membership provided today suggests there now

seems to be a similar level of membership at both centres, a difference from those that formulated the proposal to close the centre, making it fundamentally flawed. Councillor Quince said the centre was being allowed to run down, but it was important the centre survived, and equally important to publicise the centre more widely thereby enabling it to morph into a community centre, a more vibrant hub. In conclusion, Councillor Quince said the centre did not need to close, but with plenty of additional uses to support its current use it could become vibrant with potential to raise revenue. Councillor Quince asked the Panel to request the Cabinet not to implement the proposal of closure.

Councillor Dennis Willetts addressed the Panel. Councillor Willetts said the future of the Abbots Centre seemed to be drawing to its inevitable conclusion and shame on those who were determined to see the centre closed. He said there seemed to be some patterns emerging with the closure of Joyce Brooks House followed by the closure of the Tymperleys Clock Museum. The purpose of the report was following the same pathway, concluding with a sell-off, an extremely sad situation, and one that drew on the maxim 'if at first you don't succeed, try and try again'. Councillor Willetts said those organisations rejected in the 2011/12 process may have been successful if they had been given the opportunity to widen out the current centre to a community centre. Now, with the threat of closure it was a shame that the Administration felt a need to relinquish their responsibility to provide the services. In 2012 it was decided that the cards were stacked against any new provider unless some funding was provided. Having been told this solution would not fail we are now being told the new master plan has fallen apart. Councillor Willetts said the financial outturn for 2012/13 was an underspend on the revenue budget of £534k, and with the contingency reserve of £285k not used, it amounted to an overall underspend of £828k. Councillor Willetts said the Abbots Activity Centre at an annual cost of £74k could run for eleven years on the 2012/13 underspend. But instead, things of a lower priority are given precedence. He said it was unacceptable to blame the proposed closure on finances. Regarding the true costs of the services provided it was necessary to know the footfall. Councillor Willetts believed the figures were being presented in a way to make running the centre as difficult a proposition as possible. In conclusion he said there was an overwhelming argument to support a proposition to keep the centre open. Councillor Willetts urged the Panel to put the points made forcefully to the Cabinet. He was in no doubt as to the wishes of the residents of Colchester and the Cabinet should be made to listen to those views.

Councillor Sonia Lewis addressed the Panel. Councillor Lewis said she had wanted to speak last, so as to be able to listen to what all the other speakers had said. She believed the social needs for the members of the centre are very important and this had been covered by earlier speakers. She also believed the comparisons made between the Abbots Centre and the Lion Walk Centre was wrong as they both complimented one another. She had nothing but praise for both centres and it was wrong for them to be pitched against one another in the debate. Councillor Lewis said in 2011 she had asked for a task and finish group to be setup to consider all options for the centre and to draw up a business plan. She said there was still time for a business plan to be drawn up and asked whether Ms. Young, the Abbots Centre Manager had

been consulted on how to take this forward. She said the members had themselves raised large sums of money to pay for everyday essentials used within the centre, and these had not been taken into account when making the assessments and final judgement and believed it was still possible to extend the centre to a community centre for wider use. Councillor Lewis urged the Cabinet to listen to what had been said this evening. All the points raised are valid, and like other speakers believed the success of the centre should be gauged using footfall numbers not membership numbers. She begged the Cabinet to listen to the people and not go forward with the proposal of closure.

## Introduction

Councillor Feltham, Portfolio Holder for Community and Leisure Services, Councillor Anne Turrell, Leader of the Council and Ms. Lucie Breadman, Head of Community Services attended the meeting for this item. Councillor Feltham introduced the report and explained her reasoning for the Cabinet decision to be taken on 4 September. Councillor Feltham said it felt like people were suggesting that closing the Abbots Centre was an easy decision to be made. It was not, although she was in no doubt the users of the centre loved it, and it provided a lot of benefits to them. Councillor Feltham said she didn't believe any of the evidence given that suggested there was a way to make the centre viable. She said they had taken a standard approach to see if someone could do better. Taking into account the evidence at the time, the decision was changed, to offer a three year grant to the successful bidder following the Council's procurement process. Even with the extra grant there were no other groups that thought they would be able to make the Abbots Centre work. It remains the case that it is difficult to see how the Council can continue to run the centre without avoiding a substantial subsidy. Councillor Feltham recognised that people are passionate about wanting to retain the centre but it was too expensive to run for too small a return. She said she was doing what she believed to be right. Councillor Feltham said lets be straight, it is a cut of a service that had been subsidised for many years and it was a very difficult decision to be made. In conclusion Councillor Feltham said the Administration is very proud of its support to vulnerable groups and the support to the voluntary sector had increased by 2% in 2013/14. Councillor Feltham said the overall cost to the Council regarding the Cycle Race was £20k.

Councillor Turrell said Essex County Council had the statutory responsibility for supporting the elderly and vulnerable, and that by closing the Abbots Centre Colchester Borough Council was not breaking the law. Essex County Council had also confirmed they will not be able to provide any additional funding for the Abbots Centre.

## Open discussion

In response to Councillor Higgins regarding ambiguity in the information provided, Councillor Feltham said the financial disparity is between the budget and the running costs, and the subsidy is the quoted figure of £74. Councillor Feltham confirmed the usage figures are based on membership numbers not the footfall numbers. She added that whilst the footfall generates income, the income came out of the membership. The footfall shows the popularity of the centre, but is not a measure of how it increases its income.

Councillor Feltham apologised on behalf of the Council and officers for not including the MS Society in their overall consultation process. This was a true error and she would not be able to do anything about it at present.

Councillor Hazell said the Colchester Institute is looking at ways to increase campus sites and the opportunity for students to learn and train in work such as looking after the elderly and care management. She had been informed that the Institute would be interested in talking to the Council about ways of expanding their services and being of benefit to Abbots members, and could provide further information if requested. Councillor Hazell said nowhere in the report did it provide the cost of officer and transport time to support the CCVS and move people around the Town if the Abbot Centre closes. Also, no comparative figures were provided in terms of involvement and cost of the Zone Teams. Councillor Feltham said the cost of moving services had not been costed, but whatever the costs they are not quantified, but will be met no matter what decision is taken. The Zone Teams network with all Council staff across the Borough, providing a range of different services based on residents needs.

Councillor Harrington said he was overwhelmed by the arguments in favour of keeping the Abbots Centre open. Councillor Harrington said if services are signposted following the closure of the centre, there will be costs that have not been provided. Whilst Councillor Harrington was full of admiration for the Zone Teams he did not believe they had the expertise to meet some of the needs mentioned by this evening's speakers, that to suggest the teams could provide this was like comparing apples with pears. Councillor Harrington said he hoped when Councillor Feltham and the other Cabinet members discussed this proposal on 4 September, they did so with an open mind.

Councillor Feltham said she did not expect Zone Team operatives to meet variety and complex needs of many elderly and vulnerable residents. Councillor Feltham said she will follow-up the suggestions made this evening, particularly the one from Councillor Hazell, but said she would be surprised if it will be sufficient to keep Abbots open, and that was as honest as she could be at the moment. Councillor Davies said she was disappointed by what Councillor Feltham had implied, because the whole point of this review was to scrutinise the proposal and put forward alternative proposals or suggestions the Cabinet will properly listen to and consider, but now the Panel were being told the Cabinet will not consider them. Councillor Feltham said this is not what she had implied.

In response to Councillor Harrington, she said it is very difficult to respond to a hypothetical question about what would be considered an acceptable subsidy for each member. She added that she did not have a fixed figure in mind. She appreciated that the subsidy had decreased year on year and she will, together with Cabinet colleagues consider all the suggestions put forward. Also in response to Councillor Harrington she said they will also take account of the Abbot's members comments that they will be prepared to agree to an increase in fees.

Responding to Councillor Davies, who was pleased Councillor Feltham had said she and her colleagues will consider all the proposed suggestions and comments, Councillor Feltham said this will be done in advance of the September Cabinet meeting

and will be debated at that meeting, but the review date will not be deferred to a later date. Councillor Turrell confirmed that this will be a Cabinet decision and all Cabinet members will consider the points and suggestions raised at tonight's meeting, some of which have already been raised and considered, and the final decision will be made by Cabinet in September.

Councillor Ford said the arguments put forward for retaining the Abbots Centre had been very powerful. The closure will be considered as something that will bring a lack of social inclusion. The Abbot's members had paid taxes for a lifetime and they rightly expected something in return. He added the argument to remain open was powerful, but this was his heart, whereas his head was clear that money is tight and a very difficult decision has to be made. Councillor Ford said when the Cabinet consider alternative options and suggestions he hoped it will include consideration to Councillor Willetts suggestion to use reserves to cover the financial subsidy.

In response to Councillor Hayes, Councillor Turrell said whilst Colchester Borough Council had continued to fund this centre since it opened, Essex County Council, the responsible authority, said they would not be able to afford the subsidy and the Centre would have to close.

Councillor Hayes read out a proposal to put forward to the Cabinet (see resolution).

Mr. Sean Plummer, Finance Manager, responded to Councillor Ford. Mr. Plummer said the quoted underspends on the overall budget was for 2012/13, and that £300k of the underspend had been allocated by Cabinet. The allocation of funding for 2014/15 set out in the Budgets papers included in tonight's agenda is based on a number of assumptions including a reduction in Government spending. Mr. Plummer said the report suggests there is going to be significant gaps in coming years, with the 2014/15 budget forecast being £1.3m. This figure was the overall figure, and already took account of the delivery of anticipated savings and increased income. In conclusion he said there is some money in reserves but the Council will need to consider this in light of the overall budget position.

Councillor Cope asked whether the subsidy could be reassessed against other subsidies and reprioritised, that surely this decision, in the context of what has been said this evening, was about social justice. In response Councillor Turrell said the Cabinet will listen to all the comments, though the overall Budget had been set and was agreed by Full Council; this could not be changed. Councillor Turrell said an alternative budget could have been submitted but this did not happen.

Councillor Hazell said many millions of pounds have been put into Leisure World over the years though this facility did not serve all the local population. She asked that given Leisure World had been provided with the investment to dramatically change processes and the structure to ultimately make the centre cost neutral, why not do the same for the Abbots Centre. Councillor Feltham said the resultant fundamental service review at Leisure World was to change its operational structure (with the use of capital money). This has resulted in a £680k reduction in the overall budget including £280k in staff cuts. The turnaround and refurbished centre was due to the hard work of its staff. Councillor Feltham said she had not been able to find that sort of flexibility in Abbots

and that's the sort of question she had been unable to find an answer to.

Having heard many brave and passionate speeches, Councillor Hogg said the Panel were here to scrutinise the report with the purpose of trying desperately to find a solution, but that said, those present at the meeting should be prepared that this may not happen. Councillor Hogg said he would like to see the option to change the use of the centre from an activity centre to a broader community centre.

Councillor P. Higgins said whilst a way to decrease the subsidy would be to increase fees and charges, and the members in attendance of the meeting said they would be prepared to do so, you ran the risk that membership will fall. He said he would like to take the suggestion of Councillor Hazell further and see consideration given to broadening the base of the centre from an activity base to a community centre.

Councillor Harrington requested the Cabinet to keep the Abbots centre open for the duration of time that the offer of £105k lasted, the remainder of 2013/14 and two further years, during which time the Cabinet could do what others had suggested, investigate the real possibilities of making Abbots financially secure.

Councillor Hazell said she as a member of the scrutiny panel, she was uncomfortable with just requesting the Cabinet to listen to and consider the recording of the meeting, that the Panel needed to put down in the proposal their thoughts and ideas as a definite request for an outcome.

In response to Councillor Davies regarding whether the Centre's management had been consulted on the proposal, Ms. Lucie Breadman said the management consisted of the manager, Mrs Debbie Young, who with support from other officers and staff tried very hard to change the fortunes of the centre by keeping costs down, but it had been a struggle to get membership number up.

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- i) Reviewed the proposals set out in the covering report in terms of managing the closure of the Abbots Activity Centre.
- ii) Requested the Cabinet to take into account the views and comments of all the public speakers and members of the Panel when the Cabinet make their decision on the proposals at the meeting on the 4 September 2013.
- iii) Some of the main proposals and comments made by Members of the Panel have been encapsulated below, and the Cabinet is requested to consider these so that a more informed judgement can be made on 4 September 2013. These included;

Requesting the Cabinet to listen to the recording of this evening's meeting and in particular the words of the members of public speakers, and to bear in mind all the points made when considering the decision to be made on 4 September, especially the accuracy of all the figures on which the decision is based, and the possibility that Colchester Institute might be able to host some services such as the Stroke Club.

Requested the Cabinet to consider alternative funding streams.

Asked the Cabinet to work with any relevant organisations, institutions and services to fully explore how the Abbots Centre can become sustainable, for example;

Requested the Cabinet, given the Colchester Institute is looking at ways to increase campus sites and the opportunity for students to learn and train in work such as looking after the elderly and care management, to consider investigating further the opportunity for the Institute to expand their services to the Abbots Centre.

Requested the Cabinet to consider broadening the base of the centre from an activity centre to a community centre.

## **16. 2014/15 Budget Strategy**

Councillor Paul Smith, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources and Mr. Sean Plummer, Finance Manager, attended the meeting for this item.

The Scrutiny Panel was requested to consider and note the 2014/15 Budget Strategy, Medium Term Financial Forecast and Budget Timetable, to be presented to the Cabinet on 10 July 2013, and refer any comments or concerns back to the Cabinet for further consideration.

Councillor Quince addressed the Panel and mentioned a number of observations. He said the underspend within the Budget was excellent news, largely down to better returns from treasury management, and we should all congratulate officers for this position. Councillor Quince said that regarding Budget, there are significant efficiency savings mentioned in the report including those from the current fundamental service reviews, and also significant income targets. He asked how confident was the Portfolio Holder in meeting all these targets? especially in light of the fact that even including these, there remains a budget gap. Regarding balances and reserves, Councillor Quince said we are constantly reminded that they are being kept at a prudent level of £2.1m (against an advised level of £1.8m), with £5.8m in reserves, and asked for a breakdown of what this monetary figure is earmarked for, what other pots of reserves there are, and what are they being kept for?

Councillor Smith said whilst we could not underestimate the role of officers in the Council's treasury management a lot of the credit might lie with the Bank of England and their policies on quantitative easing. Regarding balances and reserves, Councillor Smith said there are a large number of reserves for many different purposes, but given the late hour, asked the Panel to agree that he would ask officers to circulate a breakdown outside of the meeting. Councillor Smith said it was good that the Council was able to report an underspend, and page 43 of the Budget report provided details of how the sums have been allocated and recommended for funding from balances. Councillor Smith said he was confident that the Council will achieve the savings predicted not only for 2014/15 but also for the current year, based on but not solely, of Colchester's past record of achieving the predicted budget savings.



In response to Councillor Hazell, Mr. Plummer said the £45k cost pressure for Trade Waste in 2013/14 related to a reduction in the income.

Whilst a budget gap remained, Councillor Smith said the UCC (Universal Customer Care) fundamental service review was starting to produce savings and additional income streams from commercial activities are being considered that will produce additional income.

RESOLVED that the Panel considered and noted the 2014/15 Budget Strategy, Medium Term Financial Forecast and Budget Timetable, to be presented to the Cabinet on 10 July 2013.

## **17. Treasury Management 2012/13 Annual Report**

Councillor Paul Smith, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources and Mr. Sean Plummer, Finance Manager, attended the meeting for this item.

The Scrutiny Panel was requested to note the activities relating to treasury management and performance in 2012/13 and note the performance of the Council's treasury management advisors.

RESOLVED that the Panel noted the activities relating to treasury management in 2012/13 and the performance of the Council's treasury management advisors.