

TELFORD & WREKIN COUNCIL

CABINET – 12TH JANUARY 2009

‘CREDIT CRUNCH’ ADVICE CENTRE – TELFORD TOWN CENTRE

**REPORT OF HEAD OF CUSTOMER SERVICES & BUSINESS
TRANSFORMATION**

1. Purpose

- 1.1 To obtain Cabinet approval for the Council to lease a premises in Telford Town Centre for the delivery of an Advice Centre, that will, in conjunction with partners organisations to help residents and businesses of the borough access services that will assist them in the current economic climate.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Council enters into a two year maximum lease agreement for premises in Telford Town Centre
- 2.2 That the Head of Asset & Property be authorised to negotiate and agree terms of the lease
- 2.3 That the Head of Legal Services be authorised to agree and execute all necessary documents in relation to the lease

3. Summary

- 3.1 Asset & Property Management commenced negotiations for a two year lease for 31 Sherwood Street, Telford Town Centre. This lease has the option to terminate after an initial 12 months by giving three months notice, for an annual rent of £147,800 and an annual service charge of £29,400. Negotiations have not yet been concluded as there are other premises available in the Town Centre which the Council may consider.
- 3.2 The premises will enable the Council, in conjunction with partner organisations, to provide an Advice Centre to help residents and businesses of the borough access services that will assist them in the current economic climate.

4. Background

- 4.1 Telford & Wrekin Council approved the Customer Services Strategy in 2007. This strategy had an objective to deal with as many customer enquiries at the first port of call, at a time and place convenient to customers. One of the actions within the customer services strategy to support this objective was to introduce series of One Stop Shops

branded as ***First Point at (Name of town)***, that would help residents and businesses access Council and partner organisation services. The creation of an Advice Centre in Telford Town Centre is therefore in line with this objective.

- 4.2 The need for an Advice Centre in the borough, that brings together a number of key Council and partner organisation services, has been heightened by the current economic recession and the Credit Crunch, that are having a significant impact on residents and businesses within the borough.

5. Aims Of The Advice Centre

- 5.1 The aim of the Advice Centre is to provide residents and businesses with a single point of contact for multiple Council and partner organisation services, that could help them deal with the impact of the current economic recession.
- 5.2 Given the immediate need for this service, and the consequential short timescales for opening the Centre, it is proposed to initially deliver those key services that we anticipate the greatest demand for, or will have the greatest impact on customers experiencing the outcome of the recession.
- 5.3 These services include: **CAB** advisors and the full range of services that CAB provide through their existing locations e.g. debt management; Housing & Council Tax Benefits; Free School Meals; Council Tax and Business Rates, dealing with arrears and entitlement to discounts, exemptions and relief's; **Welfare Benefits** (Attendance Allowance, Carers Allowance, Tax Credits, identifying potential entitlement for customers and helping them claim those benefits; **Housing Advice** offering advice on housing options, tenants rights; **Affordable Warmth** offering advice on grants available, ways to reduce fuel bills; **Community Learning** who are able to provide careers advice, job search and training on basic Maths, English & IT, Writing CV's/Job Applications, Dealing With The Credit Crunch, Starting A Business.
- 5.4 The premises will include a training room, allowing workshops and short training courses to be provided within the advice centre itself.
- 5.5 In addition, the Centre will have close links with the Department of Work and Pensions DWP, to provide information on accessing their services and the current jobs that are available in the region. We are also linking in with Transforming Telford to provide information on the services that are available to businesses in the area, and, in both cases, assisting customers to access those services.
- 5.6 The Advice Centre staff will be trained to assist customers to identify other possible support services that may not be located within the advice centre itself.

- 5.7 The Centre will also have a range of information available for customers and will include public access PC's, with staff on hand to help customers use them, to access jobs and money/debt advice websites.
- 5.8 The list in 5.3 will be enhanced as the project team work with Portfolio's and partner agencies over the coming months to identify additional services to be delivered through the Centre. A further report will be brought to Cabinet to detail those additional services as they evolve.
- 5.9 Customer demand for services will be monitored, allowing the Council to review the services that are delivered through the Centre.
- 5.10 Take up of the services through the Centre will be reported to Corporate Directors and Cabinet Members as part of the regular customer contact performance reports already in place.
- 5.11 The Advice Centre will be promoted and supported by a rigorous marketing campaign which is being developed by the Corporate Communications Team.

6. GENERAL INFORMATION

6.1 Equality & Diversity

- 6.1.1 Every effort is made to assist customers when accessing services to ensure that wherever possible we are able to provide them with the services/information that they require in a manner that is beneficial to them. This is the cornerstone of the Customer Services Strategy.
- 6.1.2 An Equality Impact Assessment will be undertaken on the Advice Centre when the Centre has been operating for three months, to give the service the opportunity to be fully operational, to ensure we are addressing all equality and diversity needs.

6.2 Environmental Impact

- 6.2.1 The Town Centre is well linked to all modes of public transport. Users of the building will therefore have alternative means of travel, reducing car dependency.
- 6.2.2 By providing a number of joined up services through a single facility will remove the need for customers to access services through various, multiple locations. This will in turn reduce the number of customer contacts leading to a potential reduction in the carbon footprint of the Council's customers as they access these services.
- 6.2.3 All goods and services for the Advice Centre will be acquired in accordance with the Council's Procurement Policy, ensuring that we minimise the environmental impact of the Centre.

6.3 Legal Comment

- 6.3.1 The Council has the power to acquire property by agreement pursuant to section 120 Local Government Act 1972 for the purposes of any of their functions under any statute or for the benefit, improvement or development of the area which includes entering into a lease as described in the report. There are no further legal comments to add at this stage but ongoing legal advice will be provided where necessary.

6.4 Links with Corporate Priorities

- 6.4.1 The development of an advice centre addresses many of the Council's Corporate Priorities, particularly Priority 7, a Modern Efficient and Effective council

6.5 Risks

- 6.5.1 The risks associated with this decision have been identified and assessed. Arrangements will be put in place to manage those risks in line with good project management disciplines.
- 6.5.2 Plans are in place to monitor the take up of services within the advice centre to aid future decisions in relation to the lease of the shop
- 6.5.3 A high profile marketing campaign is planned to ensure residents and businesses are aware of the support we can offer within the advice centre itself and across the council.

6.6 Financial Implications

- 6.6.1 The current budget strategy of the Council provides £160k of capital investment in 2009/10 for the creation of a "One Stop Shop". This funding is sufficient to cover the conversion costs that will be incurred when creating the Advice Centre, however there is a timing issue over the availability of this funding as the costs will be incurred in 2008/09 with funding being allocated in 2009/10. This could be managed through slippage within the Council's current capital programme.
- 6.6.2 The total cost of the lease of 31 Sherwood Street for 12 months is £177.2k including the rental and service charge. If the lease were entered into at the end of January 2009 £29.5k of these costs would fall in 2008/09 and £147.7k in 2009/10. There is currently no budgetary provision for the costs of the lease in 2008/09 and only £20k available through the current budget strategy in 2009/10 for a one stop shop. These costs will therefore have to be met from the use of the contingency in 2008/09 and built into a revised budget strategy for 2009/10 probably being funded from additional use of balances. There will be further additional running/staffing costs for this facility and the credit crunch project generally which are being worked up and will fall to be funded in a similar way.

6.7 Ward Implications

6.7.1 Borough wide implications.

6.8 Background Papers.

6.8.1 Customer Services Strategy.