

# Taunton Deane Borough Council

**Executive - 5 February 2014**

## **Movement of Tourist Information Centre TIC to part of Market House – Request for funding**

### **Report of the Assistant Director Business Development**

(This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Norman Cavill)

#### **1. Executive Summary**

The report outlines the proposal to relocate the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) from its current location to the Market House.

This proposal is in line with the principle suggested in the Taunton Rethink document of moving the TIC to a more prominent position. It therefore forms an element of the work to revitalise the town centre presenting an opportunity to reconsider the use of the current site. The other key benefits will be improvements to the condition of the Market House and the surrounding area.

The report outlines the budgetary requirements to deliver this relocation and the associated benefits of this proposal.

#### **2. Background**

The TIC is currently located in Paul Street adjacent to Taunton Library. It has been situated in that location since 1996.

The Taunton Rethink document which was adopted in early 2014 refreshed the council's approach to the Town Centre and made reference to the relocation of the TIC. This related to widening the opportunities at the Orchard Centre and creating a more prominent location for the Tourist Information Service. Two possible sites were suggested which were the Coal Orchard site in conjunction with a regenerated Brewhouse or the possibility of a site in North Street.

In terms of the suggestion around Coal Orchard this related to the regeneration of the site which has yet to commence and as a consequence this option is not a real possibility at the current time. Another key factor in not pursuing this option is that the footfall across the

site to the Brewhouse is not as high as that through any town centre location.

In the case of North Street there are no specific assets available to the Council for use at the current time. The Market House, in Fore Street, is a very large building with distinct areas which lends to it being let in individual sections to maximise the income generated by the council and widens the use of the building. Therefore the Market House is considered to be an appropriate option for the TIC location.

As Members will be aware the Council has also been working with Somerset County Council on the consolidation of staff into County Hall. Through that work TDBC has given consideration to moving the TIC into the proposed Public Sector Hub which would be located at County Hall. However it has been recognised that the Public Sector Hub, in a very general sense, has as its main customer base local residents. The TIC in contrast has a different customer base which serves visitors, local residents and the business community.

The differing needs of its customers and the role of the TIC therefore support the rationale for the Market House being an ideal location for the TIC. Its position will also create a very visible presence in this key central part of the Town. This visibility is also perceived as increasing the commercial opportunities for the TIC. As an example an opportunity is being explored to increase travel ticket sales due to proximity to the current bus station. The central location also presents an opening to raise the profile of local events taking place in the area as the centre's ticket box office would be in a more prominent location and also review the current range of retail goods that are on offer with the potential to provide new items for sale

Whilst the location of the TIC and the opportunities created by its relocation are important considerations in making the move there are other factors to consider. The delivery of improvements to the Market House and the surrounding area combined with the need to maintain it as an asset of the Council are also factors in this project. This also links to the reinvigoration of this part of the Town.

The location of the TIC in the western end of the Market House will complement the letting of the ground floor and basement areas to a good quality restaurant chain. This is in part due to the quality of the proposed design incorporating a new glazed area within the arches of the Market House which creates a new entrance to the this area of the building. The interior design is being developed through engagement with Visit England whose assistance has been valuable. They have provided extremely helpful examples of similar historic buildings that are used for TIC's and have provided a fresh modern offer to their customers. This has helped inform the design process, although it should be noted this is yet to be completely finalised. This design has also been developed to take into account the new restaurant. Elevation Plans are attached as Appendix A

of this report to illustrate the new feel to the western end of the market house.

The design has also been evolved through consultation with English Heritage and the SCC cultural team. The Market House has enormous historic value to Taunton so as an element of the project Tom Mayberry, Chief Executive of the South West Heritage Trust, has provided Appendix B which highlights the building's importance. It should be noted that this appendix is only intended to provide context to the report.

In terms of maintenance and repairs the work will deal with the current electrical service points for street vendors which are strung out from the Market House above head height. The current supply is unreliable and has failed on a number of occasions. The proposals would ensure that it was located underneath the paved area at ground level.

Internally there is an underutilised office suite in this area of the Market House at first floor level which will be refreshed to a basic standard and will then be made available for lease once the works have been completed. In addition maintenance work will be carried out on the shared staircase in the building which is currently used by the occupier of the dance studio and which is in poor repair. The final element of the work will be the upgrading of the services in that area to ensure they meet appropriate standards before the building is reoccupied. This will include provision of an appropriate IT infrastructure.

The presence of the TIC will enable creation of a soft seating area adjacent to it. There are a number of existing street traders providing a food offer so these will be grouped in that area. This will create an informal and attractive space which provides a positive entrance into the TIC for visitors. This space is intended to be bounded by low level removable fencing which will be branded with the Taunton "T". This combined with the use of this motif on the glazed areas will help give a fresh look to the area.

In terms of access to the proposed TIC in the Market House, previous tenants have suffered from poor physical access particularly for those individuals who have a disability or require level access. Consideration has been given to this access issue and following consultation with SCC Highways and the Building Control team an application has been lodged to provide a ramped access with appropriate consents put into place. The stopping order has now been granted and is being advertised for the statutory period of six weeks. This commenced on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015.

The final benefit of this move are the reduction of costs associated with the current lease at the library. The rental cost at the library is currently £12,000 with an annual management charge of £8 -9000. This represents a cost of £20 -21,000 per annum. Whilst the final rental cost for the Market House is not yet settled for this area, overall savings should be in the region of £10,000. This sum relates to the internal charging

mechanism for space in council buildings and is being finalised by Asset management colleagues.

In terms of the vacated space in the library consideration is being given to the opportunities that will occur to change its use. In the short term two possibilities for potential use are as a retail space or potentially an art exhibition area. We are currently evaluating the lease provisions to ensure that an appropriate use can be delivered if the TIC moves out. We also plan to explore opportunities as part of overall work with SCC and public sector partners.

### **Comments from Corporate Scrutiny**

The Corporate Scrutiny committee were broadly supportive of the proposals. Specific issues were discussed around the nature of the budget and members requested that more information be provided to them on breakdown of costs as they became known. These will be solidified through the open procurement process that will occur.

Members also raised issues around the current site, the notice period and how that effected the usage if the site was vacant. This is being explored and will be subject to negotiation with SCC. The notice period begins on 30<sup>th</sup> September with a six month period for vacating formally on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 2016. The proposal within this report would therefore mean the site was empty for 7 -8 months. However alternative uses may be available during that time and also as noted negotiation with SCC based on wider discussions of asset usage within the town are possible. This may lead to surrender of the lease at an earlier juncture but this has not been progressed until members agree the capital budget for this project.

### **3. Current project status and next Actions**

JP Gainsford have been instructed to provide an initial design, provide indicative costings, apply for and secure planning permission, secure necessary access permissions and project manage any agreed build. This work with the exception of the management of the build has been funded through existing revenue budgets.

Planning permission was secured at January Planning Committee which took into account all of the issues relating to the listed status of the building. This has now been confirmed by the Secretary of state.

The indicative costing for the work is £120,000 although this represents a maximum cost and includes appropriate contingency which links to the age of the building.

The next actions therefore are to seek agreement from council for the principle of the move occurring and for the appropriate finance to be made available to deliver it.

If budgetary allocation is made as a result of this report we aim to complete the works by 30<sup>th</sup> June 2015. This will enable the TIC to play a key role in the Taunton Live Festival which is planned for 18<sup>th</sup> -25<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

#### **4. Finance Comments**

The revenue costs of the appointment of JP Gainsford and the IT requirements of the project are in the region of £16k. This expenditure is covered by existing budget and therefore approval is being sought for the capital element only. The sum of £120k is available from the New Homes Bonus Earmarked Reserve which has an unallocated balance of £180k at the end of 2014/15. Subject to agreement by council the budget holder has approved the use as appropriate funding for this regeneration project. This project has been included in the Capital Programme Estimates Report 2015-16 which is on the same agenda as this report.

The projected savings in relation to the revenue costs have not been factored into forward budget plans for prudent purposes. An adjustment can be made when savings crystallise. At this stage until costs are clarified through the tender process the payback period is indicative at ten years but there are a number of variables to be addressed in the next few months.

Turnover & Staffing facts around the operation of the TIC are attached as Appendix C of this report.

#### **5. Legal Comments**

No specific issues identified by the Legal Services Manager which need to be addressed in conjunction with this report.

#### **6. Asset Management Comments**

The relocation of the TIC to the Market House is supported as it makes good asset management practice to utilise existing empty stock before leasing in additional stock. In this instance the Market House also provides a much improved location to support the operation of the TIC so the argument in favour of the relocation is even stronger. The timing of any move should be such as to tie in with the break option provision at the library site so as to avoid any ongoing liability for rent beyond when we require that property. There is much work currently taking place to secure a better general use of the Market House and the letting to a high-end restaurant operator is just one part of this journey, along with the relocation of the TIC. The proposed mix of uses complement each other very well. Asset Management would recommend however that where possible, works to create the TIC are timed to cause as little inconvenience to the other tenants as possible. It is considered that the presence of the TIC at the Market House would assist further utilisation of the remaining vacant / underutilised parts of the property and that the

£120,000 represents value for money in terms of mitigating our ongoing rental of the library and in terms of 'investing' in a TDBC asset.

## **7. Links to Corporate Aims**

The contents of this report support two of the three Corporate Aims  
Aim 2 – A Vibrant Economic Environment

Aim 3 – A Vibrant Social, Cultural and Leisure Environment

These proposals specifically impact on objectives 4 and 6 of the corporate business plan as they will respectively speaking increase economic activity and facilitate and support cultural and leisure activities

## **8. Environmental Implications**

No specific implications identified

## **9. Community Safety Implications**

There are no issues perceived as being linked to this report.

## **10. Equalities Impact**

An assessment has been carried out combined with informal consultation with disability groups. Initial thoughts were that it may be possible to make an access statement due to the age of the building and make appropriate arrangements to enable access. However on further consideration and in consultation with building control it has been decided to provide ramped access to the property. The TIC should therefore be fully compliant with access requirements and the design will take into account any issues related to the protected Characteristics

## **11. Risk Management**

The key risk is managing any disruption to the service and ensuring that there is continuity during any move. This will be addressed through management of the renovation work to ensure that disruption is minimised.

## **12. Partnership Implications**

There are implications in moving the TIC from its current location as they relate to the accommodation proposals being developed with SCC. However these are already being considered as part of that overall strategic plan and on balance present a positive opportunity for the use of the Paul Street site.

### 13. Recommendations

Executive agree the principle that based on the information contained within this report the TIC move to the Market House.

Executive recommend to Full Council the inclusion of a capital budget of £120,000 within the General Fund Capital Programme, to be funded from the Growth and Regeneration (New Homes Bonus) Reserve.

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Appendix A – Elevations for illustration of the planned improvements

Appendix B – Heritage of the Market House

Appendix C – Key Budgetary & staffing facts – operation of TIC

#### **Appendix A - Attached PDF elevations**

#### **Appendix B - Heritage of the Market House**

### **THE MARKET HOUSE, TAUNTON**

When Taunton's Georgian Market House was completed in 1772, it became the most conspicuous expression of a town determined to renew itself.

The Market House occupies the southern end of a triangle of land historically known as 'the Island' and 'the Cornhill'. Before 1772 the site was crowded with 14 public houses, many market standings, an assembly room, and a medieval guildhall. It was notorious for rowdiness, drinking, vice and filth, and by the 1760s an increasing number of prominent citizens were seeking ways to clear the site and create a fine new public building for the town. With the assistance of Benjamin Hammet, Taunton's MP, an Act of Parliament was obtained in 1768 for 'erecting a market house, and holding a market'. Work on the project began soon afterwards.

The Market House was designed by the gentleman artist and architect, Coplestone Warre Bampfylde, best known today as the creator of the landscape gardens at Hestercombe, his family home. The new building was 'laid out into different apartments for the purposes of justice, amusement, and pleasure', and had two large wings, or arcades (demolished in 1934), intended to accommodate farmers and tradesmen on market days.

On the ground floor of the Market House was the Guildhall, where the magistrates would sit to hear cases every Wednesday and Saturday. The Guildhall was also used for public meetings convened by the magistrates. In addition there was a Reading Room which in 1822 was supplied with four London daily papers and four provincial weekly papers.

The first floor of the Market House contained a billiard room and a 'commodious room for card tables'. But its chief public space, and the major attraction of the building as a whole, was the 'superb assembly room', measuring fifty feet long, thirty feet wide, and twenty-four feet high. The room included a music gallery, 'two elegant and large glass chandeliers', and a full-length portrait of George III which is still part of the Borough Council's collection.

From 1772 and for much of the 19th century the Market House, and especially the assembly room, provided one of Somerset's chief public meeting places. The assembly room was particularly valued as a setting for concerts and balls, and it was there in 1840 that Franz Liszt gave a piano recital during his tour of England. The rival venues provided by the great hall of Taunton Castle and the 'new assembly room' behind the County Hotel undermined the role of the Market House during the 19th century. After 1929, when the markets moved to the edge of the town, the building's public role declined steeply and has long since been effectively lost.

The Market House is a monument to civic pride whose meaning and purpose have been forgotten. Most inhabitants of the town, even those of long standing, will never have entered it or seen the assembly room. It is long overdue for public rediscovery.

Tom Mayberry  
6 October 2014

## **Appendix C – Turnover and staffing facts TIC**

### **Turnover statistics**

In terms of turnover this equates to annual sales, the average figure for the past three financial years is £267k. Sales at 14.01.15 are already at £289,900. This is due a range of factors such as increased footfall through the Dragon trail and increased travel and ticket sales

### **Staffing Facts:**

Current staffing level:

Total 2.35 FTE

0.4 FTE Business Development Specialist (or Marketing and Tourist Information Lead)

1 FTE Tourist Information Officer

0.95 FTE Tourist Information Assistants

Open to the public: Monday to Saturday 9.30am to 4.30pm (closed Bank Holidays)

Proposed staffing levels:

Costs and overall levels expected to be similar but will certainly be within existing



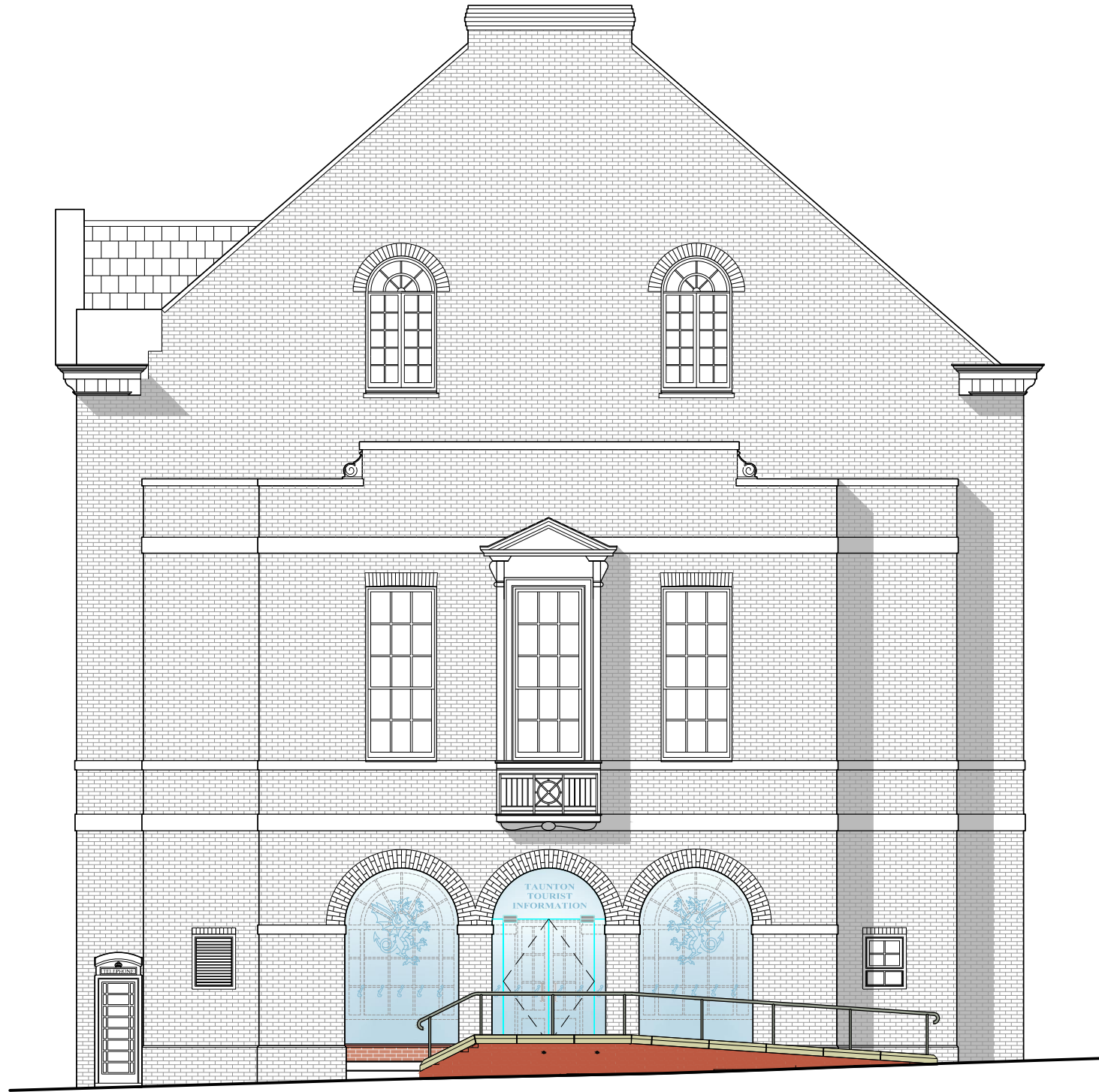
budgetary provision. Structure of staffing is being evaluated to enable additional coverage by reorganisation of rotas etc. This will be subject to consultation with staff.

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REVISION	BY	DATE	DETAILS

NOTES



WEST ELEVATION AS PROPOSED

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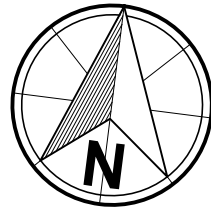
CLIENT  
 TDBC

PROJECT  
 The Market House,  
 Fore St,  
 Taunton, TA1 1JD

DRAWING TITLE  
**WEST ELEVATION  
 AS PROPOSED**

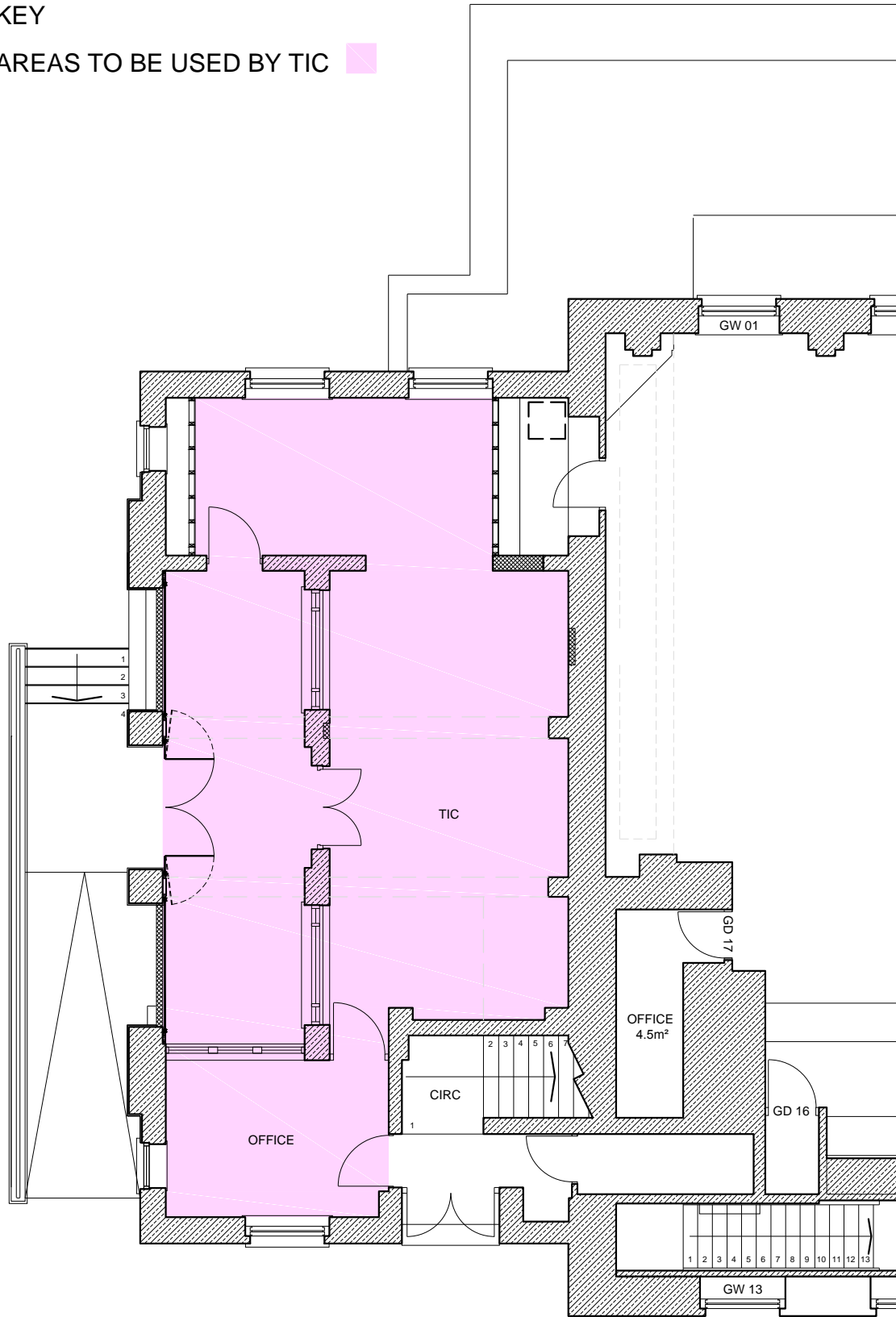
DRAWN BY	AJL	DATE	14/01/15
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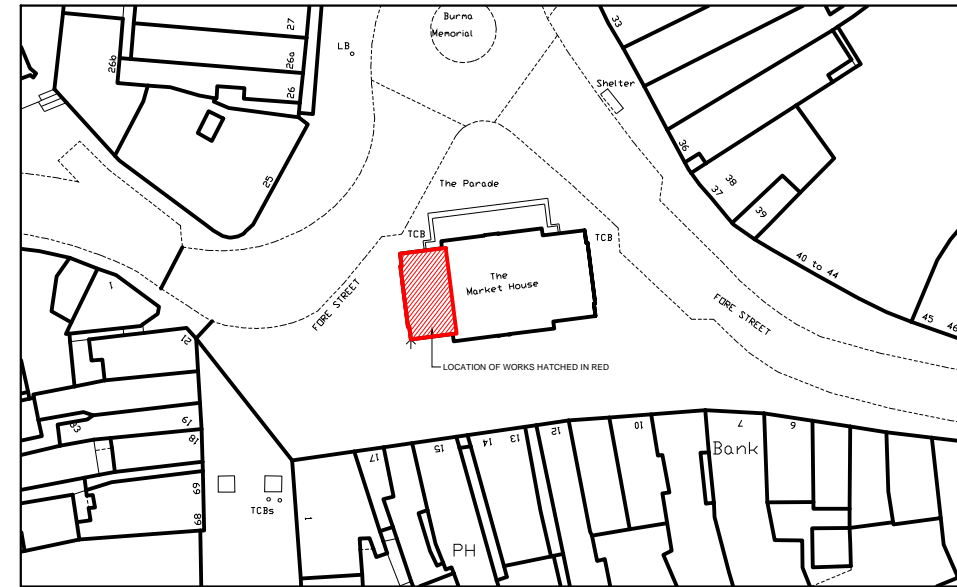


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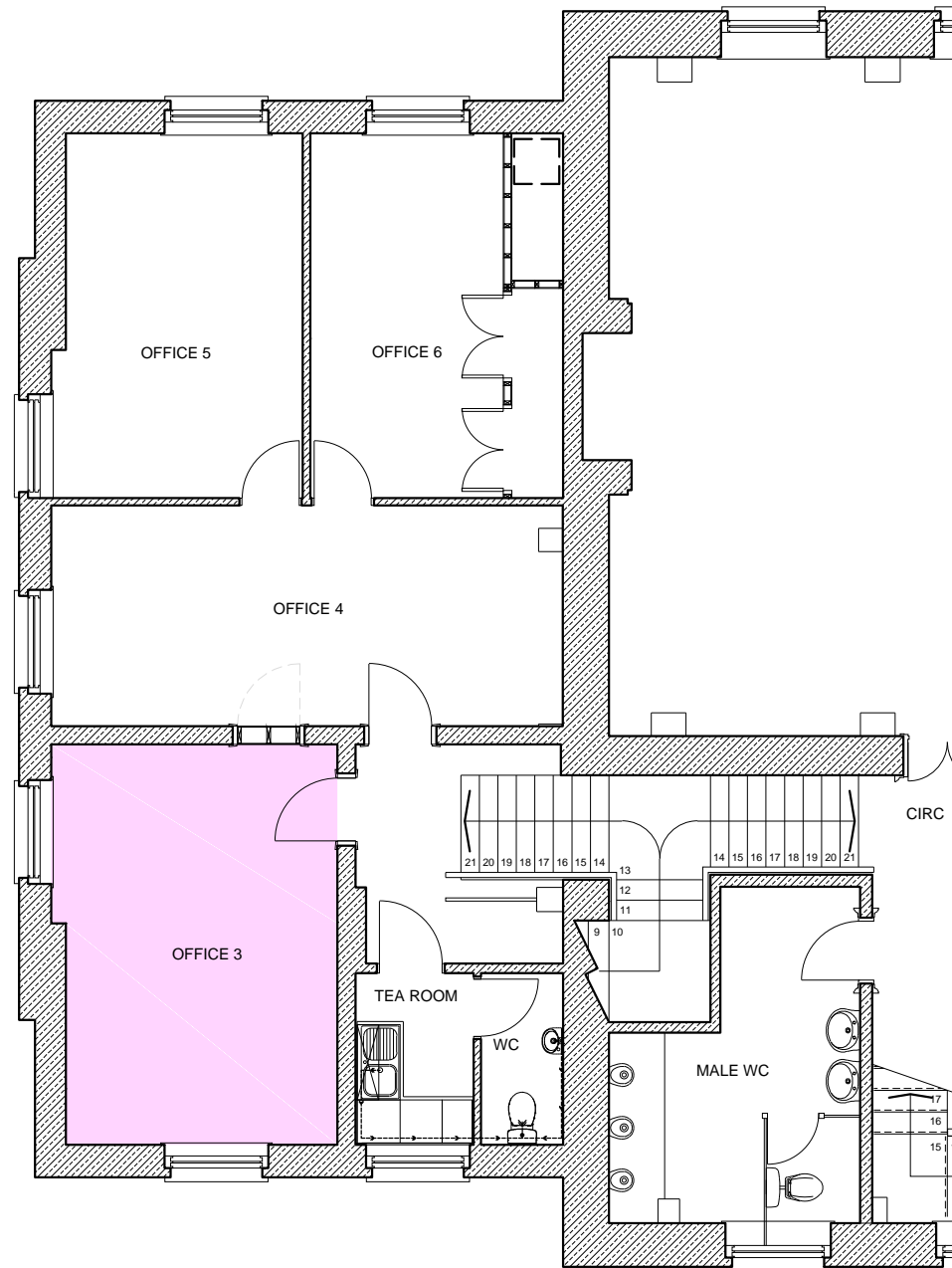
AREAS TO BE USED BY TIC



GROUND FLOOR AS PROPOSED



LOCATION PLAN SCALE 1:1250



FIRST FLOOR SCALE 1:100

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NOTES

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PROJECT  
**The Market House,  
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DRAWING TITLE  
**GROUND & FIRST FLOOR  
 PLANS & LOCATION PLAN  
 AS PROPOSED**

DRAWN BY <b>AJL</b>	DATE <b>14/01/15</b>
SCALE <b>as shown</b>	PAPER <b>A3</b>
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