



**To/
Councillor Elliott King
Cabinet Member for Equalities &
Culture**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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SPC/2022-23/1

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 16 August 2022. It is about the Archive Service and Community Hub. A formal written response is not required.

Dear Councillor King,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 16 August

We are writing to you following our Scrutiny session, which focussed on specific aspects of your cabinet portfolio, namely Archives and Community Hubs.

Having previously discussed, in December 2021, the development of a new City Centre Community Hub which will house, amongst other things, the West Glamorgan Archive Service, the Committee wanted to ask you about performance and progress in delivering this work, key headlines / achievements against objectives, and overall position. We were keen to explore with you the improvements that would result from this development.

We thank you for attending the meeting and providing a written report on progress with the Community Hub development and implications for the Archive Service, and its performance. We also appreciated input from the Leader of the Council, and the information and advice provided by Geoff Bacon, Head of Property Services, and Kim Collis, County Archivist.

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We heard that:

- the ambition was to develop an innovative, flexible, and sustainable Community Hub that would be an exemplar across Wales, but not any cost.
- the project is part of the wider regeneration strategy for the City Centre and need to re-locate services out of the Civic Centre site. Re-location would help to increase footfall in the City Centre and see the regeneration / redevelopment of key buildings within the centre.
- a separate, new Public Sector Hub will predominantly be for back-office functions, the Community Hub would be for key public-facing / frontline services; an accessible 'one-stop shop' that together would support our diverse community, support digital inclusion, and improve well-being and quality of life.
- internal, external partner, and public consultations through the process have been constructive and supportive.
- the project is now moving towards the construction phase, with main contractor now appointed, with completion estimated as late 2023 / early 2024.
- a third of the scheme costs were being met from grant funding, backed by the Welsh Government.

The Committee asked questions to explore this work and provide challenge on actions and performance, as well as future thinking. This letter reflects on what we learnt from the information presented, questions, and discussion. It shares the views of the Committee and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response - main issues are summarised below.

Community Hub

Project Costs

When we discussed back in December 2021 the Cabinet decision on the proposed leasehold acquisition and redevelopment of the buildings we noted a significant increase in project costs, due to the scope of the scheme increasing with the incorporation of the former Miss Selfridge building. The estimate provided in December 2021 was £15.5m. We asked about the current position and whether there is any significant variation of previous estimates and sought assurances about cost increases as we get to final project costs.

The Committee was told that whilst costs had increased, as it was now a bigger development, no significant increases on the previous estimate was anticipated. It was also noted that additional finance had been secured from the Welsh Government for the expanded development, who were supportive of the project. It was re-iterated that the aim was to deliver a scheme that was sustainable and cost effective, applying value engineering to the project to get the best possible final product. It was added that the Council was looking to

sign a fixed price contract to secure the best deal for the taxpayer. The Committee would like to see the publication of the costs of the Scheme as soon as possible, given the cost-of-living crisis and other cost pressures, which you acknowledged, taking into account any restrictions on reporting due to commercial sensitivity. It was stated that figures would most likely be available later this year.

We asked you about progress in relation to the appointment of a Main Contractor, which your report stated would be confirmed in August. It was confirmed that the appointment had been made and would be announced shortly. We now know that Kier Construction has won the contract.

It was noted that other considerations, such as a business process analysis, which included determination of reception areas, opening days and times and staffing levels, etc., were still being developed within the Council as it was clear that the public still require a 'face to face' service (which comes at a cost), and we need to get it right. Once the building is operational, with tenants on board, there should be clarity about running costs and will be reflected in the Council's revenue budget.

Services

We asked for an update on which Council Services & Stakeholders will be working out of the new City Centre Community Hub, as well as the level of commitment that the Council is seeing from external partners.

You stated that the Community Hub would include the following internal Council services: Library, Archives, Revenues & Benefits, Housing Options, Lifelong Learning, Employability Services, and Contact Centre. We were told that discussions were on-going with external partners, details of which could not be disclosed at this time due to commercial sensitivities and were subject to agreements being in place. We noted that there is interest from public sector partners that would complement the Council services provided from the Community Hub, and that operationally every available space in the building would be able to be fed back into use of others, so that there is always maximum usage. We noted that consultation will continue as consideration is given to operational matters for the services that will be within the Community Hub.

Regarding the level of commitment from others, the Leader stated that, as with other development in the City Centre, the lead taken by the public sector in City Centre regeneration would create confidence within the private sector to do the same. He took the opportunity to share with the Committee news of significant property investment from a major regeneration organisation (Kartey Holdings Ltd) who had announced investment in sites within the City Centre, on Oxford Street in the vicinity of the Community Hub.

Public Access

The Committee was concerned about public access to the Community Hub for those with disability, for example the provision of disabled parking spaces. You assured us that consultation with relevant groups had informed the design. We noted that existing disabled parking facilities would be available at the rear of Marks and Spencer and in the surrounding area. It was clarified that access however would be from the front of the building, but that all relevant considerations have been given to ensure the entrance would be accessible to all users. It was stated that the proximity of disabled parking to the new Community Hub was arguably better than currently the case at the Civic Centre.

Timescale

The indicative completion date for this project was reported to be late October 2023, but you stated that this will be established once the main contractor is appointed. We heard that it was anticipated that the Community Hub would be operational early 2024, and likely to be open 7 days-a-week.

Further Community Hubs

We were interested in implications of the City Centre Community Hub on possible Hubs across the City and County, and the experience of the pilot community hub schemes in Gorseinon and Clydach. We noted from the Leader that that the COVID pandemic had interrupted the development of the Schemes but re-stated the desire to develop Hubs, utilising community buildings, more widely across Swansea, building upon the City Centre Community Hub. He indicated that the pilot schemes had delivered varying levels of success and would inform approaches to future Community Hub development in other areas.

Archive Service

Public Concerns

The Community Hub development and the re-location of the Archive Service is a matter of public interest, and we received contributions from members of the public who asked the Committee to raise their questions and concerns.

One had concerns about any reduction in public access to the Archive service / available space for users. You stated that there has been consultation and engagement with all services, not just the Archive Service, about requirements, to inform decisions regarding planning and design of the building and the utilisation of available space. You were confident that the Community Hub would maintain good public access to the Archive and deliver a good service to the public, considering opportunities for extended opening

hours and digitisation, and ability to use other public spaces within the Hub where possible.

Another was similarly concerned about a reduction in the capacity of the Archive Search Room but highlighted the effect this may have on educational services able to be provided by the Archive Service. We noted that the Archive Service introduced a service to schools in 2010, initially for primary schools at KS2 level but was soon extended to secondary schools at KS3, which has involved class visits to the Archive Service. You stated the Community Hub overall would have far greater space to accommodate groups of visitors and could potentially provide a better offering for schools.

Clearly the Archive Service will need to work through the detail and practical issues to sustain its education service, as there are rules (including security considerations) around how and where original documents can be accessed, hence the importance of a secure Search Room with sufficient capacity, to the Archive Service. It is clear that the Archive Service will need to change the way they provide services to schools and adapt to the new environment as the current service cannot be replicated in the new building. Turning threats into opportunities will be key.

Meeting Standards / Accreditation

When the Committee met in December 2021 there was discussion about the ability to meet required standards within the Community Hub for the proposed re-location of the Archive Service, including fire safety and security, and future expansion, to secure necessary accreditation / certification, as well as managing other risks. We followed up on that and acknowledging that considerable work has gone on to ensure standards, we asked what alternatives have been considered regarding re-location should there be an issue with achieving necessary accreditation / certification for the Archive Service, and continued status as a local place of deposit for public records.

You were confident about the achievement of accreditation and meeting required standards given the extent of consultation with relevant bodies in the design stage, which you felt, at this point, did not necessitate looking at an alternate plan.

We queried whether proposals provided the opportunity for expansion of the Archive Service, and it was confirmed that the Archive Strong Room (storage area) will have 25 years expansion space, and that all collection would be based on-site in the Community Hub, not in other locations. This means the new development provides enough space to hold the existing Archive and room for expansion. We noted that the South Wales Miners Library collection will also be incorporated within the Hub, with artefacts to be stored in the Archive.

Long-Term Thinking

We explored whether the re-location of the Archive Service into the Community Hub should be considered to be a temporary or permanent re-location. According to the Minutes of the West Glamorgan Archives Committee in March 2022, the move to the Community Hub is the first phase of a longer term project to relocate the Service to a new facility close to Swansea Museum and the National Waterfront Museum, which would enable opportunities for mutual collaboration with the museums and would also bring the opportunity for high class purpose-built facilities for the Archive Service going forward. It indicated that a sub-group of archivists and Swansea Council officers were working together to further progress this idea and had access to a £50,000 grant to initiate this work.

You confirmed that the sub-group were still working to progress the idea, and should this be feasible the siting of the Archive Service in the City Centre Community Hub would effectively be a temporary move. The Leader of the Council stated that the Council was under an obligation to identify a state-of-the-art facility and there existed wider opportunities for universities to be part of that, however, there were no plans in place at the moment for a collaborative facility, and work needed to be progressed now to relocate the Archive Service out of the Civic Centre. He stated that the Community Hub development was the most cost-effective solution at this time. We noted that future opportunities were not being ruled out should there be serious potential for a new facility. It was added that should the need arise, it would be fairly straightforward to convert the top floor of the Community Hub for alternate use, given its prime location and the market for that space.

The County Archivist was able to update us on developments and stated that work was being progressed (in the form of an 'invitation to tender') for a more ambitious 'longer-term' plan for the Archive Service, dependent on funding. He stated that he would be providing a report on the outcome of a feasibility study (funded by Welsh Government) on the idea of a regional / collaborative archive facility to the West Glamorgan Archives Committee by the end of March 2023.

We are concerned that a multi-million-pound solution is being developed to house the Archive Service which, depending on the outcome of the sub-group's report, could be redundant. If a purpose built facility is the longer term objective, would it not be better to keep the Archive Service where it is until that can be brought on-line?

Conclusions

The Community Hub is a positive development for the public, and its location in the City Centre should contribute to increased footfall – hopefully not only a well-used hub but wider benefit to other businesses and services in the City Centre, and catalyst for other development.

It should increase visibility of the Archive Service, though with the changes from the existing service to the new there will be a need to manage expectations, particularly those of existing users, who will be aware of these changes. While the building itself will no doubt provide a great environment, there is more a question of the performance and effectiveness of the Archive Service.

In the short to medium term at least, if the current scheme goes ahead, it's clear that the Archive Service will need to review and where necessary change the way it provides services, for example its offer to schools, taking into account the public space that will be available (the new Archive Search Room will be 50% smaller than the existing room in the Civic Centre) and other constraints, to adapt to the new environment. It remains to be seen whether this will result in an improved service or not, and we will monitor this with interest. We expect that you will engage and work closely with the West Glamorgan Archives Committee as the re-location progresses and take on board its views that will help work around issues, including public access.

Finally, we would like to see the publication of the Community Hub project costs as soon as possible, as the main contractor has now been appointed and the project is now moving towards practical completion.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome comments on any of the issues raised within. However, we do not expect you to provide a formal written response, unless there are any new developments or further information to provide in relation to the Community Hub and/or Archive Service to report when you have considered this letter.

If you do provide any response, we will publish in the agenda of our next available Committee meeting.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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