

KETTERING TOWN COUNCIL

REPORT FOR DECISION

Item No:- 2023/097

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| Committee:- | Council |
| Date:- | 20 th March 2024 |
| Author:- | Martin Hammond, Town Clerk |
| Report Title:- | Shopmobility in Kettering Town centre |
| Wards Affected:- | William Knibb but all indirectly |

1. Purpose of Report

To seek the Council's views on providing emergency funding for Shopmobility. .

2. Recommendations

Council's instructions are requested in respect of the options set out in para 3.8 below.

3. Information

- 3.1. The current Shopmobility service has been provided within Kettering for many years, and is run from premises on Wadcroft car park. It is managed by Evans Hearing and Healthcare Ltd, under a service level agreement with NNC (and previously KBC). Evans took on the service 18 years ago when the previous provider handed the SLA back and were, at the time, the only interested party. Their current SLA has run since 2018.
- 3.2. Shopmobility rents out wheelchairs to users with mobility problems to enable them to shop and make use of facilities in the town centre. They have 200 registered users and approximately 30-40 hirings a week. The service is open 9.30am to 5pm Monday to Friday and is free to users, but some people make donations which are ploughed

back into the service. They have 9 units to rent out, which are supplied and owned by the parent business. The service is managed separately from Evans' main business, with two part time staff and the costs of maintenance taking up the majority of costs. Evans do effectively subsidise the service from their own resources as a business as well. They are located in a cabin owned and leased from NNC at a nil cost. NNC maintain the building.

- 3.3. The service is supported by a £13,000 annual grant from NNC, but this is due to end at the end of March 2024. NNC have, since 2021, continued the grants regime that they inherited from the predecessor authorities and during this last year, developed a new set of priorities, against which they are now seeking bids from potential providers. Grants will be awarded for NNC wide contracts, and the category that shopmobility services fall into is "community transport".
- 3.4. Evans Hearing and Healthcare Ltd is a local business which provides this service as a not for profit extension to their business and they are not in a position to bid for a NNC wide community transport contract which includes Shopmobility as part of it. It is therefore likely that the service will come to an end in March 2024 unless some emergency funding is put in place. It is conceivable that another organisation focused more on community transport might be willing to also seek funding for a Shopmobility service but none has come forward yet.
- 3.5. Evans Hearing and Healthcare Ltd has asked the Town Council if they could fund the service in place of NNC.
- 3.6. The Council's total grants budget for 2024/5 is £20,000, of which £5000 has been allocated to core fund certain local organisations and £5000 has been allocated towards environmental projects. The remaining £10,000 is clearly not enough on its own and would preclude any other organisations being funded in 2024/5 if it was so used.
- 3.7. The Council has two other sources of funding which could be used
 - the community resilience fund – this is £7500 for both 23/4 and 24/5 years. The fund has underspent by £6000 in this financial year and this is money which would otherwise be put into reserves.
 - all other general underspends in 2023/4 – the Council is likely to underspend in total by about £32,000 this year (including the £6000 above) and again, this money would also be, otherwise, moved into reserves.
- 3.8. It is therefore conceivable that the Council could provide some emergency funding for Shopmobility which would keep it in place for either a year or part year, pending a more comprehensive review of the service and how it might be funded long term, including from sources other than the Town Council. The options at this point for the Town Council would include

- a) Agreeing a multi-year funding agreement that retained Shopmobility in its current configuration. The grant of £13000 would probably have to increase year on year however. It would mean making an early commitment towards the 25/6 budget and beyond. This would give some confidence to the operator that it was worth continuing their role in providing the service.
- b) Agreeing a single year's grant and using the time to see how else the service might be configured and if other providers were interested. There might still be a case for including provision in future year's budgets at the time.
- c) Agreeing a grant for a shorter period, on the basis that an urgent solution is required and seeking to engage NNC in how that might be part funded by them.
- d) Deciding that it is not the Town Council's role to fund shopmobility.

4. Consultation and Engagement

No public consultation has been possible in the limited time available, except with the current provider and with NNC. If members were to agree a package which prevented its closure and funded it for a period, it would be possible to conduct a consultation and explore options about the shape and reach of a service in future.

5. Finance, Legal and Resource Implications

5.1. The Council has no provision for this service in its budget for 24/5 and could it only fund it from under-spending in 23/4. This would entail passporting a part of this year's underspending into the 24/5 budget and creating a new budget line.

5.2. A £13,000 grant represents a subsidy of about £7 for each hiring.

5.3. NNC have been asked about the long term occupation of the current cabin in Wadcroft and its maintenance.

5.4. The Council's policy is not to grant aid private businesses but in this case, the service is provided as a non-profit making arms length operation which, far from subsidising the parent business, is being subsidised by the parent business.

6. Climate change implications

Measures which enable people to shop more locally and use town centre facilities more easily will reduce longer journeys to other centres.

7. Policy Implications

The Council's policy is to support the town centre. Shopmobility clearly enables some of the footfall to the town centre to happen which might not otherwise.

Apart from its economic development benefit, the service also provides a social service by enabling people to get out and about who might otherwise have limited opportunity to do that.

Background Papers

Correspondence/meeting notes with Evans Hearing and Healthcare Ltd
Budget and accounts for 23/4 and 24/5