

CAMBRIDGESHIRE ARCHIVES – NEW ACCOMMODATION

To: **Highways and Community Infrastructure Committee**

Meeting Date: **23 September 2014**

From: **Executive Director, Economy Transport and Environment**

Electoral division(s): **All**

Forward Plan ref: **N/A** *Key decision:* **No**

Purpose: **To inform Committee members of progress in identifying a suitable solution to the longstanding need for adequate accommodation for historical records and associated public access**

Recommendation: **To approve the relocation of the Archive service to premises suitable for long term operation, subject to confirmation of property acquisition by the General Purposes Committee**

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1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1** There is a longstanding need to bring together the Council's historical records and to meet statutory requirements for storage and public access. Both the archive service and the registration service have statutory responsibilities to maintain vital records dating from the thirteenth Century onwards, and require new accommodation for the storage of essential archives, along with related staff and public facilities. These needs have now become exceptionally urgent.
- 1.2** The National Archives (TNA) is appointed by the Lord Chancellor to inspect local archive services responsible for public records, and all public archive services are expected to apply to meet a new UK Accreditation standard by 2017. This includes housing records in suitable accommodation to ensure their permanent preservation and minimise risk. Whilst archives have become popular in recent years due to the boom in family and local history research, the Council's statutory responsibilities exist regardless of public use.
- 1.3** At the last inspection in 2012, TNA ruled that the Shire Hall basement accommodation currently occupied by Cambridgeshire Archives is wholly unsuitable, and set a deadline for the authority to identify new accommodation by 2015. The basement suffers from widespread mould infestation and dampness, high temperature and humidity fluctuations, and a lack of air circulation, which increases the risk of deterioration of documents. .
- 1.4** The Registration Service keeps registration records of births, marriages and deaths in stores at its Cambridge and Huntingdon offices. These stores will be completely full by the end of 2016. A single record repository for registration records across the county is required in order to maximise efficiency, meet General Register Office (GRO) requirements, and release space for fee paying services. Daily access to these records is required and the records must be held locally under the care of the Superintendent Registrar. Bringing these records together with Cambridgeshire Archives means they will benefit from conservation and digitisation facilities, and enable staff savings.
- 1.5** New build would be more expensive than conversion of an existing building. However, the combination in one building of high density storage space combined with staff offices and good public access has been a difficult combination to find; industrial warehouse facilities usually lack good public access and required staff / public facilities, whilst accessible town centre locations have proved unaffordable for a largely storage use. There has also been encouragement to look beyond Cambridge in order to provide an exciting new cultural facility elsewhere within Cambridgeshire.
- 1.6** Successive attempts have been made over the past 25 years to find a solution to these issues, and a comprehensive range of internal and external options considered and costed. All these projects foundered either because the proposed building was not suitable, because partners or developers pulled out, or because the project was not financially viable. Throughout this period TNA regularly inspected the archive accommodation but refrained from imposing sanctions, due to the continual assurances from the County Council that a solution would shortly be found.
- 1.7** A Member Review Group has been working with officers to consider the issues and options for a new Archive building.

2.0 A SUITABLE AND COST-EFFECTIVE LONG TERM SOLUTION

- 2.1** The most recent property option appraisal prioritised premises that could be delivered quickly and cheaply in order to comply with the timescale imposed by TNA and budget restrictions. This ruled out new build (estimated to cost c£12M), whilst modern facilities that were easily and cost effectively capable of adaptation scored favourably. A review of Cambridgeshire public sector partners' property, under the Making Assets Count (MAC) programme was also undertaken and nothing suitable was identified.
- 2.2** This appraisal identified a building in Ely which offers an unusual combination of good accessibility by road and rail, with a suitably sized and adaptable building. Not only could it meet statutory requirements but it also offers scope to accommodate the Cambridgeshire Local Studies Collection (currently in a prime Central Library location) and other Council accommodation needs as a Making Assets Count project in its own right. Most importantly, it offers a solution at a fraction of the cost of previously considered options.
- 2.3** This would replace leased accommodation at Cottenham and enable potential rationalisation of County Council office accommodation in Ely. Revenue savings from the release of property are estimated at more than £286k, whilst savings through integrated, streamlined staffing and additional income are expected to be £223k, totalling more than £500,000k per year. A feasibility study has confirmed that the building identified could be adapted. Should the proposal go ahead, the total project cost of £12M in the current County Council Business Plan for this project would be revised down to a maximum of £4M spread over the next two financial years.

3. ALTERNATIVE SERVICE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 3.1 Do nothing:** If the Council fails in its statutory duty, TNA will remove public records from the County Council's custody; these include records of Quarter Session and magistrates' courts, hospitals and health authorities, police and prisons, manors, enclosure maps and awards. TNA would charge the Council for the costs of removal, conservation and storage of these records, whilst the Council will still have a statutory duty to provide appropriate accommodation for the rest of the records in its care. As well as this additional financial burden there is a considerable reputational risk; all other County Councils under the same obligation have, without fail, succeeded in acquiring suitable accommodation or plan to do so. Most have invested in new buildings at considerably greater cost (£6 - £60M) than is proposed for Cambridgeshire. The Council would no longer be able to access grant funds to assist with digitisation projects and customers and County Council services that use the facility as part of their business could face additional costs. Whilst every effort has been made to reduce capital costs as much as possible, it is important to understand that there isn't a no-cost solution.
- 3.2 Digital delivery:** The Archives and Local Studies service is focused on becoming primarily digitally delivered; the online catalogue now contains over 380,000 entries, more than most other county archive services. Use by online and remote users already exceeds physical visitors (10,154 physical visits compared to 157,686 online visits in 2012/13). Commercial partnerships to host family history records to generate additional income are currently being negotiated. However, online records currently represent only around 1% of the collection, and digitisation does not release the authority from its statutory

duty to retain the original historical records, so physical storage and local public access is still required. Further digitalisation will be carried out over time, dependent on cost-recovery, however, it is not feasible to digitise the entire archive in the foreseeable future. Archives cannot be bulk digitised due to their age and format; it is estimated that to digitise the whole collection would cost £150M.

- 3.3 Increase income through charging for access:** one possible income stream which is not currently exploited would be to charge members of the public for consulting original records. The advice from TNA is that this would not be acceptable. A place of deposit for public records must provide free access to public records and to certain other types of records under statute. Although charges could legally be levied for access to some classes of records, in practice this would lead to complex administrative procedures and would not be cost effective.

4. ALIGNMENT WITH CORPORATE PRIORITIES

4.1 Developing the local economy for the benefit of all

Archive and local studies services draw visitors from a wide distance; around 50% of visitors come from beyond the county and some from overseas, so convenient access by public transport and to a range of other services is important. Studies have shown that archive users make an important contribution to the economy of the local area (using restaurants and local accommodation) and this is even more likely in an area that is attractive to tourists. Use at Huntingdonshire Archives and Local Studies has increased significantly since the services were combined in fit for purpose new accommodation in 2009; the same can be expected in Ely.

4.2 Helping people live healthy and independent lives

There are no significant implications for this priority.

4.3 Supporting and protecting vulnerable people

There are no significant implications for this priority.

5. SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Resource Implications

The report above sets out details of significant implications in paragraph 2.3

5.2 Statutory, Risk and Legal Implications

The report above sets out details of significant implications in paragraphs 3.1

5.3 Equality and Diversity Implications

There are no significant implications

5.4 Engagement and Consultation Implications

There are no significant implications

5.5 Localism and Local Member Involvement

There are no significant implications

5.6 Public Health Implications

There are no significant implications

Source Documents	Location
None	