

## New Shire Hall – Multi-Function Room

To: Strategy & Resources Committee

Meeting Date: 29 March 2022

From: Tom Kelly, Director of Resources

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan ref: Not applicable

Outcome: The Multi-Function Room (MFR) at New Shire Hall may not meet the Council's current requirements as a venue for Full Council meetings. Issues relating to the use of the MFR for Full Council and scoping of solutions are presented to the committee to determine suitability of the MFR for this use.

Recommendation: The Committee is asked to:

- a) note that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and public health impacts of Full Council meetings without social distancing requires the continued use of external venues.
- b) instruct the Assistant Director Property to prepare a detailed report for the committee in September 2022 on issues relating to safety, security and working environment for Members and challenges to the Council's aspirations for public accessibility to its meetings from the current size and configuration of the MFR with detailed options to address the issues.

### Officer contact:

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Post: Assistant Director Property

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### Member contacts:

Names: Councillors Nethsingha and Meschini

Post: Chair/Vice-Chair

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## 1. Background

- 1.1 New Shire Hall at Alconbury Weald is the new headquarters for Cambridgeshire County Council following the decision to relocate from Shire Hall in Cambridge. The New Shire Hall building went live in the summer of 2021. Due to the impact of the pandemic use of the building for both council staff and for committee meetings has been limited by public health restrictions.
- 1.2 The Multi-Function Room (MFR) at New Shire Hall at Alconbury Weald forms a key part of the new civic facilities at New Shire Hall and this civic facility was integrated into the design of the building, being located above and accessible via the public reception area. Despite the pandemic, it has been able to be used compliantly for committee and other meetings. However larger meetings such as Full Council have not been able to be held in the MFR as there is insufficient space to meet the requirements of social distancing and the council's COVID policies (noting that the same would most likely have occurred at the previous Chamber at Shire Hall in Cambridge). This resulted in larger meetings being held at external venues.
- 1.3 Outside of the COVID pandemic restrictions the MFR can accommodate Full Council meetings. It was designed for this use as part of the approved specification for the building.

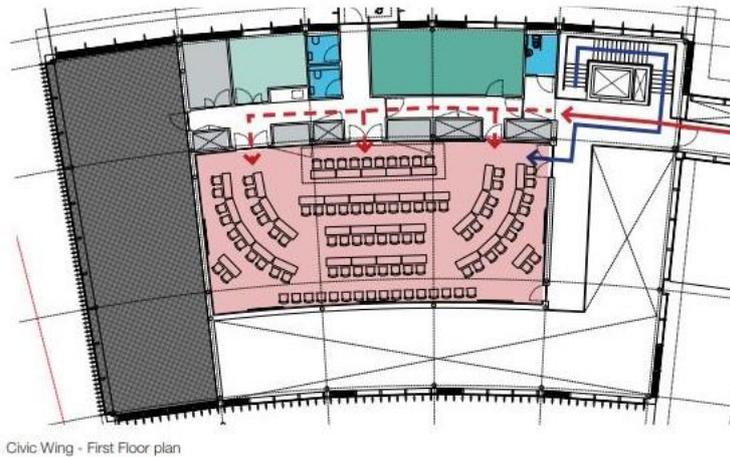
## 2. Main Issues

- 2.1 The MFR formed part of the core design requirements for the New Shire Hall building to provide a council committee room to replace the chamber and committee rooms at Shire Hall in Cambridge. However, it was not intended to be a direct replacement as a dedicated council chamber, but as the name suggests, a multi-function room that could be put to other uses outside of council and committee meetings. The Design Brief v0.3 states "*Chamber requirements: TBC, in the original business case it stated flexible space which can be reconfigured into smaller meeting rooms. This would need to seat 90 attendees.*"
- 2.2 During the design process the project was overseen by the Commercial & Investment Committee and its Chair, with the Senior Responsible Officer being the then Deputy Chief Executive. There were separate Cambs 2020 and Civic Hub boards that undertook the operational oversight of the project with 2 lead project managers from the Place and Economy (P&E) directorate and the Transformation team. During the design process the Property Services Project team evaluated other local authorities' council chambers in new build/modern buildings and submitted a report to the Civic Hub Project Board on the layout, furniture and operation of these rooms. At the Civic Hub Project Board, it was advised that the existing Shire Hall Council Chamber was not to be replicated (Civic Hub Project Board Minutes 13/02/19).
- 2.3 The initial design specification was for the room to be of sufficient size to accommodate 90 seated persons. As the design evolved the room size was increased to accommodate a Full Council meeting with Members sitting at desks in a compact format. The floor area increased from 90 sq.m. to the as-built 170 sq.m. Later, moveable dividing walls were included to allow the MFR to be split into two or three separate meeting rooms to increase its flexibility as a meeting space.

2.4 The key design approval stages are set out below. At these approval stages layout plans and schematics of the MFR were produced for consideration:

Date	Meeting	Approval
23/11/2018	C&I Committee	Milestone 2 Concept Design stage approval
March 2019	n/a	2-week Stakeholder engagement event for New Shire Hall designs held at Shire Hall, Cambridge
22/03/2019	C&I Committee	Milestone 3 Design approval (incorporating larger MFR)
16/12/2019	C&I Committee	Milestone 4/5 Detailed Design & Costing approval

2.5 The MFR layout plan from the Milestone 3 (MS3) report (p.21) is below:



2.6 The final design was for the MFR to be capable of holding Full Council with Members seated at desks, with a raised platform or dais as the front, and public seating at the side or rear of the room. Planning consent for the building included specific reference to the MFR being able to be used for Full Council meetings.

2.7 After handover of the building the MFR has been successfully used for a range of committee and other meetings. The COVID pandemic has prevented its use for Full Council due to social distancing and other requirements. The MFR has been set up for Full Council with the appropriate furniture and layouts as a demonstration. This highlights the limited overall size of the MFR and the need for Members to be in close proximity to each other for the duration of the Full Council meeting.

### Limitations due to COVID-19 Pandemic

2.8 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the requirement for social distancing, in accordance with CCC Public Health and Property policies, a limit on the number of people using the room has had to be put in place. The limit based upon social distancing is 22 persons, and this means that the MFR is currently unable to accommodate Full Council. Whilst the

severity of the pandemic has reduced over recent months, COVID-19 remains a threat. A local authority meeting that was held recently has reportedly resulted in a significant number of participants contracting COVID-19. As a result of this the MFR will not be suitable for use for Full Council until the requirement for social distancing is removed under Public Health guidance and safety risk assessments. CCC will continue to use alternative venues that provides sufficient space for social distancing until it is deemed safe to reduce or remove the requirement for social distancing.

### **Limitations due to Operational Issues**

2.9 When configured for Full Council the MFR will fit the required number of desks with a limited area for the public. Due to the limited space this has created a number of challenges that impact on the use of the MFR for Full Council. The key challenges are:

- Security and safety of Members and Officers
- Limited space for Members
- Limited space for public attendees
- Accessibility (Part M of the Building Regulations) & Fire Safety (Evacuation)

#### Security and safety of Members and Officers

2.10 The limited space in the MFR and the absence of a separate viewing area for the public means that the public are seated in close proximity to Members. As per photo 1 in Appendix 1, members of the public will be almost within touching distance of Members. Further, for those Members located on that side of the MFR, some of the public and/or press will have a view of their papers and laptops. It may be uncomfortable for Members to have people very close to and behind them, especially where matters may be contentious. Photo 2 shows how persons in the public seating will be close to Members and have a view of their desks.

2.11 The close proximity means that there is no viable means to provide physical separation to protect Members without some form of unsightly and obtrusive physical barrier. At Shire Hall the public area was on the first-floor balcony, providing physical separation for all but the most determined persons (e.g. those attempting to bring abseiling equipment into the building). This means the council is not able to ensure the physical security of Members. In committee use there is sufficient physical separation and distance to provide psychological and some degree of physical safety for Members and Officers as any person posing a threat has to overtly advance sufficient distance for those present to at least detect the potential threat and have some ability and time to react.

#### Limited space for Members

2.12 Photos 3 and 4 demonstrate that Members will be in very close proximity to each other due to the requirements for appropriately sized access routes to the exits for fire and accessibility compliance. Over a number of hours of a typical meeting this may not be conducive to Member comfort. A Member seeking to leave the room from a mid-row position would require other Members to vacate their seats to clear a path.

## Limited space for public attendees

- 2.13 The MFR has space for 20 members of the public to attend Full Council meetings, a reduction from the 26 that could be accommodated at Shire Hall. It is the Council's expectation to meet or exceed the capacity previously available at Shire Hall.

## Accessibility & Fire Safety (Evacuation)

- 2.14 Due to the overall limitations of space and the requirement for suitable evacuation procedures for persons with limited mobility, there are limitations of the location and numbers of those with limited mobility attending meetings. This affects both Members and Public. New Shire Hall and the MFR are legally compliant in respect of Building Regulations and other matters, however achieving a legal requirement may not achieve the targets or goals of the Council for accessibility and public engagement with its meetings.
- 2.15 There is a requirement for persons of limited mobility to be located close to the exit doors at the eastern end of the MFR for evacuation purposes. This means Members with limited mobility have to be located in this part of the MFR, at the rear of the room close to the doors irrespective of political affiliation or location of political colleagues. Space limitations mean that the MFR in the Full Council configuration can only accommodate a very small number of mobility impaired Members.
- 2.16 Whilst chairs can be removed from the public seating area to make space for, as an example wheelchair users, due to the First Floor location and requirement for specific evacuation procedures as part of Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPS), this also imposes limitations on the number of people who can be accommodated.

## 3. Alignment with corporate priorities

- 3.1 Communities at the heart of everything we do  
This paper seeks to consider improvements to the community engagement and interaction with the council via its formal meetings at New Shire Hall
- 3.2 A good quality of life for everyone  
There are no significant implications for this priority.
- 3.3 Helping our children learn, develop and live life to the full  
There are no significant implications for this priority.
- 3.4 Cambridgeshire: a well-connected, safe, clean, green environment  
There are no significant implications for this priority.
- 3.5 Protecting and caring for those who need us  
There are no significant implications for this priority.

## 4. Significant Implications

### 4.1 Resource Implications

Detailed options appraisals for alterations to New Shire Hall will require commissioning of specialist architectural and construction consultancy.

### 4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications

Any procurement will be conducted in compliance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules (CPRs).

### 4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications

The MFR is legally compliant under the relevant statutory provisions.

### 4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

The MFR is legally compliant under the relevant statutory provisions based upon the original specification, however the Council seeks to provide enhanced accessibility to its meetings beyond the legal minimum

### 4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications

The issues relate to consideration of improving public engagement with council processes via Full Council meetings.

### 4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement

There are no significant implications within this category.

### 4.7 Public Health Implications

The implications of COVID on council meetings are set out in the paper, the primary issue in this paper is the use of the MFR in post-pandemic conditions when there are still high rates on COVID-19 in the population. These continuing high rates demand that social distancing and other control measures remain in place and reassessed regularly.

### 4.8 Environment and Climate Change Implications on Priority Areas

There are no significant implications within this category.

#### 4.8.1 Implication 1: Energy efficient, low carbon buildings.

Neutral

#### 4.8.2 Implication 2: Low carbon transport.

Neutral

#### 4.8.3 Implication 3: Green spaces, peatland, afforestation, habitats and land management.

Neutral

#### 4.8.4 Implication 4: Waste Management and Tackling Plastic Pollution.

Neutral

#### 4.8.5 Implication 5: Water use, availability and management:

Neutral

#### 4.8.6 Implication 6: Air Pollution.

Neutral

4.8.7 Implication 7: Resilience of our services and infrastructure and supporting vulnerable people to cope with climate change.

Neutral

Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance? Yes

Name of Financial Officer: Tom Kelly, Chief Finance Officer

Have the procurement/contractual/ Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by the Head of Procurement? Yes

Name of Officer: Clare Ellis, Head of Procurement

Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by the Council's Monitoring Officer or LGSS Law? Response awaited

Name of Legal Officer:

Have the equality and diversity implications been cleared by your Service Contact?

Yes

Name of Officer: Jenni Bartlett, EDI Advisor

Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications?

Yes

Name of Officer: Christine Birchall

Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact? No

Name of Officer: Not applicable

Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health?

Yes

Name of Officer: Val Thomas, Deputy Director of Public Health

If a Key decision, have any Environment and Climate Change implications been cleared by the Climate Change Officer?

Yes

Name of Officer: Emily Bolton, Climate Change Officer

## 5. Source documents

### 5.1 Source documents

New Shire Hall Design Brief v0.3 – internal document stored on Huddle

Civic Hub Project Board Minutes 13/02/19 - internal document stored on Huddle

C&I Committee Report 'Milestone 2 Concept Design stage approval' 23 November 2018

[MS2 Report for the Alconbury Weald Hub - Cambs 2020 Programme](#)

[Commercial and Investment Committee - 23 November 2018](#)

C&I Committee Report 'Milestone 3 Design approval' 22 March 2019

[Milestone 3 Report for the Alconbury Weald Civic Hub - Cambs 2020 Programme](#)

[Commercial and Investment Committee - 22 March 2019](#)

C&I Committee Report 'Milestone 4/5 Detailed Design & Costing approval' 16 December 2019

[Milestone 4 & 5 Report for the Alconbury Weald Civic Hub - Cambs 2020 Programme \(916Kb\)](#)

- i.  [Alconbury Weald Appendix A - Plans \(7762Kb\)](#)
- ii.  [Alconbury Weald Appendix B - Risk Register \(149Kb\)](#)
- iii.  [Alconbury Weald Appendix C - Internal Finishes](#)

[Commercial and Investment Committee - 16 December 2019](#)