

Taunton Deane Borough Council

Executive - 17 April 2013

Council Accommodation and Customer Access Project – Project Mandate

Report of the Strategic Director, Joy Wishlade

(This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor of Resources, Councillor Mrs Stock Williams)

1. Executive Summary

The covering report sets out the context to recommend that the Executive mandate a project to establish options and recommendations to update the way the council goes about its business in light of technological, financial and social changes and from these conclusions devises a customer access strategy and office strategy for the Council. Other councils have already responded to these challenges and these are referred to in the earlier part of the report.

The report provides the background to the project including key outcomes, governance, risks and the resource requirements.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Executive considered the report on The Deane House Accommodation project in September 2012. One of the recommendations of this report was that officers were asked to look comprehensively at the Council's future accommodation needs in the light of the priorities identified in the Corporate Business Plan. This recommendation now appears as a separate project within the CBP and this report requests the formal approval of this project, including a request for resources.
- 2.2 Any review of accommodation needs to take into account access to services. The latest customer access strategy was approved in 2005 as part of the Southwest One project. This now needs revisiting and updating in the light of both social and technological changes and the Council's changing role.
- 2.3 Other Councils are very much in our position and are, or have, re-considered their approach to accommodation (with a view to reducing their overheads) and their customer access. In the locality of Somerset the

following initiatives are taking place:-

- Somerset County Council (SCC): rationalising use of offices throughout the county and where possible moving into shared accommodation; implementing “smart office” standards within County Hall to release space; investigating opportunities for sharing space at County Hall with other public sector organisations as a public sector hub within Taunton.
- Mendip District Council: introducing flexible working and “smart office” standards to free up space; instigating a community hub approach by letting out space to the Police, SCC and other public sector or third sector agencies; will have multi functional reception area with access to a number of services / agencies.
- Sedgemoor District Council: rationalised use of offices by moving to “smart office” approach; space being let out to SCC and other organisations. The driver for Sedgemoor was part of a change programme introducing new ways of working and investment in technology to drive down ongoing revenue costs.

2.4 The term “smart office” is a generic term that SCC has used to describe a way of using accommodation to deliver the following outcomes:-

- A Council that is more responsive and accessible for customers and partners;
- Financial savings for the Council; and
- Increased efficiency and productivity

2.5 These outcomes are delivered by:-

- Investing in more appropriate technologies that better meet our changing needs;
- Revisiting policies to ensure they support future working practices;
- Increasing performance from office accommodation and sharing with partners;
- Engaging with staff to enable the major changes in the way we work happen; and
- Consolidating the property estate to make better use of space and reduce how much storage is required.

2.6 Outside Somerset other Councils are also rising to the challenge of reducing their operating costs whilst modernising their customer interaction. A key example is Eastbourne Borough Council. Here a programme named “Agile Working” has been introduced, the key drivers for which were:-

- To create a way of working that allowed service delivery to be moved to wherever customers need it;
- To reduce the cost of accommodation;
- To provide more opportunity for staff to balance work and life; and
- To create a way of managing information and process that facilitated the sharing of these things with partner organisations more easily and reliably.

- 2.7 At a time when funding is being reduced and customer expectations are rising, Eastbourne has removed significant cost from its base whilst improving access and responsiveness.

3. Taunton Deane Current Position

- 3.1 Any review of accommodation needs to be aligned with the Council's strategy for customer access. The last time that the Council reviewed this was in 2005 with the advent of Southwest One. A major work stream of this project will be to review and update the Customer Access Strategy, taking into account the changing role of the Council, together with social and technological advances.
- 3.2 In the current economic climate it is important for the Council to consider its overhead costs and seek to reduce these. The recent report about the opportunity to share the building with the Police showed that the investment required to bring the building up to modern day standards outweighed the financial return that the Council was likely to receive from rental income sharing with only one other organisation.
- 3.3 However, some of this investment will be required for any option that retains The Deane House as an office base. A full condition survey of The Deane House will therefore be commissioned as part of this project so that the true costs of continuing within this building are understood.
- 3.4 As Members are aware, the West Somerset Project is progressing alongside this project. This project will consider a recommended strategy for Taunton Deane Borough Council but which can be scaled to accommodate a shared approach should that be the final outcome.

4. Scope and Output

- 4.1 It is appropriate that the Council considers all the options available to it for the future. The scope of the project will include:-
- To remain as sole / key occupier at The Deane House;
 - To review the business case for making changes to The Deane House in order to make it fit for purpose for sharing with other partners (see Executive report September 2012);
 - Joining a public sector hub at another location;
 - Moving as sole occupier to another location;

 - Dispersing the Council to a number of locations within the community;
 - To review all customer access channels: web, physical premises, telephone, social media;
- 4.2 All of these will have impact (both positive and negative) on the communities we serve and each will need to be assessed as to this impact.

4.3 The fundamental outputs from this project must be:-

- A Business Case to provide flexible office accommodation for staff and Members which reduces our overhead costs.
- A Business Case to provide customer access to Taunton Deane services that is cost effective for the Council and best meets the future needs of its customers

5. Key Assumptions

- Any option will include looking at different ways of working;
- Any option will include solutions for travel / parking arrangements;
- The accommodation solution will be cheaper than the current provision;
- The accommodation solution will always comply with minimum standards laid down in the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992;
- Not all staff will have a permanent desk;
- Customer access arrangements will cost no more than currently on an ongoing basis.

6. Why do we need to do this?

6.1 It is important for the Council to undertake this work in the near future to ensure that:-

- The Council has customer access that is fit for purpose;
- To drive down costs;
- To make most of the Council's resources;
- To enable decisions on investment priorities; and
- To ensure that any opportunities to share overheads are not missed.

7. Resource requirements

7.1 This project will require project management resource above the day to day work of the Council plus funding to employ external expertise. The two areas that we will need external advice are in the areas of property advice and advice on the possibilities of updating the way we work and our

inter action with customers, including new technologies. It is therefore recommended that £70,000 is set aside from reserves to fund this project with the understanding that any money not spent will be returned to reserves at the end of the project.

7.2 This funding will pay for a Project Manager to work three days a week on this project for up to a 9 month period plus some dedicated administrative support for two days a week for up to a 9 month period. In addition £20,000 has been allowed for to commission property advice and expertise as required and a further £20,000 for commissioning external expertise on updated ways of working and customer access solutions

including mobile working and use of new technologies. These figures are estimated but should the project be mandated and the requirements fully scoped, they will be further refined.

- 7.3 Any monies not used will be returned to the General Fund at the end of the project.

8. Governance

- 8.1 The project will report to the Council's internal officer Project Management Group and to the Corporate Management Team on a regular basis.

- 8.2 The project will also report progress to the Portfolio Holder, the Shadow Portfolio Holder and the Group Leaders on a regular basis. Member briefings will take place at critical stages within the project.

- 8.3 The final report will be discussed at one of the Scrutiny Committees.

9. Risks

- 9.1 A full risk register will be compiled as part of the project process. However, initial risks to achieving a positive outcome for this project are considered to be:-

- Lack of political appetite for change;
- No cheaper solution identified;
- Upfront investment too expensive;
- No partners found for joint solutions; and
- Customer access arrangements not cost effective.

10. Next steps and Timescales

- 10.1 Once the project has been officially endorsed it will be managed using the principles of PRINCE2 stands and associated controls (including risk management).

- 10.2 Some work has already commenced. Taunton Deane is included in the options appraisal that SCC are working on for the public sector hub. This will be one of the options that are considered in the output of this project. SCC are hoping to come to conclusions about the public sector hub this summer.

- 10.3 A condition survey of The Deane House is being progressed via SW1. This will be required to ascertain the costs of staying as we are or of making the building fit for purpose to share with others over the period of the next 15+ years.

- 10.4 The timescales for reporting on this project are as follows:-

- Commission project - May 2013;

- Project Team set up - May 2013;
- First draft of options - October 2013;
- Business case for both accommodation and customer access to Scrutiny October / November 2013;
- Full Council decision - December 2013.

10.5 The implementation of the decision would then need to be set up as a further project with the appropriate financial commitments.

11. Finance Comments

11.1 The costs of the project (£70,000) will have to come from General Fund (GF) Reserves and will require Full Council approval. Any under spend from the project will be returned to the General Fund. The current balance of GF reserves is in excess of £3,000,000 compared to the recommended balance of £1,500,000. The proposed spend is therefore affordable although will reduce the unallocated amount within GF reserves for use elsewhere.

11.2 The Finance Team will need to be fully engaged with this project as each option will require a robust financial assessment.

12. Legal Comments

12.1 There are no legal comments at the commissioning stage. Legal representation will be included in the project governance going forward.

13. Links to Corporate Aims

13.1 This is a key project that is identified in the Corporate Business Plan.

14. Environmental Implications

14.1 Environmental implications need to be considered for each of the options considered within the project. These will form part of the consideration of whether options are considered to be suitable for recommendation. Issues to be considered will include the environmental sustainability of buildings and transport and travel implications.

15. Community Safety Implications

15.1 Any relevant implications will be considered as part of the project

16. Equalities Impact

16.1 This report requests permission to proceed with a project to develop a business case. At this stage there are no equalities issues for Members to consider. An initial assessment has been completed and supports this position.

16.2 As the project progresses, there will clearly be equality issues that need to be addressed, both for office accommodation and for public access. A full Equalities Impact Assessment will be completed and shared with Members as part of the project delivery.

17. Partnership Implications

17.1 Working in partnership on options to share accommodation and public access will be considered as part of this project.

18. Comments from Scrutiny

18.1 This paper was discussed at the Community Scrutiny Committee on 2 April 2013. Although the recommendations were supported concerns were raised on the following issues:-

- Consideration should be given to ensuring the Council continues to serve those who do not wish or are unable to use self help mechanisms;
- That the true value of our assets is established; and
- That Members are involved with the project

18.2 The first two of these points are fundamental to the project and will be covered within the work that is commissioned.

18.3 Members will be involved on a regular basis via both formal and informal briefings as described in paragraph 8. In addition, regular progress reports can be scheduled in to be brought to the Community Scrutiny Committee prior to any final report. Any issues that concern asset management will also be discussed with the portfolio holders responsible for this area.

19 Recommendations

19.1 The Executive is requested to recommend the following for Full Council approval:-

1. That the Council Accommodation and Customer Access project is mandated by the Council; and
2. That £70,000 is allocated from General Fund Reserves to fund the costs of the project, recognising that costs will be minimised wherever possible and any under spend is returned to the General Fund.

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