

5 February, 2019

Improving security and maintaining the Council House

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Councillor M. Bird – Leader
Councillor A. Andrew – Deputy Leader and Regeneration
Councillor A. Harris – Personnel and Business Support

Summary:

The Council House is a Grade II listed building which requires regular maintenance to preserve it for future generations. This report provides details on the investigations undertaken to identify ways in which to improve the security arrangements and maintain the Council House whilst improving the visitor experience and accessibility of Walsall Council. The proposed works will assist the Council to deliver its custodian role of the Council House by meeting the expectations of managing a listed building by preserving and enhancing the premises as required by planning legislation.

The current security arrangements in the Council House require improvement to prevent unauthorised visitors accessing meeting rooms and office space in light of increasing risks to public and staff safety over a number of years. To address this a remodelled Council House reception is proposed. This includes a new reception desk and security gate to enable greater control of visitors to the building. This will improve security for visitors and staff at the building. As well as improving security the benefits of these works include an improved welcome to visitors at the Council House.

The majority of the existing seating in the Council Chamber dates back to 1905 and is in urgent need of repair and refurbishment. The refurbishment works include the addition of bench cushions for the public gallery areas and will allow the use of fire resistant materials. Further to this the audio-visual system (AVS) in the Council House and Conference Room 2 is in decline, below modern capabilities and expectations and in need of frequent maintenance. An updated audio-visual system will improve the experience for visitors and members alike. If significant refurbishment work is taking place to refurbish the Council Chamber there is an opportunity to align the works. A further consideration for the upgrade to the audio visual system is introducing the capacity to webcast Council Committee meetings. This will enable residents who are unable to attend Council meetings to watch them remotely over the internet. It will also improve the openness and transparency of the authority's decision-making process and encourage participation in local democracy.

Reason for scrutiny:

During consideration of the Draft Revenue and Capital Programme for 2018/19 – 2021/22 Members requested further information of the proposed capital investment in the Council House.

Recommendations:

That, subject to any comments Members may wish to make, the report be noted.

Background papers:

None.

Resource and legal considerations:

The Council House is Grade II listed and listed building consent will be secured, where required, and any restoration works will be sympathetic to the historical set up of the Council Chamber and maintain its character. In order to gain listed building consent the Council must make an application in its own name. The Council is the planning enforcement and regulatory authority including prosecutions for buildings that lack the required attention and as such should maintain its own estate.

The Local Government Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 requires Local Authorities to promote democracy. Improving the experience of visitors to committee meetings and/or increasing their accessibility by webcasting them would assist Walsall in meeting the provisions contained within the Act.

Looking over to Wales there are provisions within the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 that give Members the opportunity to remotely attend meetings. Whilst webcasting meetings will not provide the full functionality required for this it is a step in the right direction should provisions such as this be introduced in England.

Council Corporate Plan Priorities:

This report links to the **Internal focus – all council services and efficient and effective** corporate priority as any changes that are made will improve public access to and perception of the authority.

Citizen impact:

Improvements to the public seating area within the chamber and the AVS will improve the experience for local residents that attend council meetings.

If webcasting is introduced then this would enable those residents unable to

physically attend meetings to watch them remotely at a time of their choosing.

Risk management

The current AVS in the Council Chamber is in decline. Whilst it is anticipated that the current system can be managed to maintain and continue its lifespan as the system ages the risk of total failure increases.

Environmental impact:

None directly attributable to this report.

Financial implications:

The works to improve the Council House reception had a capital value of £106,000 allocated in the 2018/19 budget approved by Council in February 2018.

The proposed works to refurbish the seating and replace the AVS have a proposed capital allocation of £200,000. This will be considered for approval by Council on 28 February 2019. Further details on investigations into the anticipated costs for the respective works are included in a private appendix included with this report.

Reducing inequalities:

The Council will increase accessibility to its committee meetings by webcasting them. This may mean that residents unable to attend the Council House to observe them may choose to view the webcast.

Consultation:

ICT and Integrated Facilities Management.

Contact Officers:

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1. Report

1.1 Council House Reception – security upgrade

The existing Council House reception is an open foyer. Unauthorised personnel are able to enter the building, staircase areas and meeting rooms without passing through any formal security barriers. In order to address this a sum of £106,000 was approved by Council in February 2018 as part of the capital programme for 2018/19 to upgrade the building security and provide improved customer facing reception services. The proposed alterations significantly improve the security of the building, which have secured the relevant listed building consent, include:

- Installation of an electrically operated clear glass ‘swing-gate’ - that can be secured in open mode for evacuation or for high volume of visitors departing the building;
- Provision of a new counter / desk – this will be movable to enable large items / deliveries to continue to be accommodated;
- Consideration of re-opening the staff entrance on Tower Street to minimise the number of employees using the main entrance to the Council House.

Current estimates are that the above works can be undertaken for circa £50,000 inclusive of fees.

1.2 Council Chamber Seat Refurbishment

The majority of the furnishings in the Council Chamber were installed in 1905. The original works have performed well over their lifetime but due to simple wear and tear over 114 years the seating is in an urgent need of replacement. The Council House is a Grade II listed building this places a legal requirement on the authority to maintain its estate and meet its legal duties to preserve the building and the historical features within it.

There are 62 seats in the Council Chamber. Many of which are in poor state of repair and in need of restoration. The seats are formed of green leather, with interconnected seats and separate back pieces. Each chair is attached to a wooden frame by approximately 60 green leather tipped pins. Several back pieces appear to have been replaced previously, on a piecemeal basis, but the overall condition of the seats are deteriorating. Each chair is separated by an armrest that is fitted by a dove joint and glue. The seat padding is made of cotton and horsehair and for many seats the webbing is failing. The back row in particular is in a poor condition. An issue that has also been identified is that, due to their age, the materials do not conform to current fire safety requirements. As the public have access to the building it is important that this aspect is addressed.



Further to the work on Member seating it is proposed that fastened bench cushions be added to the seating in the public gallery. This would significantly enhance the comfort for members of the public who attend long Council and Planning Committee meetings.

There have been challenges identifying suitable contractors to undertake soft market testing for this job. Many tradesman in the leather/upholstery industry do not have the capacity to undertake such a large piece of work. However, it has been possible to identify a small number of companies able to complete the work.

1.3 Audio-Visual System - current

The current AVS, provided and serviced by Auditel, was installed in 2009. The quality of the system in the Council Chamber is in decline and below modern expectations and capabilities. Faults with microphones and the camera system are experienced on a regular basis. Whilst these could be managed in the medium term it may be worth considering what action to take, if any, if it is desirable to update the system, or aspects of it, in order to mitigate the risk of the equipment failing.

The system provides microphones, cameras and projectors in the Council Chamber and Conference Room 2. Underneath the public gallery in the Council Chamber are a series of rack-mounted processors that control the functionality of the system. The system in Conference Room 2 is more basic but operational with occasional faults. There are also cameras in Conference Room 2.

The system is supported by two desktop computers running on the obsolete Windows XP operating system. This is a security risk to the Council's ICT infrastructure.

Completing the system are two projectors in Conference Rooms 1 and 3.

Input into the projection equipment in all rooms is via VGA inputs which is slowly being replaced by HDMI and USB connectivity.

As part of the project there has been liaison with the council's own ICT team.

1.2 Webcasting

Webcasting of Council meetings is an increasingly common feature provided by Local Authorities. The ability for residents to watch Council meetings from home or on the move is seen as a way by Councils to engage residents in the decision-making process thus increasing openness and transparency.

Walsall is the only constituent member of the WMCA that does not webcast any Council meetings. Benchmarking has shown that regional neighbours tend to webcast a selection of meetings; other than Birmingham which webcasts as many meetings as possible. The most common meetings to webcast are: Council, Planning and Cabinet followed by scrutiny meetings. Viewing figures vary from a handful to a few hundred viewers. If Walsall was to webcast Council, Planning and Cabinet then the number of hours required for a webcasting contract is estimated as follows:

8 x Council meetings @ 3 hours each
8 x Cabinet meetings @ 45 minutes each
12 x Planning Committee meetings @ 4 hours each
Total: 78 hours

If Walsall is to webcast Cabinet meetings then this will require investment in webcasting facilities for Conference Room 2 unless the meeting relocates to the Council Chamber.

The current AVS is missing one piece of equipment to enable webcasting of meetings. The missing link is an encoder. This connects the AVS feed to the internet. For a reliable service a dedicated internet point is required, in each room where webcasts are to be broadcast from, with at least a 2mb upload speed.