

REPORT TO ASSETS AND OPERATIONS COMMITTEE COUNCIL OFFICES POST-TRANSFER



Report Reference A-22-03
Meeting Date 16th May 2022
Agenda Item 10
Prepared by Town Clerk

1.0 BACKGROUND

The freehold of the Council Offices, along with its grounds and the library garden, transferred to the town council in early April. The committee has an established sub-committee which is charged with implementing the approved business case for the renovation of the building; the minutes of its most recent meeting have been submitted to this committee for information and it is in the process of developing an updated business case for Full Council consideration.

This report provides an overview of the operational matters associated with the management of the Council Offices. It is for committee information and oversight and highlights what has, will and needs to happen.

2.0 OPERATIONAL MATTERS

2.1 INSURANCE AND HEALTH AND SAFETY

The building was insured from the point of transfer as part of the council's insurance schedules. The insurance valuation was based on the reinstatement valuation from 2019.

The Planning and Facilities Officer had already planned the routine statutory compliance and health and safety checks as part of the overall facilities compliance logs. The council holds the testing certificates and reports as these were routinely supplied by Cheshire East Council.

The building has both a fire alarm system and an intruder alarm. Both will be serviced as required. The Town Clerk is in the process of arranging the transfer/implementation of a new monitoring contract for the alarms.

2.2 UTILITIES

Opening meter readings were taken for the gas and electricity supplies at the point of transfer. The Town Clerk is awaiting proposals from a utility broker and has also received a fixed price quote to retain the existing CEC contract for the current financial year (electricity: standing charge 97.28p per day, all units 24.668p; gas: standing charge £3.08 per day, 4.5039p/kWh). Energy markets are expected to be at significantly higher costs over the next three years. Once costs are obtained from the broker the Town Clerk will determine the cheapest supplier.

The water supply has been registered with Water Plus (commercial supplier for United Utilities).

The council has previously sought to upgrade the office internet connection to fibre. This was prevented by Cheshire East Council failing to grant a wayleave for cabling. This will be now be taken forward.

2.3 OTHER OCCUPANTS

The Royal British Legion occupy two offices on the ground floor. The Knutsford and District Talking Newspaper occupy a separate building to the rear of the main council offices. It is understood that there was no formal agreement between the occupiers and Cheshire East Council.

The Town Clerk has obtained a template licence to occupy agreement which will be adapted for use (from the DCMS website). A licence is preferred over a lease as it provides greater flexibility and does not grant exclusive possession of an area. Alternatively, the committee could direct that a solicitor be instructed to draft a template licence for the council to use. Subject to the direction of the committee, the Town Clerk will issue licences for the two organisations to formalise the occupation of their areas. The licence will allow for the council to terminate the licence at the point it undertakes renovations to the building.

The Royal British Legion holds keys to the building; the Talking Newspaper only have keys to their space. The only other keyholders are the Cheshire East Council parking offices who utilise the kitchen for their rest breaks; this agreement was put in place when the council acquired the public toilets (their pervious break space having been within the King Street toilets building) it is seen as being 'in return' for Cheshire East Council Parking providing a parking permit which exempts the council's van from parking restrictions.

2.4 BUILDING MAINTENANCE

No major proactive maintenance to the building is currently planned. The last condition survey was undertaken in 2020 and identified a range of building repairs as being required which are being factored into the business case for renovation. To avoid duplicate spending, it is intended that responsive maintenance take place in the interim. In addition, once the new caretaker is in post minor redecoration / maintenance will take place as necessary.

2.5 GROUNDS

The Town Ranger will undertake routine maintenance of the benches within the library grounds. The gazebo will also be renovated (subject to costs). The railings to the library garden will be repainted, as will the Jubilee Arch.

The flowerbeds will be planted with summer and winter planting. A more perennial focused planting scheme will be introduced. The Town Ranger will maintain the shrubs, hedges and lawns.

It has previously been suggested that the wooden railing alongside the main lawn be removed to facilitate parking closer to the edge of the driveway. It has also been suggested that the dividing railing between the grounds of the offices and library be re-opened. Subject to the views of the committee this will be undertaken over the summer.

The triennial tree survey for the grounds is due this year and will be undertaken in the autumn; arising works will be undertaken. This will include the removal of a sucker-grown cherry tree which is leaning towards the flats behind the library grounds; this was recommendation in the 2019 survey which CEC

did not implement and has been a frequent complaint from the residents who it affects.

2.6 ROOM HIRE

In due course the Town Clerk intends to draft a policy and charging schedule for room hire for committee consideration. In the interim it will continue to operate as before transfer which is to provide rooms free of charge for non-commercial uses and direct commercial enquiries to other premises. Use of rooms is only during office hours except where a member/officer is in attendance at the meeting or for an organisation with an established relationship with the council where they will be provided with keys for access e.g. Knutsford Royal May Day and Knutsford Lions.

3.0 DECISIONS REQUIRED

The committee is invited to raise any questions in relation to the operational management of the council offices and to provide any direction it wishes.