

S33. FOLLOWING THE PUBLIC POUND: FALKIRK COMMUNITY TRUST

The committee considered a report by the Chief Executive presenting an update on the work of Falkirk Community Trust (the Trust) against key objectives for the period 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014, in line with Following the Public Pound (FPP) and Council procedure.

Neil Brown, General Manager, Falkirk Community Trust gave a presentation on the Trust's achievements, areas for development, improvement actions and future direction. He described a number of key successes: management of the Helix park; winning the Creative Scotland Creative Place Award for places under 100,000 residents; Callendar House securing VisitScotland's 5 star status; Falkirk Archives at Callendar House being awarded Archive Service Accreditation, and securing the Commonwealth Games running track for Grangemouth stadium. He then described areas for development: the creation of delivery plans for arts, libraries and sport; creation of masterplans for Kinneil and Callendar Estates; development of an asset management plan with the Council, and opening the Kelpie visitor centre. He provided details of a number of improvement actions: creation of a library development plan; investment at the Mariner centre and Grangemouth sports complex; ICT investment to improve customer services; development of management plans for Muiravonside and Callendar park, and reviewing the active schools programme. Neil Brown stated that the Trust faced specific challenges regarding: income growth; efficiencies, and rationalisation of services and facilities. The key objectives for the next three years were: meeting customer needs; organisational development; and financial sustainability.

Members asked if there had been initial difficulties in securing external funding. Neil Brown stated that the Trust faced issues similar to other new organisations but that the Trust's successes increased its access to funding. Members questioned the challenge of the £500,000 target for external funding when that amount had been achieved in the previous year. Neil Brown stated that attracting funding was a challenge and that some areas of funding would shortly expire whilst others had required seed funding from the Council.

The Committee asked about the future of library services. Neil Brown stated that libraries faced many issues and the library development plan had been brought one year forward to fundamentally review library services. The introduction of Universal Credit was one reason for increased library computer use as most people apply online and manage their claim through an online account. Software and hardware at Falkirk library had been refreshed. Investment in online magazine and books, for download had been a success. Analysis of why some customers stopped using libraries was ongoing.

The committee asked how the Trust would ensure that facilities were available throughout the Council area. Neil Brown stated that new facilities would be located where opportunities arose. Some customers would have to travel to access unique facilities such as the ski slope, whereas library provision was Council wide. The Trust was mindful of community needs and tried to meet them.

Members asked about visitor number recording. Neil Brown advised that Kinneil Museum's figures no longer included visits to only use the conveniences, which gave increased accuracy. Recording at Callendar House was complex due to the number of attractions there. In six months over 600,000 visitors had been counted at the Helix park.

The committee expressed concern at missed revenue opportunities at the Helix park and that a gift shop should have been provided. Neil Brown advised there was a focus on income generation and work was ongoing. The committee asked why the visitor centre at the Helix park had not been completed given the high number of visitors. Fiona Campbell stated that she would provide members with information on the visitor centre project.

Members questioned the performance indicator for admissions to the Hippodrome being rated a tick with the 19% decrease. Neil Brown stated the figures were reported to the Trust's audit performance group as a tick if within 5% of target but work to improve admissions was ongoing.

The committee asked if, with a decrease of 8,000 visitors to Park Gallery, security cameras would better use resources. Neil Brown stated that staff presence was an insurance requirement of many artists and visual arts assistants were vital in explaining artworks, without which many visitors would not engage as well with the art.

The committee asked for financial information and reinvestment. Neil Brown stated that the Trust was not run for profit and its £18.2m income had been used. Reinvestment opportunities were limited as expenditure was outpacing income.

Members asked if commercial sponsorship had been considered for Trust properties. Neil Brown stated that cultivation events had been held to encourage sponsorship, but that it was challenging to attract sponsorship for pre-existing sites.

The committee sought an update on Stenhousemuir gym. Neil Brown advised that £1m of funding had been secured and that the Trust was on target to open in June 2015.

Members asked about investment in swimming pools and fitness facilities. Neil Brown stated that sustainability was the driver for investment. The Trust sought to address the decreased use of swimming pools by children and young people.

Members asked about the Trust's borrowing powers. Neil Brown advised that the Trust sought an increase to the funding agreement from £200,000 to £1m, to allow investment and generate further income.

The committee discussed ICT investment. Neil Brown stated that investment was required to deliver services which meet customer expectations, such as online booking. Box office opening hours were under review as they were not customer friendly.

Decision

The committee approved the report and acknowledged the progress Falkirk Community Trust has made in delivering on its core commitments for the Council.