

## **Report to the Cabinet**

**Report Reference: C-070-2010/11**

**Date of meeting: 18 April 2011**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Portfolio: Finance & Economic Development.**

**Subject: Refurbishment of Finance Reception Area.**

**Responsible Officer: Bob Palmer (01992 564279).**

**Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).**

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### **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**(1) To consider the recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that Option 3 from the Norfolk Property Services feasibility study be implemented at a cost of £302,256; and**

**(2) That, subject to the decision above, to recommend to Council a supplementary capital estimate of £302,256.**

### **Executive Summary:**

Following critical comments about the Finance reception area from the Audit Commission, as part of their review of the Benefits Service, a feasibility study on improving the area was commissioned from Norfolk Property Services (NPS). The report from NPS was presented to the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel on 9 December 2010. Having considered the options presented, Members recommended Option 3 at a cost of £302,256 to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. On 24 January the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the recommendation from the Panel and decided to make a similar recommendation to Cabinet.

At the Cabinet meeting on 31 January Members decided to remove from the Capital Programme the £1.3 million that had been included for a Customer Services Transformation Programme. If a decision is made to implement any of the options from the feasibility study a supplementary capital estimate will be required.

### **Reasons for Proposed Decisions:**

The proposed decision is in line with a recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

### **Other Options for Action:**

- Implement Option 1 from the feasibility study at a cost of £200,600.
- Implement Option 2 from the feasibility study at a cost of £267,267.
- Take no action at this time but retain the study and drawings for potential future use, with an annual consideration of implementation when adopting the Capital Strategy.

### **Report:**

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 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 will offer a range of co-located services to include bringing together the area housing office alongside a satellite benefits office.

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.

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.

8. At the Panel 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 the 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 area, 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 interview under caution 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:

- (i) 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.
- (ii) Option 2 - as option 1 but with the addition of the extension to provide a group interview room. Total cost would be £267,267.
- (iii) 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 £302,256.

12. Having considered the options presented, the Members of the Panel recommended Option 3 to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. On 24 January the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the recommendation from the Panel and decided to make a similar recommendation to Cabinet.

13. Since the feasibility study was considered by the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Standing Panel on 9 December 2010, more information has become available about the Government's plans for welfare reform. This information is far from comprehensive or complete but it has provided an indication about how benefits will be provided in the future and the likely reduction in the role of district councils.

14. The Department for Work and Pensions is planning to centralise benefit fraud investigation work and has stated that they expect local authority benefit fraud investigation officers to transfer to them before 1 April 2013. Whilst under the proposed welfare reforms, housing benefit will not exist separately any more but will be combined within a Universal

Credit. How Universal Credit will be administered is still to be confirmed but it is likely that the role of local authorities will be reduced and possibly removed.

**Resource Implications:**

This is dependant on the choice of option. If Member's decide to implement any of the schemes a supplementary capital estimate will be necessary.

**Legal and Governance Implications:**

The Council should consider the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act when undertaking any alterations to buildings.

**Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications:**

There are no environmental implications.

**Consultation Undertaken:**

The Feasibility Study has been considered by the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**Background Papers:**

Feasibility Study

**Impact Assessments:**

Risk Management

If no improvements are made to the reception area the Council is likely to be criticised by external auditors and inspection agencies. Any criticism should be reduced by other efforts to improve customer access, such as the Limes Farm Hall re-development.

Equality and Diversity:

*Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications?* No

*Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken?* N/A

*What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?* N/A

*How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?* N/A