

Members' Facilities, Accommodation and Culture Task and Finish Group

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1. Chairman's Foreword

Dear Colleagues,

This task and finish group began in December 2016. Although I have been its Chairman since its inception, the group has seen a number of changes to its membership and to the council officers who have supported it. I would like to take this opportunity to thank those officers who have worked with us throughout its duration and also those who have been involved in producing this final report.

The group felt that, although there is scope for this work to continue as the council's moves into its committee system in May 2021, it was timely to produce this report for wider consideration by the council. As the last two remaining members of the group, Councillor A Moran and I would hope to be invited to participate in any work undertaken by the council to take this group's recommendations forward.

I would finally like to give thanks to the membership of this task and finish group, all of whom have been enthusiastic throughout the duration of the review; bringing a wealth of knowledge and wide range of experience to it also. Each and every member of the group who undertook this piece of work was committed to improving members' facilities, accommodation and culture, with the aspiration of helping to make Cheshire East Council a place with its own strong heritage and culture that people can identify with.

I hope that you will enjoy reading our report.



Councillor Margaret Simon, Chairman of the Task and Finish Group

2. Introduction

- 2.1. This review commenced in December 2016 and has been carried out over a period of more than four years. Since May 2019, the council has undertaken significant work to prepare for moving to a committee system form of governance, which has fundamentally changed some of the assumptions and motivations which formed the basis of the task and finish group's considerations.
- 2.2. The work carried out by this group was in response to council's cabinet system. Although this is referenced throughout the report, the Cabinet and cabinet model of decision-making will no longer apply to the authority from May 2021, however, some of the issues raised and brought forward by the group may still be relevant to the incumbent committee system.
- 2.3. In order to produce a report that both reflects and highlights the work that has been completed by the task and finish group, as well as the recent implications brought about by the council's change in governance arrangements and Covid-19 pandemic, key officers have suggested appropriate and consequential amendments to ensure that the content of the report reflects where the council will be moving to from May 2021.

3. Background

Rationale for the review

- 3.1. Cheshire East Council was formed in April 2009, following the joining-up of the three former local authorities: Crewe & Nantwich Borough Council, Macclesfield Borough Council and Congleton Borough Council. The main headquarters for the new unitary authority is Westfields, Sandbach, formerly the headquarters of Congleton Borough Council, with additional offices in Crewe and Macclesfield.
- 3.2. Westfields had provided modest facilities for the 48 elected members of the former Congleton Borough Council, however, did not necessarily sufficiently support the needs of the increased elected membership (82 councillors) of Cheshire East Council.
- 3.3. There was also a perception that the layout at Westfields – with facilities for non-executive and executive members being separated on different floors – had contributed to less effective communication and interaction between members.
- 3.4. The council's Members' Room is located on the ground floor of Westfields, but is unable to accommodate more than a small number of members comfortably; the group contended that this room was inadequate for the long term needs of the council's elected members.

- 3.5. Several members that had previously served the demised authorities had expressed a desire to improve the facilities at Cheshire East to provide conditions which would allow greater opportunities for daily informal interaction with colleagues across all political parties and with the council's executive.

Membership

- 3.6. When this task and finish group was initiated in December 2016, it comprised four councillors, with two additional councillors later joining in September 2018.
- 3.7. Further changes have been imposed to the membership of the group since this date, with Councillors M Simon and A Moran remaining as the only two members of the task and finish group in 2021. As such, this report and the finalisation of the task and finish work has been concluded and signed off by these two members.

The membership of the group when originally formed is set out below.



From left to right: Councillors Davenport*, Flude, Grant, Moran*, Simon and Wells-Bradshaw

*joined in September 2018

Methodology

- 3.8. The group carried out a scoping exercise to develop its objectives and project plan. The group decided to limit its review to facilities at Westfields only, as this was because it was council's main headquarters where the majority of formal committee meetings took place, and was therefore the most likely place that members would gather in significant numbers day to day.
- 3.9. The group acknowledged that, whilst existing member facilities in Macclesfield Town Hall and Crewe Municipal Buildings could undoubtedly be improved, they were both superior to the facilities at Westfields, and the wider aim of this review was to address issues such as culture and civic pride at the council's headquarters.
- 3.10. The group met with the council leader and various officers, including; the Chief Executive; Head of Governance and Democratic Services; Manager of the Chief Executive's Office; Facilities Manager; and Interim Chief Executive (following the departure of the former Chief Executive, Mike Suarez, in July 2018.)
- 3.11. Over the course of these meetings, the group considered a range of information and evidence, including the maps and blueprints of the council's three major office sites, as well as floorplans for various potential options for how some of the meeting rooms could be revised and changed for different uses.
- 3.12. Upon undertaking this review, the group ensured that its work was underpinned by a pragmatic and sensitive attitude in respect of the challenging financial climate for local authorities; there was no justification in this economic climate to incur significant expenditure. However, through this piece of work, it was hoped that the group could produce some workable recommendations and solutions that would deliver appropriate and sustainable improvements to members' facilities in Cheshire East.
- 3.13. The group agreed that its final recommendations within this report be expressed as aspirations, and therefore have not been fully costed.

Objectives

- 3.14. Upon initiating this project, the group agreed to the following key objectives:
 - To provide a shared space for all elected members on the second floor of Westfields, as close to the Cabinet meeting room and executive officers as possible.
 - To create a civic identity by displaying civic regalia and artefacts and other objects, and artwork displays, significant to the history of

Cheshire East and its former authorities, on the ground floor at Westfields.

- To introduce standardised use of technology for members leading to largely paperless meetings and standardised layout for meetings.

3.15. Following a lengthy break in the middle of this review, the remaining two group members met in December 2019 to review the work previously completed by the group. In addition to agreeing that steps should be taken to close the review and produce a final report, members felt that the report should also incorporate the growing concern of members regarding the availability of car parking spaces for members at Westfields; a more recent, yet important issue to members of the council.

4. Findings

- 4.1. Following the group's first phase of meetings (through to approximately December 2017), it produced a number of recommendations in relation to members' facilities and accommodation, meeting rooms, car parking and IT equipment.
- 4.2. After the group reconvened and resumed its work on this project from November 2019, it made a conscious effort to contextualise its findings and reflect how some of these original recommendations may have already been addressed, or have been influenced by the council's decision to change to a committee system form of governance, or the Covid-19 pandemic.

Meeting Rooms, Members' Room and Cabinet Office

- 4.3. The group examined the adequacy of meeting rooms available at Westfields for formal meetings to which the public have access. Local authority meeting rooms are an integral part of the visitor experience of a civic headquarters, and are often the only part of the building that members of the public see and experience.
- 4.4. Of Cheshire East Council's newly elected membership after 2009, a considerable proportion had previously been elected to the council's three former authorities, including some of the members of this task and finish group. Arrangements had been made by some of these former local authorities to provide meeting rooms for both the leader of the council and leader of the opposition which, in addition to Members' Rooms provided more space for councillors to meet and/or carry out their work.
- 4.5. The Committee Suites at Westfields were – prior to the Covid-19 pandemic – often fully booked each day, consequently meaning that there is little

flexibility to allow for additional meetings to be held which are not in the annually-approved schedule of council committee meetings.

- 4.6. The group considered whether the booking arrangements for the Committee Suites should be reviewed; although there is no appetite to reserve these rooms exclusively for member meetings, there is a case for consideration to be given to the introduction of a formal prioritisation arrangement for meetings which are open to the public. This could be achieved by means of adding an advisory note to all confirmed bookings of the Committee Suites to the effect that if a meeting involving members open to public is organised subsequent to a booking already made, the meeting involving members will take precedence, should suitable alternatives at Crewe Municipal Buildings and Macclesfield Town Hall be unavailable.
- 4.7. As the group's original work was based on the assumption relating to the continuation of the work of Cabinet, it identified a few different options as to how facilities for non-executive members could be improved without impacting the facilities for Cabinet.
- 4.8. After considering the practical and financial implications of reconfiguring the use of the Cabinet Office, S10 and Members' Room in Westfields, the group acknowledged that the desired improvements could not be achieved without sacrificing available meeting room space, or incurring additional costs. The group agreed that any such reconfiguration of the above meeting rooms should not come at a cost to the council, and therefore was discounted, with the caveat that other options be looked at in the future should the need arise.

What has changed since the review began?

- 4.9. Since this review began and the floorplans were considered, the Members' Room was moved from its previous location to a slightly larger room also on the ground floor of Westfields. This group contended that, due to the still continued small size of the current Members' Room, some of the councillors may not view it as a suitable location to meet or carry out work in. A larger meeting room was felt to improve the number of councillors using it, which would in turn support more effective cross-party communication amongst the non-executive members of the council.
- 4.10. Further to this, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 led to the speedy introduction of legislation to allow for remote, virtual decision-making local authority meetings to take place. By April 2020, the council had put in place provisions to enable decision-making meetings to be held virtually and remotely.

- 4.11. The council has monitored and maintained compliance with the social distancing guidelines and workplace guidance in all of its corporate buildings, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 4.12. At the time of concluding this piece of work, it was not known how the pandemic will impact how councils hold meetings in the long-term and whether future legislation will allow local authorities the flexibility to hold in-person, hybrid and virtual decision-making meetings. When future legislation and guidance is released on this, it will be important for the council to review how it can use its meeting rooms and virtual meeting technology to ensure that its business is carried out in the most resource-efficient and environmentally-friendly way.
- 4.13. The group noted that accommodation is a costly commodity especially if left empty. As such, whatever potential change was to be made to the council's meeting room arrangements and prioritisation, it would be important to ensure that meeting rooms are being maximised for cost-efficiency.
- 4.14. On 19 November 2020, Cheshire East Council voted in favour of changing its form of governance from the existing cabinet/leader model to a committee system form of decision-making, with effect from May 2021. This will bring about a change to the authority's decision-making processes, and a potentially changed demand upon the need for Member facilities. As the new arrangements become established, consideration will need to be given by the authority upon how and when its meeting rooms and facilities will be required for formal, informal and briefing meetings under the forthcoming committee system.
- 4.15. Further to this, the council will continue to manage and ensure the safe use of its meeting rooms and facilities to continue to comply with all Covid-19 social distancing and workplace guidance issued by government.

Council Chamber and Full Council Meetings

- 4.16. The group felt that one of the major downsides to the council's facilities and meeting rooms was that it could not facilitate full Council meetings; these meetings have had to be held at alternative venues including Sandbach Town Hall, with the venue hire being an additional cost to the council.
- 4.17. Although beyond the scope of this review, the group agreed that the council should have a long-term goal of having its own council chamber within the borough – either on its own or as a shared arrangement (with Cheshire West and Chester Council) – within the borough, which could easily accommodate all 82 elected members, officers, and members of the press and public.
- 4.18. The development of a new council chamber would need to be cost effective to the council and be a space that it can make regular use of, whether that

be through the creation of a multi-purpose room made available for external hire when not in use by the council.

Car Parking for Members

- 4.19. Another concern raised by the group during this review was the difficulty that some members had experienced when trying to find a car parking space when attending Westfields for a committee meeting, either in the private car park (for council staff and elected members only,) or the public car park next to it.
- 4.20. Members of the group noted that that in general it was most difficult to find a parking space on Monday through Thursday; the private car park was the most difficult to find a parking space in. In some instances, members had reported having to park further afield at the Chapel Street Car Park.
- 4.21. The group acknowledged that potential solutions to the car parking issues experienced by members included car-sharing, carpooling and public transport, all of which would also support the council's commitments and efforts to reduce its carbon outputs and achieve carbon neutrality by 2025.

What has changed since the review began?

- 4.22. Since March 2020, when the Government introduced restrictions in response to the Covid-19 public health emergency, the council's elected members and staff have predominantly worked remotely, including holding meetings virtually. This has significantly reduced the need for car parking spaces.
- 4.23. Depending on the content of future legislation in relation to local authority meetings/virtual meetings, and the council's approach to flexible homeworking arrangements, it is conceivable that more virtual meetings will result in a reduced demand on meeting rooms. If this is a long-term trend then it is possible that there will also be reduced demand on car parking spaces at Westfields.

Civic Pride and Image

- 4.24. Establishing and maintaining a sense of time and place, and civic identity, that are unique to Cheshire East is important to members, particularly as each of the three former authorities had their own longstanding civic identities and culture. Cheshire East has inherited these rich heritages and in its first 12 years has used these to develop its own civic culture.
- 4.25. Since its inception, this council has become a major contributor to many economic and cultural successes in the borough. Members, officers and the public should feel proud of its progress to date and the successes it has had. One of the key suggestions made by the group was that the council

should, where cost-effective and appropriate, utilise the reception area at Westfields to outwardly display and celebrate this council's heritage and its positive impact on the Cheshire East area.

- 4.26. The group agreed that any display area should be held principally in the reception area, to allow it to be most visible to the public, but that the corridor adjacent to the Committee Suites could be used as well. The group believe that some of the major companies based within the borough should be approached to ascertain whether they would be willing to provide displays.
- 4.27. The group discovered during its investigations that only a small number of artefacts from the former authorities have remained in possession of the council. This was largely because many items had been transferred to the new town councils in Crewe and Macclesfield. Nevertheless, there are some items that have been retained, particularly in connection with the Mayoralty, such as the mace, mayoral robes and tricorne that could be put on public display when not in use by the Mayor.
- 4.28. The displaying of such items could incur further cost to the council through insurance costs which, if explored by the council in the future, should be considered and cost analysed against the estimated numbers of public that would attend Westfields and experience these.
- 4.29. Elsewhere, the Council has won numerous awards since its inception and has been presented with many gifts from within the UK and abroad. The group believes that these awards and gifts should also form part of a public display at Westfields.
- 4.30. Many authorities display honours boards for Honorary Alderman and Freedom of the Borough. Whilst it is accepted by the group that an old fashioned wooden display board would be incongruous in the modern setting of a building like Westfields, there are other means available to put on public display these prestigious civic awards. The group's favoured option would be to provide an illuminated book which would list Honorary Aldermen and Freemen to be put on display in the reception area at Westfields. The group does, however, contend that a modern display board should be considered for the listing of the Mayor of Cheshire East.

What has changed since the review began?

- 4.31. Since this review began, changes have been made in the Reception area of Westfields: a cabinet has been provided for the purpose of displaying regalia, artefacts, awards and other such items relating to Cheshire East's historical and civic image. To date, there have not been many items brought forward to be displayed in this.

- 4.32. Considering how the council's corporate buildings may be used differently following the Covid-19 pandemic, the group felt that another way the council could raise awareness and appreciation for its own (and inherited) cultural heritage, by updating its public website to display images or information on key aspects of the borough's history and culture.

Improved Technology

- 4.33. Immediately following the outbreak of Covid-19 and sudden national lockdown restrictions, the council quickly responded to the challenge of transforming the use of its IT in order that officers can work remotely and meetings (public decision-making meetings and informal meetings) can be conducted through virtual meeting software. Prior to this, all councillors and officers attended all meetings in person at the council's corporate buildings.
- 4.34. The pandemic placed an acute pressure on the council to quickly complete the rollout of its Digital Refresh Programme and provide officers with laptops and other equipment necessary for elected members and officers to be able to work efficiently and effectively at home and away from the office.
- 4.35. As at the time of developing this report and finalising this piece of work, the legislation enabling legal virtual council meetings is due to expire on 6 May 2021. Whether, or to what extent, this legislation is extended after this date, the newfound experience in using virtual meeting technology will potentially afford the council greater flexibility in how it conducts its business, for example, for non-decision making meetings to take place remotely, which will help the council to manage the use of its meeting rooms for the future.
- 4.36. In addition to the group's ambition that elected members and officers would have improved use of, and accessibility to, IT equipment, it was hoped that this would help the council to reduce its use of paper and ink. This arguably became a matter of greater importance following the council's decision to declare an environment and climate emergency (Cheshire East Council, Council meeting, 22 May 2019), in addition to the commitment within its Environment Strategy to be carbon neutral by 2025 (Cheshire East Council, Cabinet, 5 May 2020).
- 4.37. In order to achieve the status of a paperless council, it is important that both members and officers receive the necessary support and training on how their IT equipment can be used in place of using paper, for example, reading and annotating meeting agendas, and making notes.
- 4.38. The group concedes that it would be difficult for some committee meetings, especially the planning committees, to be administrated without the use of paper as there is greater reliance on the use of paper plans and maps, which can sometimes be difficult to read on relatively small tablet or

computer screens. In addition, consideration would have to be given to how facilities would be provided for members of the public at meetings.

- 4.39. One innovation the group felt might help to support reduced reliance on paper copies of agendas and other supporting documentation (e.g. maps and plans), would be to make use of its existing projectors and large TV screens in meeting rooms as a central viewing point for members of the committee and public to follow during the meeting. This equipment could also enable the council to support flexible, virtual and/or hybrid meeting arrangements.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1. Since its inception in April 2009, Cheshire East Council has not established a significant display exhibiting the broad civic history, culture and heritage of itself, as well as its three former authorities (Congleton Borough Council, Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council, and Macclesfield Borough Council).
- 5.2. Before Covid-19, all formal and informal council meetings were held in person in the council's corporate buildings. In order to respond to the challenge presented by the pandemic and ensure business could continue in an efficient manner, the council's Digital Refresh Programme was quickly rolled out to provide elected members and officers with access to laptops and other equipment to support remote working.
- 5.3. It is not known at the time of writing this report whether the present legislation enabling virtual meetings will be extended beyond its planned 6 May 2021 end date. Following the completion of its Digital Refresh Programme, the council is now equipped and upskilled to support in-situ and remote meetings and working. This will afford the council greater flexibility in how it manages the use of its meeting rooms.
- 5.4. The group found that, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was difficult at times to flexibly or easily rearrange formal, public committee meetings at the Committee Suites, Westfields, which would usually lead to senior officers and members travelling between the council's three corporate buildings (Crewe Municipal Buildings, Macclesfield Town Hall and Westfields) to attend meetings. If such meetings were more easily arranged and/or rearranged to continue to be held at Westfields, this could reduce both the amount of officer time spent away from work, and the emissions associated with the increased travel.
- 5.5. With new and improved IT available to both officers and members, as well as the experience of conducting council business through online virtual meetings, the council has the IT infrastructure in place to support a move towards becoming a paperless authority, which would also help it to achieve its ambitious carbon reduction and carbon neutrality targets.

- 5.6. One of the key drivers for this review was that the Members' Room was not sufficient for a council with 82 elected members, and that it was situated on the ground floor of Westfields at a distance from the Cabinet Office on the second floor, which the group felt inhibited effective communication between the council's executive and non-executive members. From May 2021, however, when the council formally transitions to a committee system form of governance, it will no longer have a Cabinet and consideration can be given to how the former Cabinet Office will be used.
- 5.7. The group felt that if the council were to have its own dedicated council chamber, it would be easier to arrange and deliver Council meetings, and such a room would provide the council with another means to display its heritage and culture.
- 5.8. The majority of member meetings, including some full Council meetings, are held in Sandbach (at Westfields and Sandbach Town Hall), which in addition to being the main headquarters for officers, means that most weekdays both the private staff/member car park and adjacent public car park at Westfields are full. This has created issues for members when trying to find a parking space to be able to attend their meetings.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1. That consideration be given to economical and affordable ways by which the council could improve its public display of the civic history and cultural heritage, and 'placemaking', of Cheshire East Council and its three former authorities (Congleton Borough Council, Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council, and Macclesfield Borough Council).
- 6.2. That the council reviews its elected member and staff facilities – following the authority's transition to a committee system form of governance in May 2021, and in light of the virtual meeting legislation and remote working arrangements put in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 6.3. Although there is no appetite to reserve certain rooms exclusively for member meetings, the group would ask that, as part of any review of the council's facilities and accommodation, consideration be given to prioritising certain meeting rooms for elected members and member meetings.
- 6.4. That, in light of the changes and impacts brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual meeting legislation and successful deployment of virtual meeting technology, the council reviews its elected member and staff facilities, and gives consideration to the necessity of the longer-term aspiration of having its own, or shared (with Cheshire West and Chester), purpose-built council chamber.

- 6.5. That consideration be given to how the availability of car parking spaces at the private (elected member and staff) car park at Westfields could be managed so that on busier meeting days such as when full Council is held, elected members have no issue obtaining a car parking space.
- 6.6. That the council continues to build on the great strides it made through 2020/21 – successfully completing its Digital Refresh Programme and transforming how it delivers its work and meetings – by ensuring that continued IT training is made available to support effective remote working and virtual meeting delivery.
- 6.7. That, following Digital Refresh Programme, the council considers making a committed pledge to reducing its use of paper and printing ink, both from day-to-day work activities and documentation for council committee meetings.
- 6.8. That the council gives consideration to making use of its existing TV screen and projector equipment in meeting rooms and how this could support hybrid (in-person and virtual) meetings and provide members and officers with greater flexibility for how the authority can use its meeting rooms and facilities most efficiently and effectively.