

Tuesday, 19 March 2024

Report of the Leader of the Council, Finance and Governance

Tamworth Borough Council Front Desk Service

Exempt Information

Not applicable

1. Purpose

This report provides an overview of current service provision and outlines several options for future consideration of the council's customer service offer for Tamworth residents. The report also provides an update on work completed to date as well as an update regarding disposal and future utilisation of Marmion House.

2. Recommendations

Council is asked to approve the following recommendations:

1. Officers to explore options for a town centre location and delivery model to provide long term face to face customer services for Tamworth Borough Council, supporting the strategy to dispose of Marmion House.
2. Face to face customer services will continue to be provided through Tamworth Information Centre at the Assembly Rooms whilst options for the future location and delivery model are identified and evaluated.
3. Front desk services at Marmion House will remain closed.

3. Executive Summary

3.1 Customer Service Offer

Since September 2021, the Tamworth Information Centre at the Assembly Rooms has provided face to face customer services for Tamworth residents for all enquiries relating to council services. It is open 6 days per week (more days than the pre 2020 reception at Marmion House). Officers continue to offer the same service as the customer service team did previously in Marmion House, assisting with enquiries and making appointments where appropriate. Where immediate answers are not able to be given an appointment is made with an officer or the customer is signposted to the correct service (either internally or one of our partners). Where confidential matters are to be discussed private meetings can be arranged.

The customer experience team has worked hard to evolve against a demanding backdrop of technological advancements and changes in customer behaviour regarding preferred access to service. The team continue to provide vital services to residents from within Tamworth borough with emphasis and priority given to those most vulnerable through the continuation of face-to-face services accessed via the Tamworth Information Centre (TIC) situated at Tamworth Assembly Rooms. In addition, services continue to be delivered across a range of channels including telephone, email, webchat, portals, and face to face. Specific services (including council tax advice and support, welfare benefit advice, housing and tenancy services) are also delivered on a face-to-face basis across the borough including in vulnerable residents' homes and community locations. As the management of financial resources continue to be scrutinised it is imperative that appropriate strategies are adopted to ensure a fit for purpose service is delivered.

Demand and access channels continue to be robustly monitored, monthly data from April 2023 can be found in appendix 2 table 1. This demonstrates that service users have embraced new ways of contacting us. Accordingly, the Council now can take greater advantage of technology and modern communication methods available to further enhance access to services. As the digital offer continues to be developed, contact via web chat, emails, and portal enquiries continues to increase, even during operational hours when call handlers and face-to-face services are available. Customer demand is monitored across these channels

showing very low demand for face-to-face provision, with approximately 6 customer interactions per week at Tamworth Information Centre as show in appendix 2 table 2.

A more in-depth breakdown of enquiry type for face-to-face services since July 2023 has been captured from our current front facing service at the Tamworth Information centre (TIC). This is shown in appendix 2 table 3.

The council has also made use of a range of insight including the 2022 and 2023 resident surveys, learning from pop up engagement sessions and the use of household characteristics data at ward level, which has further helped to inform the four options to be considered.

To date there are no recorded complaints or service requests that been received around the lack of a return of the front door at Marmion House.

Whilst ongoing discussions to progress the disposal and re-development of the Marmion House site are held, and to work more efficiently, continued use of the alternative front desk location at the Assembly rooms has been necessary and remains as a venue able to deliver face to face customer service in the future.

3.2 Disposal of Marmion House

At the Cabinet meeting of the 20 October 2022 approval was given for the disposal route and marketing of Marmion House for residential development, and all associated processes. This report was the culmination of work undertaken since early 2021 establishing site feasibility and an understanding of site constraints, designed to determine the regeneration potential of the site.

As part of this process Thomas Lister were commissioned to; provide the Council with a disposal strategy which identified the complexities of the disposal with specialist telecoms advice, undertake soft market testing, create a development prospectus, proactively market the site, negotiate with interested parties and complete legal disposal of the site.

To support the preparation of a marketing brochure, soft market testing was undertaken with parties who had previously shown interest in the site, alongside any other developers who it was considered might be likely to bid on the site. The purpose of this was to test developer appetite. A marketing brochure has been drafted, setting out the particulars of the sale and providing detail on the development opportunity and an indicative timescale for receiving expressions of interest for the site.

To further support the marketing brochure specialist telecommunications advice and legal advice were commissioned and Blacks Solicitors and Amsey were appointed who are telecommunications experts. There are two telecommunication masts situated on the roof with a 20-year lease expiring at the end of 2029. For any developer wanting to redevelop the Marmion House, the Telecoms masts represent a significant constraint to demolition, and it would be necessary to remove the operators.

The specialist advice received reflects a complex picture of how, who and when vacant possession can be achieved. The strategy for dealing with the masts is integral to the disposal strategy overall.

To date the marketing prospectus has not been completed due to the complexity of the situation. It has transpired that determining a disposal strategy for Marmion House has not just been about the site constraints that need to be overcome, notably the telecoms masts.

The disposal strategy is also reliant on an understanding of where the Council would relocate its offices to. Relocation timescales impact upon which disposal strategy supports the Council's ambitions the most. At the point that Cabinet made decisions in October 2022 on moving ahead with a disposal strategy there was a clear direction of travel. A new Tamworth Borough Council office would be built as part of the Levelling Up Fund (Round 2) and the Council were awaiting the outcome of the process. Unfortunately, the Council were unsuccessful, and following this announcement the landscape changed in relation to a new build and proposals to deliver on North Gungate were paused to allow for other options to be explored. Without an understanding of the where and when relation would take place work on the disposal strategy was paused to allow discussions continue.

In the meantime, development viability specialists Aspinall Verdi were instructed to prepare a cost analysis around three options focussing on 1) the retention of Marmion House (do nothing option) 2) a hybrid approach on the Marmion House site whereby floors 0-2 are retained and the tower removed and 3) a new build (located somewhere on Borough Council land).

The cost analysis focusses on physical condition costs, operational costs and build costs, to determine if one particular option, when viewed over a 30-year timescale, represents value for money over the others.

In terms of the next steps further work is required to determine the exact needs of the Borough Council in terms of floorspace. There is also a need to revisit potential relocation options, whether these are new build or refurbishment within the town. These two parameters will support ongoing work to determine a disposal strategy.

3.3 Utilisation of Marmion House

Various options for rationalising the space used in Marmion House have been considered with the view that these would reduce the overall operating costs of the building. The costed options considered are set out in the report at appendix 4. The report concludes that the options for revenue cost reduction are somewhat limited and for the option that includes relocation to the ground floor requires a degree of capital investment to address infrastructure and minimal refurbishment and reconfiguration. It should be concluded that the most cost-effective option overall is to simply take the currently unused floors (3,4 & 5) out of use and benefit from not having to heat, light and clean the empty spaces. It should be noted that the savings that have been identified are largely in relation to utilities and cleaning, both of which will be affected by external factors. There will also be costs associated with minor refurbishment and ongoing operating costs associated with reopening Marmion House to customers; these will impact on the identified savings.

3.4 Public Petition and Councillor Feedback





























Further to a petition being submitted in August 2023, requesting the return of a fully functioning front desk for Tamworth Borough Council, this report presents several options for consideration, acknowledging the changing landscape and the potential benefits of providing a diversified service approach.

In providing proposals, concerns raised by elected members when the petition was presented have been taken into consideration. These ranged from the need to restore public confidence, for TBC to be visible, the perceived feeling of customers not being listened to, moving the front desk to assembly rooms not being a long-term solution, the uncertainty over the front door being right place for supporting the most vulnerable and a lack of privacy at the current front desk at the assembly rooms.

4.0 Options for consideration

4.1 Option Summary

The table below is a summary of the four options detailed in this section considered against 7 key factors. It provides weighted results for each option, where a full green circle represents a positive conclusion and a blank circle depicting an unfavourable conclusion.

	1 - As is	2 - New venue	3 - Community hubs	4 - Marmion house
Customer experience	 Feedback is largely positive. All enquiries handled. Welcoming building	 Experience is venue & demand dependant - ability to create welcoming environment	 New concept - would likely require further adaptation. Venue dependant	 Out of use for 4 years - Area run down and not as welcoming.
Privacy	 Open front desk - appointments/other rooms can be available at times	 Set up with separate area to provide higher level of privacy	 Privacy level dependant on the locations provided	 Set up with separate area to provide higher level of privacy
Reputation	 General perception area not fit for purpose although feedback largely positive	 A perception this is required based on petition - will be dependant on venue & set up	 Goes some way in resolving perception issues although not as high profile	 A perception this is required based on petition
Enquiry handling time	 Is dependant on volume and type of demand	 Is dependant on volume and type of demand	 Dependant on frequency of hub and nature of enquiry handling time may increase	 Is dependant on volume and type of demand
Readiness	 Continue with operation as is	 Significant work to secure location, staff, infrastructure and other associated set up requirements	 Requires new staff although smaller number and agreements with multiple venues.	 Requires infrastructure improvements and additional staff training and recruitment
Staff cost	 Budget & staff in place	 Requires new budget and staff	 Requires less additional budget & new staff	 Requires additional budget & staff
Other costs	 No further costs required	 New venue and infrastructure costs	 Venue hire and equipment costs	 Refurbishment, infrastructure and equipment costs

Following consideration, it can be seen the recommendations of this report are supported in that options for a new delivery model and location should be explored, however in the meantime the current location and service delivery should continue as is.

4.2 Option 1 - continuation of existing face-to-face customer service at the TIC at Tamworth Assembly rooms

This service has operated successfully since September 2021 providing a full range of customer services between 10.00am to 4.00pm Monday to Saturday. As with other access channels, there are peaks in demand when specific activity takes place for example council tax bill drop in March.

Benefits	Risks
Provides a face for Tamworth Borough Council in a town centre location	Customers perceive that there is a lack of privacy at Tamworth Assembly Rooms. However, enquiries of this nature will always result in a private appointment being made for an alternative venue including for example, the customer's home
Established ways of working are embedded and improvements continue to be made	First contact resolution is not always possible due to complexity of enquiries.
No additional budget requirements for staffing	The removal of this option could have a detrimental effect on sales revenue for the Assembly Rooms and Events.
Opportunity to improve and promote the service further	Negative public perception
Demand for enquiries which would have previously been made at Marmion House reception remain low and therefore cost efficient where co location of service provision exists	
Officers provide cost-effective box-office support, driving income generation for Arts and Events	
Officers provide a Tamworth Information Centre function, providing advice to residents and visitors to Tamworth	
The team handles most enquiries at first point of contact	
The team can signpost most customers, helping vulnerable customers directly and arrange face to face appointments with officers as appropriate	
Continue to open more days than the original reception at Marmion House did, i.e. is now open 6 days including Saturday from 10am-4pm. In addition, the service is open some Sundays and bank holidays depending on activity at Tamworth Assembly Rooms	
This service is seen as a critical support service for Arts and Events in terms of ticket sales	

4.2.1 Cost Implications

As this option is contained within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy there is no requirement for additional budgetary provision.

4.3 Option 2 - delivery of face-to-face provision at an alternative town centre venue

A phased approach to reintroduce in-person services elsewhere. Appendix 3 details employee costs for each delivery model. This is a scalable option, which provides an opportunity to adapt the offer determined by customer demand.

Benefits	Risks
Opportunity to increase customer service provision once an alternative location is secured enabling new customer demand and insight to be captured and understood	Potential change to officer terms and conditions which will have a financial impact and may increase turnover
Team will manage enquiries at first point of contact and signpost where needed	New ways of working will be necessary which will take time to develop and embed
Team will help vulnerable customers directly and arrange face to face appointments with officers as appropriate	Increased resource requirements – location, equipment, people and financial
Increased positive public perception and reputation management	Time taken to train additional officers to a level where agreed levels of service can be delivered
No change to back-office service offer	Increased likelihood that significant waste demand would occur

4.3.1 Cost Implications

- Staffing resource – up to £157,000 per annum dependant on opening hours/days
- Equipment cost – unknown - venue dependent
- Location costs – unknown venue dependent.
- Infrastructure costs – unknown venue dependent

4.4 Option 3 - introduction of community support hubs in addition to existing provision

This would see the creation of a community-based Customer Support Officer co-locate with other services to work across communities. This service would build on the current service provision (appendix 6 outlines where officer outreach and appendix 7 partnership working currently exist) and would be targeted at meeting the needs of the most vulnerable. This will allow officers to build trust through face-to-face interactions, fostering a positive perception of the council by reinforcing credibility in the eyes of the residents.

In addition, this option would work collaboratively across existing partnerships and with other service providers and would see further development of the pop-up engagement sessions. It is suggested that this option could initially be set up as a pilot to measure impact whilst the location of the civic headquarters is agreed. The service would be provided in wards/ venues and locations where demand is greatest, leading to targeted support for our most vulnerable residents.

Benefits	Risks
Localised support where it is most needed, with locations meeting needs of customers.	New ways of working would have to be embedded
Dedicated role(s) with local knowledge and insight	Increased resource requirements – equipment, people and financial
Increased liaison with ward councillors reaching the most vulnerable in a timely manner	Time taken to train additional officers to a level where sufficient level of service can be delivered
Signposting would continue	Budgetary requirement for venue access.
Team will continue to help vulnerable customers directly and arrange face to face appointments with officers as appropriate on request	
Increased public perception and reputation management	
No change to back-office service offer	
Improvement in first contact resolution	

4.4.1 Cost implications

- Additional budget requirements to fund new staffing resource up to £72,000.
- Equipment and venue hire costs unknown circa £5,000 per year.

4.5 Option 4 - reopen the front desk service situated at Marmion House in addition to the TIC service at Tamworth Assembly Rooms:

This would see the existing front desk and reception area at Marmion House reopen, offering a similar level of support as it did prior to its closure due to Covid in 2020. At this time the face-to-face customer service provision was primarily delivered on an appointment only basis, with officers signposting and booking appointments with technical officers as necessary.

Benefits	Risks
The team will manage enquiries at first point of contact and signpost where needed	Doesn't align with the Councils strategy to close and dispose of Marmon House
Team will help vulnerable customers directly and arrange face to face appointments with officers as appropriate	TIC staffing model and duties would have to be reviewed
Some infrastructure in place	Demand for face-to-face enquiries is low – this makes cost per enquiry even higher as no co-location of services would exist as it currently does
Increased positive public perception and reputation management	When a specialist appointment is needed, the resident would be required to return later.
No change to back-office service offer	
Residents already aware of the location	
Town centre location	
Security provision already on site	
Dedicated role(s) with appropriate skills and knowledge	

4.5.1 Cost implications

Additional staff resource required £156,482

Refurbishment & Equipment Costs to make ready for customers £15,000

Infrastructure costs £10,000

5. Resource Implications

Details of the financial and human resource implications are included within the options section of this report.

6. Legal/ Risk Implications

Details of the legal and risk implications are included within the options section of this report.

7. Equalities Implications

The equality implications which arise as a result of this report are considered within the options section with a focus on vulnerable residents.

8. Environmental/ sustainability Implications

There are no direct environmental or sustainability implications as a direct result of this report.

9. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Background Information

Appendix 2 – Customer Data

Appendix 3 – Marmion House Cost Report

Appendix 4 - Delivery Model Employee Costs

Appendix 5 – Customer Mosaic Profiles

Appendix 6 – Face to Face Officer Contact

Appendix 7 – Partnership Service Delivery

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