

Report of the Squash Courts Working Group to November Full Council

Introduction

The Business Case to transform the derelict Old Squash Courts into an Alcester Community Shed was approved by Full Council in November 2023 and the Terms of Reference of the Squash Courts Working Group were signed off.

Our vision in the Business Case was to ‘create a safe, weatherproof, community space for use by Alcester Shed members’. The benefits identified included contributing to the physical and mental health of shed users, (particularly by reducing loneliness of men), and the sharing of practical skills and learning new ones.

Since last November a project involving many contractors and volunteers has been undertaken and reached a successful completion with the new Alcester Community Shed being officially opened by the Mayor, Cllr Mike Bowe on 25th October 2024.

The project followed standard project management principles with the work following a clear plan, expenditure following standard protocols and the finances being closely monitored. Formal tender exercises were undertaken for the big-ticket items – the roof, the heating and ventilation system and the electrics.

Costs

At the time of the Business Case the estimated project costs were £121k for Stage 1. This included all major building works managed by ATC, with Stage 2 being the interior fit out which, it was expected, would be managed by the Community Shed Group and for which they would seek additional funding and donations. As the project progressed the scope of Stages 1 and 2 were combined with ATC managing the whole project.

Initially available funds were £86k. Opportunities were taken to apply for further grants and due to successful applications and the generosity of donors, total combined funds (in ATC and ACS accounts) increased to £163,600. A grant from Bloors was used for planning and building control costs.

The total spend as at 25 October 2024 is £141,860 against the £163,600 available budget. See attached budget and costs sheet. The remaining budget after current commitments is £20,390. This will be used to meet the operating expenses of the building and the Community Shed group for at least the next 12 months. Some of this money may also be needed to pay for resurfacing the tarmac area at the front of the building. The project has been delivered with no cost impact on Alcester ratepayers.

In addition, there remains £9,438 out of a £20,750 grant from the UK Rural Economy Prosperity Fund which was ring fenced for capital spend. This will be spent as shed members identify which additional tools and equipment they need.

In parallel with the main project the Community Shed were successful in getting £25k from the WCC Social Fabric fund to cover the cost of solar panels and batteries. A tender exercise was undertaken and the panels fitted, with a local company supplying the batteries.

Delivery

We now have a new welcoming and energy efficient community asset. The workshop is well-equipped with tools and has workbenches which were donated by Alcester Academy. The

kitchen is fitted with units donated by Orbit. Both the workshop and meeting room are light and the temperature can be easily controlled. Accessibility has been considered with a wide entrance ramp to the new doorway and appropriately fitted toilet area. We have Building Control approval for the building alterations and have passed an independent fire risk assessment.

Going forward the Town Council will manage the building. The Alcester Community Shed group, chaired by Cllr Mark Cargill, will manage use of the workshop and own its contents.

During a busy couple of open days in September and October many residents showed interest in Shed membership and 17 have now joined. As well as sessions where members can use the hand tools the Community Shed group plan to get trainers in to teach how to safely use the machine tools such as the lathe, plus demonstrations by experienced professionals. Initially focus will be on developing the Community Shed group activities but there is the potential to introduce broader usage of the building in future.

The monitoring of the benefits, including user numbers and the evaluation of how the shed has benefited individual members, is required by many of the grant providers, and will continue.

The Squash Courts Working Group will have its final meeting on November 5th.

Cllr Wendy Mills, Chair of Squash Courts Working Group.

25th October 2024