

Future arrangements for Area Working in Area East

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Purpose of the Report

To update members on progress on the arrangements for area working to include the future of Churchfields, SSDC presence, customer access and the venue for future area committee meetings.

Public Interest

The Area Committee meetings provide an opportunity to ensure that decisions about local resources and planning applications are taken locally in an open and transparent way and give access to the public to attend in person. They also provide an opportunity for the public to engage with their local councillor representatives and raise matters directly in an open and public environment.

Recommendations

That Members:-

- a) note and comment on the options set out in the report.
- b) note that a report on progress to secure alternative arrangements for the Customer Access Point, touchdown desk space and the Area Committee is brought to the November 2019 meeting.

Background

Churchfields currently provides an operational base for SSDC staff, front of house support for customers and a meeting space for the area committee and external groups. It also accommodates the Neighbourhood Policing Team and front desk.

The building has been under occupied for a number of years despite numerous attempts to market the available space to other organisations and for other purposes.

SSDC no longer requires the building as an operational asset due to Transformation and progress towards new ways of working.

Members will recall that the disposal of excess operational property was proposed and agreed in the Commercial Strategy 2017-21. Also, that District Executive would take the decision on our operational offices like Churchfields and B Way. The decision to dispose of Churchfields was approved by District Executive in March 2018.

A commitment was made that disposal would only happen once tenants were given reasonable notice and found alternative accommodation. For Churchfields this was, and still is, expected to happen by the end of 2019 with the nursery moving out on 2nd September and the Police likely to relocate by the end of the year.

The Future of Churchfields

The new ways of working launched in January have had a significant impact on the use of Churchfields. Customers are now able to access council services through a Customers Access Point (CAP) in the reception area and there is no longer a team based in the building. In line with our new, agile working practices, SSDC staff from different teams regularly use the office as a base or drop in point to work, but this facility could be based elsewhere for the limited number of desks and accommodation still used.

The building could be available for use by SSDC officers and for meetings until alternative arrangements have been finalised for all tenants and the building is ready to be marketed. However, there are risks in terms of lone working if it used by individuals on an ad hoc basis. Arrangements for committee would require people to access the building via the back door with limited access to facilities and restricted access to the rest of the building for members of the public. This will not be easy to manage and it is the officer's recommendation that an alternative arrangements for committee meetings should be put in place for when the Police vacate the building.

It is envisaged that all tenants will have found suitable alternative accommodation and will have vacated the building by the end of 2019. Work to commence marketing is in hand. Current thinking is that a buyer will be selected on a conditional basis with the sale concluding following the grant of a satisfactory planning consent. The approach is subject to further discussion with an agent to be appointed in September. A further report will be brought to Area East Committee in March 2020 or, when details of the disposal are known if sooner.

Area Presence

SSDC will continue to require a presence in the area. The Area+ implementation plan sets out a number of options, which include a network of touchdown spaces for staff and where possible a community hub approach.

The requirement is likely to be for between two and four desks with access to a compatible printer and laminator. A small amount of storage space would also be beneficial. Staff will have their own devices with mobile Wi-Fi and can also use public buildings including libraries, cafes etc.

Wincanton has been the location for SSDC area presence for many years. Wincanton continues to be a suitable location alongside other options. We plan to operate on the basis of a trial for one year initially to establish whether the desks are used. For example, we are currently trialling an arrangement in Somerton as a presence in Area North.

Options considered to date in Area East include The Balsam Centre, Community Offices in three market towns and libraries in Castle Cary and Wincanton. There could also be an opportunity to secure desk space at the Old School in Queen Camel. All are considered to be feasible and further discussion will take place when there is a clearer idea about timescale.

Customer Access

Front desk presence has been replaced by a new Customer Access Point (CAP). The CAP provides touchscreen access to council services and can be used to complete forms, report issues, upload evidence and contact the council via a dedicated phone line. Direct help or support is available to vulnerable customers by the Customer Focussed team on an appointment basis. In some circumstances home visits can be carried out by the Locality Team, at the instruction of case officer.

Further work is required to identify the best location in terms of hours of access and complimentary services. Options could include the Wincanton Library, The Balsam Centre or Wincanton Town Hall. Customer Access Points could also be provided in other towns where need and a suitable location exists.

Area Committee – Future arrangements

Some initial work has been done to identify potential alternative arrangements for meetings of the committee.

Requirements for committee arrangements are as set out below.

1. Space needs to be available at a regular time on a monthly basis. We are working on the basis that the Area Committee will continue to meet monthly on the second Wednesday of the month.
2. Completely accessible – The venue will need to be physically accessible to all and include a compatible hearing loop.
3. Set up for use. It is not possible for case officers (Democratic Services) to set the room up for a 9.00am start and pack down after the meeting. The venue will need to be equipped with compatible audio visual equipment and have full caretaking facilities.
4. Capacity to accommodate 13 councillors and up to 40 members of the public.
5. Adequate parking for Councillors and members of the public

Locations assessed against the above requirements include The Balsam Centre, Wincanton Memorial Hall, Wincanton Racecourse, Caryford Hall, Charlton Musgrove Village Hall, Galhampton Village Hall. The only venue to be able to meet the requirements at the time was the Wincanton Memorial Hall. However, the initial work will need to be revisited to check that circumstances remain the same as offered when initial contact was made and current confirmation that the required criteria are met. We will work with a venue to make reasonable improvements where necessary.

Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications resulting from this report besides the significant officer time required to investigate and assess all options to find appropriate locations that meet future needs. However, closure of Churchfields will save revenue and will result in a significant capital receipt. The meeting room has been used by external organisations therefore some revenue will be lost. There will also be a cost attached to establishing touchdown spaces.

Council Priority Implications

The work set out in this report contributes towards meeting the aims under the theme of ensuring a modern, efficient and effective council that delivers for its communities.

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

Providing local access to a range of activities and services, reducing the need to travel which therefore reduces carbon emissions.

Equality and Diversity Implications

Any proposed changes will be subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment.

Background Papers

Commercial Strategy – 2017 to 2021

Area+ Implementation Plan
District Executive Agenda and Minutes – March 2018
