

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SCRUTINY

Date of meeting: 24 January 2011

Report: Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel



Subject: Finance Reception Refurbishment and Extension Feasibility

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Committee Secretary: Adrian Hendry

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) To note this report from the Finance and Performance Management Standing Panel on the refurbishment of the Finance Reception area; and**
- (2) That the Panel's recommendation of Option 3, at a cost of £302,255.86, be approved and recommended to the Cabinet.**

Background

1. The Customer Transformation Task and Finish Panel, established to consider improvements to customer services, reported its findings to the Cabinet in 2009. As a result, a number of initiatives have been taken forward to include, additional resources to improve the quality of the Council's Website, a review of the Forester publication and the establishment of the NI14 Avoidable Contact Working Group.

2. As part of this work, the Panel reviewed the adequacy of the reception areas within the Civic Offices. Whilst ideally there was still an aspiration to bring together the disparate reception areas into a "one stop shop", examination of the costs have demonstrated that this would be prohibitively expensive.

3. Subsequent to consideration of the Task and Finish Panels' final report, the Audit Commission undertook an inspection of the District Council's Benefit Service, the findings of which were reported in May 2010.

4. Whilst the Audit Commission deemed that there were adequate levels of access to the Service, in that customers could call at the Civic Offices in Epping or could use the housing offices as a postal drop-off point, it was found that users of the service would have liked more access points across the District, so that customers could get face-to-face advice and support more easily. The Council has responded positively to this request through the redevelopment of the Limes Farm Hall. On completion this would offer a range of co-located services to include bringing together the area housing office alongside a satellite benefits office. This initiative had been partly funded by a contribution of £802,000 from the £2.129M capital earmarked for the Customer Transformation Programme. Currently there was a remaining amount of £1.327M, within the current Capital Programme 2011/12, yet to be allocated for specific customer service projects. In addition to Limes Farm, there may also be an opportunity to provide further local services to benefit customers, as a result of the further regeneration of Debden Broadway.

5. However, whilst it can be seen that progress is being made with regard to geographical access, the Audit Commission Inspectors were highly critical of the

Benefits/Finance Reception Area at the Civic Offices in Epping i.e.

"Customers using the Civic office at Epping are provided with limited and uninviting facilities. The Revenues and Benefits Service reception area is small with limited and uncomfortable seating. Customers being interviewed do not have privacy as those waiting can easily overhear any discussions. Private interviews are available on request and signs are displayed telling customers of this facility. Seating and desk arrangements are not designed to meet disabled customers needs and in particular wheelchair users. Anyone needing to complete forms has the choice of using a standing height shelf for a vacant cubicle with fixed seating, which is not suitable for some disabled people. There are no facilities for people with young children. Because there is no full-time receptionist, customers must use a telephone provided to be seen by a member of staff if no-one is present in the reception area. The lack of adequate facilities for customers, and in particular for those who are disabled, may deter some people from visiting the office".

6. In response, Norfolk Property Services had been commissioned to undertake a feasibility study to identify options in addressing the Inspectors' concerns. A copy of their Feasibility Report has been placed in the Members' Room and is also available on the following link:

[http://haako/Published/C00000491/M00006554/\\$\\$ADocPackPublic.pdf](http://haako/Published/C00000491/M00006554/$$ADocPackPublic.pdf)

Finance and Performance Management Standing Panel Meeting

7. Representatives from Norfolk Property Services attended the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Standing Panel on 9 December 2010, to take Members through the refurbishment and extension options they had identified. The presentation of the feasibility study coupled with a visit to the existing reception area assisted Members of the Panel in recommending their preferred option to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet for final approval.

8. At the F&PM SP meeting, to aid understanding and layout of the reception area, the members were taken on a tour of the area accompanied by the acting Chief Executive, the Director of Finance and ICT and two representatives from Norfolk Property Services, Ms L Turp and C Sanders, who had prepared a feasibility study identifying options in addressing the inspectors concerns.

9. Ms Turp gave a brief out-line of the problems faced in the reception area, pointed out that it was not up to Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) accessible standards, had poor acoustics, a lack of privacy and soundproofing, lots of physical barriers, poor hearing induction loops and an ineffective queue management system. They had proposed opening up the space and making it a more friendly area by taking away barriers without diminishing security.

10. The Panel in questioning the officers and representatives from Norfolk Property Services noted that:

- There may be a ticket based queuing system via a touch screen or a database system;
- Generally speaking three interviewing (refurbished) booths were adequate for the council's interviewing needs;
- With the opening up of the space in the reception are, they were looking to the installation of panic buttons for staff members;
- The new space would be 'open' and 'transparent' which should deter violent behaviour;
- The screens between the interview booths would be sufficient to provide adequate soundproofing and privacy for the people being interviewed;

- The new caution interviewing room would be able to be used for ordinary interviews as well;
- The new Limes Farm sub-office may take some potential visitors away from this reception area;
- The disruption of the existing facilities during the refurbishing would last between 6 weeks to 2 months;
- During this period a Portable Cabin would be set up to take the staff. The most expensive option for this would be £4,015 for the duration, services costs of £5,000, the least expensive option would be £1,755;
- The new area would allow buggies to be parked there with a small area for children to play in; and
- There were two options for furniture, one was to have very heavy furniture so that it could not be moved easily or, option two, to have them screwed to the ground.

11. Norfolk Property Services had proposed the following three separate costed options:

Option 1 – to open things up and put in semi transparent low level barriers, take away the glass screens, put in new furniture and move the public area back. Total cost would be £200,600.

Option 2 - as option 1 but with the addition of the extension to provide a group interview room. Total cost would be £267,266.84p.

Option 3 – as Options 1 and 2 but with new external glazing and sliding doors (two sets of automated doors), external roller shutters and new information screens. Total cost would be £32,255.86p.

Conclusion

12. On consideration the Panel recommended Option 3, at a cost of £302,255.86, to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.