

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

17 January 2012

Subject: Proposed Creation of Central Devizes Customer Access Point, the Closure of Browfort, Urchfont Manor and Bradley Road Buildings

**Cabinet member: Councillor Stuart Wheeler
Campus Development and Culture (including Leisure, Sport and Libraries)**

Key Decision: Yes

Executive Summary

This paper is about the proposed creation of a town centre customer access facility in Devizes and the closure of the above three buildings. It is not about the closure of the services that operate from them, which will be relocated as required to meet customer needs.

In addition to the creation of a new customer access facility and hot desk facilities in Devizes, this paper also seeks Cabinet approval to undertake the work necessary to cease using, and to dispose of, the buildings known as the Browfort offices (to include The Cedars, The Beeches, The Yew Trees and The Lodge), Bradley Road offices and Urchfont Manor.

In addition to the above recommendations, Cabinet will need to be aware of the need to ensure that officers secure provision, via the use of non council owned estate, of ongoing facilities for Ceremonies in the area and of the requirement to ensure that any ongoing Adult Education needs identified by the service, in consultation with service users, can be met via alternative providers or the use of other council facilities.

Although currently commercially confidential due to ongoing negotiations with the owner, a potential location for a revised customer access facility in Devizes has been identified by officers. The location identified in support of these proposals is identified in the confidential Part Two Paper. Whilst not directly on the Market Square, the potential location is broadly centrally located between the major parking areas within Devizes. Preliminary discussions with the owner of the location, officers within customer services and economic development have identified that, subject to the appropriate planning consents, it would offer a cost effective solution for the provision of central customer access facilities.

It is believed that the main Browfort office buildings could be closed by end of September 2012, with the closure of the accommodation used by the

Registration service being completed as soon as alternative accommodation can be provided for the service.

Cabinet has previously confirmed that the Browfort offices are unsustainable in terms of their current mechanical and electrical infrastructure. In recognition of this, it was scheduled for complete refurbishment as part of the Campus and Operational Delivery Programme, at a net capital cost of approximately £4 million. This cost was to be fully funded by the wider savings made within the Campus and Operational Delivery Programme and is fully budgeted within the existing capital budget. If approved, the proposals within this paper will mean that this refurbishment will not be undertaken.

Proposals

That Cabinet delegate to Dr Carlton Brand, Corporate Director, in consultation with Cllr Stuart Wheeler, Cabinet Member for Campus Development and Culture (including Leisure, Sport and Libraries) the authority to :-

- a) Undertake all necessary actions to secure, develop and deliver a new customer access site in central Devizes as well as providing hot desk facilities and an alternative Ceremony Room in the Devizes area.
- b) Instruct officers within the Transformation Programme to commence the necessary consultation with key stakeholders and staff to enable the closure of Browfort offices during autumn 2012.
- c) Complete the early closure of Bradley Road in autumn 2012, ensuring the relocation of the current customer access facility to the refurbished County Hall ensuring these complement the new Library and other customer facilities within the refurbished building.
- d) Undertake the required actions to secure the closure of Urchfont Manor by the end of September 2012. Recognising that future Adult Education Service provision including, where required, local flexible delivery in line with the Department for Business Innovation and Skills strategic proposals for Further Education and Skills, will be determined by Cabinet after consultation with service users, area boards, local communities and partners.
- e) Market and dispose of the Bradley Road offices and Urchfont Manor sites as part of the Transformation Programme.
- f) Market and dispose of the Browfort offices site if officers cannot develop an appropriate, financially viable, alternative long term public service use for the site, such as use by another public body or Extra Care provision.
- g) Ask the Chief Financial Officer to ensure that the overall savings generated by these proposals are identified and tracked within the council's budget setting process and the costs of the alternative provision is properly reflected and funded in the councils capital and revenue budgets.

Reasons for Proposal

There are four main drivers behind these proposal:-

- 1 To create a town centre customer access location within Devizes. This will complement the council's commitment to deliver services by 'taking them to the customer' and help support foot fall into central Devizes, recognising the importance of this key Market Town and the current economic climate.
- 2 To reflect the smaller staff base across the council following the reduction in 412 staff positions during the Business Plan period 2011 to date, the reconfiguration of some services and the need for less office accommodation now that staff are able to work flexibly following the successful deployment of the council's new ICT provision. .
- 3 To respond to the current economic climate and ongoing budget pressures, whilst enabling the council to continue to invest in, and protect, front line service delivery by further rationalising and modernising its property portfolio.
- 4 To continue the delivery of the councils' policy to ensure all its property holdings are sustainable, fit for purpose, and represent value for money for Wiltshire residents, both now and in the future.

Dr Carlton Brand
Corporate Director

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Purpose of Report

1. To seek approval from Cabinet to create a customer access facility in central Devizes, provide hot desk facilities in the Devizes area and provide an alternative Ceremony Room to service the Devizes area.
2. To seek approval for the closure and disposal of the existing buildings at the Browfort offices, Bradley Road offices and Urchfont Manor.

Background

3. The Browfort offices comprise Browfort, The Cedars, The Beeches, The Yew Trees and The Lodge. It has previously been identified as one of the council's four main office hubs, but is increasingly under utilised by officers as services are redesigned with an increased focus on flexibility and the ethos of 'take the service to the customer'. The council's overall office accommodation needs have reduced in line with a reducing number of office based staff, including a reduction of over 220 managers.
4. The Bradley Road office had been intended for phased closure as part of the council's wider transformation programme, but will now become surplus to requirements as the first phase of the refurbishment of County Hall is completed and an integrated customer access service is developed in the new Atrium. Therefore early closure can be achieved, bringing a benefit to the council's revenue budget.
5. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills has recently published its strategic proposals for Further Education and Skills. These include continued support for a community learning offer, with a wide range of learning opportunities available to adults. It intends to pilot locally-based "community learning trust" models to channel its future funding and to lead

the planning of local provision. The Adult Education Service remains non-statutory with a clear expectation that people who can afford to pay meet the full cost of their participation.

- 6 Consequently, a full review of the council's informal adult learning provision is needed, to ensure that it is appropriate to the needs our communities and the expectations of the Department of Business Innovation and Skill.
- 7 It is proposed that a service led consultation be undertaken with service users, Area Boards, communities and partners on the development of a service which would facilitate provision at a local level instead of the focus being on a fixed place of delivery, as is currently the case at Urchfont Manor College. Recommendations arising from the consultation would be presented to the Cabinet to consider at a later date.

Main considerations for the council

Council space requirements

- 8 As services are redesigned, and as staff work more flexibly, the total workstation requirement of the council is reducing, allowing further reduction in the size and cost of its property provision. At the initial stage of planning for the Workplace Transformation Programme, the Browfort offices, were envisaged to provide 250 workstations, enough accommodation for around 370 staff on a flexible basis. Staff reductions since the 2009 approval for the Programme are significantly above this figure and there is evidence from the Bourne Hill offices and other sites that the 3 : 2 staff to desk ratio currently used can be raised further without impacting on service delivery.

Current and future needs relating to these sites

- 9 The primary future office based needs of the council, in the Devizes area, have been identified by officers as customer access provision (including access to the Planning and Revenues and Benefits services), hot desking for staff and appropriate Registration service provision. These needs, along with the retention of the Library and leisure provision in the town, can be met without the continued use of Browfort offices, provided a suitable customer access location can be secured near to the town centre.
- 10 In Trowbridge, the council's office accommodation will be in the refurbished County Hall building, this will include a new Trowbridge Library and integrated customer access provision. Planning and Development Control services have already relocated from Bradley Road. The first phase of the refurbishment of County Hall will be completed in September 2012. Utilising a hot desking model based on the council's award winning Bourne Hill offices will provide sufficient capacity for the council to complete the early vacation and closure of the Bradley Road offices.

- 11 Urchfont Manor is currently used to deliver a significant part of the council's informal adult learning provision. Although this is also offered through council libraries, the heritage centre and the Family Learning Service, which is funded by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills. Adult learning is also provided by other bodies, including Wiltshire College and the Workers' Educational Association.
- 12 In line with the council's commitment to localise its service delivery, and the recent national guidance from the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, the Adult Education Service will consult on the development of a revised service focused on facilitating provision at a local level, instead of the focus being on a fixed place of delivery, as is currently the case at Urchfont Manor College. The current 'traded' service run from Urchfont has a projected £120,000 overspend for 2011/12.
- 13 Following the consultation, officers will bring forward long term revised proposals for voluntary Adult Education provision across Wiltshire, highlighting the council's role within this. It is anticipated that an appropriate non residential service focused on local delivery can be achieved, in line with latest government guidance.

Economic impact of the proposal

- 14 Currently, there is limited evidence staff based at Browfort, or visitors to the offices, routinely utilise facilities in the centre of Devizes. The occupancy of the building is typically below 130 staff at any one time and often much lower. Provision of a dedicated customer access facility near to the town centre will generate increased footfall to the area of the facility. The provision of hot desking facilities near to the town centre will also increase the number of staff visiting the central areas of Devizes.
- 15 It is highly likely that the redevelopment of the Browfort offices site, especially if it were used by a large public agency or for an extra care development, will bring economic benefit to the Devizes area, but at this time this cannot be quantified.
- 16 In relation to Urchfont Manor, the disposal of this facility will result in a limited loss of revenue to local businesses. This will include provisions from the local farm and a potential loss of revenue to the local public house. Other services, such as grounds maintenance, are provided through the council's Sodexo contract and so have little or no benefit to the local community. Depending on the future use of the building by a purchaser, it is possible that its disposal may, in the longer term, have a beneficial impact on the immediate local economy, but that is not possible to predict at this time.

- 17 The early closure of the council's Bradley Road offices will not, in itself, have a significant economic impact, although it is possible that the future redevelopment of this site will have a beneficial impact on the Trowbridge economy.

Savings after the cost of re-provision

- 18 The net impact of these proposals will be a revenue saving of approximately £750,000 per annum for the council, delivered via a mixture of reduced running costs and a reduced borrowing requirement. These figures are detailed within the Confidential Part Two paper that accompanies this report.

Environmental and climate change considerations

19. The disposal of these buildings and the targeted re-provision proposed will have a positive environmental impact. The extent of this will be determined by the exact mix and location of the re-provision.

Equalities Impact of the proposal

20. None identified at this time, though the central locations proposed in both Trowbridge and Devizes for the revised customer access facilities are likely to have better overall public transport links and access than the existing provision.
21. In relation to the Adult Education Service, the equality impact of any future service model will be fully assessed as part of the service led consultation.

Risk Assessment

22. In pure financial terms, this proposal will form part of the identified budget savings for 2012/13 and beyond. A major risk is that if the savings proposed are not fully implemented by September 2012, the council will need to identify, and achieve, additional savings in year.
23. Officers cannot formally pursue the options for alternative delivery locations in Devizes without approval from members and delegation of the delivery of the proposals within this paper to Dr Carlton Brand, Corporate Director, in consultation with Councillor Stuart Wheeler, who is the Cabinet Member for Campus Development and Culture (including Leisure, Sport and Libraries).
24. The potential disposal of the Browfort and Bradley Road office sites will represent a significant gain to the council's capital budget, or alternatively offer the opportunity to advance other council objectives, but there is a risk

that the sites may remain vacant and plans to mitigate this risk will need to be developed

25. In relation to Urchfont Manor, there are currently five weddings and one 90th birthday party with confirmed bookings in the period up to the end of August 2012. There are a small number of provisional bookings, which have yet to pay a deposit, after this date. Closure in September 2012 will allow all confirmed bookings to go ahead.
26. A mixture of both day and residential courses are currently offered to service users at Urchfont Manor, including 13 courses linked to the Open University. The brochure for 2012 was published at the end of October 2011. Courses running in the autumn period 2012, although advertised have, as yet, received very few bookings and so the risk of needing to cancel confirmed bookings can be mitigated by ceasing the taking of bookings for courses and events beyond August 2012, subject to Cabinets approval of this papers recommendations.

Financial Implications

27. The above proposals will generate ongoing revenue savings of approximately £0.750 million per annum.

Legal Implications

28. There are no identified legal implications in respect of the property aspects of these proposals, beyond those associated with the provision of a new Customer Access facility in Devizes and the reprovision of the Ceremony Room.
29. Although these proposals are about the buildings, not services, it is important to highlight that the council will be undertaking full consultation regarding the future delivery model for Adult Education Services as set out in paragraph 7 above. This will include an assessment of the equality impact of any proposals for future delivery of these services in accordance with the council's duties under the Equality Act 2010.
30. Staff who are affected by these proposals will be consulted in accordance with the council's established practices and procedures.

Options Considered

31. The retention of Browfort, Urchfont and Bradley Road offices, which is unnecessary in terms of capacity and would be significantly more expensive

at a time when the council is seeking to target its investment on service delivery.

Conclusions

32. To minimise the operational impact, whilst securing the identified financial savings, it is proposed that the three sites highlighted within this report are closed in autumn 2012, provided that the alternative provision for customer access, hot desk facilities and the Devizes Ceremony Room has been provided by this time.

33. This timeframe will allow clear communication and planning for the staff that are based within these buildings, as well as all service users.

34. Given the potential for the timeframe to vary due to the need to secure alternative provision and the flexibility required to be able to negotiate with partners, it is recommended that authority to deliver the proposals within this paper is delegated to Dr Carlton Brand, Corporate Director, in consultation with Councillor Stuart Wheeler, Cabinet Member, for Campus Development and Culture (including Leisure, Sport and Libraries)

Dr Carlton Brand
Corporate Director

Report Author:

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