



Shropshire Hills Discovery
Centre Advisory Board

Item / Paper

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Public

SHROPSHIRE HILLS DISCOVERY CENTRE, APRIL 2009 TO JUNE 2009

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1. Round up of our services at the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre

1.1 Craven Arms Library

The use of the library is continuing to increase. Loans of all types of books are up again this quarter versus the same period last year, varying from +5% for adult fiction to +46% for junior non-fiction. Overall total loans are up 10%. (Performance indicators will be tabled at the meeting.)

The library supports four local Reading Groups, including the Craven Arms group who meet once a month at the Centre.

Our two Thursday Rhyme time sessions for under fives and their carers remain well received and well attended.

Stokesay School's reception class also come for weekly sessions.

We had a well attended event in June as part of the South Shropshire Literary Festival - Take Tea with Phil Rickman.

The summer Reading Challenge is well underway. We have been promoting this within the library and directly to children at the desk. We have a treasure hunt on the Quest Seekers theme and several of our led activities for the summer also tie-in with the Reading Challenge.

1.2 Secret Hills exhibition, Café and Retail

Of over 50,000 Centre users in the first quarter of the year, well over 6,000 came to visit the Secret Hills exhibition or to do one of our various led activities. This is up around 20% on the previous year. Total receipts remain at a similar level to last year – given the current financial climate I believe our visitors are looking for ways to save money and so are taking advantage of some of our lower cost activities. School group visits remain at a similar level to last year - we are nearly at capacity during the summer term.

We were pleased to retain our Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme award following an inspection earlier in the year.

Our ongoing survey shows visitors remain very satisfied with their experience at the Centre. (Graphs to be tabled at the meeting.)

1.3 Onny Meadows and Outdoors

Forest school

Using a small grant from Adult and Community Education we offered a special, term long series of forest school activities between April and July. We were able to pay specialist crafts people and leaders - it was very successful. The monthly Dads' and Kids' Forest School will now continue as normal.

The Meadow Fun sessions started again in April and were reasonably well attended although numbers declined in June and July. The format may be slightly different in the autumn, as the Family Centre cannot help us to deliver the sessions, but they will continue until at least Christmas.

The Forest school site has been well used over the summer term. Church Stretton Childminders and Stokesay Primary school did self led sessions. Wistanstow School also came for half a term and had sessions led by our Education Officer.

Wednesday Work parties

Volunteer sessions continue. They have been enhanced by joint working with the Shropshire Outdoors project. Wheelchair-accessible, livestock proof kissing gates are currently being installed on the main meadow.

Community Garden

The paths throughout the garden have been improved, making them fully accessible. A small additional section of path has also been created to link to the main path through the meadows. Picnic furniture has also been installed.

Details of the next "Grow, Cook, Eat" course are being finalised for the autumn. (Participants have vegetable growing lessons at the Discovery Centre and cooking lessons at the Community Centre.)

Walks from the Discovery Centre

Following a review and several weeks of public testing of the amended routes, we now have our four new circular walks leaflets. This also coincides with the publication of the new Shropshire Way Guide, the route of which has been amended to go through Onny Meadows and past the building. We have been working closely with the Shropshire Way project officer to improve the teams knowledge and promotion skills regarding walking, including a recent training day.

Awareness of the walking opportunities from the Centre is growing – this year we have hosted a number of charity walks for various groups including Stokesay School, Shropshire Mind, Diabetes UK and Bernardo's.

1.4 Other services

Shropshire Council Customer Service Point (SCSP)

From the start of April 2009 the SCSP has been available five days a week. (Previously it was open two days a week.) Our trained advisor offers information on council, public and community services. People can pop in to get information about, and apply for, a range of services including Blue Badges, Meals on Wheels, free school meals, concessionary travel, waste permits, reporting highways and street lighting faults and signposting to other services. Enquiries to the SCSP are gradually increasing as awareness of the service rises.

Registrar

There is an appointment only session run on Mondays by the Shropshire Registration Service in order that people can register births, deaths and marriages from the Discovery Centre.

Craven Arms Homework Club

We are continuing to work with the Homework Club, in particular planning joint, special holiday activities.

Learning, Employment and Training Services advice sessions

The small office off the library is now being used at least twice a week by the Employment Services team for one to one meetings to help people get back into work. Enable are also occasionally using the room for similar interviews.

2. Marketing, Promotion and Events

2.1 Marketing & Promotion April – July 2009

The broadcast of the episode of Escape to the Country featuring Geocaching was shown in the spring.

A small grant from SSDC has funded this year's Passport to Craven Arms scheme. There is also a small sum to contribute towards updating the Craven Arms town leaflet, which will be co-ordinated by the Centre.

The Shropshire Hills Events brochure was very successful and the initial print run of 15,000 was distributed within 3 months. The AONB paid for an additional print run. The web site www.shropshirehillsdiscoverycentre.co.uk is kept up to date with events and activities.

This year's advertising plan has seen a slight shift in focus – we have spent less on advertising to the coach group market and more money on family specific publications such as The Primary Times and This is Kids Stuff.

We did a large mail shot just before the summer holidays.

We are also trialling maintaining a presence on Facebook, this began in early July.

2.2 Events and Activities Program 2009

- Easter: Seeing is Believing – make a kaleidoscope of natural things
- May Bank Holiday: Wind, Rain, Shine! – can you become a weather forecaster?
- May half-term: A special Geocaching trail round the meadows
- Summer holidays: Puzzling Palaeontology; Dinner Time; Three Little Pigs; Meadow Creations week;
- September 10th – 13th Heritage Open Days
- September 12th Craven Arms ArtWalk
- October half-term: The World's Biggest Pop-up Book?

- The Gallery has had a number of very successful shows this year, including "House of Cards" and "Four Plus Two" both of which saw good sales. Bookings for the Art Cafe Summer Festival workshops are the best ever.

3. Craven Arms Learning Centres

With all the building work completed before April, the management of the financial aspect of the project is almost complete. A final claim will be made in March following the 12 month defect liability period coming to an end at the Community Centre.

Focus has now shifted to achieving agreed outputs – business assists and employment support. By the end of the year we will have exceeded the number contractually required, as we did last year for employment supports. We are continuing to work closely with the Community Centre. Some examples of this include:

- As part of Craven Arms Youth Group - following the success of the youth workers based at the Community Centre, we have won further funding to extend the project, so they can continue to work in the town.
- We have been working closely with the newly formed community interest company established to deliver a Community Art project in and around Craven Arms during the summer.
- Joint working on events including Grow, Cook, Eat, Play Day on 5th August and activities to tie in with the switching on of Craven Arms Christmas lights.

4. Community Projects and activities

4.1 Craven Arms Local History Group

Every Friday morning the volunteers are available to help people with enquiries and continue their work cataloguing documents relating to the local area. On the first Wednesday of the month the LHG are now also holding regular talks / workshops.

4.2 Craven Arms Volunteers for the Environment (CAVE)

CAVE continues to be an invaluable help to the Centre keeping a programme of management activities going in the Meadows.

4.3 Craven Arms Community Food

The Farmers' markets continue to be well attended and have a core group of stallholders who come every month. We continue to look for ways to encourage additional people and have recently asked musicians if they would like to come and perform at the markets to promote themselves.

4.4 Other partnership and community events and activities

The Centre continues to be used by the Brownies and Guides. The local group of the RSPB will return to us for their winter talks program on the second Wednesday of the month from September. Ludlow College continue to run a Literacy Course – they are really pleased to have the People's Net computers available for their learners to use.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, to date, we have had a successful year. However, the wide spectrum of services and activities offered at the Centre creates its own challenges. Not least the need for targeted and appropriate communication with all our different users and visitors to ensure everyone gets the most out of a trip to the Centre. The shift in advertising focus, the introduction of a monthly onsite 'What's On', the trial on

Facebook, the development of in house Welcome Host training, walks and library training, are all part of the strategy to improve in this area.

In a wider context we also work to deliver and support corporate indicators and local and national priorities. The challenge here is also about communicating - often our contribution is small or the outputs are difficult to measure. But this should not devalue this aspect of the Centre's work: as a venue for a Walking for Life group; as part of the Shropshire Hills Shuttles Steering Group; the role we play in local tourism as a Visitor Information Centre; the Silver Healthy Eating Award won by the Cafe; participating in Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme, which are among the many things we do.

We are proud of the services delivered at the Centre and believe it to be a valuable asset to the community and the county. The challenges we face are also opportunities and we will continue to strive to ensure we are making the most of our resources, deliver excellent customer service and raise our profile, both within Shropshire Council and to the wider community, so that all we do receives the merit it deserves.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Human Rights Act Appraisal

No issues

Environmental Appraisal

Future work will encompass the principles of sustainable development particularly with respect to building and exhibition material and the running of the Centre and Onny Meadows.

Risk Management Appraisal

The management of the Discovery Centre is informed by a business plan and marketing plan.

Community / Consultations Appraisal

Cabinet Member

Cllr Steve Charmley

Local Members

Cllr David Evans, Cllr James Gibson, Cllr Cecilia Motley

Appendices