

Agenda Item No 5
 Overview and Scrutiny Committee
 13 November 2024

Title: The Royal Pump Rooms Customer Service Centre – Six Months On
 Lead Officer: David Elkington, Head of Customer & Digital Services
 Portfolio Holder: Councillor Jessica Melrose
 Wards of the District directly affected: None

Approvals required	Date	Name
Portfolio Holder	04/11/24	Councillor Jessica Melrose
Finance	04/11/24	Andrew Rollins
Legal Services		
Chief Executive	04/11/24	Chris Elliott
Director of Climate Change	04/11/24	Dave Barber
Head of Service(s)		
Section 151 Officer	04/11/24	Andrew Rollins
Monitoring Officer	04/11/24	Graham Leach
Leadership Co-ordination Group		
Final decision by this Committee or rec to another Cttee / Council?	No	
Contrary to Policy / Budget framework?	No	
Does this report contain exempt info/Confidential? If so, which paragraph(s)?	No	
Does this report relate to a key decision (referred to in the Cabinet Forward Plan)?	No	
Accessibility Checked?	Yes	

Summary

This report summarises progress which has been made at the Pump Rooms Customer Service centre, following its opening in April 2024.

Recommendation(s)

- (1)** That the committee receives the report and provides commentary if required.
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1 Reasons for the Recommendation

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 In February 2023 Warwick District Council's (WDC) Cabinet considered a report which discussed the relocation of services away from the (then) Council's headquarters, Riverside House. The report put forward several recommendations including migrating back-office functions to Saltisford One in Warwick and relocating front facing Customer Service operations to the Royal Pump Rooms. Cabinet agreed to these proposals and work towards the relocation commenced.
- 1.1.2 The Customer and Digital Services team, supported by the Assets team engaged with an architectural contractor, Atkins, to design a new customer service centre, to be located at the site occupied by the Pump Rooms shop. Atkins architects worked through several design iterations to ensure that any development would protect the character of the Pump Rooms whilst providing a modern and efficient customer service space. Officers from Customer Services, the Assets team and the Pump Rooms informed these discussions at every stage.
- 1.1.3 Following several months of planning a final design was produced which was significantly more expensive than what was originally anticipated. February's Cabinet report stated that the costs of relocating Customer Services to the Pump Rooms was provisionally expected to be around £200,000. However, due to massive inflationary costs for building materials and other complications discovered during the design phase, the estimated costs had grown to between £380,000 and £410,000.
- 1.1.4 In light of the significant cost increases, a report was taken to Cabinet again July 2023 requesting a final decision on the route to be taken. The report revisited previous relocation options, including renting a shop or relocating to the Town Hall, but ultimately continued to recommend the Pump Rooms as the best choice. These recommendations were accepted by Cabinet and budget was assigned.
- 1.1.5 The significant increase in costs created apprehension amongst Councillors, as did a negative reception to the project from members of the public. This was expressed most significantly in an online petition entitled "Hands Off Our Pump Rooms" which was concerned about the closure of the shop and the perceived impact introducing Customer Services would have on the Pump Rooms environment. The Cabinet decision was called into Overview and Scrutiny for further consideration and after discussing the matter, the Committee resolved to refer their concerns to Council for wider dialogue.
- 1.1.6 The Chairman of the Council agreed to take the Overview and Scrutiny

Committees referral as an urgent item at the 26th July 2023 meeting, where the Cabinet report and supporting information regarding customer numbers and alternative options were considered. After debate, a decision was reached to take no further action and therefore, the project could commence.

1.1.7 Some of the modifications to the Pump Rooms required listed building consent and these were considered by the Planning Committee in November 2023. No work started towards building the Customer Service Centre until the consent had been gained and following this approval, the Pump Rooms shop closed on Sunday, 19th November 2023. Work on converting the space started a week later and took approximately four months to complete. During this time, most of the Council's other services relocated to Saltisford One and Customer Services were the last team to move out of Riverside House.

1.1.8 The new Customer Service Centre officially opened to the public on Tuesday, 9th April 2024.

1.2 **Costs and Delivery Timeline**

1.2.1 The proposal to Cabinet in July 2023 outlined costs of between £380,000 and £410,000. This was composed of £315,000 for building and contractor works, £65,000 for professional fees and £30,000 contingency budget.

1.2.2 When the Customer Service Centre opened, the delivery cost of the project stood at £306,851. This consisted of:

- £66,767 Professional Fees.
- £240,084 Building, Contract and Equipment
 - Carpentry – £79,428
 - Electrical - £30,298
 - Mechanical - £46,477
 - Furniture - £79,994
 - ICT Equipment – 3,126
 - Decommissioning of shop - £760

1.2.3 During the project, several value engineering decisions were taken to reduce costs without significant detrimental impact on the project's overall outcome. For example, approximately £10,000 was saved by reusing desks and seats from Riverside House. Around £5,000 was saved by changing the specification of the light fittings proposed for use in the main Customer Service area and a further £6,000 was saved by increasing the gap between the oak slats used on the dividing wall to more closely match those of the Café. The Council also used its own contractors to facilitate building works and procured the required furniture directly. These actions secured significant savings on the original quoted costs.

1.2.4 Cabinet agreed that a contingency budget of £30,000 could be carried into the 2024/25 financial year in case further expenditure was incurred following the opening of the Customer Service Centre. To date, £3,323.75 has been spent, predominantly to replace a manual door opening mechanism with a powered alternative.

1.2.5 A further potential expense may be incurred to improve CCTV in the Customer Service Centre, following an internal audit of the wider Pump Rooms system earlier in the year. Customer and Digital Services are currently in discussion with the Council's CCTV team on this matter, but it is not anticipated that costs

would require any further budget to be allocated. Improvements to signage at the Pump Rooms are also required and this is currently being investigated.

- 1.2.6 It was reported to Council in July 2023, that the Pump Rooms Customer Service Centre was anticipated to be fully operational by 8th January 2024. There were two key assumptions made in the associated report which facilitated the January opening: 1) listed building consent would be granted at the October Planning Committee; and 2) that works which did not require planning permission would be allowed to start straight away – including closing the shop. Approximately four months were allocated for building work between October and January.
- 1.2.7 Unfortunately, this deadline was not met, but for good reason. Due to the level of public interest in the Pump Rooms development, the project board did not want to create any impression that work was commencing without the appropriate planning permission. The Listed Building Consent application was scheduled for consideration at the October Planning Committee, but due to timing constraints was deferred until the November meeting. The shop remained open at this point and the site was not effectively handed over to Customer and Digital Services until the end of November.
- 1.2.8 Once the site was handed over and all required permissions were gained, building work took approximately four months, as expected. Whilst the original January deadline was not met, the decision to work transparently, not undertake any action until Listed Building Consent was gained and to keep the shop open was in the best interests of the Council and its communities. The delay did not materially impact the move from Riverside House.

1.3 **Facilities**

- 1.3.1 The new Customer Service Centre's facilities are extensive and significantly better than those previously available to customers at Riverside House.
- 1.3.2 Customers primarily meet with Customer Service agents in two private meeting pods. These pods can comfortably accommodate up to six people, including the Customer Service Agent. They are fully wheelchair accessible, having an extra wide opening door, a completely flat floor and significant turnaround space, making them easily navigable for both manual and powered chair users. The desk within each pod is height adjustable and all equipment can be easily turned around and shared with the customer. Lighting and ventilation levels can fully adjust to account for customers with complex sensory needs, and a portable hearing loop is also available. Privacy screening on the entrance to the pods ensures that whilst the main door panels are glass (to let in natural light), customers cannot be easily seen whilst interacting with our teams. The meeting pods are very private and extensive sound insulation ensures that audio travel into the main customer service area is minimal.
- 1.3.3 A further private meeting pod is also available with video conferencing facilities, should a customer need to speak to an officer located elsewhere, or if they have a planned online meeting and do not have facilities of their own. The pod is enclosed and a PC with camera is fixed to a motorised height adjustable desk. Again, lighting and ventilation can be completely controlled by the occupant and the door is powered to ensure wheelchair accessibility.
- 1.3.4 Open meeting tables are also available at the far end of the Customer Service Centre, with some customers preferring to meet with our team in the open space. This area benefits from particularly good views of the Pump Room

Gardens. These tables do not provide the level of privacy extended by the meeting pods but are only used if the customer expresses a preference for them. Staff on reception can also deal with simple customer queries such as returning a form or requesting non-personal information.

- 1.3.5 The main customer service space also benefits from high efficiency cooling and heating. Ceiling mounted units fully control the temperature and ventilation in the area, ensuring the site will remain warm during the winter and cool during the summer. The office behind the Customer Service Centre, which has no openable windows itself, also benefits from this climate control system.
- 1.3.6 The back-office area accommodates up to four Customer Service Agents. Facilities available to staff in this office are comparable to those at Saltisford One and it's also fully accessible, with a similarly wide, powered entrance door and large turning circle to accommodate any type of user. A height adjustable desk is also available.
- 1.3.7 As a wider improvement for the Pump Rooms, public and staff internet connectivity were both significantly improved as part of the Customer Service Centre project. The old public Wi-Fi system was completely replaced by a modern, secure, scalable solution that is significantly faster and attracts lower costs. This new system is also universal and accessible from other sites, such as the Town Hall, Spa Centre and Tennis Pavilions. Staff access was also improved with the installation of a faster separate connection, as well as improved Wi-Fi infrastructure and general networking equipment. Later in the year, ICT will expand the service further into other areas of the Pump Rooms which are not currently served.

1.4 **Customer Numbers and Satisfaction**

- 1.4.1 As of 1st November 2024, since opening in April some 5277 customers have used the Pump Room facilities. Council Tax, Benefits and Housing related enquiries continue to be the most popular services, as was the case at Riverside House. It was reported to Council in July 2023 that on average, 266 customers per week accessed the facilities at Riverside House, which has decreased slightly to 202 customers per week, on average, at the Pump Rooms. This decrease was not unexpected.
- 1.4.2 Customer and Digital Services anticipated that around 30 enquiries per week, which related to services located at Riverside House would no-longer be received and that around 26 people per week would require video-conference facilities. Changed working practices have helped reduce this number significantly as at Riverside House customers would often be asked to reattend for a video conference appointment at a later time or date. Such issues are now typically dealt with immediately reducing the overall customer count.
- 1.4.3 Customer Satisfaction with the facility is also high and since opening, no complaints have been received. Customer Services operate a feedback system where, most customers have rated the quality of the facilities as being good, or very good. During conversations with staff, the quality of the site and it's calming location have also been complimented, with the clear views of the Pump Room Gardens being a particular high point.
- 1.4.4 The impact that Customer Services may have had on the Pump Room's other facilities and privacy issues were also cited as significant concerns when the proposals were being considered. Since opening, there have been no negative incidents in relation to customers visiting the Customer Service Centre, their

interactions with the wider Pump Rooms environment, or issues relating to loud or disruptive behaviour. The privacy of customers has been maintained throughout, with all customer interactions being contained to the customer service area.

1.5 **The Shop**

- 1.5.1 As part of the July Cabinet report, it was agreed that options for a future shop location would be investigated. Unfortunately, this work did not yield a successful outcome, with the most significant issue being the staffing of any new facility. The Pump Rooms original shop benefitted from “passive” staffing whereby personnel within the Pump Rooms were always available but were not “in the shop” itself, nor was it their primary role. This would not have been possible at another site, which would have needed a permanent, dedicated staff presence.
- 1.5.2 Following the closure of the main shop the Pump Rooms Team relocated some of the display stands into the main Pump Rooms foyer to continue selling some items. Further modifications to the reception desk in the main foyer have increased the available space and recently a pop-up shop was created, working with some of the artists who used to sell their works in the original shop, as part of the Pump Rooms 25 anniversary celebrations.
- 1.5.3 At present, no plans are being actively worked on to specifically create a new, dedicated shop space within the Pump Rooms, although there are ongoing refinements being made to the foyer reception area which is facilitating more retail activity. Other projects currently being undertaken, such as the Stoneleigh Arms and Town Hall refurbishments may provide opportunities in the future to reconsider a dedicated shop facility.

1.6 **Addressing the “Temporary” Nature**

- 1.6.1 During the project, concern was raised that the Pump Rooms Customer Service Centre was temporary, and that significant investment was being made in a facility that would not continue to be used in the long term. To offer clarity on this situation, temporary was not intended to describe the overall facility, but some of the construction techniques used to create the centre overall.
- 1.6.2 Almost all the furnishings and equipment installed at the Pump Rooms are freestanding and can be easily removed if Customer Services were to be relocated elsewhere in the future. The only change that could not be easily reversed without undertaking corrective building work would be the removal of the oak dividing wall – and this itself was installed in such a way that it could be removed, with minimal damage to the surrounding building.
- 1.6.3 Customer Services can remain at the Pump Rooms for as long as the Council requires them to. The independence of the site creates several significant benefits for WDC when considering its wider future office location, as a town centre presence for Customer Services can continue to be maintained regardless of where any back-office functions go. The site also means that any future moves for back-office staff will not disrupt customer access in any way, unlike the move from Riverside House.

1.7 **Added Value**

- 1.7.1 The centre has also opened opportunities for customers to access other partner services too and in early October, as part of the Council’s drive to increase the take up of Pension Credits, the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) began offering

sessions at the Pump Rooms every Thursday afternoon. To date, take up of the sessions for Pension Credit assistance has been very limited, but there have been other more positive, sustainable outcomes.

1.7.2 The slots have allowed the CAB to undertake additional sessions with their own customers in a better environment. This is particularly important for customers with accessibility needs, as their current offices were not entirely suitable. The partnership has also created a mechanism whereby the Customer Services team can easily book appointments and refer our own customers to the CAB's if required. This is reciprocated if a CAB customer requires help from the Council.

1.7.3 Whilst this development may seem quite minor, it adds significant value to a customer's journey by simplifying the interaction between two important public services. For example, if a customer were to visit the CAB to request financial advice, the CAB may recommend that they speak to the Council's benefits team, which historically would have required another visit. Now, they can simply ask a member of the customer service team to pick up the case and immediately undertake the required assessments. Ultimately this doesn't change the outcome for the customer, but the journey to achieving it is significantly easier.

1.8 **Overall**

Overall, the opening of the Pump Rooms Customer Service Centre has been hugely successful. The project was delivered within its budget and whilst slightly later than planned, within the original anticipated build time. The site is favourable to our customers, has excellent facilities, extends future flexibility for Council's back-office operations and is providing services that were not available at Riverside House.

2 **Alternative Options**

2.1 There are no alternative options considered by this report as its purpose is to provide an update to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3 **Legal Implications**

3.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

4 **Financial Services**

4.1 There are no further financial implications arising from this report.

5 **Corporate Strategy**

5.1 The corporate strategy in its current form was not adopted when the Pump Rooms project was approved. However, the projects outcomes are relevant to strategic priority 1, delivering valued, sustainable services.

5.2 Outcome 1.3.2 of strategic priority 1 seeks to ensure that the customer services team can help more customers at the first point of contact through different communications channels. The successful opening of the Pump Rooms Customer Service Centre has ensured that face-to-face options for contacting WDC remain available to any customer who needs it, at an accessible location, in a calm, private, high-quality environment.

6 **Environmental/Climate Change Implications**

6.1 There are no additional negative Environmental/Climate Change implications arising from this report.

6.2 The original report to Cabinet in July 2023 acknowledged that the introduction of the Pump Rooms Customer Service Centre would not increase WDC's overall Carbon Footprint. It did not however mention the potential for ancillary carbon savings associated with transport.

6.3 Whilst there is no easy way for the Council to capture information relating to transport currently, the Customer Service Centre is now located near to multiple bus and rail options. This facilitates far greater flexibility and accessibility than Riverside House, which could be considered as slightly out of town. Whilst the tracking of 3rd party Carbon emissions associated with transport is not part of the Council's strategic priorities for reducing carbon emissions, this is none-the-less, a positive contribution to wider carbon neutrality goals.

7 **Analysis of the effects on Equality**

7.1 There are no equality implications arising from this report. A fully equality assessment was undertaken as part of the Pump Rooms report to Cabinet in July 2023.

8 **Data Protection**

8.1 There are no Data Protection implications arising from this report.

9 **Health and Wellbeing**

9.1 There are no Health and Wellbeing implications arising from this report.

10 **Risk Assessment**

10.1 A risk assessment has not been completed as part of this report.

11 **Consultation**

11.1 Consultation has not been completed as part of this report.

Supporting papers:

[Cabinet – February 2023.](#)

[Cabinet – July 2023.](#)

[Overview and Scrutiny Committee – July 2023.](#)

[Council – July 2023.](#)

[Planning Committee – November 2023.](#)

[WDC Press Release: Planning Permission and Pump Rooms Shop – November 2023.](#)

[WDC Press Release: Pump Rooms Customer Service Centre Opening – April 2024](#)