

HOMES & COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

23 NOVEMBER 2020

OLLERTON LOCAL HOUSING OFFICE AND RE-PURPOSE

1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The purpose to this report is to seek approval to refurbish the Ollerton local office and refocus the purpose of it to become a multi-use facility, subject to Policy & Finance approving the required budget.

2.0 Background Information

2.1 Historically there were two contact points in Ollerton for customers to access services:- the housing office, which was previously a cash office and then was modified to become an advice office; and the joint service provision delivered at Ollerton Town Hall.

2.2 Due to the space available at these locations, both in their current format are limited as to the service which can be provided to customers.

2.3 Prior to COVID the housing office was open Monday – Friday, and the service at the Town Hall operated twice a week. Both locations are currently closed to the public due to the fact that we would not be able to maintain the required COVID Secure Standards there.

2.4 The table below shows the number of enquiries normally received at these locations

Location	Average number of enquiries per day
Ollerton housing office	20
Ollerton Town Hall (all partners)	57

2.5 The outreach service delivered at the Town Hall is in conjunction with the DWP, Ollerton and Boughton Town Council and the Dukeries Academy. Even before COVID there was no capacity to increase the offer provided from the Town Hall due to its limited space and capacity.

2.6 The local office provided primarily a housing service. There were no self-serve computers for customers to use.

2.7 Due to there being two offices in Ollerton from which customers could access services, the offer provided to customers was fragmented, especially as the service provided at the Town Hall was only open two days a week from 9.30am – 3.00pm.

2.8 The Council has been working towards an improved customer facility in Ollerton. There have been several attempts to progress this but the timing, location etc. was never quite right. These included a feasibility study, funded by the One Public Estate into the provision of a public sector hub in conjunction with other partners including health. This study confirmed that taking into account: the limited current facilities; the higher level of vulnerability within the area; and the projected increase in the population - there is a need for improved facilities. Unfortunately, although a suitable site was identified, the project did not progress, primarily due to budget implications and the CCG not being able to commit to the project.

- 2.9 A number of other locations were considered but unfortunately were not suitable for the service required.
- 2.10 A project is currently being undertaken regarding the regeneration of Ollerton Town Centre, which could result in a provision of a customer hub. However, it is likely to be some time before this would become operational, and improved customer facilities are needed in the short term.
- 2.11 There are limited locations within the Sherwood area for staff to use as drop-in locations e.g. to access the network, printing or welfare facilities. Housing staff have historically used the local office or community centres.
- 2.12 In the latest State of the District Report, the total number of people claiming Universal Credit in the Mansfield and Newark area (Ollerton is covered by Mansfield DWP) increased from 10,477 to 19,338, an 85% increase. The figure for total number of 'Universal Credit claims started' shows a more dramatic increase – for the year up to July 2020 - it is 472% in Mansfield, and 428% in the Newark area
- 2.13 There are concerns regarding projected unemployment rates for the district due to the effects of the pandemic and the impact this could have on both the residents and the economy of the area. The Council needs to be in a position to deal with the potential increased demand for its services in Sherwood and currently there is no adequate location where residents can readily access its services in person.

3.0 Proposals

- 3.1 As mentioned earlier in the report it is not possible, with the current layouts, to make either the Town Hall or the neighbourhood office COVID secure. This means that we cannot deliver a customer facing service from these locations.
- 3.2 Following the return of the housing management service back to the Council it is preferable that all council services are delivered in one location in order to simplify the journey for the customer. The current fragmented service does not enable this.
- 3.3 COVID has impacted how we all work and the Council has a much more agile workforce. It would assist many staff to have a touch down point in the Sherwood area to enable them to meet customers, print and scan documents and access welfare facilities.
- 3.4 An improved and modernised facility would provide these facilities.
- 3.5 The local office is in need of refurbishment to its décor and layout. Research shows that customer behaviour is impacted by their surroundings and this has been proven at Castle House. A modern light environment is much more welcoming and encourages better behaviour.
- 3.6 The proposal is to refurbish the neighbourhood office, transforming it into a welcoming environment for customers and officers, and for use as a drop-in facility.
- 3.7 The service delivered at the refurbished office would be Monday – Friday and delivered by customer services. Currently only housing enquires are dealt with at the neighbourhood office and the rest of the council enquiries are dealt with two days per week from the Town

Hall. The refurbished neighbourhood office would provide a location for the realigned customer services team to deliver all council services from.

- 3.8 The refurbished office would have a digital area, enabling customers to self-serve. This will support the council's digital agenda.
- 3.9 If this refurbishment proposal is approved then discussions will commence with the DWP regarding the possibility of them providing a more regular service. However, the DWP have always made it clear that they will not be in a position to deliver a full service from Ollerton and the offer they provide is based around supporting claimants with job searches and readiness for work.
- 3.10 Discussions would also take place with other potential partners regarding the possibility of delivering services from this location. However space at this location is limited and will need to be considered when discussing options with potential partners
- 3.11 It is recognised that this refurbishment would be seen as an interim solution – whilst the regeneration of the Ollerton Town Centre and the development of a public sector hub come to fruition. The medium term plan for the site is for it to be converted to social housing.
- 3.12 Full and detailed quotes are currently being obtained for this work through Asset Management. It is proposed that approval is sought from Policy & Finance Committee for a budget be added to the Capital Programme of £50,000, based on current estimates.
- 3.13 Currently, our partners do not contribute to the running costs of the Ollerton Outreach Service. Initially the service operated one day per week and Ollerton and Boughton Town Council provided the accommodation for free. When the service increased to twice a week it was agreed to pay them £2500 per annum rent to cover the loss of rental income from other organisations using the location.
- 3.14 If the above proposal is supported, then the Council would no longer need to deliver a service from the Town Hall as enquiries would transfer to the neighbourhood office. Discussions are ongoing with the DWP regarding their provision and should the refurbishment go ahead then they would be offered the option to deliver a service from the local office.

4.0 Equalities Implications

- 4.1 The revised layout of the refurbished building will ensure that it is fully accessible to all customers to ensure that there are no adverse impacts upon persons with protected characteristics. Re-opening the neighbourhood office will make accessing the Council's services easier for persons with protected characteristics in the Sherwood area of the District.

5.0 Digital Implications

- 5.1 The refurbished offices will have a digital area where customers can use the self-serve computers to access Council and partner services. This service was previously provided at the Ollerton Town Hall and was very popular.

5.2 The office will be supported officers working agilely by having Wi-Fi throughout the building.

6.0 Financial Implications (FIN20-21/6556)

6.1 Ollerton Local Office currently sits within the HRA, therefore costs associated with any refurbishment will fall within the HRA. The current costs for rates and utilities for a 12 month period are circa £3,500 and these costs are already included in the HRA revenue budget.

6.2 A proportionate recharge will need to be agreed from the HRA to the general fund for the temporary use of the building for non-housing customers compared to housing customers.

6.3 Asset Management have estimated that the maximum cost of the refurbishment, including provision of ICT, will be £50,000. This cost will need to be added to the Capital Programme.

6.4 The HRA business plan has capacity for this expenditure and financing will be updated accordingly based on resources available.

7.0 Community Plan – Alignment to Objectives

7.1 This refurbishment and offer provided to our customers will support the delivery of economic growth in the Sherwood area.

9.0 Comments of Directors

This investment in Ollerton will bridge provision of a local outreach whilst the Council progresses its longer term plans for the area. All residents will receive a good quality, one stop service for all their council services and well as a much needed self-service provision.

8.0 RECOMMENDATION that:

Members support the proposal to refurbish and re-purpose the local housing office in Ollerton as detailed in the report, and recommend to Policy and Finance Committee that this project be added to the HRA capital programme for 2020/21.

Reason for Recommendation(s)

To enable the Council to deliver a face-to-face service to its customers in the Sherwood area and to have a fit for purpose office facility for officers to access when working in that area of the District.

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