

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **CABINET**

DATE: **TUESDAY, 17 SEPTEMBER 2013**

REPORT BY: **HEAD OF ICT AND CUSTOMER SERVICES & HEAD OF HOUSING**

SUBJECT: **FLINTSHIRE CONNECTS UPDATE**

1.00 **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1.01 To provide an update to Cabinet on the Flintshire Connects Programme.

2.00 **BACKGROUND**

2.01 Flintshire Connects is a key element of our Improvement Plan and identified as a priority for 2013/14. 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 a modern and welcoming environment.

2.02 The first Flintshire Connects centre opened at Holywell in November 2012, and currently receives 350 customer service enquiries each week relating to key County Council Services such as Housing, Council Tax, Benefits and Streetscene. In addition, customers are also able to access Job Centre Plus and North Wales Police services and information at Holywell.

2.03 Plans are at various stages of development for Flintshire Connects centres in Flint, Connahs Quay and Buckley.

3.00 **CONSIDERATIONS**

Flint: County Offices

3.01 The Flintshire Connects Centre at Flint will be located on the ground floor of County Offices, Flint. The building will also accommodate North Wales Police and JobCentre Plus. The creation of a modern and welcoming Flintshire Connects Centre will also support the delivery of the Flint Master Plan.

3.02 Detailed plans have been developed for the Flint facility including proposals for the ground floor refurbishment. This will increase the floor space available for the public to access the integrated reception

counter which will be shared by the County Council and Jobcentre Plus. The Flintshire Connects 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 extensive negotiation has taken place with the County Council's Conservation Planning Officer to ensure that the proposed refurbishment and external improvements are sympathetic to the many historic buildings located in close proximity.

- 3.03 A planning application for the construction works at County Offices, Flint was approved by the County Council's Planning Department in June 2013. Both Jobcentre Plus and North Wales Police have signed-off the plans for the areas which they will occupy within the Flintshire Connects Centre. The detailed design work element of the project has now been completed, with the view of undertaking the work to both the Flintshire Connects and North Wales Police sections as a single contract. Key dates for the project are listed below;

Key Milestones	Target Date for Completion
Detail Design and Scheme Sign-off	12/07/2013 (completed)
Production of Design Information	09/08/2013 (completed)
Tender	06/09/2013 (completed)
Tender Evaluation	20/09/2013
Contractor Lead In	04/10/2013
Start of Construction Phase	01/10/2013
End of Construction Phase	14/02/2014

Temporary Reception County Offices, Flint

- 3.04 The main reception and Cash Office at County Offices, Flint will be closed during the construction period. A temporary reception will be located in the shop next door from the middle of September 2013 until the end of February 2014. During this period, all customers wanting to make payments over the counter will be directed to Flint Post Office, which is conveniently located near the existing cash office in Chapel Street. All customers using the Cash Office have received written confirmation of these changes by the County Council. In addition, all scheduled appointments in Flint with the Housing Options Team will be held in the Flintshire Connects Centre at Holy well.

Connah's Quay: Integration with the Library and Learning Centre

- 3.05 The preferred option for a Flintshire Connects Centre in Connah's Quay is the integration with Connah's Quay Library and Learning

Centre. This option will enable service integration and shared facilities and it is envisaged that the addition of the Flintshire Connects Centre will increase footfall to the Library and Learning Centre. The scheme will also involve the creation of a dedicated Heritage Exhibition Centre displaying artefacts of local, historical interest to the local area.

- 3.06 The central location of the site, prominent position local 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.
- 3.07 This project will increase the floor space available for the public to access the integrated reception counter, increase the size of the existing children’s library, and provide a dedicated Heritage Exhibition Display. A working group which includes local Elected Members and County Council staff has been established to monitor the delivery of the project in order to ensure that the Heritage Exhibition Display meets the aspirations of the local community to showcase the history of Connah’s Quay.
- 3.08 The scheme will also provide office accommodation on the first floor for the County Council’s East Housing team which will have a permanent presence at the new Flintshire Connects Centre. In addition, agile working space will be provided on the first floor, enabling County Council and partner organisation employees to work when visiting the locality.
- 3.09 A planning application for the scheme was approved by the County Council’s Planning Department in August 2013. Key dates for the project are listed below;

Key Milestones	Target Date for Completion
Detail Design and Scheme Sign-off	23/09/13
Production of Design Information	21/10/13
Tender	22/11/13
Tender Evaluation	06/12/13
Contractor Lead In	20/12/13
Start of Construction Phase	06/01/14
End of Construction Phase	18/04/14

- 3.10 Whilst only the County Council will be permanently based at the new integrated Flintshire Connects Centre, other organisations have indicated they would like to hold regular weekly community surgeries. This will include North Wales Police who work closely with the County Council on community safety initiatives. Both Jobcentre Plus and Communities First have also indicated a strong interest in using the community IT / training room for job search workshops and training

courses. This will be complimented by regular and on-going surgeries from key County Council services including Benefits, Welfare Rights, Streetscene and Housing.

Temporary Library Arrangements

- 3.11 Options to enable the continued use of the current library during the construction phase are currently being developed.

Flintshire Connects Centre Buckley

- 3.12 An Options Appraisal has been undertaken to identify a suitable site to house the Buckley Flintshire Connects Facility, considering key factors such as value for money, accessibility to the public, proximity to local facilities and partner organisation views. The Buckley Town Council building has been identified as the preferred location, the options appraisal included the existing Library, Police Station and vacant retail unit near the main shopping centre.

- 3.13 Buckley Town Council Building is a two storey, Grade 2 Listed building which has a central location in the town. It is distinct in character and would certainly benefit from a scheme of sympathetic improvement and repair works. The ground floor currently consists of Buckley Town Council Chamber and offices and the County Council's Cash Office. The first floor provides accommodation for the Citizens Advice Bureau, Victim Support and North Wales Trunk Road Agency. There is also an upstairs room which is used for community activities. Under this proposal, the Flintshire Connects Centre would occupy a section of the ground floor, with the integration of the existing Cash Office into Flintshire Connects.

- 3.14 Due to the nature of the building and time of construction, there is currently no provision for disabled access. There are a number of level differences within the building which need to be overcome to meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. The outline proposals provide all services and sanitary accommodation on the entrance level. Constructive discussions have taken place with CADW and the Conservation Officer around required structural alterations and external works will be required to provide the necessary ramped access. These improvements have been approved in principle by CADW and the County Council's Conservation Officer.

- 3.15 North Wales Police have expressed an interest in occupying an office on the first floor. They are currently conducting internal discussions and assessment of their likely future space and service requirements for their occupation. North Wales Police will meet the entire capital refurbishment costs of the area they will use solely.

Self-serve Payment Machines

- 3.16 Self-serve payment machines will be installed at the Flintshire Connects Centres to enable customers pay any County Council account. Flintshire Connects Customer Service Advisors will be available at all times to support all customers using the self-serve payment machines, which will provide a 50% cost reduction per transaction to the County Council.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

Cabinet are asked to:-

- 4.01 Note the update report on the delivery of the Flintshire Connects Centre at County Offices, Flint and Connah's Quay;
- 4.02 Agree the preferred location for the Buckley Flintshire Connects Centre on the ground floor of the Town Council Building at Buckley, subject to further consultation with partner organisations and local Buckley Members.
- 4.03 Authorise lead officers to proceed to design approval and conclude negotiations with North Wales Police on their proposed occupation at Buckley Town Council Building as part of the Flintshire Connects Programme;

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Capital Costs

- 5.01 The Flintshire Connects Centres at Flint, Connah's Quay and Buckley can be delivered within the budget figures of £250K.
- 5.02 The County Council's element of the Flintshire Connects Capital Programme will be met through a combination of the County Council's Capital Programme Budget and Invest-2-Save funding. The County Council's revised Capital Programme Budget for 2013/14 has a capital allocation of £650K for the provision of Flintshire Connects Centres at Flint, Connah's Quay and Buckley. A £50K Housing Revenue Account (HRA) capital allocation has also been earmarked for use towards the Flintshire Connects Programme.

Welsh Government Invest-2-Save Fund

- 5.03 In order to increase the pace and scale of the implementation of the programme a successful bid of £698K has been made with North Wales Police and Jobcentre Plus to the Welsh Government's "*Invest-2-Save Fund*" for the capital works at the Flintshire Connects Centres at Flint and Connah's Quay. Investments made from the Fund are fully repayable but there are no interest charges. The payback period

is as follows:

2013/14 - £300K

2014/15 - £398K

- 5.04 The Invest-2-Save Funding will reduce pressure on the County Council's Capital Programme budget, and enable the Flintshire Connects Programme to be implemented to Flint and Connah's Quay in the timescales identified.

Tenure and revenue arrangements County Offices, Flint

- 5.05 The inclusion of the vacant hair salon as part of the Connects Centre will necessitate re-designation from a non-operational unit, and a loss of rental income of £11K 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.
- 5.06 The County Council is currently working with 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.
- 5.07 It is anticipated that revenue costs for the ground floor of County Offices, Flint will be circa £16K per annum, with revenue contributions from North Wales Police and Jobcentre Plus totalling £30K per annum. This will represent an annual efficiency saving in the running costs for the ground floor of County Offices, Flint of circa £14K.

Revenue arrangements Connah's Quay

- 5.08 The on-going revenue costs will be apportioned with the Library Service. The establishment of a Flintshire Connects Centre in Connah's Quay will facilitate the closure of Civic Offices, generating annual revenue saving of £92K.

Tenure and revenue arrangements Town Council Building, Buckley

- 5.09 Initial discussions have taken place with Buckley Town Council to determine the terms of occupancy likely to be offered to the County Council and its partner organisations. This has been confirmed as being £5.5K p.a. This excludes other on-going utility and Business Rates.

Flintshire Connects Revenue Costs and Efficiencies

5.10 The original proposal for £300k to be released to cover revenue costs for the Flintshire Connects Centre at Holywell has realised £240k, which includes £100k from Housing, £50k from Community Services, £50k from Environment and £40k from ICT and Customer Services. Discussions are currently taking place to establish proposals to fund the further revenue requirements for all three sites.

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

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

6.01 The provision of Flintshire Connects Centres at Flint, Connah's Quay and Buckley respectively will improve face-to-face access to key County Council and partner organisation services and information locally and reduce the need to travel to centralised office locations.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

7.01 It is proposed that the Flintshire 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 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, Flint and Buckley 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 Flintshire 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. 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 Flintshire 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 the Flintshire Connects Programme will result in the phased closure of the Council's 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 offering redeployment opportunities.
- 9.03 As the provision of Flintshire Connects Centre at Connah's Quay will mean integration with the existing Library and Learning Centre, detailed discussion and consideration will be given to the future role of the library staff.
- 9.04 There will also be personnel implications arising from the intention for Flintshire Connects Centres to have extended opening hours for face to face contact, including Saturday mornings.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

- 10.01 A Communications Plan is being 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 Flintshire Connects Centres. The feedback received will be considered when developing service delivery options from each of the Flintshire Connects Centres.
- 10.02 Subject to Cabinet approval, this process will be repeated for Buckley.

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

- 11.01 A regular update on progress with the Flintshire Connects programme

is given to the County Forum, which is the representative forum for Town and Community Councils.

- 11.02 Employee Briefings on the Flintshire Connects Programme took place at Flint and Connah's Quay in June which were also attended by North Wales Police and JobCentre Plus colleagues. A total of 110 employees attended these briefings.

12.00 APPENDICES

None.

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

None.

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