

# **The Viability of the Kirkby Suite:**

## **Is the 'remodelling' of a key community venue necessary or justifiable?**

**- An assessment by the Kirkby Residents Action Group**

### **Summary**

Knowsley Council plans to 'remodel' the Kirkby Suite in order to 'centralise' a range of services. Primarily this involves completely removing the current entertainment facilities in order to move the existing Kirkby Library and other pre-existing services into the Kirkby Suite. This has, according to reports, become necessary as the council can no longer afford to pay Tesco for the building and rent of a new Library as part of the planned Kirkby Town Centre redevelopment.

The details of this plan were approved on 4<sup>th</sup> March by Knowsley Council's Cabinet, however the effective closure of the Kirkby Suite on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 for 'refurbishment' has been planned since at least mid-summer 2011. All events that had already been booked for after this date were cancelled and no new bookings were taken, despite there apparently being 'no plans' at the time to remove the entertainment function offered by the Kirkby Suite.

Data supplied by Knowsley Council to residents, either via direct requests or through Freedom of Information Act requests, show that the Kirkby Suite is used to a high degree of occupancy, that the yearly cost of running the Kirkby Suite has been decreasing year-on-year for the past 6 years, and that the Kirkby Suite is actually very good value for money compared to the Huyton Suite, which is much more expensive to operate.

The Kirkby Suite has operated in the recent past using a very small team of 3 permanent staff supported by a larger pool of bar staff shared with the Huyton Suite. The building itself is in need of some obvious maintenance and improvements, but these appear largely cosmetic. The notable exception is that much of the ground floor is actually given over to the Kirkby Health Suite which is due to move into a new build on the other side of the town centre and is therefore not currently available for use in any capacity.

It is my opinion that the facility is unique in the area, well used by the local population and by people from a wider area, is value for money both for the tax payer and the user, and should not be deprived of its current facilities by the proposed 'remodelling'.

## Introduction

The Kirkby Suite is a purpose built civic building with a series of suites or different sizes providing a dance floor, bar areas, performance stage and catering facilities for a wide range of events and functions. The Kirkby Suite currently comprises the following:

- The Eagle Suite is the main entertainment facility which includes a fully equipped performance stage and supporting backstage facilities, the largest dance floor in the North West of England, a bar and ample additional space around the dance floor for tables and chairs.
- The Falcon Suite is a secondary entertainment facility which also includes a smaller dance floor, ample table and chair space, and another bar. This room can be opened up to extend the Eagle Suite as needed.
- The Kestrel Suite is a smaller meeting room situated in the cross-over bridge between the Kirkby Suite and the Kirkby council offices building to which it is attached.
- The venue also has catering facilities on the first floor to support events.
- The reception area and main toilets are located downstairs, although much of the ground floor space is now taken up by the existing Kirkby Health Suite.

Like the Huyton Suite, the Kirkby Suite was managed as part of the 'Knowsley Suites' (not to be confused the Suites Hotel on the East Lancashire Road) by Knowsley Council, and the senior management for both venues were based in the Huyton Suite. Since the closure of the Kirkby Suite in April 2012, the Huyton Suite has been rebranded as the 'Knowsley Suite' and has continued to operate.

It is not clear who the Kirkby Health Suite is managed through or whether it contributes financially to the running of the Kirkby Suite building.

## The Evidence

There are a number of key pieces of evidence which must be considered when examining the viability of the Kirkby Suite. These pieces of evidence include the usage of the facility when compared to the Huyton Suite, the running costs of both venues, and the reported plans for the 'redevelopment' of Kirkby Town Centre.

### **Relative usage**

Data relating to the use of the Kirkby and Huyton Suites was provided by the management of the Knowsley Suites after a direct e-mail request was made. This information provides estimated average usage per event type for the past four years, not including the 2011/12 financial year (these were unavailable). This information shows a steady increase in Kirkby Suite usage compared to the more variable usage of the Huyton Suite.

A key difference between the two venues is that whilst the usage of the Huyton Suite has had a major contribution from 'internal' (that is to say Knowsley Council) functions, a much higher proportion of Kirkby Suite functions are from 'external' (that is to say largely community) events.

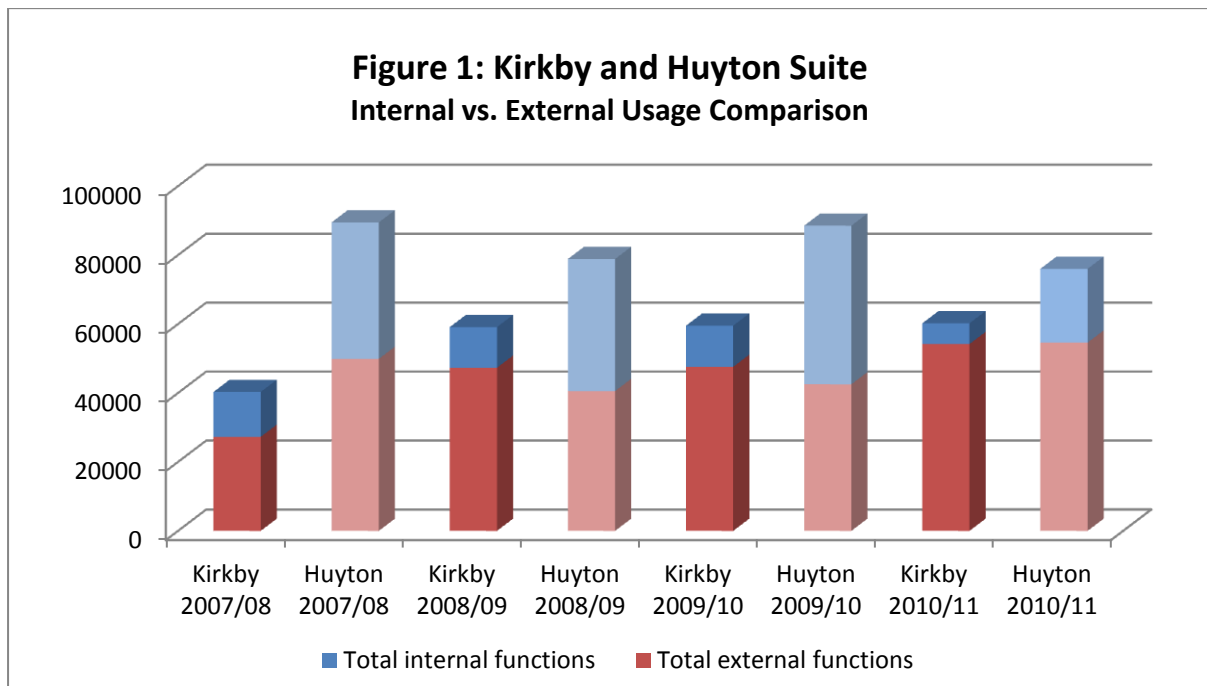


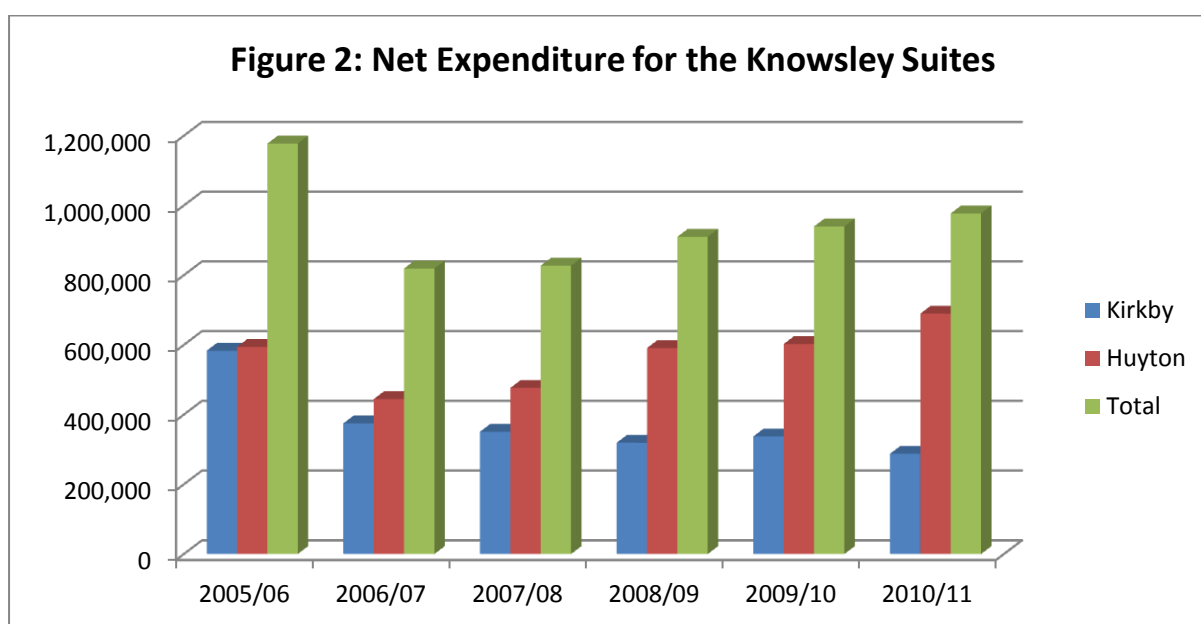
Figure 1 shows the 4-year, internal vs. External usage for both venues. The first important thing to note is that the Kirkby Suite does have a lower usage than the Huyton Suite, but this is a reflection of the fact that the Huyton Suite has more function rooms than the Kirkby Suite has and therefore has a greater capacity.

Figures A1 and A2 in the appendix show detail about what events contribute to the overall usage of both facilities. Huyton usage is dominated by internal (that is to say Council hired) events and associated catering. Stage shows feature significantly for the Kirkby usage statistics leaving plenty of scope for increased usage for private parties, community events and a lunch club/Bistro (this was

doing well before its closure in 2009/10 following the end of the Public Enquiry into the 'Destination Kirkby' fiasco.

### ***Knowsley Suites Finances***

The summary finances of the Knowsley Suites were provided to us via a Freedom of Information Act request made in December 2011. These show that the cost of running the Kirkby Suite has been decreasing since 2005/06 whilst the cost of running the Huyton Suite has been increasing year-on-year since 2006/07. The overall cost of running the Knowsley Suites has increased solely because of the increasing cost associated with the Huyton Suite which is shown in figure 2. And yet... it's the Kirkby Suite that has been closed!



There is a valid question about whether the expenditure has dropped because Knowsley Council have stopped investing in order to run down the facility, or whether this is due to an actual managed and sensible reduction in running costs. But that is a question we cannot answer without more detailed information than we have available to me.

### ***The knock-on effect from the Kirkby Library demolition***

The current Kirkby Library is planned to be demolished as part of the Tesco-led 'regeneration' of Kirkby Town Centre. However, as the Library is not known to be structurally flawed, is already paid for and actually owned by Knowsley Council, the demolition of this building seems senseless. Nevertheless, the library was due to be replaced by a new build on the site of the old Kirkby Swimming Pool, as can be seen on the Spenhill's website (Tesco's development subsidiary) and this is present on various planning drawings. However, several Knowsley Council employees have confirmed that this plan has collapsed due to financial problems.

As we understand it, Knowsley Council was due to lease the new library from Tesco who would own the new build. The cost of this lease appears now to be too great owing to the financial crisis the country – and the council – finds itself in. Whilst we cannot blame Knowsley Council for the global economic crisis, we can squarely lay the blame for this mismanagement at their feet. An existing publicly owned building will be demolished and a new one will no longer be built to replace it.

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As a result of this failure, the council now intend to move the Kirkby Library into the Kirkby Suite as part of the 'centralisation of services' and 'refurbishment'. It is our opinion that such a ludicrous situation should never have been allowed to happen. Additionally, we believe this calls into question the overall benefits that the Tesco-led development is supposed to bring. As this one issue is apparently beyond the control of Knowsley Council, it is entirely foreseeable that other issues may result in a negative impact on the public services available to the residents of Kirkby.

## Discussion of the Current Situation

### ***Council claims***

Knowsley Council has perpetuated the idea that the Kirkby Suite is neither a well-used facility nor does it represent value for money as it is not self-financing. Whilst it is true that the Kirkby Suite is not currently self-financing, we have demonstrated that compared to the Huyton Suite, it offers far better value for money to the residents of Kirkby than the Huyton Suite does to the residents of Huyton-with-Roby. In addition, there are options for improving the financial self-reliance of the Kirkby Suite, which we will discuss later. The Huyton Suite is not, as of yet, currently under threat of closure.

The Council also claims that the centralisation of services is important, although most council services in Kirkby are already central (being as they are almost entirely in the **Town Centre**) and there has been no explanation as to why moving the Library would actually make any difference to how much it is used. There is no evidence, for instance, that people who use the council One Stop Shop also use Kirkby Library on the same day, which is the only link which might – at a long stretch – justify such a move.

Furthermore, the health facilities offered by the Kirkby Health Suite are actually due to be moved away from the rest of the intended new civic centre. We suggest that the idea of ‘centralisation of services’ is largely a cover for incompetence in relation to the original plans for a new Kirkby Library. We would further argue that there is no need to demolish the existing library building in the first place.

Ironically, in the process of demolishing the Kirkby Stadium/Sports Centre and Kirkby Swimming Pool, Knowsley Council have undertaken a programme of decentralising sports facilities to the new smaller Leisure Centre, the two Centres for Learning, Towerhill Community and Health Centre and a few other locations around Kirkby. Why should sports facilities be decentralised, yet entertainment facilities be destroyed and the Library simply moved from one end of the Town Centre to the other, all in the name of the ‘centralisation’ of services?

### ***Value for money***

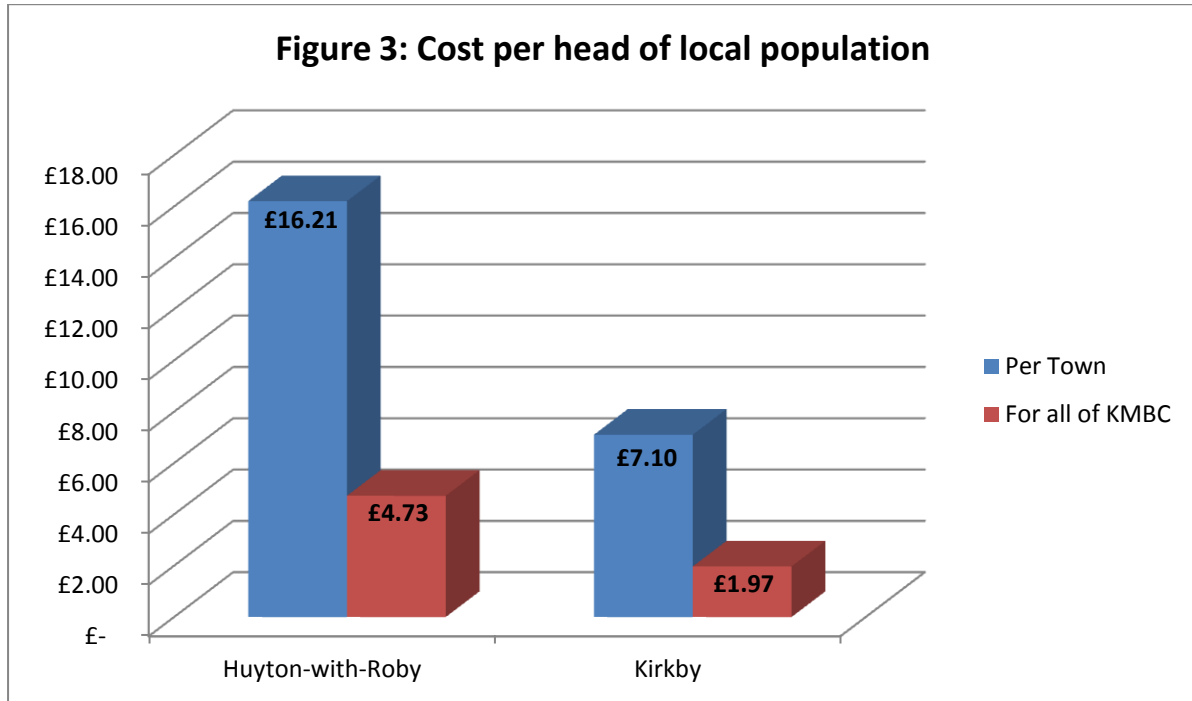
If we say each part of the Knowsley Suites serves only its immediate local community then the Kirkby Suite costs £7.10 for every single person who lives in Kirkby, whereas the Huyton Suite costs £16.21 for every single person who lives in Huyton-with-Roby. So per head of population in each town the Kirkby Suite is more cost effective for local community. This is shown by the blue columns in figure 3.

If we say that each venue is a Knowsley-wide asset used by people from all over the area, then the Kirkby Suite costs just £1.97 per person living in KMBC where as the Huyton Suite costs £4.73 per person living in KMBC. This is shown by the red columns in figure 3.

In both comparisons, over twice as much per head of population is spent to operate the Huyton Suite than the Kirkby Suite. Bearing in mind that this is a figure of net expenditure (i.e. both venues

are not self-sustaining) it is incredulous that the Kirkby Suite should be closed for 'remodelling' whilst the more expensive Huyton Suite remains open.

*Note: Both calculations are based upon the 2010/2011 financial year (that which is most recently available to us).*



### ***Functions only offered by the Kirkby Suite***

The Kirkby Suite is the only venue in Kirkby providing the kind of facility that it does. Specifically, the Kirkby Suite now has the only permanent performance stage in Kirkby. The three old secondary schools – All Saints, Ruffwood and Brookfield – all had their own dedicated stages capable of hosting performances, but the two new Centres for Learning – Kirkby Sports College and All Saints – do not have such a facility. Instead they only offer open plan spaces with lighting rigs, no suitable changing facilities and far lower capacity.

A variety of groups using these performance facilities have outlined that the Centres for Learning, despite the insistence of Knowsley Council, do not provide adequate facilities to put on stage shows, dance performances and other such events.

Not only does the Kirkby Suite have a unique capacity for providing a venue for stage and dance shows, it is also the only venue in Kirkby capable of staging the increasing number of concert nights which have proved to be a great success. This proves that there is, contrary to the council stance, increasing demand for the use of the Kirkby Suite.

In addition, the Kirkby Suite offers the only non-religious venue in Kirkby for holding wedding ceremonies, and is one of very few facilities capable of providing the range of facilities needed for wedding receptions. This key factor could easily be turned to the further advantage of the Kirkby

Suite if a small amount of investment was made to the building to increase its attractiveness to engaged couples as a potential venue.

Interestingly the Huyton Suite (now the Knowsley Suites) is currently advertised as follows on the Knowsley Council website:

“The Knowsley Suite is an ideal choice for your celebration, wedding, function corporate event or meeting.”

As the ‘Knowsley Suite’ has similar facilities to the closed Kirkby Suite one has to wonder why such an equally wonderful and useful venue should be closed whilst a similar one is kept open. No credible reason has yet to be provided for this and no public consultation seems to have been undertaken to assess whether the people of Huyton want the Huyton Suite to remain open – could it be that both venues offer something valuable to their local communities? We think so!

### ***‘Consultation exercise’***

Knowsley Council undertook a consultation exercise from 21<sup>st</sup> December 2011 to 24<sup>th</sup> January 2012, whereby they surveyed via the internet and through one-to-one surveys in Kirkby Town Centre about the public facilities offered in Kirkby Town Centre. We have already published our pre-result critique of this survey, which outlined how the survey was highly open to bias, asked leading questions, and the results of which are easily subject to manipulation.

Furthermore, this consultation exercise was only undertaken after opposition to the Kirkby Suite changes emerged. This consultation was undertaken at a time when all the decisions about the future plans for Kirkby Town Centre created through the Tesco redevelopment have already been made and the intended closure and demolition of the current Kirkby Library to make way for new shops has already been released. Therefore, the entire consultation exercise must be viewed as nothing more than an exercise in political manoeuvring disguised (quite poorly) as public engagement.

The results on the consultation are therefore largely irrelevant owing to the fundamental flaws in the way it was conducted. However, as predicted the result of the consultation has been used to justify the effective closure of the Kirkby Suite despite at no point asking people if they wanted the Kirkby Suite retained for its current use.

### ***Regional importance***

We have made the case for the importance of the Kirkby Suite to the local community, however in addition we have also noted that the venue has the largest dance floor in the North West of England. The Kirkby Suite provides a facility for regional as well as local dance competitions which is a positive contribution to the local economy – people are coming to Kirkby to use our facility and spend their money in our town, and this can surely be capitalised on in the future. Curtailing or eliminating the facility provided is both economically and culturally flawed.



### ***Cost of refurbishment***

We currently live in relatively austere times, but even if we didn't it is difficult to comprehend why any council would spend large sums of money moving existing facilities (Kirkby Library, One Stop Shop, etc.) from the current fit-for-purpose buildings in which they currently operate to another building at great expense and undoubtedly causing interruption to the services provided. It makes no financial or organisational sense to proceed with Knowsley Council's plan, particularly as it will actually result in the destruction of an existing entertainment facility which will, almost certainly, never be replaced.

An additional issue raised by the refurbishment process is what will happen to the buildings that house the various services which are due to move into a 'remodelled' Kirkby Suite. This includes:

- the building(s) which currently provide the Adult Disability Day Service (presumably the facility on Bewley Drive which was refurbished only a few years ago following the decision to close an earlier facility in Westvale, which was subsequently sold for building houses).
- the Kirkby Civic Buildings located next-door to the Kirkby Suite itself, which houses the current One Stop Shop and some partner services;
- the Knowsley Works 'shop' on St. Chad's Parade (where many units are already empty).

No plans have been presented for the fate of these facilities despite the obvious major impact that the Kirkby Suite 'remodelling' will have on them.

### ***Potential for improvement***

The Kirkby Suite has seen an obvious lack of investment and maintenance over the years, although despite this the facility remains in a relatively good state, no doubt due to the dedication and professionalism of the facility's staff.

The exterior of the building requires some re-pointing of some areas of brickwork, minor repairs to the roof, and the windows need some exterior attention (i.e. repainting). The interior has a few issues, notably the toilet facilities – particularly in the backstage areas could do with some attention to ensure they are fully functional. The largest issue however is the void due to be left by the move of the Kirkby Health Suite into the new Kirkby Health Centre in 2013. This will provide an opportunity to reinstate additional functionality to the Kirkby Suite, either in the form of additional function rooms, or perhaps some other function which would generate venue with which to make the Kirkby Suite financially self-sufficient.

### ***Protecting other facilities***

Whilst we are primarily concerned in this document about the fate of the Kirkby Suite, we wish to stress that our arguments are not intended to favour the Kirkby Suite against other community facilities. For instance, we support the continued use of the existing Kirkby Library, and we would support the residents of Huyton-with-Roby in having their own Huyton Suite maintained (despite the higher running costs). This document seeks to outline the valuable position the Kirkby Suite has in the life of Kirkby, the unique events it allows us to hold and the value for money with which it offers

these services. It is easy to see how similar arguments to which we deploy here can apply to other valuable community facilities which should also be protected.

## **Future Options**

As we have demonstrated, there is a clear demand for the current facilities offered by the Kirkby Suite, but we also recognise that improvements need to be made to the facility and we recognise that an argument could be made to say that it could and should be a self-funding facility.

Possible options could take the form of additional function rooms for community meeting activities, a dedicated ceremonial facility to increase the attractiveness of the building for weddings, or some other way of expanding the current facilities already offered.

Another option for the void created by the Kirkby Health Suite is the creation of a family restaurant in the heart of Kirkby. Such a venue would be unique to the centre of Kirkby, as the only other such venues nearby are the Bootle Arms in Melling and the Copper Pot on the East Lancashire Road. It would also provide a reliable source of income to reduce or eliminate the subsidy required from the taxpayer to maintain the Kirkby Suite. This could be done through a lease arrangement.

A family restaurant would complement the community facilities, could provide the catering for Kirkby Suite events and could increase occupancy of the Kirkby Suite facilities through the added on-site facilities. For example, a community meeting in the evening may wish to finish off with a drink and some food provided at restaurant prices rather than at catering prices.

Regardless of which of the above or other option might be taken forward, closing the Kirkby Suite and ripping out its vital and unique facilities is nothing short of legal vandalism.

## Appendix

