
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY: INFORMATION BULLETIN

TITLE: FREIGHT HOUSE AND OFFICE ACCOMMODATION FOR ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL STAFF

TO: OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

FROM: PHOEBE BARNES, DIRECTOR – ASSETS AND INVESTMENTS

At the request of Members from the Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) Committee an information bulletin was asked to be brought to O&S on 4 April. This update was requested to provide a high-level overview from officers on the current proposals for the Freight House and office accommodation for staff.

Introduction and Background

Planning permission was granted on the Freight House on 22 March 2022. This is for the existing community space to be retained and upgraded whilst providing flexible space for Rochford District Council public meetings. A new extension is proposed to provide flexible and efficient working space for the Council.

At the time of developing the plans for the new office space at the Freight House assumptions were made on Council Staff not working remotely and all requiring a personal desk space to work from. Following the pandemic, the organisation has switched to a hybrid working model like many other organisations across the world. This new way of working has required officers to revisit the plans for the Freight House to ensure the plans still align with the Council's way of working.

On 13 July 2022 a decision was taken by the Executive for the Freight House in Rochford to be reopened as soon as possible. This was in advance of the Council taking a formal decision regarding commencement of refurbishment and development works at the site.

The building was opened; however, no bookings were made. The building was utilised for a period of 9 weeks during December 2022 and January 2023 to support King Edmund School who, due to its own school developments, was unable to use school grounds.

On 26 January 2023 an operational decision was made by the Director of Assets & Investment to stop any bookings being taken for Freight House.

The fire alarm system has come to the end of its life and is no longer compliant. Quotes obtained to replace the system were in the region of £10,000 to £20,000 as a new panel is required to be installed along with rewiring and reinstating sensors, etc. As the Council is committed to moving officers into the Freight House it is deemed to not be financially viable to replace the system now, when a whole new system would need installing as part of any future development of the building.

As the site is not compliant the Director of Assets and Investment has put measures in place as a duty of care to all that the building is closed for use. The Asset Team is currently managing the risk of the non-compliant system and ensuring the building meets insurance requirements.

Current Situation

The current offices at South Street are not fit for purpose. They do not promote a culture of collaboration and instead create pockets of silo working. The Council is conscious of the health and wellbeing of its officers and believes that an enhanced office space offering would create a new culture of partnership and cross-departmental collaborative working.

The Council also wants to lead by example by creating an improved presence along South Street by developing the site into sustainable homes.

With this in mind the Council has currently commissioned a review of the Freight House. The scope of this work is to look at the existing site and determine how it can be converted to create an open plan office space whilst retaining a space for community use. This piece of work will include viability assessments and a business case for any proposed redesign, taking into account the current financial market.

In the meantime, officers are also exploring options for renting office space within the Rochford District. This interim arrangement is to expedite the opportunity to create an improved working culture. Currently officers are being asked to 'spring clean' the South Street offices and to review all the paperwork and items within the South Street offices, so that officers are in a better position to move to a new location when the time comes. Confidential waste bags are supplied to ensure that the Council is disposing of sensitive information correctly. The Council will look to donate any surplus furniture or equipment to charitable organisations or seek other opportunities for recycling before disposal.

Officers are currently developing a business case to understand the financial impact on the budget regarding an interim move, alongside a cost benefit analysis.

Conclusion

The ongoing work highlighted within this report is due to be concluded by the end of April. It is then envisaged that decisions would be brought to Members, through the Executive or Council, early in the new municipal year. Officers will be looking to engage with all Members as part of this decision-making timetable.