



OLDHAM COUNCIL

Councillor Howard Sykes MBE

Leader of the Opposition, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group Oldham Council, Member for Shaw Ward, Member for South Ward Shaw & Crompton Parish Council.

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Cllr Abdul Jabbar & Jenny Harrison

Re: A Future for the Link Centre – Philip Harrison House

I was saddened to read that as part of the current round of public consultation over proposed budget cuts, that consideration is being given to the closure of the Link Centre – Philip Harrison House.

I see that in the consultation: "*Another key proposal is to **close the Link Centre**, Oldham's Centre for Independent Living.*"

It offers a large number of services, support groups and signposting facilities for residents with a disability, carers and others with additional needs.

The centre has experienced low footfall for a period of time and it is felt there is potential to offer the services, for example in helping to co-ordinate volunteering across the borough, in other ways other than through a dedicated centre which costs a significant amount of money to run.

If this measure is approved, Oldham Council will work closely with the individuals involved to understand how we can support them going forwards."

I am not naïve. I recognise that in our current financial reality real savings will have to be made from our budget; in some instance this will mean that the local authority may be forced to relinquish buildings from which it provides public services and these may then be subject to sale or demolition.

In the case of an office block the impact will not be too great as services can easily be relocated, however where a building delivers unique person-centered services to a particularly deserving client group, and this is the case with the Link Centre, these services may be impossible to replicate and so may be lost forever.

We have to recognise that, with an aging population, the prevalence of disabilities and long-term health conditions will increase, and so also, and here I speak from personal experience, will the burden placed upon an increasing number of carers in our community; so it is inconceivable that the demand for these services will not rise incrementally.

When the late Councilor Philip Harrison had cabinet responsibility for adult social services, in private discussions, he impressed upon me and several of my Liberal Democrat colleagues his vision that the Link Centre could be developed into an independent living centre, based on the model of the Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living. I understand that Councilor Harrison visited this centre personally to explore this possibility.

I would like to suggest that now would be the opportune time to re-visit his vision and that we should look first at the practicalities of divesting ownership and operation to an independent charitable trust to ensure that the needs of these service users can continue to be met?

The Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living (<http://www.gcil.org.uk/>) is an independent charitable trust of disabled people, which is run by disabled people for disabled people.

The primary advantages of this model are that:

- Services are delivered by staff and service users who all have a disability or health condition. This means that those individuals who access the service benefit from the acquired knowledge and understanding gained by staff from this lived-experience
- A service of disabled people run for disabled people is empowering for those individuals and will be a great example of the co-operation we aspire to as a Council
- An independent charitable trust can attract funding from external sources that a Council cannot

Yes budget cuts are a huge threat to services, but I am sure you would agree that they also force us to look at different models to deliver them. This then is a possible service-delivery model for the Link Centre and I do hope that you will want to investigate it.

I can say that the Liberal Democrat Group stands ready to work with the Administration, our officers and the groups and individuals who use the Link Centre, or who aspire to do so, to explore this option, and in the hope that this might receive your urgent consideration, I very much look forward to hearing further from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Howard Sykes". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Howard Sykes