

MEDWAY COUNCIL

CABINET

9 NOVEMBER 2004

REVIEW OF PROPERTIES IN ROCHESTER

Portfolio holder: Councillor Alan Jarrett, Finance

Report from: Neil Davies, Director of Finance and Corporate Services

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1. Summary

- 1.1. This report sets out the findings of the review of properties in Rochester and presents the outcome of consultation into moving Rochester Library to Eastgate House.

2. Decision Issues

- 2.1. Any proposals that require capital investment will be a matter for Council. If Members are minded to confirm the Rochester Library move to Eastgate House, this will be a matter for Cabinet.
- 2.2. The Cabinet are asked to consider this as a matter of urgency to enable the consultation, as detailed in the report, to commence and the proposals to be taken forward.

3. Background

- 3.1. Excluding the castle, car parks and public conveniences, the Council's principal premises in Rochester town centre together with the services they currently deliver are set out in the following table:

Premises	Service(s) delivered
Guildhall Museum	Museum
Corn Exchange	Function rooms, bar & kitchen Library
95 High Street	Visitor information centre Café Art gallery Auditorium Offices Coach set down/pick up
Adult Education Centre	Adult Learning
Eastgate House Eastgate Annex Eastgate Cottage Dickens chalet & gardens	Dickens museum (to Oct 04) Offices (vacant) Gardens

- 3.2. Through improvements in the provision and management of its property assets the Council is seeking to ensure they are in the right location, accessible and fit for purpose. Given that property costs are a local authority's second largest item of expenditure after staff, it is essential that the provision and use of property assets be dictated by the need to deliver services.
- 3.3. In Rochester town centre the Council currently owns and manages five large complexes of buildings spread along the length of the High Street. The justification for the retention of the assets and their component parts must be seen not only in the context of the services currently delivered from the premises, but in the context of the Council's future plans for service provision. Clearly, assets that provide flexible space, capable of adapting and accommodating future service needs are more desirable for long term retention than those that are inflexible and constrained.
- 3.4. In terms of future service provision the Council's asset management plan proposes that frontline service provision will be provided in each of Medway's principal centres, including Rochester.
- 3.5. The existing Registry Office does not meet service needs and there is a desire for a new Dickens tourist attraction in Rochester.
- 3.6. A matrix outlining the pros and cons of each new service requirement against possible locations is attached at appendix 1.

4. Advice and analysis

4.1. A brief analysis is set out below.

4.2. Registry Office

4.2.1. Of the possible locations appraised in the matrix for the registry office the Corn Exchange is undoubtedly the most suitable. It complements the predominant use of the building and provides the opportunity to relocate the service from its existing premises, which are not DDA compliant and do not meet service needs.

4.2.2. Currently, the Corn Exchange provides the following services:

Function Rooms

These comprise the Queens Hall, the smaller Princes Hall, bar, reception and kitchen. The building was the subject of investment in the late 1990s, although it is not fully DDA compliant.

Library

The library is principally located on the rear ground floor of the of the Corn Exchange, under the Queens Hall, but extends into a number of sub-standard buildings and huts on the adjacent land. The premises are not DDA compliant and in their current condition do not contribute well to service delivery.

- 4.2.3. Overall it is felt that whilst the Corn Exchange is a magnificent building it is not realising its full potential. However, with the addition of the registry office the Corn Exchange building could become a first class 'ceremonial centre' with the potential to become entirely self-funding. It is considered the land to the rear could provide a new garden and vehicle set down facilities whilst still retaining its potential for future development and consequently the ability to generate a capital receipt for the Council.
- 4.2.4. The existing registry office provides a statutory marriage room for up to 8 people that can be replicated at the Corn Exchange. The larger room at the current building in Maidstone Road, Chatham accommodates up to 35, whilst the Princes Hall at the Corn Exchange can accommodate up to 100 people. This would give extra flexibility, but a careful charging structure will be required to ensure that comparable or better service is continued. The proposed layout for the Corn Exchange may need to be revisited to accommodate this issue.
- 4.2.5. Charges should compare favourably with other neighbouring facilities to ensure the centre's competitiveness.

4.3. **First Point of Contact (One Stop Shop)**

- 4.3.1. The analysis indicates the preferred location would be the Visitor Information Centre at 95 High Street. It is an excellent high street location, which is essential for this use, and sufficient space is available.
- 4.3.2. This property has been the subject of significant investment, is DDA compliant and has a prominent high street frontage. Whilst the accommodation it provides is on different levels, due to the sloping site, and is somewhat compartmentalised on the upper levels it is considered sufficiently flexible and adaptable to meet current and future needs. With its coach set down/pick up facility to the rear it is one of the principal arrival points for visitors to Rochester. The addition of a first point of contact facility would strengthen its role for the delivery of front line services and contribute to fulfilling the Council's commitment to roll out this initiative.

4.4. Dickens Tourist Attraction

4.4.1. Potential locations include 95 High Street and the Guildhall Museum.

4.4.2. At 95 High Street the only suitable space would be the Art Gallery. However, this is tucked away on the first floor and could only accommodate a small-scale exhibition. A more viable alternative that should be investigated is the Guildhall Museum.

4.4.3. The Museum occupies a complex of buildings that have significant historical interest, although the accommodation is relatively inflexible and not well suited to the requirements of a modern museum service. Furthermore, there are no public amenities on the site and the buildings do not meet DDA requirements. There is also a significant backlog of maintenance. Nevertheless, it is a potential location for a new Dickens tourist attraction, which could provide the opportunity for additional revenue income and subsequent investment into the building.

4.5. Re-location of Rochester Library

4.5.1. If it is decided to re-locate the registry office to the Corn Exchange, the existing library will be displaced.

4.5.2. On 29 June 2004 a decision was made by Cabinet to move Rochester Library to the Dickens Complex and also to create a Writing and Literary centre there, with work to commence on 1 November 2004. Consultation was undertaken using questionnaires distributed to Rochester residents and a public meeting held on 12 August 2004. The outcome of the consultation is set out in appendix 2.

4.5.3. Environment and Front Line Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered the provisional outcome of the consultation on 2 September 2004 (together with a report on the wider review of properties in Rochester) and recommended to Cabinet that no decision be made until the work on the review of premises in Rochester is completed. The Committee also asked that ways of maintaining the Dickens Exhibition be examined and options be brought forward.

4.5.4. Whilst Cabinet has decided in principle to move the library to Eastgate Annex, an alternative worthy of consideration would be a move to the Adult Education Centre (AEC). There is an obvious synergy between the uses and since the AEC is already DDA compliant this option could be more cost effective. Combining the two functions could create a library and lifelong learning resource centre in the heart of the town, with the potential to become a centre of excellence.

- 4.5.5. The Adult Education Centre itself has benefited from a recently completed refurbishment programme and given this level of investment, the fact the building is fully accessible, DDA compliant and provides reasonably flexible space it is felt to be worthy of retention in the medium to long-term. It is considered sufficiently flexible to be suitable for the provision of additional or alternative services. Currently it is not fully utilised during the late afternoon/early evening and the August holidays.
- 4.5.6. Possible locations within the building for the library have been examined and a ground floor location is feasible on the left hand side as you enter the complex. In this location a refurbished entrance foyer could be created for the building with new reception areas on either side for each service. This would provide a considerably improved entry point to both the services and the building itself. It would also mean that both facilities would have the flexibility to operate independently of each other as appropriate and particularly when their service delivery times differ.
- 4.5.7. The usable area of library in this location is 263 sq. metres excluding staff facilities and up to 331 sq. metres inclusive. In addition by integrating the two uses greater use could be made of the remainder of the building during its quieter periods. This could include Homework Help Clubs and other community uses. Therefore, through utilising the building more effectively the library would have a much greater area at its disposal than would otherwise be the case. The space available at the alternative location of Eastgate Annex is 272 sq. metres.
- 4.5.8. Through revised timetabling and some reconfiguration of the remaining space officers are hopeful that the displaced AEC uses can be accommodated within the remaining parts of the building, without detrimentally affecting current service provision. Furthermore utilising Eastgate Cottage and other council facilities could accommodate short-term pressures, particularly during conversion works.
- 4.5.9. With the increased usage of the building it is also recommended that the existing toilet facilities are refurbished. Other recommended improvements would include new internal and external signage. Externally this could take the form of bespoke high quality vertical banners to the buildings frontage and its elevation to Corporation Street and should include a suitable illumination scheme.
- 4.5.10. It should also be noted that if the facility is successful there is the potential for the building to be extended. Currently part of the complex includes a linked single-storey timber extension used as a fitness studio. This area is capable of redevelopment to provide a permanent extension of up to three storeys in height and linked to the main building at each level. Initial calculations indicate such an extension could provide in excess of 500 sq. metres of additional floor space.

- 4.5.11. To ensure both services make the best use of the building it would be advisable to develop a centralised room booking system. This would ensure that when rooms are not needed for their core uses they are available for use by other council sections, community groups and outside bodies. Suitable charges should be made, which would reduce the premises costs for the core users and enable the revenue savings to enhance service delivery.
- 4.5.12. Consideration should also be given to combining this booking and charging regime with similar council facilities to improve the economies of scale and also move towards a comprehensive facilities management function. Such a function would enable buildings to be managed more cost effectively, ensure users focus on service delivery and is consistent with the council's asset management plan.
- 4.5.13. The pros and cons of both options are set out in appendix 1, together with the estimated costs of each.

4.6. Eastgate House Complex

- 4.6.1. Eastgate House – The significance of this former residential house was outlined in the report to Cabinet on the 29 June 2004. It currently suffers from a substantial backlog of maintenance and is not DDA compliant. Furthermore, given its listed status and grading it is considered to be prohibitively expensive, if not impossible, to make the whole building DDA accessible. These factors and the constraints of the accommodation mean that it is extremely inflexible and very difficult to adapt for the delivery of front line services.
- 4.6.2. The complex of buildings and gardens are of national architectural and historic interest and Eastgate House itself would be suitable for restoration to become a 'house of its period'. If the gardens are also restored the complex has the potential in the longer term to become a new visitor attraction and high quality green space at this end of high street.

5. Consultation

- 5.1. Public consultation regarding the proposal to move the library to Eastgate Annex has taken place and the results are set out in this report. Additional consultation has taken place internally with leading officers and relevant portfolio holders.
- 5.2. The service managers and management teams of both the library and the adult & community learning service are supportive of the principle of co-location, subject to a combined facility satisfactorily meeting their respective accommodation requirements.

5.3. If it were decided to re-locate the library to the AEC it would also be essential for the Director of Education and Leisure to ensure that:

- The Learning and Skills Council are fully consulted throughout the process and any concerns adequately addressed.
- Tutors and the staff of both services are fully consulted and engaged in developing the detailed design proposals.
- The reconfiguration proposals for the building will meet current and future service needs.
- The timing of any works is sympathetic to enrolment and other periods of high service demand.

6. Financial and Legal Implications

6.1. The broad estimated capital costs of the various options are set out in the table below:

Scheme	Cost of element £'000	Scheme totals £'000
POSSIBLE PHASE 1		
Conversion works (inc. DDA)	40	
IT Service delivery	20	
First Point of Contact		60
Conversion works (inc. DDA)	230	
IT Service delivery	50	
Demolition and garden	120	
Equipment and hire	20	
Registry Office		420
New reception areas for both services	52	
Conversion works inc. signage & toilet refurbishment	130	
Relocation of displaced facilities	70	
IT Service delivery	22	
Set up costs	30	
Equipment & move	20	
Library to AEC		324
PHASE 1 TOTAL		804
POSSIBLE PHASE 2		
Restoration repairs	450	
"House of its period" interpretation & set up costs	100	
Garden restoration (min.)	50	
Relocation of chalet (optional)	75	
Demolish toilet and replace with pod elsewhere	25	
Eastgate House		700
Panel Exhibit	70	
Dickens Tourist Attraction		70
PHASE 2 TOTAL		770
GRAND TOTAL		1,574

- 6.2. Against these costs will be the capital receipt from the sale of the existing registry office in Maidstone Road, currently estimated to be in the region of £500,000. Other funding sources include the DDA capital allocation for the buildings. The table below sets out the available sources:

Funding Source	£'000
Sale of existing registry office	500
Registry office DDA	30
Corn Exchange DDA	40
Eastgate Annex DDA	50
Total	620

- 6.3. The programmed cost of moving the library to Eastgate Annex is £333,000 against a forecast of £324,000 for a move to the AEC. The pros and cons of these locations for the displaced library are set out in the matrix in appendix 1.
- 6.4. Depending on the final price obtained for the existing Registry Office the capital costs of the Phase 1 proposals might be funded from existing resources. Additional resources would be required to implement Phase 2 and for any shortfall from phase 1, but if the proposals are agreed in principle business plans could be prepared and appropriate funding sought.
- 6.5. Members should note that the proposal to fund this scheme from reserves represents a significant call on a diminished resource. Further the proposal to utilise resources set against DDA works is also problematic as not all of these works are necessarily phased for the current year, and future year allocations have yet to be agreed, and would in their turn represent a further draw on reserves. The unallocated reserves available at the beginning of this financial year to support all demands not currently reflected in the authority's budgets is approximately £3.6 million. This proposal has the potential to reduce that sum to less than £3 million.
- 6.6. The revenue implications of these proposals are considered to be largely budget neutral. However, overall the Council will not incur the costs of the existing registry office, which has a budget of £22,000 in 2004/05. In addition, external income at the Corn Exchange is likely to improve as a result co-location with the registry office and the complex being promoted as a ceremonial centre.
- 6.7. However, these potential savings could only be realised in full if the revenue costs of the new one-stop-shop in 95 High Street could be contained within the existing budget provision for that service.
- 6.8. By virtue of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 the council has a duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service, which must include but is not limited to, lending books and other

material to people who live, work or study full time within the Medway area.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1. Based upon the attached high-level matrix and the above analysis Cabinet are recommended to approve the following series of proposals:

First Point of Contact

- 7.1.1. The Rochester 'One-Stop-Shop' is located at 95 High Street.

Registry Office

- 7.1.2. The Registry Office is relocated from its existing location in Maidstone Road, Chatham to the ground floor of the Corn Exchange, with the creation of a new garden to the rear and vehicle set down facility.

- 7.1.3. The existing registry office and any remaining land or development rights to the rear of the Corn Exchange is declared surplus and sold for best consideration with the whole of the receipts returned to reserves.

Dickens Tourist Attraction

- 7.1.4. Officers are recommended to develop the business case for a Dickens tourist attraction to be located in the Guildhall Museum, on the basis that with this added facility, it would be reasonable to charge an admission fee to the Museum to recoup the cost and reduce the costs of the overall service.

Rochester Library Move

- 7.1.5. Cabinet is asked to:

Consider the proposal to move the Library to the Adult Education Centre, subject to the proposed consultation and provided the realigned service provision meets the needs of current and future learners.

OR

Confirm the decision to move the Library to Eastgate House Annex.

Eastgate House

- 7.1.6. The management of the Eastgate House complex (excluding the public conveniences) is brought under the day-to-day management of the Education and leisure directorate, with effect from 10 December 2004 and Council is recommended to approve this transfer.

7.1.7. Officers are instructed to develop in the short to medium term Eastgate House as a Writing and Literary centre. In addition it should be available for occasional hire for use for such events as civil weddings and ceremonies.

7.1.8. Officers are instructed to explore proposals for its restoration as a “house of its period” for the longer-term, drawing on its unique history and links with the Dockyard. This would include restoration of the gardens and possible re-location of the existing public conveniences to create a re-vitalised high quality green space at this end of the High Street. The house and gardens would have the potential to become a new visitor attraction in central Rochester and related commercial activities should also be investigated.

Consultation

7.1.9. Officers are instructed to undertake appropriate consultation, as outlined in the report, with staff, stakeholders and service users regarding the Cabinet’s recommendations.

Delegation

7.1.10. Authority is delegated to the Director of Finance and Corporate Services, in consultation with the portfolio holder for Finance, to consider the outcome of the consultation processes, finalise the detailed proposals and implement the recommendations.

Recommendation to Council

7.1.11. Cabinet is asked to recommend to Council that a total of £804,000 be included in the capital programme to fund the phase 1 proposals set out within the report, to be met from reserves noting that the capital receipt gained from the sale of the Registry Office in Maidstone Road, Chatham will be used to replenish the Council's reserves.

8. Suggested reasons for decision

8.1. To improve service delivery and ensure the council makes the most efficient use of its property assets.

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Background papers

Environment and Front Line Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 27 May 2004 and 2 September 2004

Cabinet report and minutes – 29 June 2004

Council report and minutes – 15 July 2004

Location/ Service	Corn Exchange	Eastgate House	Visitor Information Centre	Adult Education Centre
Registry Office	<p>Pros Synergy with existing use DDA compliant Potential for dedicated garden Public car parks nearby Proximity to other photo opportunities</p> <p>Cons No dedicated off-street parking Displaces Library</p>	<p>Pros Potential for dedicated garden Public car parks nearby</p> <p>Cons Impractical to become DDA compliant Not easily converted to intended use</p>	<p>Pros Potential for dedicated garden DDA compliant Public car parks nearby</p> <p>Cons Displacement of existing uses Not best use of high street frontage Not compatible with the coach set down area</p>	<p>Pros Potential for dedicated garden, albeit opposite Public car parks nearby DDA compliant</p> <p>Cons Displacement of at least part of the existing uses No synergy with existing uses Not easily converted to intended use</p>
	<p>Conclusion Floor plans have been prepared which demonstrate its feasibility and subject to the provision of a garden and adequate vehicle set down, the proposal can be recommended.</p>	<p>Conclusion Not considered a viable option as the building is not considered suitable for largely an office use. Such use would not complement the house's historical significance.</p>	<p>Conclusion Whilst potentially viable it would displace much of the existing use and is not compatible with the well-used coach set down facility.</p>	<p>Conclusion The building could not be easily converted to compartmentalised offices. Existing uses would be displaced.</p>
Dickens Tourist Attraction	<p>Pros Located near other tourist attractions DDA compliant Public car parks nearby</p> <p>Cons No particular synergy with existing uses</p>	<p>Pros Public car parks nearby</p> <p>Cons Impractical to become DDA compliant History of the house is not Dickens related</p>	<p>Pros Synergy with existing uses DDA compliant Public car parks nearby</p> <p>Cons Displacement of existing uses</p>	<p>Pros Public car parks nearby DDA compliant</p> <p>Cons Displacement of at least part of the existing uses No synergy with existing uses Not easily converted to intended use</p>
	<p>Conclusion Potentially a suitable location – although slightly off-pitch, but no particular synergy with the existing uses.</p>	<p>Conclusion Not considered practical.</p>	<p>Conclusion Potentially a suitable location, but would be small scale.</p>	<p>Conclusion No synergy with existing use and off-pitch location.</p>

Appendix 1 contd.

Location/Service	Corn Exchange	Eastgate House	Visitor Information Centre	Adult Education Centre
One Stop Shop	Pros DDA compliant Public car parks nearby Cons Not high street location No synergy with existing use	Pros Public car parks nearby Cons Impractical to become DDA compliant Not easily converted to intended use	Pros Some synergy with existing information use High street location Sufficient space available without displacing existing users DDA compliant Public car parks nearby Cons	Pros Public car parks nearby DDA compliant Cons Not a high street location Displacement of at least part of the existing uses No particular synergy with existing uses
	Conclusion Not a high street location and would not require all the available space. Also no synergy with existing uses.	Conclusion Not practical.	Conclusion Meets criteria.	Conclusion Not a high street location and no particular synergy with existing uses.

Location/Service	Option A – Eastgate Annex			Option B – Adult Education Centre		
Displaced Library	Pros High street frontage Public car parks nearby Cons Significant conversion works Building not currently DDA compliant Smaller than existing	Costs Conversion and DDA ICT Service Delivery Set up costs Equipment and move Total	£ 241,650 42,200 30,000 <u>20,000</u> 333,850	Pros Synergy with existing uses Close to the high street Currently DDA compliant Public car parks nearby Cons No high street frontage Some displacement of existing facilities	Costs New Reception area Conversion Displaced relocations ICT Service Delivery Set up costs Equipment and move Total	£ 52,000 130,000 70,000 22,200 30,000 <u>20,000</u> 324,200
	Conclusion The main advantage of the building is its high street location, but conversion costs are relatively expensive.	Conclusion Not on the high street, but synergy with existing use and the building is already DDA compliant. Potential to create a new combined "Library & Lifelong Learning Resource Centre" suitable for the 21 st century.				

Relocation of Rochester Library

1. The outcome of consultation is set out below. 639 responses were received of which 86.2% currently used the library. 59.9% of respondents stated that they would continue to use the library if it was moved. Only 7% of respondents would be less likely to use it.
2. General comments provided through the questionnaires concerned the availability of car parking near to the library, a possible adverse effect on library stock and the creation of a separate reference library unconnected to areas designated for on-line access.
3. A public meeting was arranged for 11 August 2004 at 7pm in the Visitor Information Centre for the public to express their views. Notices were put in the library, VIC, local shops and pubs informing the public. The consultation was also publicised in the Medway Standard and the Medway Messenger.
4. The main issues raised at this meeting included the reduction in space, the effect on book stock and the suggestion was made that the library move to the VIC.
5. Although not specifically referring to the library proposal, a significant number of comments were made opposing the decision to close the Dickens Centre and the lack of prior consultation. A large proportion of those attending the meeting made the connections between Dickens and Rochester and felt that it was important to retain a Dickens branding within Rochester to sustain the tourism economy. In addition the Medway Tourism Association is opposed to the loss of a visitor attraction in Rochester.

Rochester Library Consultation – Final consultation response

The “Updated figures” column shows the final consultation figures and the “Variance” column shows any difference between the final figures and those appearing in the Environment and Front Line Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

	Figures in the Cabinet report	Updated figures	Variance
Number of responses received	552	639	+87
Number who use Rochester library	482	551	+69
Percentage who use Rochester library	87.3%	86.2%	-1.1%

The library is used by residents to:

Borrow books	87%	87%	-0.9%
Seek information	52%	49.9%	-2.1%
Borrow videos/DVDs	40.2%	38.7%	-1.5%
Use computers	17.4%	16.9%	-0.5%
Borrow spoken word books	10.1%	9.9%	-0.2%
Borrow music	16.3%	15.5%	-0.8%
Read newspaper/magazines	17.6%	17.6%	-0.5%
Other	7.4%	7.4%	-0.2%

Percentage who would continue to use the library if it was moved	59.6%	59.9%	+0.3%
Percentage who would be less likely to use the library if it was moved	7.4%	7%	-0.4%

What residents would like to see in the proposed Writing and Literary Centre:

Seminars	16.5%	18.2%	+1.7%
Author visits/ book signings	38.6%	37.9%	-0.7%
Lectures	31.5%	31.6%	+0.1%
School visits	16.5%	16.9%	+0.4%
Literary research	20.7%	20.2%	-0.5%
Children’s activities	30.3%	30.2%	-0.1%
Reader groups	17.6%	17.4%	-0.2%
ICT facilities	20.1%	20.3%	+0.2%
Tours of Eastgate	24.6%	24.1%	-0.5%
Poetry readings	11.2%	11%	-0.2%

Suggested opening times:

9am to 6pm seven days a week	14.3%	14.1%	-0.2%
9am to 6pm Monday to Saturday and 10am to 4pm Sunday	25.9%	27.2%	+1.3%
9am to 9pm Monday to Saturday	48.9%	46.8%	-2.1%
9am to 6pm weekdays only (closed weekends)	5.4%	5.5%	+0.1%

Percentage who would need wheelchair/pushchair access	18.3%	17.2%	-1.1%
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