



Cabinet

Tuesday, 13 February 2024

Potential Relocation of the West Bridgford Customer Service Centre

Report of the Director – Finance and Corporate Services

Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Wellbeing, ICT and Member Development – Councillor J Wheeler

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. The Council has identified a potential move from its Customer Service Centre in West Bridgford to West Bridgford Library, given the decline in numbers visiting the centre and the objective that the Council should optimise the use of its assets and bring a commercial unit back to the market to further boost West Bridgford Town Centre. This should leverage financial savings and result in a shared service space opportunity with a public sector partner.
- 1.2. The partnership would be formalised through an initial license agreement that could be extended. This would be subject to the Council re-letting its existing Fountain Court Customer Service Centre on Gordon Road. A decision is to be taken on whether either to make the move to the library or identify if there are any other locations to relocate Customer Services to or remain at the existing premises.

2. Recommendation

It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet:

- a) approves exploring the relocation of the Customer Service Centre to West Bridgford Library as soon as possible in conjunction with Inspire who operate the site on Nottinghamshire County Council's behalf; and
- b) requests the Council's Property team to work with partners to market the existing Fountain Court premises to find a suitable tenant in line with its lease obligations at the site.

3. Reasons for Recommendation

Sharing service space with public sector or other partners continues the Council's service model, building on contact points at Cotgrave, Bingham and East Leake to deliver value for money services. In addition, potential savings could further contribute to the financial stability of the Borough Council. Ultimately, the location and service arrangements should continue to give

excellent customer service for those that require in person meetings and maintain security and safety, for staff, customers and personal information.

4. Supporting Information

- 4.1. The Council is committed to continuing to have a town centre presence in West Bridgford to ensure residents can access services face-to-face when required in conjunction with the authority's existing Customer Access Strategy. It includes a review of all existing Customer Services sites that prompted discussions about exploring a shared service space and a better value service.
- 4.2. The current site, Gordon Road in West Bridgford opens three days a week from 8.30am to 5pm on Mondays and Thursdays and 8.30am to 4.30pm on Fridays with annual costs exceeding £55,000, mostly consisting of rent, utilities and Business Rates. Gordon Road has increased in popularity and is thriving as a destination for businesses. The West Bridgford Customer Service Centre location will therefore be attractive for new businesses and should continue to further boost the local economy. Since re-opening after Covid restrictions in June 2021, face to face enquiries have gradually fallen year on year with 4,578 visits in 2022 and 3,780 in 2023 (with the decline even starker from before Covid where visitors were around 20,000). This decline in face-to-face demand prompts the question as to what is the best way forward for the West Bridgford Customer Service Centre location and the re-siting of the service?
- 4.3. By comparison, the current three Customer Contact Points offer more value for money either currently at no cost or under £5,000 per annum at:
 - Cotgrave Hub – open Mondays 8.30am to 5pm
 - East Leake Library – open Wednesdays 8.30am-12.30pm
 - Bingham Medical Centre – open Thursdays 9am to 5pm
- 4.4. In line with the Customer Access Strategy 2022-2025, an action point was agreed to examine all Customer Service sites including existing leases and service level agreements with partners and reviewing each site annually to assess its location, if it meets customers' needs whilst still being located to nearby public transport stops or car parking.
- 4.5. The library's location, close to all West Bridgford car parks and many public transport routes and bus stops, is fully accessible and similar to the current Gordon Road site in location and convenience. However, it offers a more familiar landmark for many Rushcliffe residents whilst offering an option to deliver a better value for money service.
- 4.6. Inspire and the Council have identified converting an existing alcove to the left of library entrance as a possible service area with the creation of a Customer Service contact point, with space for four helpdesks for Customer Service advisors. Opening hours would be similar to the existing Gordon Road offering, switched slightly in line with current library opening hours to be

Mondays 9am to 5pm, Thursdays 9am to 5pm and Fridays 9am to 4.30pm. A sustained publicity campaign across Council channels and the local press would inform residents and stakeholders of any move. The proposed lease at the library, with an option to extend, allows all parties to evaluate the success of the location in terms of both service delivery and demand and therefore the future of the Customer Service Centre in West Bridgford.

- 4.7. As of January 2024, Rushcliffe Borough Council is contracted to a further five years of occupation at Fountain Court on Gordon Road. The lease allows the Council to explore sub-letting and assignment options, subject to landlord's approval and an Authorised Guarantee Agreement. This would guarantee all covenants contained within the current lease including but not least rent, Business Rates, service charges and building insurance, until February 2029.
- 4.8. There may also be an option of surrendering the lease but would be subject to landlord approval. A one-off premium payment in recompense would likely be required in this scenario to cover any reduction in covenant strength and reinstatement liability.
- 4.9. Specialist retail agents have indicated the unit could be assigned or sub-let with a possible timescale for marketing and legal completion of around nine to 12 months, although timings are caveated. A publicity campaign would inform all residents and stakeholders of the move to ensure they are aware of the service's new location. It is important the site is occupied as soon as possible not only because the Council does not want to pay for two properties but importantly for town centre development that the property does not remain vacant.

5. Alternative options considered and reasons for rejection

- 5.1. Continue the service's current lease arrangement at the Customer Service Centre on Gordon Road in West Bridgford until further notice or the lease's end in February 2029. Option suggested to be rejected in favour of better value for money option at library site.
- 5.2. Explore moving to West Bridgford Library. Currently the preferred option to help realise savings and deliver an even better value for money service.
- 5.3. Explore moving to Rushcliffe Arena. This option is rejected as the site is not in a town centre location but as an alternative location has some merit with free car parking and close to public transport routes.
- 5.4. No longer have a Customer Service Centre in West Bridgford and review further where customers can interact and engage with the service in line with the existing Customer Access Strategy solely via other means than in person. This option is rejected in line with the commitment to continue to deliver a face-to-face customer service to residents and stakeholders who value this method of contact, particularly the more vulnerable who may not have easy access to ICT equipment or are unable to use ICT equipment.

6. Risks and Uncertainties

- 6.1. A new tenant or business is unsuccessful at Fountain Court and the Council incurs costs both at the current Gordon Road and library sites.
- 6.2. The Authorised Guarantee Agreement means the Gordon Road property risk stays with the Council including any missed rent, damage, final reinstatement works at lease end that could lead to increased costs to the service should a new tenant be unsuccessful and require to end their lease.
- 6.3. There is a delay in securing a tenant or no tenant is secured meaning the realised savings at the library site are not achieved. Or if a move takes place, part year costs increase or cannot commence move until an alternative tenant is identified.
- 6.4. Customers and stakeholders do not engage or are not aware the service has relocated to the library site.
- 6.5. Inspire library users and staff are adversely affected by shared space noise and usage leading to need to review service offering at the library.
- 6.6. The lead in time to complete the move is longer than expected due to contractor delays.
- 6.7. The licence lasts until March 2026 and therefore will need revisiting prior to this date once Inspire have renegotiated their lease with Nottinghamshire County Council. This gives an opportune time to assess the success of the transition to the library location.

7. Implications

7.1. Financial Implications

Capital or refurbishment costs of any move to the library and re-letting of the Fountain Court site is anticipated to be met from existing budgets. Ongoing financial implications of the proposals form part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and the Council's Transformation Programme.

7.2. Legal Implications

Any move is subject to a satisfactory licence being agreed with Inspire.

7.3. Equalities Implications

The Council is actively seeking to ensure all customers can access the services they require in a manner and at a time that suits them. This increases equality for all residents.

7.4. Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Implications

There are no Section 17 implications contained within the recommendations of this report.

7.5. Biodiversity Net Gain Implications

There are no Biodiversity Net Gain implications contained within the recommendations of this report.

8. Link to Corporate Priorities

The Environment	There are no direct links arising from the recommendations of this report
Quality of Life	There are no direct links arising from the recommendations of this report
Efficient Services	Customer Services is part of the range of functions committed to delivering Efficient Services to residents.
Sustainable Growth	There are no direct links arising from the recommendations of this report

9. Recommendations

It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet:

- a) approves exploring the relocation of the Customer Service Centre to West Bridgford Library as soon as possible in conjunction with Inspire who operate the site on Nottinghamshire County Council's behalf; and
- b) requests the Council's Property team to work with partners to market the existing Fountain Court premises to find a suitable tenant in line with its lease obligations at the site.

For more information contact:	Peter Linfield Director – Finance and Corporate Services plinfield@rushcliffe.gov.uk
Background papers available for Inspection:	Customer Access Strategy 2022-2025
List of appendices:	N/A