



Committee	Cabinet
Date	7 May 2024
Subject	Relocating Customer Services to Lowestoft Library
Cabinet Member	CLlr Paul Ashton Cabinet Member with responsibility for Corporate Services - Digital, Customer Services, HR & Assets
Report Author(s)	Tom Darling-Fernley Customer Experience Development Manager tom.darling-fernley@eastsoffolk.gov.uk
Head of Service	Sandra Lewis Head of Digital, Programme Management and Customer Services sandra.lewis@eastsoffolk.gov.uk
Director	Kate Blakemore Strategic Director kate.blakemore@eastsoffolk.gov.uk
Key Decision?	Yes
Is the report Open or Exempt?	OPEN
Category of Exempt Information and reason why it is NOT in the public interest to disclose the exempt information.	Not applicable.

Purpose/Summary

The decision would support relocation of East Suffolk Council's front-facing reception and core contact centre from Marina Centre to Lowestoft Library. This is in direct response to the need to vacate the existing facility to enable the Cultural Quarter development, part of the Lowestoft Towns Deal.

This would secure the provision of a tangible front-facing service option in the town centre.

Recommendation(s)

That Cabinet:

1. Approves the relocation of the council's public reception and core contact centre from Marina Centre to within part of Lowestoft Library.
2. Approves the council entering (a) a five-year lease with Suffolk County Council for the core contact centre space and (b) and a five-year licence to occupy with Suffolk's Libraries IPS Ltd for the public reception and back-office spaces.
3. Approves additional budget in the capital programme of £165,000 to support the relocation, and for this to be profiled across 2024-25 and 2025-26 as per paragraph 4.4.
4. Approves the use of Customer Services' existing revenue reserves to fund the addition to the capital programme.

Strategic plan

How does this proposal support Our Direction 2028?

Environmental Impact	This proposal in itself has a neutral effect on the theme of environmental impact, we would re-use as much equipment as possible currently located in the Marina Centre.
Sustainable Housing	This proposal has a neutral effect on the theme of sustainable housing. Indirectly, housing officers will continue to have a town centre location from which to deliver responsive housing needs services.
Tackling Inequalities	Continuity of provision for front-facing services in Lowestoft is an explicit response to the town's particular issues of deprivation. Maintaining this facility in a central, reachable location is a key pillar of East Suffolk's strategic plan to ensure equality of access to public services, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances.
Thriving Economy	This proposal has a positive effect on the theme of a thriving economy by keeping our location in the town centre.
Our Foundations / governance of the organisation	Provision of easily accessible council services is a key component of our foundations.

Justification for recommendations

1. Background

Marina Centre

- 1.1. The council's customer services team has operated out of the Marina Centre in Lowestoft town centre since 2009. This has remained part of a model for providing face-to-face support for residents and other customers, alongside regular presence at half a dozen libraries throughout the district.
- 1.2. The Marina Centre supports a customer reception, contact centre, and general office space for East Suffolk Council. It is owned jointly with Suffolk County Council, whose youth justice team occupies part of the building's north wing.
- 1.3. In October 2022 the customer reception at Marina Centre underwent a light refurbishment, in part to test ideas for how to configure an anticipated new location. Front-facing operations were relocated temporarily to Lowestoft Library at that time.

Cultural Quarter project

- 1.4. In June 2022, Cabinet approved the development and delivery of the Cultural Quarter, one of five projects in the wider £24.9mn Towns Deal. The Cultural Quarter will be a new leisure and culture destination in the heart of Lowestoft which will drive footfall and spend and support a transition from traditional retail.
- 1.5. As well as redevelopment of the former Battery Green car park, retail premises, and public realm creation and enhancement, the June 2022 approval included repurposing of the Marina Centre. It also delegated authority to the Strategic Director and the relevant Portfolio Holder to make change decisions and to facilitate and deliver the Cultural Quarter project.
- 1.6. The Cabinet paper detailed the following points:
 - 1.6.1. The Marina Centre's usage conflicted with the wider aspirations of the Cultural Quarter project, plus customer behaviour had changed after the Covid-19 pandemic. This suggested an opportunity for both a revised operational model with a smaller size building, as well as for new leisure-based development supporting Lowestoft's wider regeneration. This was informed through joint working with the then Head of Customer Experience, who'd provided a report 'Customer Services - Service Delivery Model and Public Access' in March 2021 to help inform the Business Case.
 - 1.6.2. Relocating Customer Services was to be considered as part of a wider project to determine the future need of the service and addressed in a separate business case. This would introduce an opportunity for a new community-based development that

would support the wider regeneration of Lowestoft and cluster uses in part of the town.

- 1.7. In October 2022 the customer reception at Marina Centre underwent a light refurbishment, in part to test ideas for how to configure an anticipated new location. Front-facing operations were relocated temporarily to Lowestoft Library at that time.
- 1.8. The project design team produced a range of development options for the Cultural Quarter, which were presented to the Project Sponsor Group in May 2023. The chosen option involved demolition of the Marina Centre's north wing, so that the scheme could create (a) more commercial and cultural space increasing the footfall and feasibility of the scheme; (b) line-of-sight between the town centre and the port through the project area; and (c) enhanced and increased public realm within the scheme area.
- 1.9. In July 2023, Corporate Leadership Team discussed the need to support the Cultural Quarter by vacating the Marina Centre. CLT opted to seek a way to continue a tangible customer-facing presence within Lowestoft town centre, working with the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services. This recognised the town's particular deprivation issues and the need for focussed support to be available reliably and set parameters to identify a new location.
- 1.10. The planning application for the chosen Cultural Quarter delivery option will be determined by Planning Committee on 11 May 2024, with a proposed timeline that sets September 2024 for vacant possession of the whole Marina Centre for partial demolition.

2. Introduction

- 2.1. To support and sustain a customer-facing presence inside Lowestoft, officers have identified a workable option to relocate East Suffolk's customer reception and core contact centre to Lowestoft Library. This follows exploration of alternative locations in the town centre, twin-tracked with work to better understand the nature of enquiries coming through our doors. The library option builds on a productive working relationship between East Suffolk Council and Suffolk Libraries (the charity running libraries on behalf of Suffolk County Council under a contract running between 2011 and 2025).
- 2.2. Moving quickly enough to support the Cultural Quarter sets a challenging time window. Funding for that project is time-bound, such that late commencement of enabling works could jeopardise its financial basis.

3. Proposal

- 3.1. By taking on the space identified at Lowestoft Library, East Suffolk Council can secure a convenient, stable location for local front-facing services through to 2030. Compared to other available and explored options, the library site presents a commercially sustainable case for the council with a healthy balance between need and resource.

- 3.2. Suffolk Libraries are an enthusiastic third sector partner with an enabling attitude and a strong sense of community; they are keen to work in partnership with ESC. The site benefits from high recognition and fulfils the council’s remit for a town centre location. Communications by each organisation would publicise the relocation jointly.
- 3.3. Customer Services will be able to build on established working relationships with the Suffolk Libraries team, extending the partnership working model seen at other library sites in the district. As well as planning to bring opening hours closer together between the library and the council’s reception, different availability windows mean we can find innovative new ways to meet our visiting customers’ needs whenever the library is open and our reception is closed.
- 3.4. The adjacency between the core contact centre and the public reception allows Customer Services to sustain the operational flexibility seen at the Marina Centre, which allows staff members to be quickly redeployed between these roles to respond to fluctuating demand.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1. The Cultural Quarter budget contains no provision for the service relocation it necessitates; therefore, additional budget in the capital programme, through use of reserves, is needed to support this change.
- 4.2. Between 2019-20 and 2022-23 inclusive, the former Customer Experience service area realised a series of efficiencies, which are captured in a revenue reserve fund. These reserves are sufficient to fund the capital investment necessary for the relocation to Lowestoft Library. The total capital budget needed for relocation would be £165,000, which includes contingencies.
- 4.3. Over the medium-term financial strategy, the revenue costs of operating the service out of Lowestoft Library would be absorbed into annual revenue budgets. These costs can be absorbed by offsetting against the current operational costs of the Marina Centre, which will no longer be required once decommissioned.
- 4.4. This table summarises the absorbed financial effect:

	£	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29	2029-30	Total
Revenue, absorbed into operating budgets		37,230	26,200	29,200	25,200	25,200	15,690	
Capital, funded from existing reserves		130,070	34,930					165,000

5. Legal Implications

- 5.1. East Suffolk Council would enter (A) a five-year lease agreement with Suffolk County Council and (B) a five-year licence to occupy with Suffolk’s Libraries IPS Ltd.

5.2. The proposal is in support of and enables multi-partite commitments made under the Lowestoft Towns Deal.

6. Risk Implications

Opportunities and leverage

- 6.1. Partnership working – The location at Lowestoft Library lends itself to a natural confluence between the needs of different customer/resident groups. There is an opportunity to develop more substantial ties with Suffolk Libraries and other third sector actors in Lowestoft.
- 6.2. Innovation – We intend to use the new facility to continually re-assess our service operating model and exploit the modular fit-out approach to increase our service availability to residents and other customers.
- 6.3. Stronger town centre presence – Locating in Lowestoft Library will give all organisations chances to capitalise on adjacency and serendipitous ‘while you’re here’ transactions.

Threats and mitigations

- 6.4. Budget – Components of the capital budget are subject to uncertainty in terms of both scope and materials prices. We intend to mitigate this threat by limiting physical intervention to a level that’s appropriate to our tenure within the building and using a modular fit-out approach to make the costs of any interim reconfiguration more predictable.
- 6.5. Schedule – This project is being planned for an extremely tight timeframe. Keeping the scope rational and appropriate to tenure will help with this. We also plan to provide our reception service from elsewhere in the library building for up to two months between vacating the Marina Centre and beginning permanent operations to allow for refurbishment to take place.
- 6.6. SCC services at Marina Centre – There is a risk that SCC’s services would not move from Marina Centre to 2 Canning Road before September 2024. While this presents an intermediate-severity threat captured in the risk profile for the Cultural Quarter project, this proposal assumes relocation to Lowestoft Library regardless.
- 6.7. Suffolk Libraries contract – Suffolk County Council will award a new operating contract in November 2024, to commence in June 2025. The existing operator, Suffolk’s Libraries IPS Ltd, will be bidding for this new contract. The new contract, the county council’s project lead, and the existing operator’s plans all assume a five-year presence in the Lowestoft Library building by East Suffolk Council.
- 6.8. Engagement – There is a risk that the library location is perceived as a sub-optimal solution or afterthought made in response to more publicised decisions around the Cultural Quarter. We are mitigating this through detailed team engagement and by using our modular fit-out approach to achieve a high-quality environment.

- 6.9. Footprint – It will be challenging to fit our operations into the library space. Taking a shared approach to back-of-house facilities and building on our operational experience in 2022 will help manage this, as will reducing the back-office footprint and consolidating some non-front-facing usages from Marina to Riverside.
- 6.10. Operational – The nature of the available space in the library building means that customer access will be shared between East Suffolk Council and Suffolk Libraries. Hours of operation will also be different. We are already managing this uncertainty through proactive tactical planning between respective management and supervisory teams.

7. Options

Remaining in Marina Centre

- 7.1. It would not be possible for Customer Services to remain in the current building whilst the approved development of the Cultural Quarter, including demolition works, takes place. This would also cause significant disruption to staff and customers. Delaying any relocation of the service would place an unacceptable risk on the deliverability of the Cultural Quarter.
- 7.2. Returning to the reconfigured building would still necessitate the costs and disruption of temporary relocation, as well as internal reconfiguration of the remaining south wing to customer services' operational needs, which may be suboptimal for the regenerated context.

Other town centre locations

- 7.3. The team has considered, visited, and engaged in exploratory discussions about several alternative locations that would meet the town centre criterion. These have included the council's own 151 London Road North site, DWP's Rishton House complex, the former magistrates' court building, and the former Lowestoft hospital site, plus a series of high street retail options. While many were compelling options, each presented their own difficulties, whether through significant reconfiguration cost, difficult layouts, or higher rental costs.
- 7.4. Lowestoft Library offered a good balance of cost and opportunities by comparison. We also share space within other library locations across the district.

Withdrawing from Lowestoft town centre

- 7.5. Options outside the clear town centre of Lowestoft were considered, including the council's own Riverside office complex in Kirkley. Moving away from the accessibility and amenity of the town centre wasn't deemed an acceptable outcome for residents needing the council's services and support.

8. Recommendations

- 8.1. It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 8.1.1. Approves the relocation of the council's public reception and core contact centre from Marina Centre to within part of Lowestoft Library.
- 8.1.2. Approves the council entering (a) a five-year lease with Suffolk County Council for the core contact centre space and (b) and a five-year licence to occupy with Suffolk's Libraries IPS Ltd for the public reception and back-office spaces.
- 8.1.3. Approves the use of Customer Services' existing revenue reserves to fund a capital investment of £165,000 to support the relocation.

9. Reasons for Recommendations

- 9.1. The recommendations are made because they secure a sustainable, medium-term future for face-to-face services in the district's largest town, in ways that build partnerships with other agencies and work towards a more developed solution in the long term. They support the council's strategic imperatives as well as its emerging service principles.

10. Conclusions/Next Steps

- 10.1. As a result of the Cabinet decision taken from this report, the team will take the following steps:
 - 10.1.1. Begin planning public communications jointly with the Suffolk Libraries team to prepare people for the relocation.
 - 10.1.2. Finalise and agree the heads of terms for the lease between East Suffolk Council and Suffolk County Council, and agree a memorandum of understanding to support the licence to occupy between East Suffolk Council and Suffolk's Libraries IPS Ltd.
 - 10.1.3. Review quotations from tenderers and appoint contractors/suppliers for refurbishment works and modular fit-out.
 - 10.1.4. Continue to set in train operational planning and team engagement activities to support the relocation of the service.
 - 10.1.5. Ensure we have vacated the Marina Centre to allow for demolition works to begin in September 2024 including any contingency planning.

Areas of consideration comments

Section 151 Officer comments:

This proposal does require additional capital budget, which can be funded from a Customer Services earmarked reserve which has remained unused for a number of years. This report seeks approval of the additional budget and use of reserves in accordance with the Finance Procedure Rules.

Monitoring Officer comments:

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no additional comments.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion/EQIA:

No significant change is occasioned by the relocation to the council's EDI obligations and aspirations. See EQIA607405396.

Safeguarding:

The proposal places our facility next to the youth library in the building, but not in a way that access needs to be shared. We will design our operations to avoid any non-essential access to this space. Beyond this, no particular change to the service's existing safeguarding controls is brought about by the relocation.

Crime and Disorder:

No impact.

Corporate Services implications:

(i.e., Legal, Finance, Procurement, Human Resources, Digital, Customer Services, Asset Management)

Digital, legal, financial, procurement, HR and asset implications have been factored into the background development of this report

Residents and Businesses consultation/consideration:

Please refer to the content of the report.

Appendices:

None.

Background reference papers:

Date	Type	Available From
Mar 2021	Report (Customer Services - Service Delivery Model and Public Access)	Paul Wood
7 Jun 2022	Report – Cabinet – Pt2 Key Decision (Lowestoft Town Investment Plan)	Paul Wood
19 April 2024	Equality Impact Analysis (EqIA) (EQIA607405396)	Tom Darling-Fernley