

FAKENHAM : THE COMPELING CASE FOR A RESOURCE CENTRE

Fakenham is set in the North Norfolk countryside and has served as a market town for centuries. It is more than twenty miles from the major centres of Norwich and Kings Lynn. The population, of some 6,000, is well served for most everyday needs with shops and other businesses. However, both the town and its surrounding villages contain many people living on low wages, many who are disadvantaged in some way and many elderly people who live in the area in retirement.

People in groups such as these frequently require support in order for them to pass their lives in relative comfort and without undue anxiety or depression. Support to them may be provided by a spread of services some of which are statutory (such as the Social Services) and some voluntary. Whilst statutory services are usually adequately housed and provided for, the same cannot be claimed the Voluntary Services, despite the support which the government claims to offer to them and the need that it avows towards them.

At the present time the voluntary services operating in Fakenham struggle to meet their reasonable objectives because of the unsatisfactory nature of the buildings from which they operate. This includes the Citizens Advice Bureau, The Wensum Centre (providing day support for those with mental health difficulties), the First Focus Drop in Centre and Information Service and the Youth Club. The buildings provided for these organisations are offered in good faith, but they lack amenities and stifle the opportunities and assistance which could be offered in different and more purpose built environments. If voluntary groups such as these, along with other community groups, could be united in a Resource Centre fitted to purpose, so much more could be achieved .

The voluntary agencies mentioned above have the wholehearted support of the Fakenham Community Centre Committee who believe it would prove possible to develop the present Community Centre to achieve the Resource Centre required ; we understand, however, that difficulties might be met in respect of land and buildings tenure with this option. Whatever the outcome, a Resource Centre should be convenient to the town centre and accessible to disabled or otherwise handicapped people and should be provided with parking space.

In addition to the aforesaid, it is proposed within the Core Strategy that Fakenham shall be appreciably expanded, with as many as an additional 1,500 homes provided over the period up to 2020. This development will inevitably add further pressure to the resources of all support agencies, whether statutory or voluntary and further underlines the case for a Centre meeting the operational needs of all of the Voluntary Support Services.

Brief details relating to the voluntary agencies mentioned above are as follows :-

FIRST FOCUS

Operating from privately owned premises which it shares with others, First Focus is open to the public on two weekdays. It provides information and support to all community members but especially to adults with physical difficulties, to the socially isolated and to the financially disadvantaged. Since opening five years ago user numbers have steadily increased and in the twelve months to August 2007 total attendance reached almost 2,500, an increase of 36% on the previous year. The Charity works in partnership with many other statutory and voluntary services by arranging for specialist and expert outreach "surgeries" for Fakenham residents and the wider community in villages around the town.

THE WENSUM CENTRE

Offers day provision for people between 18 and 65 years of age suffering from mental ill health, stress or depression. The aims are to provide a social outlet through a variety of activities (such as games and discussion groups), to offer support in an environment where members can meet in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere with staff members at hand and to provide a children's room where mothers can leave their offspring with trained staff in secure conditions.

The Wensum Centre has approximately 40 male and female members on its register. This membership is fluid with changes over time. Referrals are accepted from Social Workers, Community Psychiatric Nurses, Health Visitors and Doctors. The Centre is grant funded by Social Services and, in addition to opening twice weekly for full days there is a half day set aside for "drop-in" when referrals are not necessary to attend.

The Centre shares accommodation with other community services.

CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

The aims of the Citizens Advice Bureau are, firstly, to provide free, independent and confidential advice and information to all regardless of age, race, gender, sexuality or disability. Also to ensure that individuals do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their responsibilities, or of the services available to them, or through an inability to express their needs effectively and equally.

Additionally, to exercise a responsible influence on the development of social policies and services, both locally and nationally.

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