

Report to Cabinet

16 November 2022

Subject:	New Archives Centre
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member – Leisure and Tourism Councillor Laura Rollins
Director:	Director- Borough Economy Alice Davey
Key Decision:	Yes Agree requirement for new centre; agreement on proposed location
Contact Officer:	Assistant Director – Libraries, Archives, Information Services, Tourism and Community Hubs Dawn Winter dawn_winter@sandwell.gov.uk

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That approval be given to identify land to the rear of Smethwick Council House as the preferred site for a new Archives Centre.
- 1.2 That the Director – Borough Economy be authorised to proceed with feasibility, design, specification and the development a funding strategy for a new Archives Centre at the preferred site.
- 1.3 That the Director of Borough Economy, in consultation with the Section 151 Officer, be authorised to:
 - Prepare any necessary tendering documentation;
 - Procure, in accordance with the public procurement rules, the Council's procurement and financial regulations a contractor(s) to carry out further feasibility, draft design and specification and support a funding strategy; to award a contract and to enter into or execute under seal any financial agreement(s) as may be deemed necessary in relation to the project



2 Reasons for Recommendations

2.1 Currently archives storage is at capacity, and the material is housed in three separate sites, which makes managing the collection and providing access difficult. Much of the storage does not meet the required standards (BS 4971) set out by The National Archives (TNA). The archives are stored in the basements of Smethwick library and West Bromwich town hall (neither of which meets the standard) and in the relatively new Dudley archives – (which does, but costs the service £13k per annum). The Archives Service had its application for mandatory accreditation by the TNA rejected in July 2018, because storage did not meet minimum standards. The service should have reapplied by 2021 but TNA recognise that the standard cannot be met and agreed to a delay in applying for accredited status. We cannot however, delay indefinitely.

2.2 A new archives centre provides several opportunities for Sandwell.

- Opportunity to develop a new and improved true heritage and Storytelling centre for Sandwell that incorporates both a new archives centre and a records management facility to preserve the corporate memory. Economies of scale would allow the authority to develop a more proactive strategy for the acquisition of historic corporate records in a timely manner.
- Providing much needed high-quality storage for Sandwell's public art collection which is also in unsuitable storage conditions.
- The geographical area covered by the Archives is made up of several diverse communities and it is our aim to ensure that our collections represent these communities living in Sandwell. A new centre will allow us to fully address gaps in our collections by working closely with community groups and other local bodies to collect material.
- A new building would provide the opportunity to undertake a range of events and activities in a dedicated community space and allow touring exhibitions on the history of Sandwell to be more effectively displayed, and to begin to actively collect items and stories to tell the true 'story of Sandwell'.



3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p>The Best Start in Life for Children and Young People</p> <p>Improving access to Archives gives more opportunities for families and children to attend for local history and storytelling</p>
	<p>People Live Well and Age Well</p> <p>Improving access to Archives, local history and heritage gives greater opportunity for residents to enjoy their local community assets. It also increases the opportunity for local groups to use the facility with residents benefitting from their activities.</p>
	<p>Strong Resilient Communities</p> <p>A new Archives Centre enables Sandwell Council to retain its archives and public records and make them accessible to local communities and creates and sense of civic pride and pride in place.</p>
	<p>A Strong and Inclusive Economy</p> <p>The project will deliver direct improvements within Smethwick neighbourhoods and make the area more attractive to live in.</p> <p>By delivering this ambitious project will further demonstrate Sandwell Council's ability to get things done.</p>

4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 Sandwell's Archives include the political, personal, domestic, industrial, religious, educational and social histories of Sandwell dating from 1369 through to the present day. These unique documents offer the people of Sandwell and beyond a journey through the development of the area, up to now. This material is available in a wide variety of formats. Their preservation ensures that future generations will be able to learn from the experiences of the past to make decisions about the present and future.
- 4.2 Funding is made available from central government to account for changes made to legislation that are estimated to have a disadvantageous financial effect on local authorities. A 'New Burdens' payment compensates local authorities for the increased activities that places of deposit may experience during the transition period. TNA agreed that some of this money awarded to Sandwell could be used for



a feasibility study into a new archives centre. This feasibility is complete and further research now needs to be undertaken to develop costings and a design for an agreed site. Additional New Burdens funding was received from TNA in 2021-22 and this can also be used to fund further feasibility, design, specification for a new centre and support to develop a funding strategy and potential bid to external funders e.g. National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Costs for a new centre were previously estimated at £8-9 million. With current increases in building costs, this is now expected to be significantly higher and will be re-examined.

- 4.3 Research carried out in 2020/21 identified and assessed feasibility of 6 sites (see Appendix A). Since the feasibility was carried out no further progress was made due to Covid 19 limitations. TNA have now identified further New Burdens funding payable to Sandwell and have agreed that this can be utilised to develop a costed design and specification of the identified site. Since the production of the feasibility a further three sites were identified and assessed. (see Appendix B). The 1st and 2nd choice sites from the 2020/21 feasibility are no longer available for the archives and two of the newly identified sites are not considered to be suitable. It is intended, therefore, to explore further feasibility, design and specification for developing the third newly identified site at Smethwick Council House. There is potential to build a new Archives Centre on land at the rear of the building as well as reconfiguring the existing building to accommodate Smethwick library (currently housed in poor accommodation further down the High Street).
- 4.4 It is important from an operational, staffing and revenue point of view that the new Archives Service be housed alongside a library. Staffing is currently low and is supported by the library staff in the existing location at Smethwick Library.

5 Alternative Options

- 5.1 see also Appendix A and Appendix B



Option	Reason for rejection
Do nothing	Sandwell could lose its place of deposit status and be required to pay another local authority to house its public records
Conversion of existing storage at Smethwick Library	Too small and costly
Rental of additional space at Dudley Archives	Not sustainable – Dudley will want the space back as their archives grow and has revenue implications as well as costs and travel for Sandwell residents with a disconnect from local services
Utilise SMBC owned industrial units	All those available are either too small or not accessible enough
Lease or purchase private sector industrial units	All those available are not accessible enough and not cost effective
Use unoccupied space at Operations and Development centre (Roway Lane)	Too small and not accessible enough
Smethwick Swimming Centre (Thimblemill Baths)	Restrictions due to layout and listed status

6 Implications

Resources:	<p>The cost of any options will be significant and based on the experiences of other small records offices (and recent increase to building costs), likely to cost between £10m and £11m, depending on size, option chosen, and any issues arising.</p> <p>There may be some funding available from external sources e.g Arts Council England's Cultural Development Fund or National Lottery Heritage Fund, although their funding for such projects has fallen, and it doesn't fund straightforward building projects, but substantial capital is likely to be needed from Sandwell Council.</p> <p>An increase in annual revenue is likely to be required unless the new site included a library (because there are financial and operational management advantages of sharing a space with a library which would be lost if the centre was in a stand-alone building).</p> <p>Moving the library into Smethwick Council House would bring the building back into greater use.</p>
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Legal and Governance:	<p>Sandwell Council would be able to comply with required standards and retain its place of deposit status.</p> <p>A small strip of land to the rear of the site is subject to an adverse possession application to the Land Registry. The council's legal team are progressing this.</p>
Risk:	<p>Doing nothing – Reputational - TNA ultimately has the sanction to remove Sandwell's "Place of Deposit" status and store the archives elsewhere at our cost, but more immediately archives storage is now at capacity, and if a major collection were offered we would have to turn it down. Climate change means there is an increased likelihood of floods in the immediate vicinity, meaning irreplaceable records could be damaged beyond repair. This would result in the loss of a valuable service to our residents with an interest in local and family history. It also means Sandwell would not have a modern, interactive Archives and Storytelling centre.</p>
Equality:	No Issues
Health and Wellbeing:	<p>Improving access to archives, local history and heritage gives greater opportunity for residents to enjoy their local community assets. It also increases the opportunity for local groups to use the facility with residents benefitting from their activities.</p>
Social Value	<p>The project will help to encourage people to use their archives at a convenient time and location and will engender a sense of pride in place and heritage in general.</p> <p>The project will help to put Sandwell 'On the Map' as a place that values its archives.</p>

7. Appendices

Appendix A – Feasibility December 2020

Appendix B – Feasibility April 2022

8. Background Papers

Public Records Acts, 1958 and 1967

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/6-7/51>

