

CREATION OF A ONE STOCKPORT HUB IN STOCKPORT TOWN CENTRE

Report of the Cabinet Member for Citizen Focus & Engagement and the Cabinet Member for Economy & Regeneration

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report sets out the proposal to establish a new cultural and social hub in Stockport town centre, provisionally titled 'One Stockport Hub'; seeks approval from Cabinet to the proposal in principle; and requests that delegated authority be given to the Cabinet Member for Citizen Focus & Engagement and the Cabinet Member for Economy & Regeneration to take the necessary decisions to implement the proposal.
- 1.2 This paper was presented to the Corporate Resource Management and Governance (CRMG) Scrutiny Committee on 22 September 2020. Further details of the CRMG Scrutiny Committee's recommendation to Cabinet are provided in section 8 of this report.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The proposal forms part of the Council's response to the global public health emergency (COVID-19) that has required the Council to reconsider how and where services to the public are provided.
- 2.2 COVID-19 has changed the way the way that we live, work and play. The Council has committed to a significant regeneration programme for Stockport town centre, attracting £1bn of investment. Part of this investment includes a large cultural and community hub in the heart of the Town centre for which the Council has already applied for £14m Future High Streets Funding.
- 2.3 The need to diversify town centres away from predominantly retail destinations due to the oversupply of traditional retail space, is a challenge which existed before COVID-19 and still remains relevant. However, the recent pandemic has probably accelerated this need to address this challenge as the lockdown may result in changes to the long-term structure of retail, in light of reduced use of physical retail and the increased use of online shopping.
- 2.4 The challenge posed by the recent pandemic means it's even more important to continue the improvements and make a visit to Stockport Town Centre a safe and enjoyable experience. As part of this the Council is proposing to introduce 'One Stockport Hub' which we would open in early in 2021.
- 2.5 Since March this year, the Council has, through necessity and in line with government guidance, made significant changes to service provision in response to Covid-19. This has required a re-thinking of the way some services are delivered and, in some instances, pausing services to the public in public facing buildings. These have included:

- Libraries across the borough
- Stockport Museum/ Stockport Story Gift shop
- Stockport Art Gallery
- Staircase House

- 2.6 Currently, library services are provided from seven locations which have reopened with COVID-service measures in place, following the Libraries Connected guidance issued by the government on 29 June 2020. Additional measures introduced in line with this guidance include one way systems, order and collect services for books, and bookable IT slots. The libraries that have reopened were those that required minimal adaptation in order to provide a COVID-secure service.
- 2.7 Since the libraries re-opened, footfall has averaged only 16% of last year's figure. Book loans have averaged 17% of last year's borrowing, and the total hours booked on library IT services averaged 24% of the previous year's use. Group activities have not restarted, such as children's story time, coffee mornings and community meetings, which in part explains the reduction in footfall, however it is clear that people are still wary of public spaces and yet to be convinced that accessing the current offer is safe.
- 2.8 Providing a COVID-secure service requires more staff in each library that was required previously. In addition, a proportion of Library Service staff (who all operated the council's Coronavirus Helpline when libraries were unable to open, as per government guidance) are currently redeployed to provide the council's local track and trace service. The council's tracing service complements the national service already in place, contacting those who have tested positive to ascertain their close contacts so that these in turn can also be contacted to be advised to self-isolate.
- 2.9 The reopening of Central Library poses some challenges in this context. The staff requirement would be greater than it was pre-COVID and in addition, some adaptations would be required to the building to provide a COVID-secure service in line with government guidance. In addition, the archives (heritage library) service will need to be offered on a much-reduced scale, in line with guidance provided by the National Archives Service. In particular, the browsing of heritage items will not be possible for the foreseeable future, requiring significant changes to be made on the first floor where the heritage library is currently located.
- 2.10 Across the UK, traditional library usage is in decline with the need to reimagine libraries in a way that is relevant to a broad cross section of our community. This proposal would see the library service currently provided from Central Library on the A6 move to One Stockport Hub in Mersey Square, with the added benefits of being closer to a range of public transport and convenient for those visiting the town centre for other purposes such as work, shopping or entertainment.
- 2.11 Post COVID-19, museums in Stockport have had to adapt their model of operation. It has been possible to successfully implement the Government's safety guidelines at Air Raid Shelters and Bramall Hall and these sites reopened to the public in August 2020, albeit with revised opening hours. It is anticipated the War Memorial Art Gallery will also be able to reopen safely from October 2020. Work is progressing to reopen Staircase House and Hatworks (once refurbishment is

complete). Stockport Museum currently presents a number of operational challenges from a COVID safety perspective and the One Stockport Hub provides an opportunity to showcase some of our museums offer, co-located with the library offer, whilst we resolve these issues.

2.12 One Stockport Hub therefore seeks to achieve these four objectives:

- Maintaining a safe and vibrant Stockport town centre that attracts visitors
- Providing a library service for the Town Centre, including information and advice, adopting modern design principles in a convenient location, attracting greater footfall and visitors from a wide range of Stockport residents and broadening access to the service
- Providing access to local history in a convenient and attractive location
- Providing an important precursor to the cultural and community hub for which the Council has applied for Future High Streets Funding

2.13 One Stockport Hub would be located in the vacant former Argos store on Mersey Square, repurposing an empty retail unit that in the current retail market is unlikely to be let in the near future and a unit that attracts significant void costs. The unit has a prominent position and is clearly visible from the A6.

2.14 One Stockport Hub will help the recovery of Merseyway and the wider town centre from a challenging 2020 and will support our High Street, helping to create a vibrant Centre that people want to visit and feel comfortable spending time in.

2.15 Construction work to develop the hub is likely to take around 12 weeks and it is anticipated that One Stockport Hub would be open in February 2021.

2.16 In April this year the Council was invited to submit a final business case to the government's £1 billion Future High Streets Fund. The bid, for £14m, is to create a new social, community and cultural hub in the heart of the town centre. The Final Business Case was submitted following a successful 'Expression of Interest' that was shortlisted alongside 49 other bids and consultation with the public on what was then provisionally titled 'Stockport Central'. We expect to hear in Autumn 2020 whether the Final Business Case has been accepted. If so, the new facility, spread over more than 120,000 sqft around Adlington Walk, will combine with the offer at One Stockport Hub to create a transformational space where people can spend leisure time, learn and celebrate our shared heritage.

2.17 Should the government make an announcement on this in the Autumn, it is unlikely that the new facility will be ready until early 2023. As well as enabling a town centre library offer to be provided in the short to medium term, One Stockport Hub will act as a precursor to the more comprehensive development that will follow should the Council receive funding through the Future High Streets Fund.

2.18 Should the Council not receive funding through the Future High Streets Fund, consideration would be given to a second phase of the One Stockport Hub, in order to expand the offer proposed in this paper and a further public consultation would be carried out if this were the case.

3. ONE STOCKPORT HUB

- 3.1 The vision for One Stockport Hub is that it will provide a mix of cultural and social experiences in the heart of the town centre, for residents of Stockport and beyond. The creation of One Stockport Hub will allow the Council to design a flexible service from scratch that would be more resilient to the challenges posed by Covid over the next 18 months and enable residents to access services that would complement the One Stockport recovery plan as we move forward into 2021.
- 3.2 One Stockport Hub will provide a modern welcoming view for those coming to the town centre and will give an opportunity for people who would not normally access services to experience the best of Stockport's cultural offer. It will help to provide confidence that Stockport is 'open for business' and encourage visitors and support the overall town centre economy.
- 3.3 Although delivered over a smaller floor space than Central Library, One Stockport Hub would be designed using modern design principles, be fully accessible, with flexible spaces and larger windows to attract more people in and make them aware of what's on offer. The final component parts of One Stockport Hub will be determined following consultation but it is likely that the following will be included;
- Lending library
 - With an estimated 5000 adult and 1500 children's books on display
 - Children's library with Storytelling and baby change facilities
 - Reference library with bespoke 'research booths'
 - Stockport Museum artefacts and displays
 - A 'Stockport Story' Gift Shop
 - IT facilities
 - Static PCs for public use
 - Data access points
 - Fixed tablets for public use
 - Customer service points
 - Self-service ordering and returns kiosk
 - Signposting to a wide range of services and attractions in Stockport
 - Large capacity for storage and archiving on the first floor with back office space, workstations and welfare facilities for staff.
- 3.4 One Stockport Hub will operate a regular book rotation system to provide customers with a changing range of titles regularly. All 21,000 books that are currently at Central Library will move to the site with regular stock rotation allowing all books to be displayed at times across the year. In addition, the public will be able to request any titles not on current display through an order and collect system. One Stockport Hub will also offer the same number of hours of IT sessions used by customers at central Library pre-COVID through a combination of desktop PCs and tablets that can be used in the Hub.
- 3.5 The Council is required to provide an archive service. A reduced archive service, in line with recent guidance provided by the National Archives in relation to COVID-secure archives could be accommodated at One Stockport Hub. Alternative options

for the provision of a full archive and heritage service will be considered as guidance around archives and COVID evolves.

- 3.6 CGIs of the draft design for One Stockport Hub have been produced to complement the consultation. They give an impression of how One Stockport Hub could look and are included as appendix 1

4. KEY RISKS

- 4.1 The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 section 7 (amended by the Local Government Act 1972) requires local authorities to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons who live, work or study in the area. An efficient service has been held to mean making the best use of the assets available in order to meet its core objectives and vision, whilst recognising the constraints on council resources. In considering how best to deliver the statutory duty each library authority is responsible for determining, through consultation, the local needs and to deliver a modern and efficient library service that meets the requirements of their communities from within available resources. The Council could be open to challenge if citizens are not consulted on proposals while they are in the formative stage.
- 4.2 The cost of redeveloping and fitting out the unit in line with the design ambitions set out in appendix 1 have been assessed by CBRE and is given below. This budget figure includes 15% contingency but does not cover refurbishment of the first floor for public use.
- 4.3 It is hoped that an announcement will be made by the government in Autumn 2020 on the successful bids for the Future High Streets Fund. Should Stockport be successful, work will start on a new £14m new social, community and cultural hub to be located on Adlington Walk and the offer provided at One Stockport Hub will be included within this. Should the Council not be successful with the Future High Streets Fund, further work would be done to develop a second phase of One Stockport Hub, exploring how space on the first floor, or in adjacent units, could be utilised to expand the offer.

5. CONSULTATION

- 5.1 Consultation is being undertaken with the public and stakeholders and will continue until mid- October. The consultation is primarily taking place online with a information and questionnaire available on the Council's Consultation Hub. Direct conference calls and Zoom meetings have been held with stakeholders, including the VCSE Forum and the Stockport Youth Council. Face to face consultation will be done with public and staff will be occupying a unit on Merseyway and inviting passers-by to give their views on the proposal.

A report on the consultation responses to date is included as appendix 2 to this report.

- 5.2 As of Friday 25th September, 446 responses had been received, of these, 55% have been from regular users of Central Library.
- 50% of all respondents say they will use One Stockport Hub
 - 23% say they say they might use One Stockport Hub
 - 13% say they probably won't use it
 - 15% say it's definitely not for them.
- 5.3 The main concerns raised by respondents are around the future use of Central Library building, which is clearly well loved by those who use it. There are also concerns at a reduction in the overall size of the library offer in One Stockport Hub.
- 5.4 A number of suggestions have been made by respondents regarding additional services that should be included in One Stockport Hub. These have included;
- Pottery and Crafting classes
 - CAB / Age UK advice desk
 - Cycling facilities
 - Seminars and Courses
 - Recycling information
 - Coffee and cake
 - Daily newspapers

The suggestions will be considered by the Council for inclusion in either One Stockport Hub, in any Future High Streets facility or potentially elsewhere in the town centre.

6. CENTRAL LIBRARY BUILDING

- 6.1 Both the Corporate, Resource Management and Governance Scrutiny Committee and consultation interim findings have highlighted that there is a need to address the question of what might happen to the current Central Library building if the current services are moved from this building to another.
- 6.2 The Central Library building is a key part of Stockport's heritage. The original building, built in 1913, which houses the main lending library and heritage section is an iconic building and is valued by people across the borough for its architectural merit.
- 6.3 It has served Stockport well for more than 100 years but the work needed to make the building safe and Covid-secure is costly, requiring a range of physical adaptations and a much greater number of staff to manage the library.
- 6.4 Through the development of the Expression of Interest for the Future High Streets Fund, the Council has been researching how new library facilities that have been provided across the country. The Council commissioned some work through AEW Architects to look at what could be delivered should the funding bid to the FHSF be successful. Case studies at Rochdale, Chester, Croydon and Barnsley, where local authorities have re-imagined their central library offer, were researched and it is clear that more sophisticated facilities are needed to cater for the modern ways in

which people now access information and to attract more people into our libraries. This is increasingly important as we respond to the challenges of the pandemic.

- 6.5 As part of work to deliver the Future High Streets Fund, it was planned to review options for the future use of the Central Library building. The building is one the town's heritage assets, and the Council has a good track record in preserving and developing some of our important heritage assets.
- 6.6 People are being asked for their views now on the relocation to One Stockport Hub and should this proposal go forward then the Council would want to see this architectural gem thrive in another format, sympathetic to its importance and value to Stockport. A recommendation of this report, in line with the recommendation to Cabinet from the CRMG Scrutiny Committee as set out in section 8 of this report, is to approve a request to start this review immediately and consider what uses may be appropriate for this iconic building in the future. As part of this review, further engagement would be carried out with the public and relevant stakeholders. In addition, should any change of use under planning law be proposed at a future date, this would be subject to consultation through the planning process.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The annual revenue costs of the two sites has been considered along with the alterations and adaptations that would be required to make the existing offer at Central Library 'covid safe'. The Council will continue to have a liability for the former Argos unit for service charge, insurance and business rates until such time as an occupier is found.
- 7.2 The total occupation cost of both Central Library and the vacant former Argos unit should the proposal for One Stockport Hub not go forward are approximately £250,000pa. The future occupation costs for One Stockport Hub have been considered and are likely to be approximately £150,000pa along with a temporary residual holding cost for Central Library of around £30,000pa. This gives a total occupation cost IRO of £180,000pa going forward which will provide an estimated saving in occupation costs of £70,000pa overall.
- 7.3 The fit-out costs for the development of One Stockport Hub have been considered by the Council's retained agents, CBRE. They have estimated that costs of delivering One Stockport Hub, in line with the indicative designs shown in appendix 1, will be IRO £350,000. As well as the fit out of the unit, including the purchase of new furniture and equipment as necessary, this figure includes the costs of stripping out the unit, (which will be the subject of a dilapidations claim to recover costs from the former tenant) and a provisional sum for the transportation of stock.

8 SCRUTINY COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET

- 8.1 This paper was presented at the Corporate, Resource Management and Governance Scrutiny Committee on 22 September 2020. The Corporate, Resource Management and Governance Scrutiny Committee resolved as follows:-

RESOLVED - (6 for, 1 against, 2 abstentions) – (1) That the Cabinet be recommended to undertake further work on the future of the Central Library building

and subsequently undertake a further round of consultation on the proposal to develop a 'One Stockport Hub' making clear what the Council's plans are for the Central Library building.

(2) That the outcome of the further round of consultation be reported back to this Scrutiny Committee.

- 8.2 As a result of the comments and recommendation made by the Corporate, Resource Management and Governance (CRMG) Scrutiny Committee, Section 6 of this paper has been updated to include additional detail in relation to the current Central Library building.
- 8.3 In addition a series of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) has been drafted and will be published with the current consultation in order to provide further clarity for the public in relation to the question of the future of the Central Library Building.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Cabinet is requested to:

- 8.1 Note and approve in principle the proposal to develop 'One Stockport Hub'.
- 8.2 Note and approve the work to consider any future change of use for the Central Library building, which would include engagement with the public and relevant stakeholders.
- 8.3 Note the recommendation from the Corporate, Resource Management and Governance Scrutiny Committee and the response to the recommendation as set out in Section 8 of this report.
- 8.4 Delegate authority to the Corporate Director for Place Management & Regeneration and Borough Treasurer, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Citizen Focus and Engagement and Cabinet Member for Economy & Regeneration to take all necessary steps to implement the proposal set out in this report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Appendix 1. Indicative CGIs of One Stockport Hub

Appendix 2 Interim Consultation report

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Paul Richards, Kirsteen Roe on Tel: 0161-474-2940, or by email on paul.richards@stockport.gov.uk, kirsteen.roe@stockport.gov.uk