



## **North Devon Council**

Report Date: 5 February 2024

Topic: North Devon Council Town Centre Hub

Report by: Head of Customer Focus

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1. This report outlines the proposed North Devon Council (NDC) Hub in Green Lanes, Units 38 & 39 (Former M & Co) and the benefits to North Devon Council.

### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1. Members endorse the Town Centre Hub as part of the Customer Focus Programme with the associated benefits to the wider council and community.

2.2. That Members approve the estimated one-off infrastructure costs of £220,000 be funded from the earmarked Transformation Reserve.

2.3. Subject to 2.2, that Members recommend that Full Council vary the Capital Programme by £220,000 and that funds be released.

### **3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

3.1. The Hub will enhance the presence for all aspects of our services, as well as enhancing our relationship further with the Police and the overall community safety partnership.

### **4. REPORT**

4.1. The project forms part of the overall objective of the Customer Focus Programme which was presented and endorsed by members in December 2021.

4.2. Units 38 & 39 have been empty since NDC purchased Green Lanes in November 2021 and even though the units have been actively marketed over the past two years there has been no commercial interest from retailers during this time. Reported feedback has said it is the wrong shape and size for modern retailers; not big enough for larger requirements and too large for others. If the Council did not occupy the unit then it would take considerable additional investment to create a space to interest potential retailers.

4.3. Units 38 & 39 being vacant within Green Lanes are currently a cost already borne by the Council as landlord and have been since we acquired the shopping centre in November 2021. The current business rates and service charges for the units are approximately £50,000 per annum which are currently built into the Green Lanes revenue budget. If the Council were to occupy the premises we have the opportunity to create an additional income stream by sharing with other 3<sup>rd</sup> parties.

- 4.4. We propose to revert to our pre-Covid opening hours of 9am-5pm Monday to Friday. Customer Services currently see approx. 100-130 customers per week on the 3 mornings a week that Lynton House is open. There is no 'passing trade' along Commercial Road and so the only people we see are those who have made a special trip to come into town to see us for a purpose. With current Green Lanes footfall of approximately 10,000 per day and a more central location we anticipate an increased number of people coming in to see and speak to staff regarding a variety of services. This is seen as a positive opportunity to further humanise both North Devon Council and our staff by having a more regular presence in our residents' day to day lives.
- 4.5. Community engagement brings together diverse perspectives to improve the impact of policies and projects on people. The Hub will enhance our current offering by having the space for public consultations for both physical documentation and screens with information. There will be hot-desking space for officers to locate themselves during consultations when expertise is required on-site.
- 4.6. We will have self-serve kiosks to encourage customers to interact with us digitally, with staff on-site to help those who need assistance.
- 4.7. Alongside Customer Services, there will be a daily presence from those services which have the most regular customer interactions, namely Housing and Revenues & Benefits.
- 4.8. The Police have provided a commitment to occupy the premises alongside NDC with a daily presence from members of the neighbourhood team working alongside NDC officers, which will further benefit retailers in both Green Lanes and the whole town centre. NDC are working with the Police and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner to explore more permanent options.
- 4.9. Positive discussions have taken place recently with the Police and the local Inspector has stated "Devon and Cornwall Police are actively engaging with North Devon District Council to understand the options and shared benefits of a Devon and Cornwall Police presence operating from the proposed hub site. Our Policing teams work closely with North Devon District Council colleagues to prepare for and mitigate offending risks, prevent crime, protect communities, and pursue offenders across our geography. The site provides scope for a scalable range of options in which to host Devon and Cornwall Police staff and services, as a potential enabler of further improvements to our interoperability. The site is centrally located in a highly populated, high footfall area, which has the potential to offer fantastic access and visibility amongst our communities. There are ongoing discussions between our local Policing Leadership team and Force colleagues to understand if or how this unique opportunity could align within our organisations estates plan."

- 4.10. There is opportunity to share the front office spare with a 3<sup>rd</sup> party which would generate an additional revenue income.
- 4.11. The Customer Services telephone team moved from Lynton House up to Brynsworthy Environment Centre in August 2023. This enabled the whole Parking team, both wardens and officers, to move to the ground floor of Lynton House. This released Castle Lodge for external use which is now occupied by Families in Grief and will generate a positive financial income contribution to the council. Similarly, by moving the Face to Face (F2F) team into the centre of the town it will release further space within Lynton House which could be utilised either internally by the Council or externally through re-configuration and generating a potential new revenue stream to the Council.
- 4.12. To bring Lynton House up to current standards, with regard to disabled access, would cost an estimated £30,000. Any changes made to the incline of the current ramp would create a further impact to our ability to unlock car parks cash due to the van not being able to access the courtyard.
- 4.13. Green Lanes has a significantly improved accessibility for the public, there is a bus stop directly outside the Boutport Street entrance making it easier for those who rely on public transport to access than at Lynton House. As well as the main public toilets there is also a newly opened Changing Places toilet facility, for those with complex disabilities, within a few metres of the entrance to units 38 & 39.
- 4.14. A public consultation on the proposed hub provision was carried between 30/10/23 and 11/12/23 (see Appendix A) and the results show significant support with around 90% in support and/or making suggestions for the scheme.
- 4.15. It is therefore proposed to move forwards with the provision of the Town Centre Hub within Green Lanes Shopping Centre to maximise the usage of the vacant unit and to work with partners to maximise occupancy arrangements for the hub and in addition look for further opportunities to utilise the remaining space within Lynton House.

## 5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. The estimated one-off cost of infrastructure changes required to facilitate the hub are £220,000. This includes all necessary building works and ICT infrastructure.
- 5.2. The Council set aside funds a number of years ago to cover associated costs of transforming the way we provide our services and currently there is a forecast balance at 31 March 2024 in the Transformation Reserve of



£236,106. It is therefore proposed to fund the one-off costs outlined in 5.1 above from this reserve.

5.3. The units 38 & 39 being vacant within Green Lanes are currently a cost already borne by the Council as landlord and have been since we acquired the shopping centre in November 2021. The current business rates and service charges for the units are approximately £50,000 per annum which are currently built into the Green Lanes revenue budget. If the Council were to occupy the premises we have the opportunity to create an additional income stream by sharing with other 3<sup>rd</sup> parties as set out in the report.

## 6. EQUALITIES ASSESSMENT

6.1. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been completed and is attached as Appendix B to this report.

## 7. ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

7.1. No environmental implications identified.

## 8. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

8.1. What impact, positive or negative, does the subject of this report have on:

8.1.1. The commercialisation agenda:

8.1.2. Improving customer focus -

8.1.3. Regeneration or economic development-

## 9. CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

9.1. The decision in respect of the recommendations in this report can be made by this Committee pursuant to delegated powers provided in paragraph 1 of Annexe 1 to Part 3 of the Constitution.

## 10. STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

This report contains no confidential information or exempt information under the provisions of Schedule 12A of 1972 Act.

## 11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: (The background papers are available for inspection and kept by the author of the report).



## 12. STATEMENT OF INTERNAL ADVICE

The author (below) confirms that advice has been taken from all appropriate Councillors and Officers: Sarah Higgins, Head of Customer Focus