

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

**Report of Corporate Director for Place
to
Cabinet
on
18th June 2013**

Report prepared by: Peter Vadden
Culture Improvement & Development

**Agenda
Item No.**

Future Use of the Central Library (Victoria Avenue)

Place Scrutiny Committee - Executive Councillor: Councillor Derek Jarvis

A Part 1 Public Agenda item.

1. Purpose of Report

To set out proposals for the potential short & long term use of the Central Library following the Library Service's move to its new premises in September 2013 and to highlight the associated costs.

2. Recommendations

2.1 That Members agree, in the short term, to relocate the Beecroft Art Gallery, including temporary galleries, a shared community lecture theatre and a short term exhibitions from its current location into the Central Library building and agree to the cost of undertaking necessary building works. The Capital cost of the work is £310,000 and the annual running costs will be £195,000 (including the cost of an additional Museums & Galleries Assistant).

2.2 That Members note the work with the Digital Exploration Centre Trust to develop a scheme to take occupation of the Central Library in the long term.

3. Background

3.1 The Council's Library Service is due to vacate the current Central Library (Victoria Avenue) in September 2013 to relocate to the Forum and provide a joint service with the University and College situated in Farringdon Road.

3.2 This move will leave the current Central Library building empty and available for alternative use.

3.3 Although in need of some investment, the vacation of this building provides an opportunity to further develop the borough's cultural facilities and support our corporate priority to make Southend active and alive with culture. It occupies a prime position in Victoria Avenue and its continued use will also support the Council's City Deal application to regenerate Victoria Avenue.

3.4 **Future Use**

3.4.1 Considerable thought has been given to the possible future use of the Central Library building, including educational uses, cultural incubation space, artistic display space, a resource centre etc. However, a recent condition survey of the building has highlighted that its continued use will require improvement works to be undertaken on: emergency lighting, smoke detection, ventilation, heating and revised fire escapes routes to meet current building regulations. As such these considerations have also taken into account the cost to ensure the Council gets value for money.

3.4.2 As a result the following is proposed as the most appropriate and practical short and long term use taking into account the level of investment required and potential cultural impact:

Short Term

3.4.2 A temporary home for the The Beecroft Art Gallery, including temporary galleries, a shared community lecture theatre and a short term exhibition from Escala (Essex Universities Latin American Art collection) to celebrate the Essex University's 50th Anniversary in 2014. The provision of this will require the use of the basement, ground floor, lecture theatre and the first floor of the building.

3.4.3 The Beecroft Art Gallery's current location is in a converted Edwardian Hotel. The building belongs to the Beecroft Trust of which the Council is custodian. The building has had major subsidence and maintenance issues for the last decade and whilst temporary measures have been undertaken to support the building there is increasing evidence that further work will be needed to underpin the gallery. In addition the condition of the building is becoming increasingly unsightly which is not conducive with a public attraction.

3.4.4 The Beecroft Art Gallery is due to be moved into the New Museum when it is built and the current building can therefore be sold to realise a capital receipt. It is therefore practical to find a temporary home for the Beecroft which will negate the considerable cost of underpinning its current home and which may be demolished in a few years.

3.4.5 The current central library offers the possibility of a suitable temporary home, but will require some changes in order to create the right environment and space. In particular the Central Library will need to have areas made secure for storage and appropriate lighting installed. This solution will provide for the current display provided at the Beecroft Gallery and its temporary exhibitions. It should be noted that, as at present, the Beecroft's collection's more delicate and sensitive pictures will not be able to be displayed without additional investment in climate controls. However, provision can be made for its safe and environmentally controlled storage.

- 3.4.6 The Beecroft currently operates temporary exhibitions which are extremely popular and offer a variety of artistic displays. The proposed use of the Central Library includes the expansion of these galleries to offer an increased variety of temporary exhibitions, potentially working with students from the University, The Temporary Arts Project (TAP) and other artists.
- 3.4.7 Escala is Essex University's acclaimed collection of Latin American Contemporary Art. Whilst the collection is looking for a permanent home it is proposed that an element of the collection is displayed in the Beecroft's temporary galleries for the summer period in 2014 to promote the University's presence in Southend and as part of their 50th Anniversary celebrations.
- 3.4.8 Discussions with the White Bus Film Company and the Temporary Arts Project have shown that their current film venue in North Road is insufficient for their needs. In addition it has been highlighted that the Museum Service and other cultural organisations within the town would have a use for a lecture theatre/film venue. There is therefore an opportunity for the Museum Service to utilise and hire out the lecture theatre to the White Bus Film Company and other organisations.
- 3.4.9 The Beecroft Art Gallery has for some time been looking at accommodating a small coffee area for its visitors in order to raise revenue. It is therefore proposed that a high quality self service coffee facility and small seating areas is also accommodated within the Central Library. This will capitalise on some of the people who currently use the libraries coffee shop as a meeting place and add to the overall attraction of the facility.

Long Term

- 3.4.10 A permanent home for the Digital Exploration Centre (DEC). The Council is currently working with the DEC to undertake a feasibility study and updated business plan. This work will be completed in July 2013. If the feasibility study is positive this will necessitate the DEC securing funding to undertake additional works on the Central Library building to meet building regulations. The Council will work with the DEC to take occupation over a transitional period. The DEC would initially occupy part of the building jointly with Beecroft Art Gallery (as detailed above) until such time as the Beecroft Art Gallery moves into the New Museum. This would provide the DEC with an opportunity to expand into the whole building. It is anticipated that the DEC will start to take occupation within 2 – 5 years.
- 3.4.11 Digital technology underpins nearly every aspect of our daily lives, and is a field in which the UK has a wealth of talent and expertise. The Digital Exploration Centre (DEC) arises from the recognition that there are very few organisations working with digital technologies in the UK that bring together business, the arts, entrepreneurship, academic research and public entertainment. This mix of creative invention, the generation and transfer of knowledge, and its foundational link to business and commerce, makes the DEC an ideal Cultural and regeneration project for Southend and Victoria Avenue. The DEC concentrates on three distinctive digital areas:

- Commercial and Industrial - invention, entrepreneurship, product development and showcasing, define the Commercial and Industrial ambitions of the DEC.
- Research and Education - The creation of its own Research Centre in collaboration with leading universities and business partners,
- Arts and Exhibition - Exhibition spaces in which relevant work, whether commercial or purely creative, can be shown.

The DEC is based up on the hugely successful Arts Electronica museum based in Lintz. More information on principles behind the DEC can be seen on <http://www.aec.at>

4. Other Options

- 4.1 The other option considered is the mothballing or demolition of the building. Costs to mothball or demolish the building are considered to be excessive given the potential for the short term use of the site.

5. Reasons for Recommendation

- 5.1 The vacation of the Central Library (Victoria Avenue) in September 2013 could leave the Council with an empty building incurring both maintenance and mothballing costs. In addition, following the public's expression to reuse the building as a cultural attraction there is also a reputational risk to the Council if it were sold or demolished.

6. Corporate Implications

6.1 Contribution to Council's Vision & Corporate Priorities

The project directly contributes to the Council's visions of 'creating a better Southend' and 'making Southend active, attractive and alive with sport & Culture' by providing a further attraction and activities.

6.2 Financial Implications

- 6.2.1 The total capital cost of implementing the proposal in this report will be £310,000. This will be funded from the £150,000 capital budget specifically for the refurbishment of the central library in 2013/14 and the balance of £160,000 will be funded from the Council's capital reserve.

6.2.2 The relevant annual running costs in respect of either occupying the building or leaving the building as a mothball site are as follows:-

Running Costs £'000's	Occupied Building £'000's	Mothballed Building £'000's
Secure and decommissioned building (one-off)	0	40
Rates	25	125
Utility costs & essential checks	109	10
Insurance	20	7
Security	15	53
Premises Costs	26	0
Staffing	25	0
Less: running costs from Beecroft Gallery	(25)	(0)
Total	195*	235**

*Rates are lower as the occupants would be in receipt of mandatory charity relief of 80%.

**The total is made up of £40k of one off costs and £195k annual running costs (for the first year annual running costs these would be £164k, as in the first year of being vacant the property would be entitled to three months empty rates).

6.2.3 If the building was left unoccupied the Council will need to incur the above costs of a mothballed site. Similar annual running costs will be incurred with the occupation of the building but this will allow a service need to be met, the realisation of a capital receipt and that a Council asset will not deteriorate or be subject to vandalism, etc.

6.2.4 The annual costs of either option will need to be factored into the setting of the Council's 2014/15 budget.

6.3 Legal Implications

In the short term, The Beecroft Art Gallery Trust is operated by the Council with the Members as trustees therefore legal agreements with the Council will not be required, however the longer term occupation by the DEC, may require legal agreements or Service Level Agreements for which assistance will be sought from the Council's Property Services and the Head of Legal and Democratic Services.

6.4 People Implications

The recommendations in this report will increase the Council's establishment by 1 level 7 post at an annual cost of £24,646 including on costs.

6.5 Property Implications

The implementation of the recommendations in this report could lead to a long term use of the Central Library (Victoria Avenue) which negates the cost of an unoccupied building, improves the town's cultural attraction and increases the economic wellbeing in the borough. It should however be noted that a recent condition survey had indicated that additional works will be required to the building over the next 5-10 years.

If the proposal is approved the current building occupied by the Beecroft Trust will be available for sale and realisation of a capital receipt.

6.6 Consultation

The Cultural Advisory Working Party have been consulted (Pre-Cabinet Scrutiny) at their meeting on 6th June 2013. There was general positive support for the proposal to re-locate Beecroft Gallery, however concerns were expressed about the long term future use of the building for Digital Exploration Centre and Members would wish to consider the proposal in more detail following the outcome of the feasibility study and completion of the business plan.

6.7 Equalities and Diversity Implications

The project will implement the Council's Equalities and Diversity policy within any scheme which is developed from this project.

6.8 Risk Assessment

The main risks are:

Risk	Impact / Likelihood High (H) Medium (M) Low (L)	Mitigation
The feasibility study for the DEC proves inappropriate or too costly.	Impact (H) Likelihood (L)	Ensure a pragmatic approach to the works required. Continue to seek alternative uses
The building requires too much investment to warrant future occupation	Impact (H) Likelihood (M)	A condition and occupation survey is currently being undertaken.
The DEC is unable to secure appropriate funding to occupy the building	Impact (H) Likelihood (L)	Work with the DEC to pursue funding options.

6.9 **Value for Money**

All elements of the project have and will be conducted in accordance with the Council's Contract Procedures Rules and Financial Regulations in order to ensure value for money.

6.10 **Community Safety Implications**

No community safety implications have been identified at present however, The Council's obligation under section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 will be taken in to account if any arise during further stages.

6.11 **Environmental Impact**

There are no direct environmental implications to this report.

7. **Background Papers**

There are none

8. **Appendices**

There are none