

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

THE PUBLIC FUTURE OPTIONS

1. Background

The council is considering leasing The Public to Sandwell College as a sixth-form and lifelong learning centre with associated 'arts café' and exhibition space.

This follows many years during which opponents of the arts centre have criticised us for – in their view – wasting millions of pounds on a 'pink elephant' which people do not want.

Ironically, the college proposal has prompted a 'Love our Public' campaign – led by tenants/users of the centre with the apparent backing of its managing director – to save the centre.

2. Communications objective

We want to convince people that we have a plan to secure a viable, long-term future for The Public which:

- means council tax payers will no longer have to put so much money into The Public every year;
- boosts Sandwell's education 'offer' to young people by providing high-quality courses;
- looks after existing businesses (and the jobs/apprenticeships involved in them) which rent space in The Public;
- continues arts activities; and
- provides alternative venues for entertainment and community activities currently offered by The Public.

3. People to reach

- Sandwell residents;
- partners in The Public who have put money into it (Arts Council, Advantage West Midlands and the European Regional Development Fund);
- council members;
- tenants of the centre; and
- existing users.

4. Main messages

- we rescued The Public after the project went into administration some years ago, setting up Sandwell Arts Trust to make sure the building was finished and run activities there;
- we can no longer afford to carry on pumping money into it at a time of massive cuts in cash support from central government;

- our plan gives an opportunity to secure a viable, long-term future for The Public which is not dependent on council tax payers' cash every year;
- the college proposal provides high-quality extra sixth form courses that young people need – part of a big step forward in Sandwell's further education facilities alongside the existing college and proposed University Technical College (specialising in health sciences) not far away in West Brom town centre;
- we are offering space in the town centre (part of a fledgling cultural/creative quarter near the library, Town Hall etc) to tenants to safeguard business, jobs and apprenticeships;
- we are working with the college to continue arts activities at The Public (ground-floor arts café, exhibition space) and also looking for alternative venues in West Brom for the entertainment provided The Public such as comedy gigs, music and so on (Town Hall, New Square, George Salter Academy's 500-seat theatre when it is developed);
- we will work with community groups to continue activities they currently stage at The Public (tea dances and so on); and
- we have listened to the views of opponents of the sixth-form and come up with alternatives which meet their objections.

5. Channels

- council website;
- social media (Facebook, Twitter pages);
- council intranet and other internal comms tools (Chief Exec's blog, emails and so on);
- "The Bottom Line" (Leader's blog);
- local press;
- regional broadcast media (radio, TV);
- specialist arts, business publications (print and online);
- community radio (Raaj FM);
- Sandwell Herald.

6. Timing & tactics

The timetable for deciding if the sixth-form centre proposal is feasible is tight. The college will need to move into The Public by 1 October if it is to have time to convert the building so students can start learning there in September 2014.

There are various milestones along the way including:

- talks with project partners to eliminate/minimise the chances of them 'clawing back' cash they have put into The Public;
- reaching agreement with the college on details of the partnership between us and them (building lease, business support, continuing arts offer etc);
- relocating tenants to Development House;

- ending our agreement with Sandwell Arts Trust to run The Public; and
- a report to the council's cabinet (currently scheduled for 14 August).

Any or all of these milestones may generate a need for communications activity.

This could be:

- proactive (issuing news releases on steps forward in the process, providing spokespeople for broadcast media, putting releases on the council's website, sending Facebook or Twitter messages and so on); or
- reactive (answering enquiries from journalists, questions on social media and so on).

So far council leader Councillor Darren Cooper and deputy leader Councillor Mahboob Hussain have mostly been our spokespeople. Given the priority of The Public to the council, this should continue wherever possible.

We will continue to liaise with college press and marketing people as we put this communications plan into action. This will enable us to use their comms channels as well as our own.

7. Budget

There is no need for money to put this plan into practice.

It will need the time of staff in the council's communications unit (manager Steve Harrison, press officers, digital staff and so on) rather than cash.

8. Measuring progress

The council's communications unit will monitor press, online and social media coverage of The Public as the situation develops. It already has both paper and electronic files; and will add to these throughout the summer.

These will enable us to assess:

- how successful we are in getting across our main messages; and
- whether we meet our aim of convincing people that we have a plan to secure a viable, long-term future for The Public.

