

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL
RESOURCES COMMITTEE – 15th April 2009

Agenda Item	
Report No	

Wick Office Project

Report by Corporate Manager Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross

Summary

This report provides details of recent work carried out on the Wick Office project.

1. Background

- 1.1 In June 2008, members of the Resources Committee agreed a revised project scope for new offices in Wick. In place of an earlier decision to pursue a Competitive Dialogue with a view to establishing an alternative use of the Council's office site in Market Square, members agreed that the Council's overall objectives could best be achieved by providing new offices on that site.

Members agreed, amongst other things, that a project team should be formed by the Corporate Manager, CSER to progress this approach.

2. Project Organisation

- 2.1 An overview of the project is being maintained by a small Project Board consisting of the Corporate Manager, CSER, the Director of Housing and Property, and the Head of Corporate Finance.
- 2.2 A Project Team has been set up under the chairmanship of the Caithness Wards Manager, and all relevant Services have members on the team. The team has carried out a significant amount of work in a relatively short period of time and has produced a comprehensive project brief, which is now being taken forward by technical colleagues in the Housing & Property Service.

3 Project Brief

- 3.1 In addition to the fundamental necessity to improve the working conditions of Council staff, there are three main elements to the project. Firstly, there are interesting challenges associated with redeveloping a historic town centre site which contains a listed building. Secondly, the new building complex needs to have a strong level of interface with the public in order to enhance its economic role. Thirdly, the project will also contribute significantly to the Council's corporate improvement programme. Each of these aspects will now be considered in turn.

3.2 **Redevelopment**

3.2.1 Because part of the site is Listed, a Conservation Statement is required by Historic Scotland, and this has been compiled on this occasion by the distinguished architect Mr Andrew PK Wright who, amongst other things, acts as conservation adviser to the Highland Buildings Preservation Trust.

3.2.2 The listed building itself, with its curved frontage on to High Street and its distinctive roof formation, dates from the 1830s. Mr Wright recommends that the redevelopment of the site should retain, as much of this building in terms both of its external shape and various detailed internal features, as is compatible with the brief. It is anticipated that Historic Scotland will not disagree with this assessment.

3.3.3 Mr Wright is considerably less complimentary about the other buildings on the site, but does stress the location's importance in defining the local townscape, and recommends that any replacement buildings should be consistent with these townscape values.

3.4 **Public interface**

3.4.1 It is accepted that a public office with substantial numbers of visitors, such as a local authority's area office with an integrated Service Point, has a key role to play in the economic life of a town centre. In Wick, the intention is to enhance this role. This will be achieved not only by bringing other Council services on to the same town centre site (see further below), but by seeking to maximise the use which members of the public can make of the building's facilities, for example, by offering internet access in an extended public area on the ground floor of the building, or by providing local information beyond the standard Council services.

3.5 **Corporate improvement programme**

3.5.1 **(i) Asset rationalisation**

There are currently three principal Council offices in Wick – the Market Square offices, together with a Social Work Office located at the end of the High Street, and ECS Offices, currently located in Rhind House in the Pulteney area of the town. Staff in all three premises will be co-located at the new office development. The Social Work premises are leased, and the lease will be given up at the appropriate time. The ECS offices are held in the name of the Caithness Educational Trust, and their disposal will require to take the Trust's interests into account.

Staff in certain other smaller offices in the town will also be relocated. Where possible, other property costs will be reduced as a result.

3.5.2 In addition, Registration staff will move from Wick Town Hall, thereby opening up the possibility of making that important public building DDA compliant at an affordable cost. That in turn, by making the former Council Chamber fully accessible and bringing it back into full use, will ease the design burden and the cost of the new building in Market Square.

3.5.3 **(ii) Business Support**

The Council took the opportunity presented by the Drummie project to review its Business Support functions across all Services, and was able to produce significant ongoing efficiencies as a result. The Wick office project will be able to develop these concepts to the next stage and, because the building is expected to have a large element of new build, there will be fewer physical constraints than there were at Drummie, where the dimensions of the various rooms were largely fixed at the outset.

3.5.4 (iii) Mobile and flexible working

A critical piece of work which has been undertaken by the Project Team has addressed the size of building which is required. It is now a generally accepted principle that it is not necessary to provide a separate permanent workstation for every member of staff. There is ample evidence from other Scottish local authorities and from further afield to support this. Many Council employees spend considerable periods of time away from their desks, either out of the office altogether, or at meetings with colleagues. A recent study carried out in a Highland Council office for this project showed that, generally, no more than 50% of the staff were at their desks at any one time. Desk occupancy at Drummie is estimated to be around 50 to 60%.

For the purposes of this project, a ratio of approximately 10 to 7 is proposed, which is to say that, overall, for every ten members of staff who are based in the building, seven workstations will be provided. A similar ratio is being used at both Aberdeen and Dundee Councils, who are also undertaking office rationalisation projects at the present time.

Compared with a 1:1 people to workstations ratio, the proposed approach will save over £1million.

4 Partnership opportunities

- 4.1 The NHS management team of the North Highland Community Health Partnership (CHP) is currently located in Caithness General Hospital, which they believe is a less than ideal location for them for a number of reasons. Agreement in principle has been reached for the CHP General Manager and her team to relocate to the new offices, and the terms of this arrangement are under discussion.
- 4.2 As previously stated, the Registrar's office will be moving to the new premises.
- 4.3 Members of staff of the Caithness & North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership are currently based in premises which could provide a base for companies who have an interest in the Pentland Firth project, and the relocation of these staff is under active consideration.
- 4.4 Discussions will also continue with other public sector partners on other co-location opportunities.

5 **Local Consultation**

- 5.1 Members of the three Caithness Wards have received regular updates from the Ward Manager, and the Corporate Manager, Caithness Sutherland and Easter Ross provided an overview at a recent meeting.
- 5.2 The Royal Burgh of Wick Community Council also receives regular updates from the Ward Manager.
- 5.3 The project is a standing item on the Caithness Staff Forum, and also on the Caithness Sutherland and Easter Ross Area Management Team agenda. Many members of the Area Management Team were actively involved in the Drummuie project.
- 5.4 Following this meeting, the Corporate Manager, Caithness Sutherland and Easter Ross intends to hold a series of local staff meetings to ensure that all colleagues who will be affected by this project have an opportunity to hear directly about it and to ask questions.

6 **Next steps**

- 6.1 The Housing & Property Service's Design Team will now begin to consider the Project Brief with a view to producing initial cost estimates by early June. These estimates will be considered by the Project Board and will be presented to members in the context of the Council's ongoing review of its capital programme.

<h2>7. <u>Recommendation</u></h2>

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">7.1 Members are invited to consider this report, note the progress to date, and agree to Receive further progress reports. |
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Signature:

Designation: Corporate Manager Caithness Sutherland and Easter Ross

Date: 02 April 2009