

Committee: Extraordinary Council Meeting
Date: 17 June 2002
Agenda Item No: 2
Title: Office Accommodation Report
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Summary

- 1 This report updates members on the principal of administrative centralisation at the Saffron Walden offices. It does not include again all the detailed information included in the report submitted to members in January/February 2002. It advises members of the outcome of further work undertaken and concludes that it is possible to proceed with centralisation at Saffron Walden within a practical time frame this financial year.

Background

- 2 Following the presentation of a detailed report including a full financial appraisal the Council meeting on 12 February resolved that:
 - 1 the principle of relocating Planning staff at Saffron Walden be agreed,
 - 2 following further consultation a detailed action plan be prepared to cover such issues as car parking and relocation arrangements within Saffron Walden offices,
 - 3 the market for leasing/selling potentially surplus accommodation be explored, and
 - 4 improved service delivery through website development, the provision of hot desk sites and the Community Information Centre be progressed.
- 3 To assist with the consultation process and get more staff involved with looking at the practicalities two officer task groups were formed to consider the issues of car parking and relocation. Each group had a representative from the Planning section. Additionally, external professional property advice has been sought on the merits of leasing and or selling surplus accommodation at Dunmow. An indicative action plan has been prepared following this further consultation.

Car Parking

- 4 There are approximately 130 existing car parking spaces at the Saffron Walden offices although with double parking more cars park on site. By amending the layout and extending around the Lodge House it is possible to increase this number to approximately 150 spaces without significantly compromising the environment of the site.

- 5 The existing visitors car parking is not ideal and relocation to a more obvious location would be better. A reorganising of the car park area currently used as dedicated spaces for Chief Officers and Senior Members would provide for better visitor car parking both in number and location.
- 6 In spite of the improvements noted above there will be insufficient car parking in the short term for all staff to use. Parking will have to be managed and access controlled with barriers and swipe cards. Points which were considered by the task group included
- (a) Allocation of spaces
 - (b) Preference to those who are car sharers in accordance with the Councils Local Agenda 21 priority..
 - (c) Essential car users requiring ready access to their cars for carrying out their work.
 - (d) Casual users.
 - (e) Commuters and the distance travelled: staff living within walking distance.
 - (f) The less physically able.
 - (g) Whether dedicated car spaces should still apply.
 - (h) The arrangements for parking for those unable to park on site.
 - (i) Whether a mini bus should be provided between Great Dunmow and Saffron Walden.
- 7 There has been further consultation with staff following the task groups conclusion with the following outcome:
- i. There will be insufficient voluntary support to justify the provision of a mini bus.
 - ii. Although there will be 138 car parking spaces for staff, with holidays and absence this would mean more parking passes being issued – 160.
 - iii. There is enthusiasm for car-sharing and for flexibility within teams in managing car parking to suit service delivery.
 - iv. There is concern that staff not able to park on site will park in neighbouring streets to the annoyance of local residents creating traffic management problems and that consequently there should be an opportunity for staff to park at Swan Meadow and that such an arrangement should not financially penalise those staff not able to park at the Council offices.
 - v. A planning application will be necessary to extend and amend car parking. Planning guidance has been sought and a maximum figure of 150 spaces is considered to be appropriate.
- 8 Managing Car Parking will be a challenge, and it is suggested that the detailed arrangements are the responsibility of the Council's Corporate Management Team. One option is as follows:

A quota is agreed through the C.M.T. for each Directorate and then from each Directorate to the Heads of Service based on service delivery needs and that each Head of Service is allowed the freedom to allocate car parking taking into account physical ability, distance, commuting, car sharing etc. It is thought that this would encourage alternative ways of maximising the benefit of on-site car parking for each service.

Newly appointed staff who do not require a car to carry out their duties for the authority could be advised that there is no parking provision. It is expected that over time the staff parking at Swan Meadow will be assimilated into parking on site at the Council Offices through car sharing, walking to work, etc. Currently there is spare capacity at Swan Meadow and there will be no direct loss of income or impact on public parking. However, it will be necessary to set up internal charges to ensure that car parking is suitably reimbursed. Although this would not impact on the Council's overall financial position.

Whatever scheme is adopted it should be implemented for a trial period of six months, then evaluated and amended if necessary.

Office Relocation

- 9 **The officer task group concluded that Planning Services could be satisfactorily accommodated without any new-build extension at Saffron Walden**, but only if all existing space is fully utilised and reorganised in a more efficient way. There would be implications for existing staff, which would need careful managing.
- 10 The general recommendations were:
- (i) Corporate Directors be located closer to the Chief Executive.
 - (ii) Heads of Service be located close to their teams where possible.
 - (iii) Teams are amalgamated as much as possible.
 - (iv) Best use be made of all available floor space, including the Stewards Lodge, whilst keeping disturbance to existing staff to a minimum.
 - (v) Meetings room's facilities be maintained and enhanced if appropriate.
 - (vi) Staff who frequently meet the public be located close to Reception if possible.
 - (vii) Continued exploration of flexible working arrangements as identified within the action plan of the Best Value Review of Corporate Support Services.
 - (viii) Continued work on electronic and off-site file storage.
 - (ix) Expansion of CIC at Great Dunmow to offer full 'One Stop Shop' facilities.
 - (x) Potential amalgamation of duplicate staff/sections of Dunmow and Saffron Walden.
 - (xi) Disruption to existing arrangements at Saffron Walden be kept to a minimum if possible.

- 11 Item (ix) is particularly relevant to the concerns previously expressed by members. It recommends that the CIC at Dunmow be expanded to allow for a range of other services including Planning, Housing, Revenues, Environmental, etc to be able to advise callers in person at appropriate times. One of the upper rooms could be retained as an office for the duty officers to be available to answer queries from customers and to work when not. One of the meetings rooms could be used as a local surgery for all services, including access to files of current planning applications in the south of the District. The other could be retained for meetings. Use of the Committee Room could also be retained and shared with the future tenant for public meetings, inquiries etc. As part of the Best Value Review of Corporate Services, the development of electronic access to services and the Council's website is also progressing
- 12 The task group looked in detail at the permutations of re-allocating spaces at Saffron Walden and outline proposals have been discussed at meetings with the Corporate Management Team. The detailed arrangements will be considered through further discussion with the Corporate Management Team and Heads of Service. It is proposed that the Members Room should additionally become available for meetings of Directors only and that a part of the staff room is used as a general meeting room.
- 13 There has been further consultation with staff with regard to the outlined proposals with the following outcome.
- (a) There remains concern within the Planning Section at the principal of centralising and leaving Dunmow although there is an acknowledgement that in any event there would need to be a development of a planning service at Saffron Walden.
 - (b) The accommodation arrangements for Planning at Saffron Walden are considered appropriate and would not compromise service delivery.
 - (c) Some concern was expressed by those at Saffron Walden who would have to endure the inconvenience of moving whilst at the same time possibly losing an opportunity to park on site.
 - (d) There was no concern that was so fundamental as to threaten the viability of centralising at Saffron Walden

Leasing/Selling

- 14 Professional independent advice has been sought in relation to the Dunmow asset. The advice confirms that the rental level advised by the District Valuer is appropriate although the sale value is considered to be low. More significantly the guidance given is that there would be better long-term benefit if the offices were retained as one holding rather than split with one part sold and the other retained. It is recommended that the High Street Property is retained for use as a Community Information Centre and for voluntary bodies such as C.A.B and U.C.V.S. and that the remainder is let for the most favourable terms obtainable.

- 15 Discussion with the independent adviser confirmed that until a decision is made to centralise it is difficult to progress this as there is no certainty or timescale for any prospective tenant. However, centralising will result in a more efficient use of the property asset at Saffron Walden as recommended by District Audit's Value for Money Report and add certainty and timescale into marketing the spare capacity at Great Dunmow.

Financial Information

- 16 A full financial appraisal was included in the report submitted to members earlier this year. However, indicative one-off set up costs have been adjusted upwards by £15,000 to take account of improvements to car parking outlined earlier. Consequently these one-off costs are amended to £160,640.

Revenue costs remain as previously reported. in the Council's three year indicative financial model a prudent further projection was included for letting the Dunmow offices and no allowance was made for income until 2004/5.

Conclusion

Following additional officer work including further consultation and investigation, this report reiterates the conclusion that administrative centralisation at the Saffron Walden offices can be achieved.

Attached to this report is another report from Councillor Chambers, Leader of the Council with appropriate recommendations.

Background Papers

1996 Report
District Audit Report
Minutes of the Best Value Review of Corporate Services
Report to Resources Committee 21-01
Task Group Reports
Valuation Correspondence