

# Central Bedfordshire Council

07 June 2022

## Executive

## Consultation on public facing services delivered from Watling House

### Report of:

Cllr Eugene Ghent, Executive Member for Assets and Housing,  
[Eugene.Ghent@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Eugene.Ghent@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

### Responsible Director:

Lorna Carver, Director of Place and Communities,  
[Lorna.Carver@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Lorna.Carver@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

**This report relates to a decision that is Key**

## Purpose of this report

For the Executive to consider the future of public facing services delivered from Watling House and seek authority to consult on the proposals contained within this report.

## RECOMMENDATION(S)

The Executive is asked to:

1. Authorise a public consultation on proposals for public facing services delivered from Watling House.

## Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations

1. This matter has not yet been considered by the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This item has been requested to be considered at the June Committee meeting to respond as part of the consultation process, and an update be provided to the September meeting of the Committee.

## **Executive Summary**

2. The council has a continuous drive to improve efficiency, reduce costs and increase the effectiveness of staff. Enabling staff to maximise their time by working from wherever they are and using technology is a key to being efficient.
3. One of the benefits to flexible working is the need for less office space. Property is expensive to buy, run and maintain. As part of the council's continued focus on efficiency it started to review its corporate estate in 2016 to make sure it has the right buildings, in the right locations that help deliver quality services to customers.
4. Since 2016, the Council has been seeking to reduce its office space. It has offices across Central Bedfordshire, including Watling House in Dunstable. For some time, the Council has planned to reduce its office space at Watling House and for the remainder of the building to be put to another use. In recent years the intention has been to consolidate the Council's operations into one third of the building and for the remaining two-thirds to be rented to generate income.
5. In 2019, market insight indicated that in order to attract a tenant investment in the property would be required to create high quality office accommodation. The Council approved this proposal and work on the project started in 2020 but was put on hold when the COVID-19 pandemic hit due to uncertainties surrounding demand for office space.
6. The annual running cost of Watling House is circa £600K. The building has an estimated £1.7M maintenance backlog.
7. The way the Council's staff worked during the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated changes in flexible working. Necessary changes to working practices during the height of COVID-19 meant that staff were working in a more flexible way at home, and office space has been at a minimal occupation during that period. Watling House was closed to the public and changes were made to interact differently with customers that might previously have accessed services by visiting in person. Feedback obtained from staff and customers during this period has enabled the Council to propose alternative solutions for public-facing services.
8. Authority is sought from the Executive to undertake a consultation on changes to public facing services delivered from Watling House. As part of the consultation process the proposals will be considered by Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The outcome of the consultation will be presented to Executive in October 2022.

## **Background**

9. Before the COVID-19 pandemic the Council had been providing staff with the tools they needed to do more of their work at home and out in the community. The Council had also been providing more services online in response to customer preferences. These developments have delivered operational efficiencies and cost savings, as well as providing residents with more convenient, modern ways to interact with the Council.

10. As the Council's operating practice changes, its corporate buildings also need to change to meet the needs of the organisation. The Council keeps the number and use of its buildings under review and seeks opportunities to maximise use, reduce overhead costs, and generate income, to ensure the estate provides best value.
11. Since 2016, the Council's direction of travel has been to reduce the space it uses at Watling House. Financial efficiencies associated with this have been included in the Council's Medium-Term Financial Plans.
12. When the Council reviewed its demand for office space in 2019 it concluded that the construction of Integrated Health and Social Care Hub in Dunstable would further reduce the need for space in Watling House and that only Housing, Revenue & Benefits, and the Customer Contact Centre staff would need to remain. It was proposed that these remaining teams would be consolidated into one area of Watling House to allow the remaining space to be leased out to generate income. Following market insight, the Council approved investment in the building to create marketable office accommodation.
13. The financial implications of vacating teams from Watling House and refurbishing the building to provide rentable office space were approved through the Council's Medium-Term Financial Plan process.

## **Issue**

14. The Council responded quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic to keep its employees and residents as safe as possible. To ensure continued access to services they were made available online or by phone, and when face to face contact was allowed COVID secure spaces were used for unavoidable in person interactions.
15. The project to refurbish Watling House to create high quality office accommodation was placed on hold due to the uncertainty the pandemic created about the future demand for office space from the Council and others.
16. Since the pandemic the use of Watling House by Council employees and customers has been minimal. A limited number of teams are making occasional use of Watling House leaving most of the building empty. Some of the unused space has been leased to the NHS for a Vaccination Centre and the NHS are committed to remaining in the building until September 2022.
17. The services that the Council had intended to retain at Watling House in their pre-COVID accommodation model (i.e. staff from Housing, Revenue & Benefits and the Contact Centre), all indicated they would be working differently. This would make Watling House surplus to the Council's requirements.
18. In addition to Watling House's annual running costs of circa £600K, there is an estimated £1.7M maintenance backlog.
19. The running costs associated with the building, the required expenditure to continue its use as an office, and the reduced demand for office space has resulted in a proposal to vacate the building when it is no longer required by the NHS for a Vaccination Centre.
20. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic Watling House was open to the public and there has been some limited use of the building during the pandemic. A public consultation is therefore required to obtain feedback on the proposed alternative solutions for services that were previously available at Watling House.

21. In order to propose alternative solutions for public-facing services previously delivered from Watling House a review was carried out of how the building was used prior to and during the pandemic, and detailed discussions taken place with departments across the Council on future ways of working.
22. The following sections of this report describe how the building was used prior to and during the pandemic.

### **Public-facing service delivery from Watling House pre-COVID-19**

23. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic several Council services operated out of Watling House, including Housing, Revenue and Benefits, Children's Services, Adult Social Care and Customer Services.
24. Watling House was open to the public from 09:00 until 17:00, Monday to Friday, and customers were seen with and without an appointment.
25. If customers wanted to speak to someone in the Council in person they could come to Watling House. Customer Services managed the reception and there were small meeting rooms in the reception area where customers could have private conversations with Council officers as well as space in reception where customers could discuss matters that were less confidential. The building also had larger meeting rooms where resident meetings were held, such as tenant association meetings and fostering events.
26. The Registration Service had a registrar's office where customers could register births, deaths, and marriages in person. The office was open on Mondays from 09:00 until 15:00, and Thursdays from 09:00 until 16:00. Customers were seen by appointment only.

### **Public-facing services delivered from Watling House since COVID-19**

27. One of the Council's responses to the pandemic was to close Watling House to the public.
28. To reduce the need for customer contact with the Council the government granted temporary dispensations for some in-person activities so they could be undertaken by phone or online. For example, in person verification of original documents by Revenues and Benefits, and the registration of deaths with the Registration Service by phone.
29. A small number of services retained a limited physical presence at Watling House in order to deal with emergencies.
30. Assessments that were previously conducted in person at Watling House, moved to being undertaken by appointment over the phone or via video calls, and in some instances by post.
31. Most queries or problems were successfully resolved over the phone or via video calls.
32. On the rare occasion that activities or issues were unable to be resolved over the phone or online, customers were invited by appointment to be seen at Watling House or another Council buildings, or Council officers visited customers in their homes.
33. When customers needed to scan and submit documents and evidence to the Council this was done online or by post. Customers unable to scan and submit themselves were assisted in person at another Council building.
34. Services continued to receive post from customers during the pandemic. Although most correspondence was electronic.

## **Proposals for public-facing services**

35. The following types of customer interaction with the Council were previously available at Watling House:

- a. Remote access to services
- b. In person meetings which includes
  - i. Planned in person meetings
  - ii. Emergency meetings and unscheduled drop-ins
  - iii. Interviews under caution
  - iv. The Registration Service
- c. Document verification, scanning and submission
- d. Issue and return of housing stock keys
- e. Post

36. There is no intention to stop any services that the Council currently provides.

37. Continuing remote access to services builds on the positive feedback received about online, video and phone services with customers reporting pre-booked appointments and no travel time is more convenient. To ensure customers are not excluded from accessing services because they don't have their own ICT equipment the Council is proposing to install customer self-service points in public buildings.

38. In person meetings and activities such as document verification and issuing of housing stock keys will still take place, but will be available from different public buildings located in the community. These will offer convenience to customers as well as making efficient and effective use of the Council's estate.

## **Reason/s for decision**

39. During the pandemic Watling House was closed to the public and changes were made to interact differently with customers that might previously have accessed services by visiting in person.

40. The proposal in this report will enable delivery of efficiencies in the Medium-Term Financial Plan. Services available to customers will remain the same, but how these services are accessed is proposed to change. During the pandemic it has been possible to test alternative ways of working and delivering services, providing useful feedback that has fed into these proposals.

41. Authority is sought from the Executive to undertake a consultation on changes to public facing services delivered from Watling House. As part of the consultation process the proposals will be considered by Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The outcome of the consultation will be presented to Executive in October 2022.

## **Council priorities**

42. Providing residents with more convenient, modern ways to interact with the Council, alongside maximising the use of other Council buildings for the delivery of customer facing services that were previously accessed at Watling House aligns with the Council priority of "making best use of resources".

## Legal Implications

43. Where a Local Authority is contemplating changes to the delivery of services to the public it has a public law duty to consult with those that would be affected and there is clear guidance and precedent about how consultation should be conducted and the part that the public play in future decision making.
44. The general principles derived from case law as to how consultations should be conducted, known as the “Gunning principles” are: consultation should occur when proposals are at a formative stage; consultations should give sufficient reasons for any proposal to permit intelligent consideration; consultations should allow adequate time for consideration and response. ***There must be clear evidence that the decision maker has considered the consultation responses, or a summary of them, before taking its decision.***
45. In the Supreme Court case of **R (Moseley) v LB Haringey (2014)**, the Supreme Court endorsed the Gunning principles and added two further general principles: the degree of specificity regarding the consultation should be influenced by those who are being consulted; and the demands of fairness are likely to be higher when the consultation relates to a decision which is likely to deprive someone of an existing benefit.

## Financial and Risk Implications

46. Watling House has an annual running cost of circa £600K.
47. There is an estimated £1.7M maintenance backlog on the building.
48. The Medium-Term Financial Plan incorporates efficiencies associated with the Council ceasing its use of Watling House after 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. An allowance for leasing short term office accommodation for those staff that will be working in the Dunstable Health Hub from 2023 was built into the MTFP proposals agreed at Council in February 2022.
49. In 2020/2021 a £100K efficiency was delivered by leasing space at Watling House to the NHS for use as a Vaccination Centre. The NHS are continuing to rent the space and have committed to renting the space until September 2022.

## Equalities and Fairness Implications

50. Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty (i.e. public sector equality duty – PSED) to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics: age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
51. The statutory grounds of the public sector equality duty are found at section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and are as follows: A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
  - i. eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
  - ii. advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
  - iii. foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
52. Decision makers should have due regard to Public Sector Equality Duty in making their decisions. Consideration of the duties should precede the decision. It is important that

Executive have regard to the statutory grounds in the light of all available material such as material in the press and letters from residents. This duty should be considered with information gathered during the consultation process and from the Equality Impact Assessment.

53. Digital exclusion is linked to wider inequalities in society and is more likely to be faced by those on **low incomes, people over 65 and disabled people**. As part of the consultation process consideration will be given to ensuring that suitable alternative locations and assisted digital access points are identified.
54. The consultation will be promoted widely through a wide range of digital and engagement networks and channels. Posters to promote the consultation will be placed in library, leisure and children's centers and shared with voluntary sector partners such as Citizen's Advice.
55. Paper copies of the consultation document and questionnaire will be made available to people who are unable to submit an online response.
56. Results of the consultation will be carefully analysed by protected characteristics to ascertain the extent to which proposals impact on different groups and to ascertain the extent to which alternative proposed solutions will be appropriate or require further consideration.
57. An Equality Impact Assessment will be developed to help inform the final decision. The proposal will also be considered by the June meeting of the Central Bedfordshire Equality Forum.

## **Sustainability Implications**

58. Rationalising use of Council buildings makes better use of the Council's existing estate and is more cost effective.
59. Making services available by phone and online supports sustainability as it would reduce the need for staff and customers to travel.
60. The age of Watling House and the heating system within it mean that it is not an energy efficient building resulting in high energy costs.
61. If the building remains operational the heating system will need to be replaced at a substantial cost.

## **Conclusion and next Steps**

62. The Executive is asked to review the proposals set out within this report and to approve a consultation on the future of public facing services delivered from Watling House.

### **Report author(s):**

Iain Berry, Assistant Director - Assets, [iain.berry@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:iain.berry@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)