

Somerset Council  
Corporate and Resources Scrutiny Committee  
– 7<sup>th</sup> March 2024



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## Property Rationalisation Programme Update

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### 1. Summary

- 1.1.** Post covid working has seen a dramatic change in the way that offices are used and has resulted in significant under-utilisation of office buildings. Additionally, now that the 5 former Councils have merged to form one Somerset Council there is an over-supply of office accommodation. A property rationalisation programme is underway, with an initial focus on office / customer service sites. This is a large and complex programme that is being broken down into manageable phases.
- 1.2.** The programme, led by the Strategic Asset Management service, will focus on scoping opportunities to reduce the Council's property portfolio on a phased approach over the next 2-3 years and in doing so, reduce our running costs, carbon footprint and generate capital receipts.
- 1.3.** Phase one projects identified include properties in Yeovil and West Somerset, with an aim of rationalising the number of properties in those areas and delivering integrated customer service provision. It also includes C Block at County Hall in Taunton.
- 1.4.** In relation to the Somerset Council Plan 2023-2027 this project will deliver against the following Priorities:
  - A Greener, More Sustainable Somerset by utilising existing Council assets that are accessible and have already had energy efficiency measures implemented.
  - The Council's estate is financially sustainable, efficient, and effective, selecting Council assets to be retained that can be better utilised with moderate investment into layout changes which will meet the needs of incoming customer facing services.

- 1.5.** The projects are included within the Council's MTFP savings under reference NS-2324-TSIGP-282. This sets a target for revenue savings of £425,000 from property rationalisation over two years.

A confidential appendix is attached to this report detailing the financial modelling for the Yeovil Library and West Somerset projects.

## **2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations**

- 2.1.** Scrutiny is asked to consider and comment on the following recommendations, the first three of which are contained within a Key Decision report currently under consultation;

1. Relocate services from Petters House Yeovil to Yeovil Library
2. Relocate services from Williton Childrens Centre, Williton Library and Beckett House to West Somerset House
3. Fund capital works to make layout changes to Yeovil library and West Somerset House to facilitate the co-location of services and delivery of running cost savings. (Capital costs are within existing capital budget approval).
4. Proceed with marketing and sale of C Block, County Hall, Taunton.

## **3. Background**

- 3.1.** There are c. 150 properties across the operational estate in Somerset Council. The Council has identified a programme of asset rationalisation to take place over the next 2-3 years to look at opportunities to review, rationalise and reduce operational sites to contribute to the financial sustainability of the Council in the longer term.

- 3.2.** The property rationalisation programme is large and complex and is being broken down into manageable phases. Phase one of the programme includes properties in Yeovil and West Somerset and also C Block at County Hall in Taunton.

### **3.3. Yeovil**

There are 2 customer facing operational sites in the centre of Yeovil; Yeovil Library and Petters House, Petters Way. In addition, Brympton Way which is a non-customer facing building sits just over a mile from the town centre and was historically the HQ for South Somerset District Council. It is still an operational office building, accessible to all staff.

- 3.4.** The close proximity of these buildings provides an opportunity to co-locate customer service delivery into one building in the town centre and generate

revenue savings as well as a capital receipt. Condition surveys have been conducted to assist with understanding the overall financial business case.

- 3.5.** Yeovil library is in a prominent location in Yeovil Town Centre, within easy reach of public transport and has recently undergone a nationally recognised decarbonisation project at the site in 2021. The library building has an EPC B rating, whereas Petters House is rated C and has not undergone any decarbonisation work.
- 3.6.** Petters House has been operating as a customer services hub for the ex South Somerset District Council. Customer advisors and Housing officers work in this building and Citizens Advice (CAB) are tenants under a 10 year lease which is due to expire in September 2024. The CAB have been consulted regarding the proposals.
- 3.7.** A feasibility study has been completed to consider whether the services could be co-located into Yeovil Library, supported by The Design Concept. The Design Concept are a dynamic provider of total design solutions for libraries and public spaces and have a wealth of experience supporting co-location projects in libraries to achieve optimum solutions.
- 3.8.** Detailed requirements of each service were provided, which the Design Concept used, alongside knowledge gained from site visits to produce initial draft plans. These were reviewed by the project team and several amendments made until the team felt it met the requirements provided within the design brief. The final draft designs were then shared at a face-to-face meeting with teams impacted by the proposals, where there was also the opportunity for staff to ask questions and make suggestions. A mailbox was created on outlook for staff to provide feedback individually or collectively following the face-to-face session and these were reviewed by the project team and a detailed response provided. A copy of the response is available if required.
- 3.9.** Key themes that came out of staff feedback were the challenges that will be faced when co-locating services that have differing customer types, the possible impact on other customers of any anti-social behaviour, the importance of a suitable security provision, provision of adequate desk space for staff who will be required to work in the building and GDPR concerns. The project team are confident that the final designs address feedback received and provide a space that is workable for all services and their customers. A security review has been undertaken and recommendations received.
- 3.10** Further consultation took place with the customer panel and the draft designs were shared on Library social media pages. In addition, the survey was shared into social media groups which had the greatest reach within the geographic area most likely to be impacted by the decision and physical surveys were available at Yeovil

Library. Links were also sent by email to the Yeovil Chamber, Yeovil Town Council and Brympton Parish Council for distribution through their channels while Yeovil Members, and Members in the villages/wards around Yeovil, were also supplied with survey information and encouraged to share.

**3.11** Over 200 responses were received by customers. Key themes were the challenge faced when co-locating services with differing customer types, the concern over loss of library stock, the desire to maintain current services offered in the library and the ability to manage noise and retain quiet spaces. The design of the space addresses many of the points raised and due to the majority of additional service delivery being created on the ground floor in an area previously not populated by book shelves, there will be no reduction to library book stocks. All services currently provided (including wellbeing area, employment hub, children's and music groups etc will continue to run).

**3.12** The co-location will enhance the customer offer in Yeovil Library and provide a single customer service site in the town centre, in a building that has benefited from a nationally recognised decarbonisation scheme and is fully accessible.

### **3.13 West Somerset**

There are 9 operational sites in West Somerset, spread across Minehead and Williton. A number of these were considered out of scope for the West Somerset review as follows;

- Minehead Library - recently renovated and decarbonised, and is fully utilised
- Depot sites – these will be included in a separate review incorporating all depots in the County
- The Alcombe Centre – a fully utilised building housing valued local services; decarbonisation project is underway and will conclude shortly.
- The Seahorse Centre - in the process of being sold to Avon and Somerset Police.

**3.14** Therefore, the focus of the West Somerset review has been on 4 sites in Williton: West Somerset House, Williton Children's Centre, Williton library and Beckett House, Bridge Street, Williton. The first three sites are all located on the same street, Killick Way.

**3.15** West Somerset House (WSH) provided the administrative centre for the former West Somerset District Council until ownership transferred to Somerset West and Taunton Council and in 2023 to Somerset Council (SC) following the formation of the new unitary authority. Aside from the Police who part occupy (lease) some of the ground floor, the building is significantly under-utilised but is accessible having been constructed in 2008. The building is not decarbonised but does have a reasonable energy performance rating DEC (C) and a heating system which is not likely to require replacement for a number of years.

- 3.16** The Children’s Centre and Library & Registration services are currently delivered from 2 separate buildings located adjacent to WSH. These buildings are not decarbonised and the library / registration site has an end-of-life heating system.
- 3.17** Beckett House is only a short distance away by foot or car and operates as an enterprise centre. There are 3 tenants in the building and several vacant rooms. The building currently operates at a loss. We have consulted with Economic Development who understand the reasons for the proposed approach, and we have discussed options for relocation of the service offered at Beckett House. There are lettable spaces at West Somerset House that could be explored if there is interest in doing so.
- 3.18** A feasibility study was commissioned to determine if / how WSH might be reconfigured to co-locate these services into a single site and still retain flexibility to meet any future operational business requirement in the area. AHR architects were appointed to assist with the feasibility study. AHR are architects and building consultants who deliver projects for clients in a variety of sectors using a multi service approach.
- 3.19** The project team have engaged and consulted with managers of library and children’s centre services throughout the scoping and feasibility stages. Detailed requirements were sought from each service, and these informed the design brief. The brief required that there be no loss of service delivery space for the library and children’s centre from existing space provision.
- 3.20** The library, registration office and children’s centre will be relocated on the ground floor of the site, which is currently largely open plan and will require some segregation to meet the service needs. In addition, there is a double height atrium space in a section of the ground floor which needs segregating and sound proofing, so noise is restricted from travelling between customer areas on the ground floor and first floor back-office areas.
- 3.21** Local Members have received updates at key stages during the project lifecycle and Town and Parish Councils have also been engaged.
- 3.22** As the ground floor space will provide dedicated space for each service on the same size footprint as the current provision and is on the same street as existing buildings, it is deemed that there is little impact on customers and therefore no formal customer consultation has taken place.
- 3.23 C Block, County Hall**  
Detailed analysis of staff data has confirmed that there is no requirement to retain C Block. Occupancy data shows that staffing requirements can be met within the rest of the campus. Asset Management Group declared C Block surplus and agreed to proceed with sales and marketing at its meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2024.

- 3.24 Work has been undertaken to understand how C Block can be separated from the remaining campus.
- 3.25 There is considerable interest in C Block. Discussions are well developed regarding the potential to deliver Key Worker accommodation on the site.
- 3.26 Pre-sales condition survey & architectural advice has been obtained and the property is ready for market. We are informed that sale of the whole site is not likely to deliver significantly more value than sale of parts.
- 3.27 The proposal is to include the land to the front of C Block to form a wider parcel of land for potential development.

#### **4. Consultations undertaken**

- 4.1. See sections 3.10, 3.11, 3.19 and 3.21

#### **5. Implications**

- 5.1. The recommendations would result in the need to relocate 31 staff whose current contractual base is listed as Petters House and 13 staff whose base is either Williton Library or Williton Children's Centre. Staff and trade union representatives have been engaged throughout.

#### **6. Background papers**

- 6.1. Slides presented at 7<sup>th</sup> September 2023 Scrutiny Committee  
Response to staff feedback document

**Note** For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author