

The Highland Council

Resources Committee - 27 August 2014

Agenda Item	10.ii.c
Report No	RES/34/14

Ross and Cromarty Citizen's Advice Bureau – Application to Capital Discretionary Fund 2014/15

Report by the Chief Executive

Summary

This report seeks Members' approval to provide a contribution of up to £40,000 from the Capital Discretionary Fund to re-furbish new premises for Ross and Cromarty Citizen's Advice Bureau, based in Alness.

Ross and Cromarty Citizen's Advice Bureau is contributing £30,000, which includes a grant of £10,000 from Awards for All, towards a total project budget of £70,000.

Ross and Cromarty CAB have already received committee approval to swap their current premises at 4 Novar Road, Alness, with an ex-social work property (Suie House). The funding is required to make the new CAB premises fit for purpose.

The old CAB site is being converted by the Council into 4 x 1 bedroom properties to assist the Council in providing low cost housing which complies with the new Welfare Reform Housing requirements. 1 bedroom properties in Alness are in high demand.

1. Background

- 1.1 Established in 1977, Ross and Cromarty CAB delivers free, impartial, confidential and independent advice, information, support and representation services to the people in their community, regardless of age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion or any other social factor.
- 1.2 Ross and Cromarty CAB also provide training and support to over 40 volunteers, many of whom go on to employment or further or higher education as a result of the in-depth training and experience they develop with the CAB. In addition to general advice and information service which covers a very wide range of topics, the CAB offers in-depth support and representation in relation to debt, welfare rights and housing. Services are provided face to face in their 2 main offices (Alness and Dingwall); by using outreach services; and also, by phone, by e mail and by letter. In 2013/14, they answered over 7,000 enquiries and helped clients to access £1,547,561 to which they were entitled, considerably improving the quality of their lives and helping to support local economies.
- 1.3 In addition to the delivery of their core services, Ross and Cromarty CAB are currently involved with delivering projects with Ross-shire Women's Aid, The Scottish Legal Aid Board, The Big Lottery, The Chartered Institute of Bankers in Scotland, Citizens Advice Scotland and the Highland Council. These projects aim to provide specialist, high level support to vulnerable people likely to be affected by welfare reforms, the

economic downturn, increases in the cost of living, fuel poverty and domestic violence and aim to maximise incomes, prevent homelessness, help people manage or avoid indebtedness, help people to access the financial products and services including financial education that might help them to manage their financial situations and gain a better quality of life.

- 1.4 Alness CAB's current premises are no longer fit for purpose. There are not enough interview rooms which means people are kept waiting to see an adviser whilst the waiting area is cramped and difficult to keep warm. The interview rooms themselves have no windows and are too small to comfortably accommodate wheel chairs, buggies or children. Due to lack of space, the Alness Bureau is unable to accommodate the additional volunteer and paid staff needed to develop and improve their services. Those they do have are split over two floors, which hinders collaboration, training and development activity. The workspace is too cramped to accommodate wheel chairs comfortably.

2. The Project

- 2.1 Ross and Cromarty CAB have been seeking a more suitable premises for many years, without success. An opportunity has now arisen which enables the Highland Council to swap premises with Alness CAB. The proposed new CAB premises at Suie House are central and accessible, have their own parking, and have space for expansion. Ross and Cromarty CAB are confident the relocation will enable a better, more efficient service to be provided to a greater number of vulnerable people and for more volunteers to be accommodated, including wheelchair users. It also provides the potential to expand the range and depth of services on offer, which is not currently possible due to the constraints imposed by their premises at Novar Road.
- 2.2 Work will be required to make Suie House fit for purpose. A structural survey has been carried out which has identified a range of issues that need to be tackled in addition to general re-decoration and re-configuration of the internal space to accommodate the optimum number and layout for meeting rooms and offices. In addition to the internal works and replacement windows, the CAB will also be refurbishing the entrance gates, external perimeter walls and upgrading the car park area.
- 2.3 In return, Highland Council is now able to convert the CAB's old premises at Novar Road into 4 X 1 bedroom self-contained flats. The completed properties will remain in the ownership of the Council for affordable rent. Proposals are far advanced and it is intended to start on site later this year.

3. Fit with Council Programme

- 3.1 The Project supports the "Programme for The Highland Council 2012-2017: Working together for the Highlands" themes: Better Housing; Working together for the economy and Working together to empower our communities.

4. Budget

- 4.1 Total project costs are £70,000. Funding of £20,000 is being provided from Ross and Cromarty CAB's own resources and a further £10,000 from Awards for All grant. .

4.2 The Project currently has a shortfall of £40,000.

5. Implications

5.1 Resources - there are no resource implications beyond the grant sum requested and no ongoing revenue commitments arising from The Highland Council's involvement.

5.2 Legal - there are no legal implications for The Highland Council in providing financial assistance.

5.3 Equalities and Climate Change - There will be a positive equalities impact as the building is made more accessible and improved services will be made available to a larger number of disadvantaged people. There will be a positive climate change impact as new insulation and new windows are being installed in Suie House which will make it more energy efficient. In addition, the Council's conversion of the Novar Road property will turn a single, energy inefficient building into 4 energy efficient homes.

5.4 Risk, Gaelic and Rural - there are no risk, Gaelic or rural implications to The Highland Council.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Members are asked to approve a total, capped contribution of £40,000 from the Capital Discretionary Fund, to Ross and Cromarty Citizen's Advice Bureau.

Designation: Chief Executive

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Date: 15 August 2014