

**FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:**           **CABINET**

**DATE:**               **TUESDAY, 19<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY, 2013**

**REPORT BY:**       **CHIEF EXECUTIVE, HEAD OF HOUSING, HEAD OF  
ICT AND CUSTOMER SERVICES**

**SUBJECT:**           **FLINTSHIRE CONNECTS**

**1.00**   **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.01   This report provides an update on the progress of the Flintshire Connects programme, the preferred options for the second and third Connects in Connah's Quay and Flint and the strategy for the complete programme across the County.
- 1.02   The report proposes a number of special actions for Phase 1 of the programme, and the development of Phase 2.

**2.00**   **BACKGROUND**

- 2.01   Flintshire Connects is a key part of changing and improving the Council with the emphasis on first class customer service.
- 2.02   The vision for Flintshire Connects is to improve customer service by providing simpler and more "*joined up*" access to County Council and public sector services in County towns in a modern and welcoming environment. Connects support the decentralisation of County Council workforce and services and more flexible ways of working.
- 2.03   This vision for Flintshire Connects was approved by the County Council's Executive Committee on 19<sup>th</sup> July 2011, following extensive consultation and workshop briefings with Elected Members, employees, Trade Unions and partner organisations. In addition to agreeing the concept and vision for customer facing services delivered through Flintshire Connects, elected members also authorised lead officers to bring forward firm proposals on the first location which could be located on the site of the Old Town Hall, High Street, Holywell.

2.04 The Centre at Holywell opened on November 1st 2012. Its High Street location means it is highly visible for the public to access. The following services are being delivered from the Connects Centre at Holywell:

- Housing
- Welfare Benefits Advice
- Council Tax and Business Rates
- Streetscene (including refuse collection and Highways)
- Concessionary Travel
- Blue Badges
- Payment facilities for Council services
- Planning enquiries
- Referrals to Adult and Social Services
- Information and referrals to Environmental Services.

2.06 The Connects Centre at Holywell is open to the public between 8.30 am to 6.00 pm Monday to Friday, and between 9.00 am and 12.00 pm on Saturdays. These extended hours and Saturday mornings enable customers who experience difficulties in accessing County Council services during the working week to do so after work or on a Saturday morning. Connects Customer Service Advisors also support and complement the County Council's Customer Services Strategy by working with customers to support them to use the self-serve facilities which are available for them to access in the Flintshire Connects Centre.

2.07 Training for Connects Centre Customer Service Advisors (CSAs) has been based upon the principle that when a customer has an entitlement to a service verified, such as Council Tax Benefit or Concessionary Travel they are able to process their entitlement and authorise service delivery. Where more specialist or discretionary support and advice is requested on potentially complex or sensitive issues such as homelessness, planning policy or social services, Connects Customer Service Advisors have receive specialist training, so they recognise "*trigger points*" and will know when to refer a case on to specialist staff to make a home visit or appointment in the Connects Centre using the private interview rooms.

2.08 A key feature of the Connects Centre at Holywell has been the new collaborative working arrangements with key partner organisations such as North Wales Police, Deeside College, Communities First and JobCentre Plus. North Wales Police have vacated Holywell Police Station to have a permanent presence on the first floor of the Centre. North Wales Police have met the entire costs of the refurbishment of the first floor and will also contribute towards the on-going running costs of the building. Similarly, Communities First presence in the building will enable them to maintain a strong presence in Holywell and the surrounding rural communities it serves. As Communities

First work closely with a number of County Council service areas, their presence will strengthen existing working arrangements through improved cross agency working, referrals and co-location. Deeside College are also a key partner in the partnership, and are already using the Centre for community learning.

- 2.09 More recently, JobCentre Plus has a presence within the Connects Centre. Data collated by JobCentre Plus indicates that up to 50% of customers visiting their Flint office come from the Holywell area. Their involvement at Holywell will also reduce the need for customers to travel to either Flint or Rhyl where the nearest JobCentre Plus offices are currently located.
- 2.10 The Flintshire Connects Centre at Holywell can be regarded as a “*test bed*” for rolling out the Programme across the county. It will set the standard for both the design and approach to the delivery of key County Council and partner organisation services in the future. In order to support this process, data is being collated at Holywell to monitor and evaluate customer contact trends including service areas accessed and customer satisfaction. Appendix 1 provides a summary of the number and nature of enquiries from customers at Holywell
- 2.11 It is also proposed to monitor from where customers are travelling to access services at the Connects Centre at Holywell. This information will be used to support the County Council’s Customer Service Strategy by informing future service delivery arrangements, ensuring that they are efficient, cost effective and tailored to meet the needs and aspirations of customers. This exercise will also help the County Council to target services and customer groups through its “*Channel Shift*” project to gain the most benefit of moving them from face to face to telephone, and telephone to self service – particularly those living in rural or remote communities.
- 2.12 The provision of strategically located Connects Centres is part of a programme of change which will support Flintshire Futures Assets Programme for the management and rationalisation of its property assets. This includes the County Council’s overall approach to agile working provision with the network of Connects Centres supporting the decentralisation of employees. In addition to improving customer access to County Council services, this will have the effect of reducing the need for office space.

### **3.00 CONSIDERATIONS**

- 3.01 The Connects Programme has been broken down into two phases. There has been a commitment from the outset to locate a fully functioning Flintshire Connects in each of the County towns. The order of choice, and therefore phasing, is based to an extent on capitalising on opportunities. When a location emerges, either through the use of our own property portfolio or in partnership with other public

bodies, the County Council have aimed to capitalise on the opportunity. This thinking and creativity was behind the choice of location for Holywell with a firm business plan turning the vision into reality. Both the towns of Flint and Connah's Quay have creative preferred options for allocation and are therefore in Phase 1. Other towns will follow in Phase 2. Two Options have been developed for Flint and Connah's Quay. A number of potential sites had been identified and assessed for location, accessibility to the public and interest from partner organisations. Appendix 2 details the key activities and projected time frame for implementing the Connects programme at Flint and Connah's Quay.

- 3.02 It is proposed that the Connects Centres at both Flint and Connah's Quay will also receive cash and card payments for any Council service (including housing and garage rents and Council Tax), which will also allow the migration of the existing Cash Offices into the proposed Connects Centres.

### **3.03 Flint: County Offices**

- 3.04 The preferred option for a Connects Centre in Flint is the ground floor of County Offices, which are located at the top of Church Street. This site fully compliments the key principles for the Connects Programme and consequently, has been the only site considered for the Connects Centre. The rationale for this includes its central town location, close proximity to excellent public transport and local facilities including library, leisure centre and Post Office. The building also affords the required office space to accommodate key strategic partners such as North Wales Police and JobCentre Plus who also wish to retain a strong community presence in Flint through co-location in the proposed Connects Centre.
- 3.05 County Offices also accommodates key County Council customer-facing service areas such as Housing Management and Repairs, Housing Options, Welfare Rights, Supporting People and the Learning Disability Team. A Connects Centre within the building will support the modernisation and realisation of efficiency savings through more efficient and cost-effective service delivery arrangements, enhanced referral and signposting between different service areas and partner organisations and increased take-up of Council and partner organisation services.
- 3.06 The creation of a modern and welcoming Connects Centre will also support the Flint Master Plan by enhancing the physical appearance of the townscape and support the economic regeneration by supporting local businesses and stakeholder groups.
- 3.07 Appendix 3 provides initial drawings for the site which propose the refurbishment of the existing ground floor reception area, connecting it with the neighbouring vacant former hair salon. This will increase the

floor space available for the public to access services and information provided at the Centre. The Centre will be accessed from Church Street, and it is proposed to introduce a modest glazed canopy which will clearly demarcate the new main entrance to the building. Church Street is classed as a conservation area, and any proposed refurbishment will be sympathetic to the many historic buildings located in close proximity

- 3.08 The Design and Consultancy Team have provided estimated costs for the capital refurbishment of the ground floor of County Offices, Flint of £330K. These are draft costs at this stage and are being challenged for value for money. These projected capital costs will be shared between the County Council and JobCentre Plus. The County Council's contribution to the costs is yet to be finalised but will be within the region of £250k which was the outline costing per facility agreed at the outset of the programme.
- 3.09 North Wales Police are currently conducting internal discussions and assessment of their likely future space and service requirements for their occupation of a separate section of the ground and first floors at County Offices. North Wales Police will meet the entire capital refurbishment costs of the ground and first floor areas of County Offices they will use solely.
- 3.10 In addition to sharing the capital refurbishment costs, all partner organisations would similarly share the on-going annual running costs of County Offices, Flint.
- 3.11 Connah's Quay: Modular integration with the Library and Learning Centre**
- 3.12 The preferred option for a Connects Centre in Connah's Quay is the modular integration with Connah's Quay Library and Learning Centre. This follows a detailed Options Appraisal which considered key factors such as value for money, accessibility to the public, proximity to local facilities and partner organisation involvement. The viability of a number of sites was assessed which also included the former Custom House School and vacant units in the new Quay Medical Centre complex.
- 3.13 The modular integration of a Connects Centre to Connah's Quay Library and Learning Centre will facilitate the phased closure of Civic Offices, generating annual revenue saving of £92K. The central location of the site, prominent position close to shops and amenities, excellent pedestrian and transport links, along with low capital and on-going revenue costs makes the modular integration of a Centre within the existing Library and Learning Centre a viable option. The scheme ties in well with County Council services currently in the area and nearby parking is readily accessible.

- 3.14 Appendix 3 outlines proposals that will look to take advantage of a modular construction on the current Library and Learning Centre car park, using sustainable materials which will integrate well with the surrounding buildings. The form and external finishes of the proposed building will be sympathetic to the local streetscape, whilst at the same time creating a focal point which will be supported by the attractive green-space fronting the High Street. The form will reflect the cellular flat roofed nature of the Library and Learning Centre and will be connected via a glazed link corridor to minimise impact upon the existing structure. This option will enable service integration and shared facilities and it is envisaged that the addition of the Connects Centre will increase footfall to the Library and Learning Centre. This will also enable the inclusion of a display facility for the provision of local artefacts and items of historical interest.
- 3.15 Based upon the preliminary concept drawings, the County Council has received estimated outline costs of £250K as a complete design and build package. This includes all necessary groundwork's, Mechanical and Electrical engineering (M&E) installations, connections and glazed link connection to the Library. Under this option, it is projected that the combined on-going revenue costs for the building will be £15K per annum. This is primarily due to the proposed use of high efficiency and renewable energy sources, sustainable materials, and high levels of thermal insulation that will have obvious benefits on the environment and help reduce the running costs of the building. The on-going revenue costs will be apportioned with the Library.
- 3.16 The proposed use of a modular solution will enable a Connects Centre to be delivered in Connah's Quay within a relatively short timeframe. The utilisation of a modular design also lends itself to providing an option which can be re-used by the County Council at other sites in the future should this be required e.g. educational space.
- 3.17 This approach will enable the County Council to retain a strong and central presence in Connah's Quay whilst proposals for a potentially broader regeneration initiative involving other partner organisations can be further developed. This will also enable additional time for key partner organisations such as North Wales Police to ascertain its future space and service delivery requirements for Connah's Quay in the longer term and as part of a wider regeneration approach.
- 3.18 Flintshire Connects Programme – Phase 2**
- 3.19 The 19<sup>th</sup> July 2011 report to the County Council's Executive Committee which approved the vision for Flintshire Connects, also approved in principle that there should be a Connects Centre in each of the principal county towns. This will provide a geographical distribution of Connects Centres across Flintshire, providing high quality, public services which are easily accessible for all residents, regardless of where they live or work.

3.20 With this in mind, detailed proposals are being developed for Phase 2 of the Flintshire Connects Programme for 2014/15. The needs of Buckley will be a prime consideration. The needs of outlying Saltney will also be reviewed. Key considerations will include projected customer demand and footfall, site identification and assessment, space requirements and the attainment of value-for money from each potential location. Discussions are also continuing with key partner organisations around their strategic service priorities, space requirements and available funding streams which will also inform their level of involvement and presence at these locations. The collation and analysis of this information will enable the development of tailored options which are appropriate and sustainable in each town including service delivery arrangements and targeted opening and closing hours which match customers' needs and aspirations.

3.21 A Connects Centre at Mold is projected to be delivered during 2015/16. A decision on Mold will need to be made by the County Council alongside decisions on the future of County Hall. During the interim period, the County Council will continue to deliver the comprehensive range of services which are already easily accessible to the public from County Hall, Mold.

### **3.22 Rural / Remote Communities**

3.23 Whilst the intention is for Connects Centres to be located in key towns across Flintshire, research is proposed by the County Council and partner organisations to consider how access to key public services and information can be improved for customers with specific service needs whom live in rural or remote communities, or are unable to visit County Council or partner organisation premises. This will include developing proposals for Connects services, including regular surgeries and appointments to be delivered from buildings and locations which are accessed by the public on a regular basis including leisure centres, health clinics and the key retail centre at Broughton Retail Park.

3.24 This approach has proved successful in other rural areas of the UK, and is a low cost option which could be rolled out in a short period of time. The County Council is hoping to explore this option in greater detail in partnership with rural communities.

3.25 In order to develop this further and increase the County Council's geographical coverage by improving remote access and facilitate tailored, remote community visits, an expression of interest has been made for funding to the Welsh Government's (WG) "*Digital Inclusion*" Fund. The Fund has been established by WG to support improved accessibility to Council and DWP services in the light of Welfare Reform, with the aim of supporting the delivery of tailored and effective services to vulnerable and excluded households whose

service needs can be highly complex and who often have only limited mobility.

#### **4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.01 That Cabinet approve:

- Progressing Phase 1 of the Flintshire Connects programme,
- That a Flintshire Connects Centre is located on the ground floor of County Offices, Flint, with a proposed opening to the public of February 2014;
- The modular extension to Connah's Quay Library and Learning Centre to deliver a Flintshire Connects Centre, opening to the public in October 2013 and enabling closure of the Connah's Quay Office;
- Authorises lead officers to proceed to design approval and conclude negotiations with North Wales Police and Jobcentre Plus on their proposed occupation of County Offices, Flint;
- Authorises lead officers to proceed with the migration of cash collection services into the Flintshire Connects Centres;
- Authorises lead officers to undertake a consultation period with the local community and stakeholders on proposals for Flintshire Connects Centre at both Flint and Connah's Quay;
- That Cabinet receive an update report on final working arrangements with partners and resulting financial implications.

4.02 That Cabinet authorise lead officers to proceed with key activities to explore proposals for Phases 2 and 3 of the Flintshire Connects programme.

4.03 That Cabinet authorise lead officers to develop options for Flintshire Connects Customer Service Advisors to offer Flintshire Connects services in outlying and rural areas.

#### **5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

##### **5.01 Flintshire Connects Centres, County Offices, Flint**

5.02 The projected financial implications for Connects Centres at County Offices, Flint and Connah's Quay Library and Learning Centre are summarised in Appendix 5.

5.03 It is anticipated that the provision of a Connects Centre at County Offices will be delivered within a cost envelope of £330K capital expenditure. As the section is to be occupied jointly by the Connects

Centre and JobCentre Plus, it is proposed that capital refurbishment costs will be shared between both organisations.

- 5.04 Subject to County Council approval, it is anticipated that the County Council's element of the refurbishment works of County Offices, Flint would be met from the Capital Programme Budget for 2013/14 which has a capital allocation of £500,000 for the provision of Connects Centres.(subject to approval).
- 5.05 North Wales Police will meet the entire capital refurbishment costs of the ground and first floor areas of County Offices they will use solely.
- 5.06 The inclusion of the vacant hair salon as part of the Connects Centre would necessitate re-designation from a non-operational unit, and a loss of rental income of £11,250 per annum; however this is more than offset by partner contributions to revenue costs in County Offices which will provide an overall net efficiency on current running costs.
- 5.07 The County Council will work closely with its partner organisations on the tenure arrangements for County Offices, Flint. It is proposed that the County Council will charge an occupation fee to JobCentre Plus on a pro rata basis determined by the amount of space occupied overall. The County Council will sub-let the ground and first floor areas solely occupied by North Wales Police, who will be responsible for the rent and running costs.
- 5.08 It is anticipated that revenue costs for the ground floor of County Offices, Flint will be circa £16,000 per annum, with revenue contributions from North Wales Police and JobCentre Plus totalling £30,000 per annum. This will represent an annual efficiency saving in the running costs for the ground floor of County Offices, Flint of circa £14,000.
- 5.09 Modular extension to Connah's Quay Library and Learning Centre**
- 5.10 It is anticipated that the modular extension to Connah's Quay Library will be delivered within a cost envelope of £250K capital expenditure.
- 5.11 Subject to County Council approval, it is proposed that the County Council's element of the refurbishment works will be met from the Capital Programme Budget for 2013/14 which has a capital allocation of £500,000 for the provision of Connects Centres (subject to approval).
- 5.12 The anticipated revenue costs for the modular extension to Connah's Quay Library and Learning Centre will be £12, 000 per annum. The on-going revenue costs will be apportioned with the Library. The establishment of a Connects Centre in Connah's Quay will facilitate the closure of Civic Offices, generating annual revenue saving of

£92K.

### 5.13 **Welsh Government Invest-2-Save Fund**

5.14 In order to increase the pace and scale of the implementation of the programme a joint expression of interest has been made with North Wales Police and JobCentre Plus to the Welsh Government's "*Invest-2-Save Fund*" for the capital works and initial start-up costs for the proposed Connects Centres at Flint and Connah's Quay. The Invest-to-Save Fund is available to Welsh Government funded public service organisations to assist them transform the way that they work. In particular, the Fund target's strategic projects which;

- lead to the release of significant cash-releasing savings;
- deliver citizen-focused services; and,
- support key aspects of the Welsh Government's public service efficiency and wider improvement agenda.

5.15 Investments made from the Fund are fully repayable but there are no interest charges and there is flexibility on the payback period. This approach ensures that the Fund is sustainable and available for investment in new projects in the future.

5.16 The joint expression of interest made has been warmly received by the Welsh Government, progressing to the second stage of the Invest-2-Save assessment process. This will take place on the 11<sup>th</sup> February 2013. The final outcome of the Invest-2-Save funding round will be announced by the Welsh Government's Finance Minister in early March 2013. The attainment of Invest-2-Save Funding will reduce pressure on the County Council's Capital Programme budget, and enable the Connects programme to be implemented to Flint and Connah's Quay in the timescales identified.

### 5.17 **Flintshire Connects Revenue Costs and Efficiencies**

5.18 A business plan for securing revenue efficiencies to meet the staffing and on-going revenue costs of Phase 1 of the Connects Programme (the first three Connects Centres at Holywell, Flint, and Connah's Quay) from 2013/14 is well developed, with £150,000 efficiency savings already identified. This includes a £100K contribution from Housing and a £50K from Corporate Services.

5.19 It is proposed that each Directorate will make an equal contribution of £50K from each County Council Directorate from identified efficiency savings achieved through elements of service delivery being devolved to the Connects programme.

5.20 There is also a £100,000 staff cost efficiency in each of the next three years, totalling £300,000 as the programme develops.

## **6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT**

- 6.01 The provision of Flintshire Connects Centres at Connah's Quay and Flint respectively will improve face-to-face access to key Council and partner organisation services and information locally by reducing the need for households on low incomes to travel to County Hall, Mold.

## **7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT**

- 7.01 It is proposed that the Connects Programme will support the Town Action Plan Programme, which is the County Council's agreed strategic approach to regenerating town centres by boosting footfall. Data will be regularly measured to assess whether the presence of Flintshire Connects Centres on the High Street of Flintshire's towns are increasing the flow of people. The impact of Connects Centres will also be monitored through the business impact survey which is undertaken by the County Council to gauge business performance and confidence across town centre based-businesses.
- 7.02 It is anticipated that locating Connects Centres in town centres will support each town's centre regeneration priorities as set out in the respective "*Masterplan*" strategy documents for Holywell, Connah's Quay and Flint by improving the physical appearance of buildings and stimulating economic activity by increasing the number of people visiting the town centre.
- 7.03 Approved drawings for the Connects Centres at Connah's Quay and Flint will incorporate recommendations from the County Council's Energy Unit to maximise energy efficiency in accordance with the Environmental Policy.
- 7.04 Less carbon will also be emitted as households will be able to access key Council and partner organisation services and information locally.

## **8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT**

- 8.01 The main focus of Flintshire Connects is to improve access and quality of services to vulnerable groups who often favour face to face contact when interacting with the County Council and partner organisations.
- 8.02 An Equalities Impact Assessment has also been undertaken to ensure that the needs of all households across Flintshire are considered during the scoping, planning, delivery and monitoring of all Council services via the Holywell Connects Centre. This will include consultation with a number of local stakeholder groups, including Flintshire Deaf Forum, Flintshire Disability Forum, Gypsy and Traveller Group, Flintshire Youth Service and local Welsh speakers.
- 8.03 All Connects Centres will also be DDA compliant.

8.04 A Welsh Language Impact Assessment proforma has been completed to ensure that Flintshire Connects complies with the Council's approved Welsh Language Scheme.

## **9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS**

9.01 Recruitment for Customer Service Advisors (CSAs) for Flintshire Connects Centres will continue to be undertaken from the existing Council workforce, subject to the required skills and experience being met.

9.02 The migration of cash collection services into Connects will result in the phased closure of the Councils Cash Office network. There will be a need to undertake a full assessment of the staffing impact of these changes in line with the corporate policies already in place, avoiding compulsory redundancies where possible and redeploying some Cashiers to other vacant positions within the Council, including potential assimilation into Customer Service Advisor vacancies.

9.03 There will be implications for staff in terms of work locations and new ways of working which will bring more diverse opportunities for personal development for staff as part of the Council's longer term vision.

9.04 There will also be personnel implications arising from the intention for Connects Centres to have extended opening hours for face to face contact, including Saturday mornings.

## **10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED**

10.01 Subject to Cabinet approval, a Communications Plan will be jointly developed with partner organisations and local stakeholders in both Connah's Quay and Flint to raise awareness of the services and information which will be delivered through the Connects Centres. The feedback received will be considered when developing service delivery options from each of the Connects Centres.

## **11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN**

11.01 A regular update on progress with the Connects programme is given to the County Forum, which is the representative forum for Town and Community Councils.

## **12.00 APPENDICES**

12.01 Appendix 1 - Breakdown of Enquiries Received at Flintshire Connects Centre, Holywell

12.02 Appendix 2A - Proposed Project Timetable for Flintshire Connects

Centre, County Offices, Flint

- 12.03 Appendix 2B - Proposed Project Timetable for Flintshire Connects Centre, Connah's Quay, Library
- 12.04 Appendix 3 - Outline Plans for Flintshire Connects Centre on Ground Floor at County Offices, Flint
- 12.05 Appendix 4 - Outline Floor Plans for Modular Extension at Connah's Quay Library and Learning Centre
- 12.06 Appendix 5 - Projected Financial Implications for Flintshire Connects Centres at County Offices, Flint and Connah's Quay Library and Learning Centre

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985**  
**BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

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