

Title: Customer Services Relocation – Rejected Site Options
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Portfolio Holder: Councillor Jessica Harrison
Wards of the District directly affected: None

Introduction

During the 20th July Scrutiny meeting which discussed the Council's plans to relocate customer services to the Pump Rooms, further details were requested regarding the relocation options that were previously rejected. Officers from the Council's Assets team and Customer and Digital Services were previously asked to find a suitable site to relocate Customer Services to, following the Council's decision to move from Riverside House.

Rent a Shop or Commercial Premises.

Consideration was given in the February Cabinet proposals to renting a town centre shop unit and converting it to meet customer service needs. The option was revisited as part of developing the most recent proposal to Cabinet, to reassess if there were any potential benefits.

It was originally anticipated that overall, renting and converting a shop could have been an easiest option.

Converting a town centre shop does have several positive qualities. It would not have any impact on the Pump Rooms or Town Hall, would fill a vacant town centre unit long term and potentially provide additional space for other staff to co-locate. There would likely be fewer planning considerations if the site already had appropriate planning permission and the preparation of the premises would not disrupt any existing operations or future work. Town centre sites were also likely to benefit from similarly good transport links.

A major drawback, however, is that a shop would also incur significant additional costs. For example, 36 The Parade was recently available (as at 16/06/2023) to let and would have been an ideal site. The unit incurred an annual rental cost of £70,000 with a rateable value of £58,500. This excluded service charges such as electricity and gas and would have also required connectivity to the Council's network, security preparations, and safety servicing (such as electrical and gas compliance).

Another property at 74 The Parade was similarly priced at £50,000 per year, with a rateable value of £57,500, again excluding all service costs. Units within the Royal Priors were also considered but were also found to be very expensive. Unit 21 of the Upper Mall for example is 108m² and has an annual rental of £42,500 (as at 03/07/2023).

There are lower cost alternative units available but in general, these are not of a suitable size. 64c Regent Street for example is available for £25,000 per year but has a floor space of just 53m². The current customer service centre at Riverside House occupies approximately 330m² and whilst this is significantly larger than required, at least 110m² is likely to be needed. 36 The Parade is approximately 148m² and 74 The

Parade just 104m².

Capital expense would still be incurred to prepare the shop premises for use. Whilst it may be possible to engineer out some costs, it is still anticipated that the Council would have to spend a similar amount and would have the added complication of agreeing plans with a landlord in advance.

The addition of a new building would also impact on the Council's plans to become Carbon Neutral, as it would introduce new emissions and energy costs. Whilst this would not make the Council's existing plans impossible, it would make them harder to achieve. Whilst it cannot be ignored that moving into an existing building will impact on the carbon footprint of that building, it is not anticipated that the impact would be as high as a completely new premise.

Overall, the renting of a shop was not considered as a realistic long-term option. It would incur continual revenue costs for the Council and these would likely increase as time goes by. Even if the Pump Rooms shop remained open, the revenues it generates each year would not be sufficient to offset the costs of renting a shop of the size required.

Links to the respective listings are included below, but please be aware that these are not permanent links and may not be available in the future.

- Right Move, 36 The Parade Property Details. [Available Online](#) (accessed 16/06/2023)
- Right Move, 74 The Parade Property Details. [Available Online](#) (accessed 16/06/2023)
- Right Move, 64c Regent Street Property Details. [Available Online](#) (accessed 16/06/2023)
- Prime Location, Unit 21 Upper Mall Property Details. [Available Online](#) (accessed 03/07/2023)

Town Hall

The Town Hall is clearly seen as the psychological home of Council services, but also has the advantage of not requiring any changes to the Pump Rooms if it were used to re-home Customer Services. However, the choice between the two buildings is not as simple as it may first appear and further details are provided below, to explain why the Town Hall was not considered the most suitable location.

Space

The Town Hall was originally created to serve a work style that is very different to modern requirements. As such, whilst the Town Hall is vast in footprint, the rooms within it can be quite small and often have features which were essential to their operation a century ago, but now limit what can be done with the space.

To provide a Customer Service facility, accessible space would need to be located on the ground floor of the Town Hall. A significant part of the ground floor has already been earmarked for the development of a Creative Hub, which has received financial assistance from the Future High Streets fund. This only leaves the space recently vacated by Warwick University for potential use.

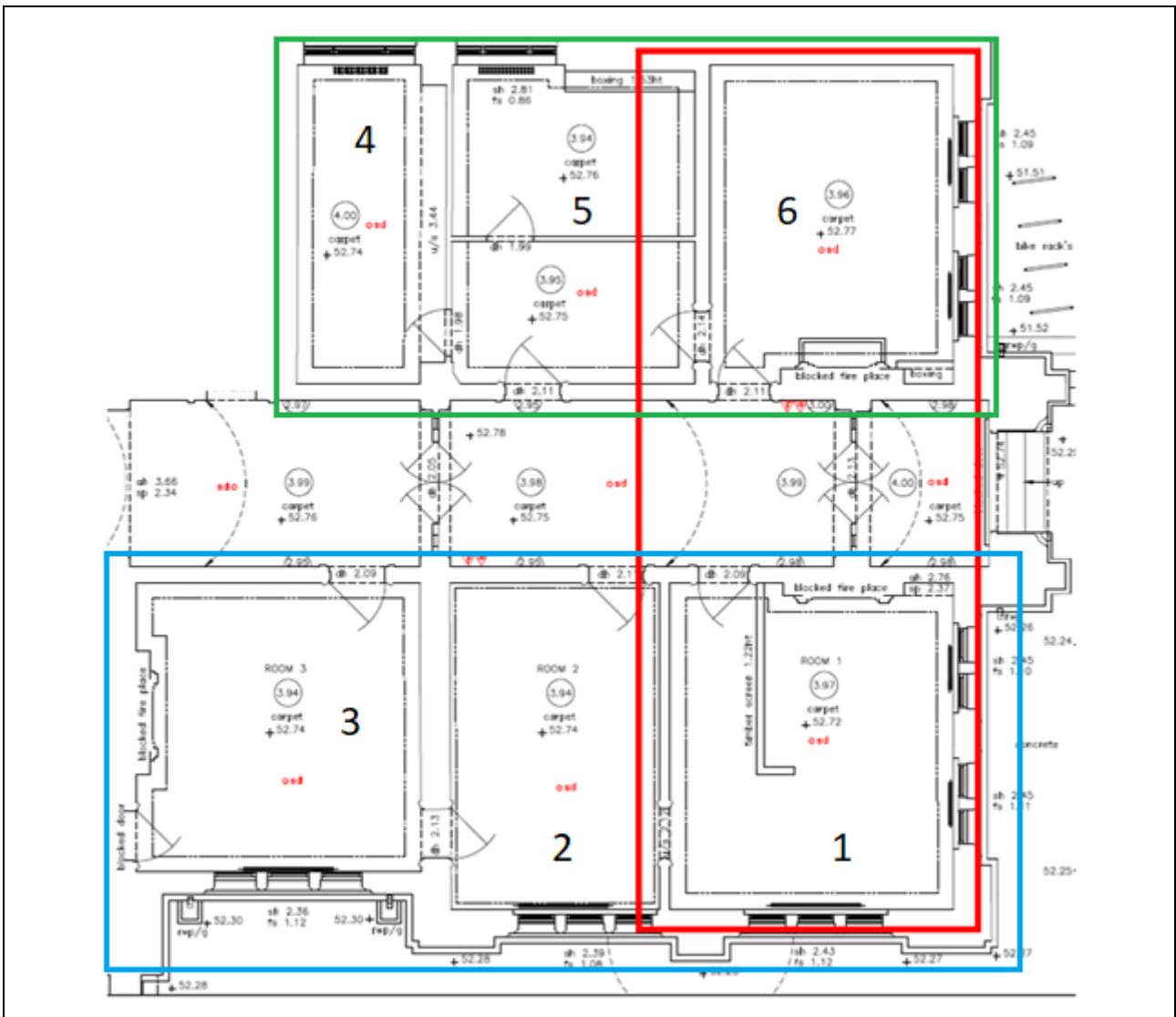


Figure 1 – Town Hall Site

Any combination of the rooms highlighted above could potentially be used for a Customer Service function. Together, they would provide sufficient space.

As shown in figure 1 the historic layout plan for the Town Hall is made up of several small, interconnected rooms. None of these in isolation would provide sufficient space to locate an effective customer service environment as each is between 35 to 50 m². Provisions at Riverside House are spread over 330m² and whilst this is excessive, our designs require around 110m².

To accommodate this multiple rooms would have to be used to create a viable space at the Town Hall, and none of them would be an ideal size. Alternatively, existing rooms would have to be “knocked through” to increase their overall space. This process, which would require listed building consent, would be technically challenging and attract significant cost as most are load-bearing, structural walls that support the open-plan Council Chamber above. The space also has several historic fireplaces and would not be easy to manipulate.

At a previous point, an historic intervention was made to rooms adjacent to the lift, including the removal of one structural wall and the insertion of two stud-walls, to form three small compartments. The removal these stud walls could provide a larger room, albeit similar in volume to the other interconnected rooms.

Accessibility

Significant efforts have been made in recent years to ensure the Town Hall is as accessible as possible for users. As shown in figure 2, the main entrance has a ramp but this is the only way the public can access the building without having to climb stairs.



Figure 2 – Front Entrance and Ramp

The main entrance of the Town Hall provides the only public access to the building which is suitable for wheelchair users.

Within the potential Customer Service area, the entrance to each of the offices vary in width, as shown in figure 3 and doors open manually. Whilst it would be possible to add powered openers to the existing doors and some are quite wide, problems may occur on the other side, where space is more limited; any resident or visitor using a powered device may have difficulties. Equally, the entrance to Room 1 is quite narrow, making this room potentially unsuitable for disabled users.

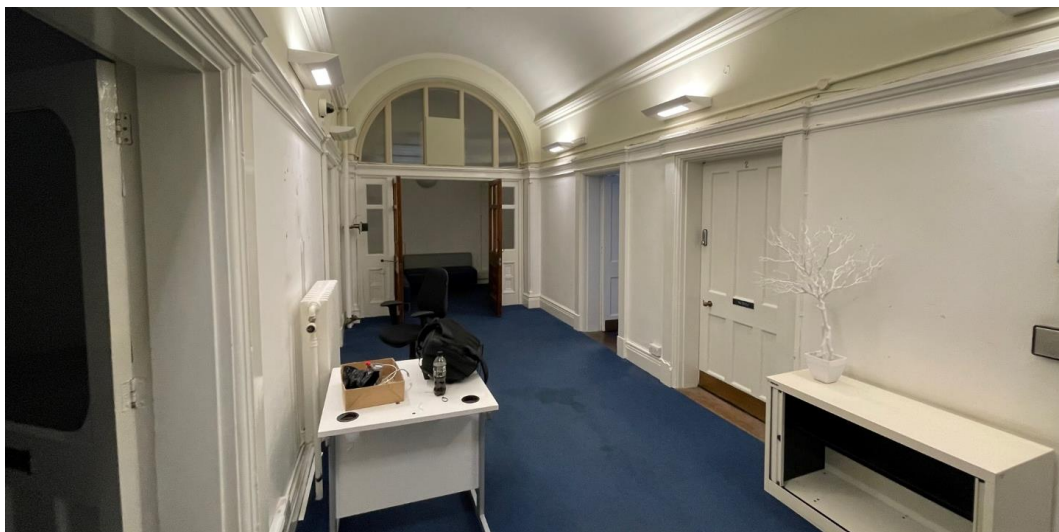


Figure 3 – Office Entrances

The doors to each office vary in size and due to load bearing nature of the walls, modification would be difficult.



Figure 4 – Room 1

The fireplace of this room extends all the way through the building. Removing it, would be a significant and complex task, that would be challenging to secure permission for.

Adaptability

The Town Hall is a listed building so any works would likely require consent.

Introducing a high-quality customer service centre at the Town Hall would likely require significant modification of the existing structure, which would introduce additional costs and time delays unless we were to do the absolute minimum.

For example, figure 4 shows the room marked as Room 1 (figure 1). As can be seen, there is a divider (which could easily be removed) but more substantially, there is a large fireplace that, if we were to try and make the room larger by crossing the corridor (red outline figure 1), would require removal. This would not be an easy task and the wall behind it supports the floor of the Council chamber.

Many of the walls on the Ground Floor support the substantial structures above them, as shown in figure 5. Modifying or removing any of these divisions would require the input of a structural engineer, which would incur costs over and above those already quoted and would be likely be difficult to secure listed building consent for.



Figure 5 – Supporting Walls

The walls across the corridor support the substantial structures above them and would be difficult to modify or remove.

Similar walls are present in the horizontal division of the rooms too (such as between Room 1, 2 and 3, Green Outline in figure 1 and Rooms 4, 5 and 6, blue outline). Whilst removing these to create a large enough single space would not involve any fireplaces, they would still be extremely challenging and introduce additional costs.

Safety

Whilst not initially considered as part of the February recommendations to Cabinet, significant concerns have been raised as part of the Save Our Pump Rooms petition about the safety of visitors using our facilities and the threat an aggressive customer may pose. Whilst it is extremely rare for customer services to receive an overly aggressive customer, it must be acknowledged that this can happen and as such, mitigations must be in place.

The Town Hall presents several challenges that would prove problematic to managing the risk of an aggressive customer. For example, each of the rooms has limited visibility. Except for the windows facing out to the Parade, there is no internal line of sight, especially if a door is closed which would be a practical requirement to ensure privacy. A member of staff working alone in a room would not be visible to their colleagues, and should an incident happen, this puts them at far greater risk.

There is also no easily accessible exit route to remove a troublesome customer, visual deterrence such as staff presence would be harder to achieve and there would be limited scope to provide a "safe space" for staff and other visitors to retreat to. In short, the nature of the building layout introduces risks that cannot be as effectively mitigated here as they can elsewhere.

Existing Plans for the Town Hall

As part of the plans to relocate from Riverside House, the space outlined in figure 1 as a possible customer services location, has already been allocated to other service needs. This includes the relocation of the Council's secure Store and Corporate Support Team (CST).

The existing plans are shown in figure 6.

If these services could not be located at the Town Hall, there would be an impact on the wider relocation strategy, as a home would need to be found for them elsewhere. The current relocation plans do play to some of the Town Halls strengths, with the smaller office layouts being suited to the Council's needs. For example:

- Whilst the limited visibility of Room 3 (figure 1) is a problem for Customer Services, it makes it ideal for a Pace Room which is not intended to be visible from the outside world.
- The Meeting Rooms shown in figure 6 may cause safety concerns for Customer Services or create a lot of wasted space in terms of adaptation, but they are ideal for the intended internal usage.
- Drop-in desk space will greatly assist agile staff and overall concerns around privacy would be lower. All staff are provided with headsets to maintain privacy on calls and internal staff have a duty to maintain confidentiality too.

Whilst using the space for Customer Services would not occupy all these offices entirely, it would leave very little available. It may for example still be possible to create a PACE interview room, but it is unlikely that CST and an secure Store could be accommodated too.

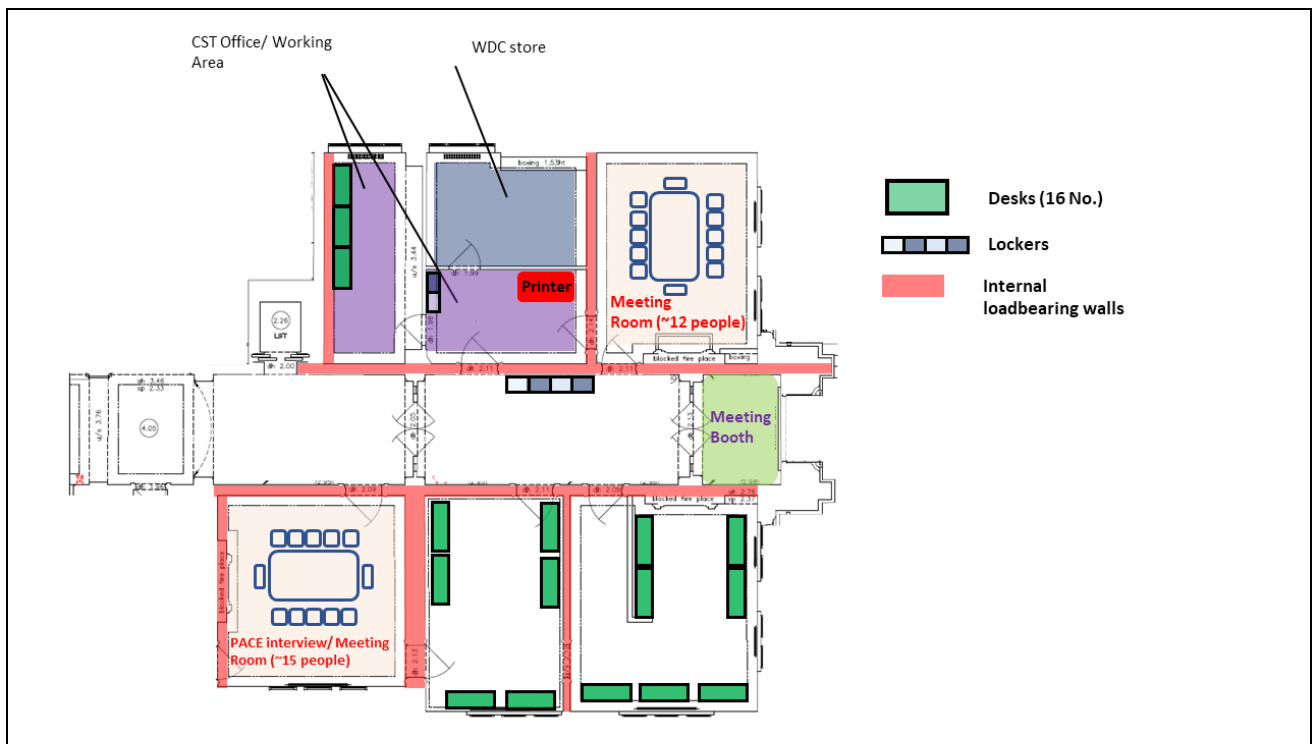


Figure 6 – Planned Town Hall Usage

The existing rooms within the Town Hall have been planned to compliment the delivery of services at Saltisford. This includes the provision of an secure store, flexible office space, a PACE compliant interview room and the location of the Central Services Team.

Other Factors

Several other considerations were also made when looking at the Town Hall:

- Acoustics

The high ceilings of each room would make establishing any kind of privacy for customers very difficult. We would not be able to introduce soundproof booths as are proposed at the Pump Rooms, as they simply would not fit through the doors unless they were completely customised and built on site. As such, any customer service desks would have simple vertical divisions.

Unlike the Pump Rooms which has natural, ambient background noise, the Town Hall would create a sterile, near silent environment for discussions. Two customers located in the same room would easily be able to overhear one another's conversations.

- Temperature Control

The Town Hall has very little in terms of cooling capacity and the location of heating sources is limited. The ability to create a comfortable working environment for both our customers and staff would be more challenging and our options limited. The ducting work required to accommodate air conditioning or forced cooling for example would have to pass through the very thick walls. There are no false floors or ceilings to hide heating cassettes, and the associated plant equipment would be hard to hide.

- Intimidation Factor

The Town Hall is an imposing building; symbolising the grandeur of past times, steeped in the visible and proud history of Warwick District. Whilst the building

itself is very distinctive and is a key part of Leamington, it is not inviting. For customers who has never used our services before or are simply nervous of talking to the Council, this could be quite intimidating.

When a customer enters the building, direction would be required to stop them going upstairs. People would be pointed down a corridor and the almost atmospheric formality of the building would be carried through into our customer service area; small rooms, old fireplaces, whitewash walls. It would not be conducive to a providing a friendly and empathetic service and may put some people off engaging with us.

In addition, if we established a waiting area, it would most likely be in the corridor shown in Figure 7. Again, this would not be inviting and completely uncomfortable for our customers.

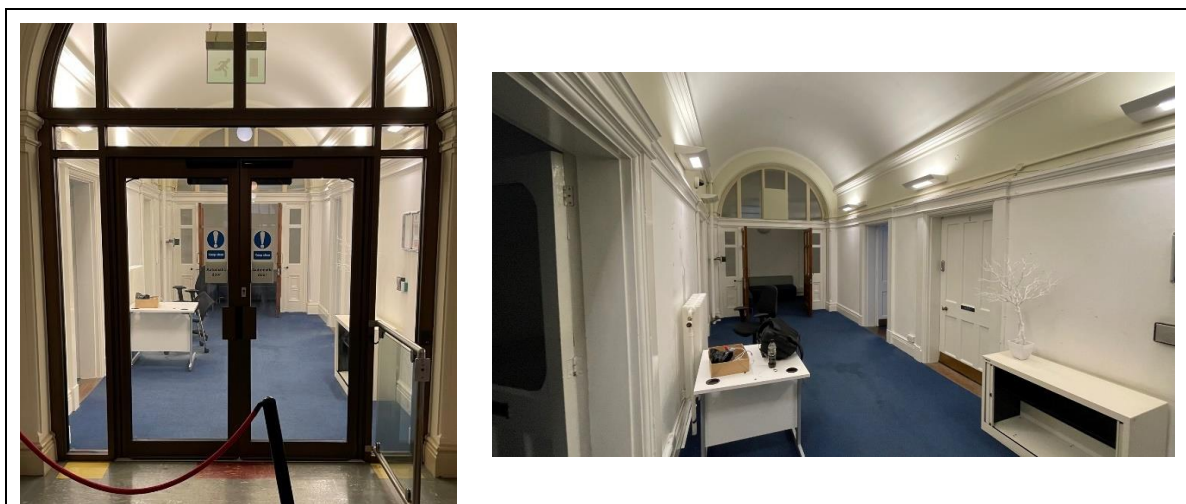


Figure 7 – The Corridor

This area would likely be used as a waiting area and reception for users accessing services.

- **Timing**

The Future Highstreets work being undertaken at the Town Hall has a significant impact on the availability of the site. Discussions regarding the project have indicated that the site would not become accessible to customers until at least August 2024.

Whilst any associated work to create a Customer Service space could be conducted in tandem, the restricted site access would prevent the site being used.

The Minimum Viable Option

During Scrutiny, multiple questions were asked if the Council could do any more for any less – essentially seeking our minimum viable option. Particular reference was made to how easy this was perceived to be at the Town Hall.

If Cabinet were to decide that the preferred choice would be to disregard the February 2023 decision and instead create a customer service offer within the Town Hall, for the minimal cost possible, the proposal could be as follows:

- **Waiting Area:**

Subject to building control restrictions, this would be created in the corridor as shown in Figure 7. The existing furniture would be removed, and chairs would be lined against the walls to ensure that access could be maintained. A small reception desk would be introduced towards the end of the corridor.

Any decoration work would be minimised although some artwork may be introduced to add some colour. The area beyond the double doors may be used to house some self-service terminals and the existing lighting and carpet would likely be retained.

If building control restrictions prevented the route being used, further office space would be required to create a waiting area.

- **Service Areas:**

Two customer service desks could be installed within Room 1 as shown in Figure 4. These would not be enclosed desks or pods, but would instead have vertical divisions between them. If the Council were to avoid knocking down any walls, a further desk could be placed in the room next door (Room 2), as shown in Figure 8. This room however may not be practical for use as it would involve a member of staff working alone.

The fireplace in Room 1 would remain as is, resulting in a large empty space. There would be little point in introducing further soft furnishing, as the rooms would not be suitable for customers to wait in whilst others are being seen.

As mentioned, consideration would also have to be given as to the safety of staff, as these rooms have no internally facing windows and anything happening would not be visible to other Customer Service representatives or those within the waiting area.

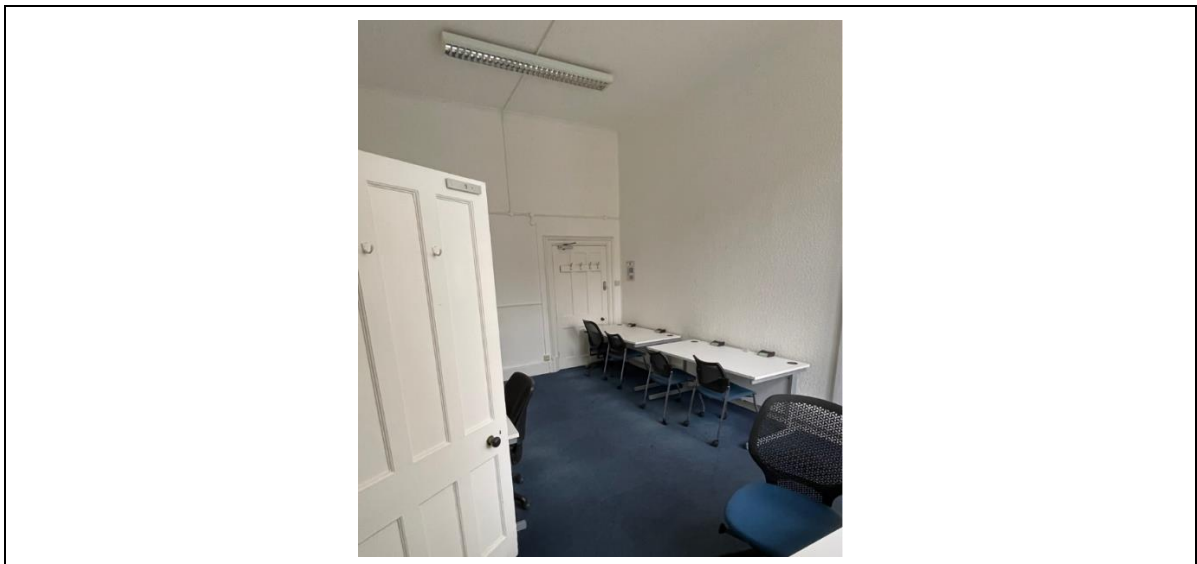


Figure 8 – Room 2

A further customer service desk could be installed, but the room has no internal windows.

- **Office Space**

A further room could be used to accommodate customer service staff who are not required to deal with face-to-face customers. Accommodation for up to

four staff is included within the existing Pump Room proposals and allows Customer Services to optimise how staff are deployed. Room 3 as shown in Figure 9 would be suitable and can be accessed from the corridor.

Similar challenges would be faced if rooms 4, 5 and 6 were used as is, but it may be possible to create a space suitable for three customer service desks if the walls dividing rooms 4 and 5 were removed. This would still create privacy issues for Customers and safety challenges.



Figure 9 – Room 3

Room 3 could potentially be used to accommodate up to four customer services staff, who will deal with telephone calls when not required by face-to-face customers.

Conclusion

Any structural work that would be required to make a better customer service environment would likely be extremely costly, and ultimately outweigh the value of the compromises required to accommodate the Pump Rooms proposal. At this time, precise costs for carrying out this type of work have not been acquired.

Using the space at the Town Hall would also impact on the Council's plans to relocate some services that were not intended to move to Saltisford. Whilst this would not be of extreme importance, it is an impact that would need to be considered.

Overall, whilst the Council does have the capacity to create a cheap customer service offer using the space at the Town Hall, it would not necessarily be a good offer. The environment would be disjointed, the rooms poorly sized, the decoration dated, the privacy limited and the risk to staff safety higher.

Whilst it may be possible to accommodate this within the previously agreed budget, the offer would be vastly inferior and would not appear to be directly compatible with Council's values of Fairness and Equality and Community Focus.