

## **HOMES & COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE**

**14 MARCH 2022**

### **FUTURE USE OF THE HAWTONVILLE LOCAL OFFICE**

#### **1.0 Purpose of Report**

1.1 To agree the future of the Hawtonville Local Office.

#### **2.0 Background Information**

2.1 Historically Newark and Sherwood Homes provided a customer outreach service from Hawtonville and Ollerton. These were originally cash offices and when in 2017, the Council ceased the delivery of a cashier function these become enquiry offices and a base for housing officers to meet with tenants.

2.2 It was recognised that due to its location and lack of service provision in the west of the district that there was a continued need for an outreach provision in that area. In 2021, the Ollerton office underwent a complete refurbishment which has resulted in a welcoming environment where customers can access all Council services and a limited number staff can work from.

2.3 Prior to Covid, the Hawtonville office provided a face to face housing advice service. During 2019, there was a total of 2972 enquires which is an average of 11.5 per day – 2 per hour. The most popular enquires are detailed in the table below.

Self-serve including payments	647
Placing bids on properties and being a drop off point for housing applications	480
Benefit applications – customers providing documents (not an advice service)	459
Repairs reporting	315

2.4 The Hawtonville office has not reopened since it closed due to Covid in March 2020 and has suffered several attacks of vandalism as well as fly-tipping and cars being dumped in the car park.

2.5 Data wasn't captured to determine if those customers accessing this service were housing tenants, but as the staff were only able to assist with housing enquiries, the feedback from the staff running the service was they were.

2.6 The nature of the enquiries received were straight forward e.g. dropping off paperwork, collecting forms, reporting a repair or asking for bus times. For any more complicated enquiries, customers were advised to either telephone or visit Castle House.

2.7 During the two years since the office was last opened, the Council has not received any complaints regarding the office being closed. One of the impacts of Covid is that customers

have adapted their behaviour and use alternative contact channels. This is also reflected in a reduction of customers accessing the face to face provision at Castle House, not just for Council services but that of our partners.

- 2.8 There is now a greater emphasis on self-service and developments with on-line services. The Council is shortly launching three new communication tools which will support customers
- Webchat went live February 2022. Customers can use this to access all Council services and not just those relating to Housing.
  - E-newsletters which will have an array of information for both tenants and residents are due to commence shortly.
  - An enhanced My Account will go live later this year which make it easier for residents to manage their transactions and to find information specific to them.
- 2.9 Partner organisations, for example the DWP, have changed their delivery model and there is now a much greater emphasis for claimants to manage their claims digitally.
- 2.10 As part of ensuring we know our tenants, we have commenced annual tenancy visits to create a positive interaction with tenants and includes promoting engagement activities, understanding how their home is working for them and checking our occupancy information. We actively encourage home visits rather than visits to offices as this is a real opportunity to understand how the tenant is coping in their homes and to catch early warning signs of tenancy failure/breach. Revenues and benefits also provide home visits for those residents who require them.
- 2.11 The Chatham Court Community Hub which has opened recently, provides an additional service for tenants. Regular events are held at the Hub, which acts as a one stop shop for community services. Local residents can benefit from face-to-face contact with Council and partner services for a range of enquiries, including housing and tenancy support and community safety concerns. This is approximately 0.7 miles from the Hawtonville office and 0.6 miles from Castle House.
- 2.12 Additionally, the Cleveland Square community centre has become a very active resource for tenants in the community with a range of groups providing advice, and support. It is situated in the heart of Hawtonville, within a complex of Newark and Sherwood District Council supported living bungalows. Groups are run and supported by a variety of members of the community including; local members, church groups, NSDC tenancy staff, and volunteers. The community centre has a number of regular attendees from the community who rely on the services to access advice, information and social interaction. E.g. meeting tenancy officers, Cllr drop-ins, and support with completing forms. Due to the size, location and access to Wi-Fi it is also used regularly for consultation and community events such as the Tenant Satisfaction Measures consultation and Safer Streets event.'
- 2.13 The Hawtonville office is very dated in its décor and has received very little investment in terms of heating, CCTV etc. It would require funding in the region of £120,000 to make it fit for purpose and compliant with regulations.

### **3.0 Proposals**

- 3.1 Taking into consideration the limited use of the office prior to it being closed, customers using alternative contact channels, the amount of anti-social behaviour and the associated cost to make it fit for purpose, it is recommended that this office does not reopen.
- 3.2 The closure of this office would offer the opportunity for the site to be included in the Councils approved and ongoing HRA development programme, which would meet the local evidenced housing need. The development would include the demolition of the existing office and the construction of much needed homes. The development of this site would support the regeneration which is taking place in the adjacent shopping area.

### **4.0 Digital Implications**

- 4.1 The existing infrastructure within the office would require a significant upgrade to deal with system and technology demands.

The adopted Digital Strategy and the recently implemented modern, user friendly website supports the increase in digital transactions

The Chatham Court Hub provides digital training for tenants and provides self-serve computers for them to use.

### **5.0 Financial Implications (FIN21-22/6322)**

- 5.1 The current cost for accommodation at the Hawtonville local office is circa £6,200 per annum which funds utilities and general repairs. Should the recommendation to close be approved, this would be an annual saving to NSDC. If the decision was to retain the Hawtonville office, then the extensive repair work to make it fit for purpose would require NSDC to schedule a programme of improvements and investment from within its Capital Programme, potentially taking away funding from other, more urgent and advantageous development opportunities.

### **6.0 Equalities Implications**

- 6.1 It has been considered whether a full equalities impact assessment is required or not. Due to there being other methods in which customers can access services, it was felt a full equalities impact assessment was not needed. It could be argued that there could be negative implications for those customers with protected characteristics. However this are mitigated by the fact that those customers can access the service by other channels including telephone and digitally. Tenancy officers and visiting officers are able to provide support in resident's homes.

### **7.0 Comments of Housing Advisory Group**

- 7.1 The group reviewed and supported this proposal at their meeting on 28 February 2022.
- 7.2 It was noted that the ways people contact the Council has changed over the last two years and that other offices/hubs are available nearby compared to other areas of the District and that this property could be utilised to provide much needed homes to the area.

## **8.0 RECOMMENDATION**

- a) that the Committee approve the closure of the Hawtonville Local Office; and
- b) agree that the site is included in the Councils approved and ongoing HRA development programme, which would meet the local evidenced housing need.

### Background Papers

Nil

For further information please contact Jill Baker, Business Manager Customer Services on ext. 5810

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