

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel - 8 June 2023 Comments to the Cabinet on the Proposal to Relocate of Redditch Library

The proposal to relocate Redditch Library was discussed, the main areas and key comments made were:

General Comments

- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) confirmed that the role of Worcestershire County Council (the Council) in the process was to provide a statutory Library Service. The CMR assured Members of the Panel that there were no pre-determined views on this matter and that he was in listening mode. The Cabinet would have due regard to the comments made from Scrutiny and the responses from the Consultation as part of its consideration.
- There would be further discussion of the proposal and consideration of additional information by the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board (OSPB) at its meeting on 26 June prior to the Cabinet decision on 20 July 2023.
- The Council would ensure that there was a comparable site and service offer and that its costs would be no worse as a consequence. The Panel noted environmental benefits to the move, the proposed new location already benefits from energy saving measures.
- Although updated floor plans had been received, they had not yet been signed off as there were outstanding queries; revised floor plans were awaited. The Council required clarification on the useable space available, the specific layout for the Children's Library, a Young Person Space and the size and flexibility of the multi-functional space.
- Redditch Borough Council (RBC) were looking to improve the shop mobility offer including access to mobility vehicles, blue badge car park spaces and improved lighting on the walkways.
- Confirmation on the archive space available was awaited. Further collaborative work was ongoing with a team of staff and volunteers to establish which archives would be kept locally and which would need to be transferred to The Hive, Worcester for secure storage.
- The Panel was informed of the three most common themes given by respondents in the Consultation process, which were:
 - i. That the proposed location was not as good as the current site, being further away from the town centre, bus stops, railways station and car parks.
 - ii. Concern that there would be a reduction in the facilities and services offered by the new location, with information provided at the consultation stage not being sufficient to reassure them that facilities and services would not be lost.
 - iii. Concern that the relocation would result in a reduction in size of the new library and thereby having an impact on how the building could be used.
- In response to a Member's concern about what the benefits would be for the residents of Redditch and the Council's taxpayers of the proposed move, the Panel was given examples of the themes of respondents to the Consultation who were in favour of the move eg the new location was only a very short distance away, it was an effective use of buildings, they were happy to have the library as part of a hub with services all in one place, that the move to a new location could include new, modern facilities and the new location could be more accessible.

Public Consultation process

- The Panel was assured that the public Consultation exercise had been sufficient in size and scope and had followed due process and legal advice had been sought.
- It was also confirmed that the Consultation had been widely publicised and was as transparent as possible. Some examples were given of this, including that there had been 2 public consultation meetings (which had been well attended), posters had been put up in Redditch Library and Library staff had been briefed in order to be able to advise and answer questions about the process and there had been publicity via social media. Copies of consultation documents had been made available in paper as well as online and translation services had also been made available.
- The Business Intelligence Team had analysed the Consultation responses and it was confirmed that this was a Team independent of the Library Service.

Commercial Arrangements

- It was confirmed that an updated Heads of Term agreement had now been received.
- It was confirmed that the Council would be no worse off, financially from this move.
- Removal costs would also be covered by RBC.
- The Panel was assured that there would not be a loss of a capital asset to the Council, as the Council owned the freehold of the land of the existing Redditch Library site and this would be retained. The proposed move would involve a 125-year leasehold exchange arrangement between the Council and RBC. It was requested that a more detailed explanation of this be included in future reports.
- The utilities costs payable by the Council would be apportioned from the metered cost of the utilities. It was highlighted that with the sustainability improvements to the Town Hall site, such as solar panels and heat pumps, some benefits were expected to be gained by the Council, though these had yet to be quantified.
- Further due diligence on the commercial arrangements would be carried out.

Operational Services

- The learning from previous library moves eg Bromsgrove was shared. It was confirmed that historically, library moves to new sites had resulted in an increased footfall.
- Assurance was received that staff were fully engaged in the process and their views had contributed to the proposed operational arrangements.
- With regard to the position of stakeholders, it was confirmed that as a current tenant, the Department for Work and Pensions had been formally consulted and should the proposed relocation take place, would move to the new site.
- It was confirmed that there would be good access to the Town Hall site for deliveries and collections.
- There would be no impact from the move in respect of the roll-out of Libraries unlocked.
- Back office accommodation at the Town Hall would be shared with other users.
- The viability of a sensory room in the proposed new library would be included in the report for OSPB.

Collaboration opportunities

- The Council was looking to work collaboratively with the Innovation Centre development which was a part of the wider Redditch Town Development Plan.
- There were potential opportunities for collaboration with Redditch College for various initiatives, to be determined
- It was envisaged that the new site was a multi-functional space, with the opportunity for wide range of events going forward.

Recommendation:

It was recommended that OSPB should be provided with floor plans including the children's library and the multi-functional space for its meeting on 26 June 2023.

8 June 2023