

MJ Local Government Achievement Awards

Facilities and Asset Management Category

Crawley Borough Council - Creation of Crawley Voluntary Services Hub:

Executive Summary

In November 2006 Crawley Borough Council completed an ambitious project to create a Voluntary Services Hub at "The Orchard" a newly acquired building within Crawley Town Centre. Prior to this date thirteen different voluntary sector organisations occupied three functionally unsuitable Council freehold buildings (The Tree, The Annex and WRVS House) on sites which are required for a £700m mixed use/retail led Town Centre regeneration. The completed project has addressed both social and commercial objectives and drawn plaudits from Crawley Council for Voluntary Service (CCVS) and international developer Grosvenor. (See attached letters)

Background

The Council was quick to recognise the potential for an innovative asset management solution and commenced an ambitious project which complemented our strategic property and FM objectives. This involved:

- Assessing the requirements of the 13 separate voluntary groups, some of which by nature were highly specialised.
- Negotiating the vacation of the 3 unsuitable voluntary sector occupied buildings
- Procuring and fitting-out an alternative building, "The Orchard," which could accommodate all voluntary groups
- Advising 13 separate voluntary groups with regard to a facilities management and leasing model.
- Exploiting the value contained in previously occupied Council owned assets, providing a means of funding.
- Negotiating terms for the CCVS to become Head Tenants and assisting them in sub leasing and Facilities Management matters.

The final result has not only conferred significant financial and social benefits on both the Voluntary Service and the Council but also hugely assisted our regeneration aims within the Town Centre through securing strategic sites.

Development of Strategy

Both the Council's Property strategy and asset management plan focus on the disposal of surplus property in order to assist the authority's financial position. Early meetings with the Crawley Council for Voluntary Service (CCVS) sought to better

understand their organisational aims in order to establish a complementary strategy. This regular two way dialogue with clearly identified communication channels was fostered throughout the project. We sought to ensure that the asset management solution not only appealed to our own commercial property objectives but also to CCVS's own vision (below)

“The Orchard (will) exist to provide a wide range of voluntary sector services, to meet the needs of our community. Our intention is that the building will be used to promote partnership working between different agencies in the town and to develop a range of excellent services that are open to all, readily available and professionally and cost effectively delivered. Our work is based on the belief that everyone matters and that the people of Crawley have a wide range of skills, knowledge and experience that can be harnessed to deliver services for the benefit of us all.”

Communication to Staff and Stakeholders

The attached letter (entirely unsolicited) of support from the Chairman of Crawley Voluntary Services, the umbrella body for the 13 individually affected groups, provides evidence of the successful outcome of this project. By definition this success depended on the Council's property team clearly and regularly communicating with a diverse range of groups, all of whom had specific and sometimes conflicting requirements. Some of which were highly specialised e.g. sound proofing for Crawley Audio News and needle exchange for Addaction.

Achievement of what we set out to do

Social/Community

In part, the above vision is the measure by which we can judge our success. Evidence of our success in achieving what we set out to do is provided by the following comments from a letter dated 4/1/07 from the CCVS Chief Officer to the Council's Head of Property and Procurement

“The building offers significant benefit to service users. For example clients for Citizen's Advice Bureau services are frequently in difficult situations and can be quite volatile. Previously at “The Tree” these clients had to wait in cramped and poorly ventilated conditions, often with inadequate seating to meet demand and no facilities such as toilets. Now these customers have a spacious waiting area and toilet facilities are available. Since the move to the new building staff at the bureau have noticed that their clients are much calmer and therefore more able to take on board the advice they are being given. The atmosphere is also more pleasant for their advisers to work in and since many of them are volunteers this is clearly important and helps with retention. (Again this is an efficiency issue; it takes six months to train a Citizen's Advice Bureau adviser, so losing one is costly.)”

Space within the new building is used imaginatively and effectively. For example two groups with totally different needs share one facility. The Easter Team, a group of volunteers, only operate during the daytime whereas the Crawley Audio News, another of the voluntary groups, only meets in the evenings. Previously they held accommodation at separate locations but now work together in the spirit of partnership, sharing the costs of their new facility.

Commercial (Inc Value for Money)

Savings (both cashable and non-cashable) have been realised by the Council following full implementation of this project. The Council previously had responsibility for a range of maintenance liabilities associated with the upkeep of both WRVS House and The Tree. Under the new property/facilities management arrangements these responsibilities will fall to the WRVS and CCVS respectively.

Relocating WRVS will enable the Council to realise the development value of the WRVS House site (one of the original unsuitable buildings). In large part, this has financed the procurement and fitting out at The Orchard and facilitated delivery of the new Voluntary Sector 'Hub' for Crawley.

CCVS now have responsibility for full repair and maintenance of The Orchard. On the advice of the Council property team, a Premises Manager has been appointed to fulfil this role and the service charge levied by the CCVS will go towards these costs.

The Orchard brings scope for greater efficiency. Prior to the relocation, the various groups now located at The Orchard were accommodated in three separate buildings. Management of the various sites was covered by a variety of the voluntary organisations. Each of these buildings for example had separate cleaning arrangements, repair and maintenance issues, portable appliance testing, fire and other safety alarms etc to oversee. Now all of these issues are managed by one person, employed by CCVS, on behalf of all groups located at The Orchard.

The new arrangements generated efficiencies in a variety of other ways. For example previously each group managed its own purchasing arrangements. The CCVS plan to seek co-operation of the various user groups for example in bulk purchasing stationery items to gain cost reductions based on economies of scale. This approach has been replicated in gas and electricity supply contracts. Immediately bringing the groups to one location has eliminated the daily charges imposed by gas and electricity providers.

The Council will also benefit financially in a number of other ways:

With vacant possession, we will be able to exploit the development potential of The Tree/Annex site. This site remains hugely important as a strategic location within the "red line" area for the proposed £700m Grosvenor redevelopment of the northern part of Crawley Town Centre. As a listed building "The Tree" provides options for the provision of cultural uses, which will assist the investment potential / viability of the overall scheme and increase the financial offer made by Grosvenor to the Council.

The Council will no longer be responsible for external repairs and maintenance of The Tree/Annex and WRVS House. Many of the organisations relocating to The Orchard are in receipt of significant grants from the Council to cover their costs associated with renting CBC properties, although funding support will still be needed to meet service/maintenance costs at The Orchard. Overall, the Council will achieve both revenue and capital savings.

Supporting Evidence that the Project has made a difference to customers

Please see attached letters of support from Crawley Council for Voluntary Service and International developer, Grosvenor Estates.

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Timeline for the Creation of Crawley Voluntary Services Hub

Jan 06:

Inception meetings with Crawley Council for Voluntary Service to establish project principles.

Feb – March 06:

Meetings with 13 separate voluntary groups to establish requirements. Some of which were highly specialised e.g. sound proofing for Crawley Audio News and needle exchange for Addaction.

March 06:

Acquisition of new building “The Orchard” (1-2 Gleneagles Court)

May- Aug 06:

Refurbishment works undertaken. Leasing and FM advice provided to CCVS

July –Sept 06:

Commercial negotiation with Grosvenor to assess the impact of securing vacant possession on the financial viability of the Town Centre redevelopment and consequent base financial offer.

November 06:

Handover to Crawley Council for Voluntary Service.

December 06:

Hub opens

