

Report to: Council

Date of Meeting: 22 July 2015

Report Title: **Co-location of ESCC Register Office in Hastings Town Hall and creation of civic facilities within Aquila House**

Report By: Jane Hartnell
Director of Corporate Services and Governance

Purpose of Report

To invite Council to agree to lease space within Hastings Town Hall to accommodate the ESCC Register Office, and refurbish space within Aquila House to accommodate the council's democratic and civic functions in a fully accessible Council Chamber, Committee Rooms and Mayor's Parlour together with Member facilities.

Recommendation(s)

- 1. Council is recommended that the Director of Corporate Services and Governance, be given delegated authority, in consultation with the Leader, to:**
 - a) Agree Heads of Terms with East Sussex County Council for the lease of space in the Town Hall for 10 years;**
 - b) Design and implement a programme of refurbishment to accommodate the civic functions within Aquila House and any other accommodation works as required to facilitate the move, to a maximum cost of £200,000;**
 - c) Renegotiate the existing Aquila House internal refurbishment work contract to undertake the works, rather than tender the additional works on the grounds of expediency and urgency.**
- 2. That the Council agrees to the replacement of the existing microphone system, and the purchase of new audio visual equipment at an estimated cost of £50,000.**

Reasons for Recommendations

An opportunity has arisen to achieve a substantial capital receipt for sale of land at Summerfields for affordable housing. This sale has prompted the proposal to co-locate the ESCC Register Office within the Town Hall - providing an income stream, and an opportunity to relocate the Council's civic and democratic functions to an efficient, modern, flexible working environment in Aquila House.

Introduction

1. The opportunity has arisen to consider whether HBC wishes to lease out part of the Town Hall to the ESCC Register Office, as the decision is outside of the Council's normal day to day decision making process the decision needs to be determined by Full Council.
2. The factors that have led to this proposal are as follows:
 - a. Amicus Horizon has made an offer to purchase land at Summerfields for a social housing scheme which will create a minimum of 30 affordable units by 31st March 2018. The sale of this land would create a significant capital receipt for HBC as landowner. The offer is however time limited as the site would need to be vacant by January 2016. This timescale is therefore driving the speed at which decisions and implementation of this project will need to be made.
 - b. The existing office complex on the site is leased by both Let's Do Business (LDB) and the ESCC Register Office. If Council is minded to progress with this scheme, LDB will be given notice to terminate their lease, and we will offer support for their search for alternative accommodation.
 - c. HBC in early March 2015 informed the County Council that it would consider sharing Hastings Town Hall with other organisations as a way of reducing the running costs of the building, whilst ideally retaining a key role for the building in the lives of local people. The ESCC Registration Service was due to relocate to the newly refurbished library building in Claremont, however due to difficulties with this proposed scheme the two councils have worked together to seek a mutually beneficial outcome
3. Inter-authority officer discussions have identified Hastings Town Hall as an appropriate venue for the Register Office. There is enough space to accommodate the 'back office' requirements as well as appropriate ceremony space. The town centre venue would offer an improved customer experience for local people using the Register Office (including public transport access) and the attraction of the Town Hall as a venue for weddings, civil partnerships and other ceremonies is clear.
4. The Register Office would require use of approx. 1/3 of the Town Hall and would wish to maximise use of the historic parts of the building including the Council Chamber, Mayors Parlour and the sweeping staircase, as well as committee rooms 2 and 3 and the lower floor front office space.
5. At the same time, as part of its Transformation Programme, the council is implementing a programme of alternative use of space and working arrangements. The current Aquila House (AH) refurbishment project offers a timely opportunity to 'piggy-back' on the works underway and to locate most council services and functions in one smart, efficient, flexible and modern environment.
6. The refurbishment project and new working arrangements are on schedule to free up space in Aquila House by October 2015. This provides an opportunity to re-fit

space to accommodate civic functions from January 2016. A newly refurbished and purpose designed area within Aquila House could provide Members and the public with the facilities currently available within the Town Hall, together with greater accessibility, improved on-site support and more flexibility than can be provided with the many conservation and building restrictions in the Town Hall.

7. In addition, the council would be able to offer good quality conference facilities for hire with a fabulous viewpoint of the sea and parking facilities opposite.

The proposals in detail

8. There are a number of issues that will need to be addressed if the project is to be approved, these are identified below.

Town Hall

9. The space proposed to be leased by ESCC includes:
 - i. Current Committee Room 2 and 3
 - ii. General Office
 - iii. Reception desk and back office
 - iv. Council Chamber
 - v. Mayors Parlour
 - vi. Members Room (but not the Members IT/work room)
10. ESCC have agreed that pre-arranged access to the current Mayors Parlour and Chamber for visiting dignitaries etc. can be facilitated. In addition, if Members were minded to require that Full Council meetings still be held in the Chamber, this could also be accommodated, again on a pre-planned basis (up to 12 times per year). It would however be likely that special/urgent full Council meetings would need to be held in an alternative venue.
11. The remaining areas in the Town Hall would be marketed for rental. However it is acknowledged that this is more difficult space to let due to the listed building status and the accessibility issues. There are no plans at this stage to relocate the Community Contact Centre, but that could be a medium term option should an appropriate tenant be forthcoming.

Aquila House

12. The current proposal for accommodating civic and democratic functions in Aquila House is based on the experience gained of designing space during the refurbishment project. The brief would be to create space that is appropriate for the functions required, is comfortable, accessible, and flexible and offers potential for income generation from lettings for conferences etc.
13. Members' views will be sought on the design of the final layout and how the available space could be utilised for council and Member functions. Including: a

large meeting room - with scope to be used for large/full council meetings, three committee rooms, Mayors Parlour, Members' room and Leader's office/meeting room

14. The proposal would re-locate the publicly accessible meetings rooms to the Upper Ground Floor of Aquila House. This floor is currently used for Personnel and Business Support and the rear portion is leased to a third party. These functions would need to be transferred to the vacant first floor.
 - a. A large meeting room could be created with the capacity to seat the whole council if that were desirable. The sea view would be spectacular and the space could be equipped with modern Audio Visual equipment for presentations etc. and modern energy efficient lighting and acoustics. This room would be created with glass walls providing a light, modern, open and welcoming environment.
 - b. The committee rooms would also be replicated on the upper ground floor.
 - c. The rest of the floor would house the Mayors Parlour, a new unisex disabled toilet and a small kitchenette for preparation of refreshments.
 - d. The public access to the floor would be provided via the existing Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant lift from the Tourist Information Centre and the stairs to the upper ground. Access to the rest of the floors would be restricted by fob access. Visitors would therefore need to be accompanied by officers or members (as now) if they needed to access other parts of the building.
15. The Leader's office and Member's room would be located on the 1st floor (the upper ground floor is narrower than the first floor).

Timetable and decision dates

16. Were Council minded to progress, the timetable for the project is very tight:
 - a. In order to achieve the sale to Amicus, vacant possession of the Summerfields site is needed by January 2016.
 - b. The Register Office would need to move from its current location and be operational from late December 2015.
 - c. There is a window of opportunity to undertake fit out works by the existing contractor in autumn 2015 if the works are scheduled shortly. The costings for furniture, room construction etc. is available as they have been tendered for the existing works – this could expedite the process and enable occupation of the 1st floor by early 2016.
 - d. Works are required by the Register Office (to transform the committee rooms into appropriately sized interview rooms etc.), however as these are very likely to need Listed Building Consent, they will not be completed by the time the service is operational. They would however wish to have access to start permitted works from early September – this will be for the ground floor meeting rooms only and will not affect Chamber bookings.
17. Key decision dates:

- i. HBC Full Council Meeting recommended to approve the move and proposals for refurbishment of Aquila House - Wednesday 22 July
- ii. ESCC Lead Member Meeting (open to the public) to agree to signing of the lease for the Town Hall - Thursday 23rd July

Financial Implications

18. The sale of land at Summerfields is already included in the Council's land disposal programme and will provide a significant Capital receipt. (Details included in Part II). The money received will be used to finance the Council's capital programme. There are a range of opportunities for which this money could be used, and it will be particularly important to consider using it to create income generating opportunities into the future.
19. The proposed income from ESCC would be up to £58,000 p.a. this includes service charges, rates and £24,000 rental.
20. The Council has a notional income figure included in its Medium Term Financial Plan for 2016/17 of £35k, rising to £70k for 17/18 for lease of the 1st floor of Aquila House. It is however by no means certain that we would realise this income stream on the open market.
21. In addition to income generated from the rent of the Town Hall, the refurbishment costs of the 1st floor of Aquila House would need to be funded from the capital programme.
22. The estimated £200,000 refurbishment, construction and furnishing costs are based on the pre-tendered prices for works currently underway in Aquila House. This includes a 10% contingency and contract management fees.
23. The proposal assumes we will be re-locating the existing tables/chairs from the Council Chamber, the members' room furniture and some additional tables and chairs.
24. Note this budget does NOT include the costs of the hearing loop or a replacement microphone system which is a cost the Council is looking to meet due to the almost end of useful life of the current system. Initial investigations suggest this will be in the region of £50,000. New AV screens for presentations will also need to be installed. It is recommended that these facilities are acquired at the same time as the works are undertaken.
25. This investment would equate to 3.5 years of income from Town Hall rental, and the pay-back period would be reduced if other space were let in the Town Hall during this period.

Policy Implications

26. Equalities -
 - a. The issues of DDA access to the public meeting areas have been addressed in the proposal to use the Upper Ground Floor of Aquila House for the majority of public meetings. The added advantage of using this floor for our public meeting rooms is

that the current restriction on wheelchair users attending meetings could be lifted as there is a ground floor level fire exit route out of the building at the rear.

- b. The inclusion of a replacement microphone system will be a cost the council will need to meet regardless of whether this project progresses or not, however it is worth noting that the acoustics in Aquila House are superior to those in the town hall.
27. Anti-poverty - the sale of land at Summerfields for affordable housing will contribute to the stock of decent homes for people on lower incomes and in housing need. The current proposal for the sale of land at Summerfields includes a covenant that the site is to be developed to provide a minimum of 30 affordable units by a longstop date of 31st March 2018. This will contribute to the council's new homes target of 200 per year.
28. Environmental Issues - Aquila House is a far more energy efficient building than the Town Hall and room design can capitalise on modern standards of working conditions e.g. better acoustics, lighting etc. all of which are more challenging in a listed building.
29. Organisational consequences - the opportunity to further enhance one team working by having members, officers and civic space in one building is also complemented by the efficiency of officers/members not needing to move between buildings frequently during the working week. We will however need to ensure that the Community Contact Centre staff are not isolated in the Town Hall.
30. Local people's views - the urgency of the programme and need for rapid decision making will not allow for public consultation on this issue. The functions of the council will however not be affected by this decision, merely the location from which they are undertaken. However officers are of course sensitive to the attachment people in the town have to buildings. An alternative viewpoint is that many more local people will have cause to use parts of the Town Hall that are not readily accessible now if this proposal is progressed. The agreement for Council to continue to use the Council Chamber for pre-planned full Council meetings may assist with people's readiness to try new working arrangements.

Wards Affected

Castle

Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	Yes
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	No
Risk Management	Yes
Environmental Issues	Yes
Economic/Financial Implications	Yes
Human Rights Act	No
Organisational Consequences	Yes

Local People's Views
Anti-Poverty

Yes
Yes

Additional Information

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