

Report to Cabinet

7 February 2024

Subject:	New Archives Centre for the Borough
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member – Leisure and Tourism Cllr Charn Singh Padda
Director:	Director – Borough Economy Alice Davey
Key Decision:	Yes Boroughwide service – affects all wards
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 work with appointed subject matter expert consultant for archives and senior council officers to develop a funding strategy for the development and capital scheme to establish a new Archives Centre for the Borough at the preferred site as approved by Cabinet on 16 November 2022;
- 1.2 That the Director of Borough Economy, in consultation with the Section 151 Officer, the Monitoring Officer and the Portfolio holder for Archives be authorised to progress the proposed scheme through the Council’s consideration and approval process for capital schemes with an associated business model to outline the revenue impact of the proposed scheme and submit a further report in due course.



2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 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. 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.
- 2.2 Currently archives storage is at capacity, and the material is housed in three separate sites, which makes managing the collection and providing access for residents difficult, it also restricts the provision of resources in relation to a public service for family and local history searches.
- 2.3 The service is a Place of Deposit for Public Records as set out under Section 4 (1) of the Public Records Act 1958. To retain this status the Borough must hold The National Archives Accreditation standard, and in 2018 we were unsuccessful in our application for this award. This was primarily due to the unsuitable storage environment, which continues to jeopardise our ability to effectively care for and conserve our collections.
- 2.4 Sandwell Archives is in the minority of archives services in not being accredited. 90% of local authority Places of Deposits in England are Accredited (about the same in Wales). Of those not accredited, the majority have made unsuccessful applications and are following a programme of rectifying activity aiming to address the issues.
- 2.5 An archives service that is not accredited may trigger a review of the Place of Deposit status. This would cause reputational damage to the Council so is identified as a red risk on the Corporate risk register.
- 2.6 Most 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 at a cost. The current rental price of £13,000 per year is below market value, and the agreement can be terminated by either party by giving six months' notice.





2.7 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’.

2.8 Significant funding will be required to realise this ambition (current estimate is c. £20 million), so a funding strategy and subsequent external funding bids will need to be prepared. Additional funding streams could also be explored. Senior officers to work with finance colleagues will set aside resource time to work out Council contribution as this may be required as first element before securing external funding.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p>The Best Start in Life for Children and Young People 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 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 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 The project will deliver direct improvements within Smethwick neighbourhoods and make the area more attractive to live in. 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 this money totalling £119k awarded to Sandwell could be used for feasibility studies and project management into a new archives centre.
- 4.3 These studies delivered by specialist archivist contractors are now complete (see Appendix A, B and C) and a draft design with indicative costings has been produced for the agreed site. Officers will now work with the consultant and an archives funding specialist to develop a funding strategy and support bid(s) to external funders e.g. National Lottery Heritage Fund, Arts Council England.
- 4.4 Costs for a new centre are now estimated to be in the region of £20 million to provide a building that is able to meet the standard required for



accreditation and full public access. Such a building would be expected to have an asset life in the region of 40 years.

- 4.5 Research carried out in 2020/21, funded by TNA at a cost of £15k, 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. 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 were no longer available for the archives as they had been identified for alternative uses, and two of the newly identified sites are not considered to be suitable.
- 4.6 It was, therefore, agreed by cabinet in November 2022 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 and the reception area of the Archives Service (Smethwick Library currently housed in poor accommodation further down the High Street). Smethwick Library could then be disposed of as part of the Council's Asset Rationalisation Strategy and this was agreed in principle by Cabinet in October 2023.
- 4.7 Utilising Smethwick Council House gives an opportunity to secure this building for the long term. It is a Grade II listed building and likely to be retained by the Council. If a refurbishment of this building were to be carried out it could run into several millions of pounds regardless of its inclusion in this scheme.
- 4.8 Not operating the Archives from suitable accommodation is incurring additional revenue costs for the service, particularly at Smethwick Library which is in poor condition and liable to flooding.



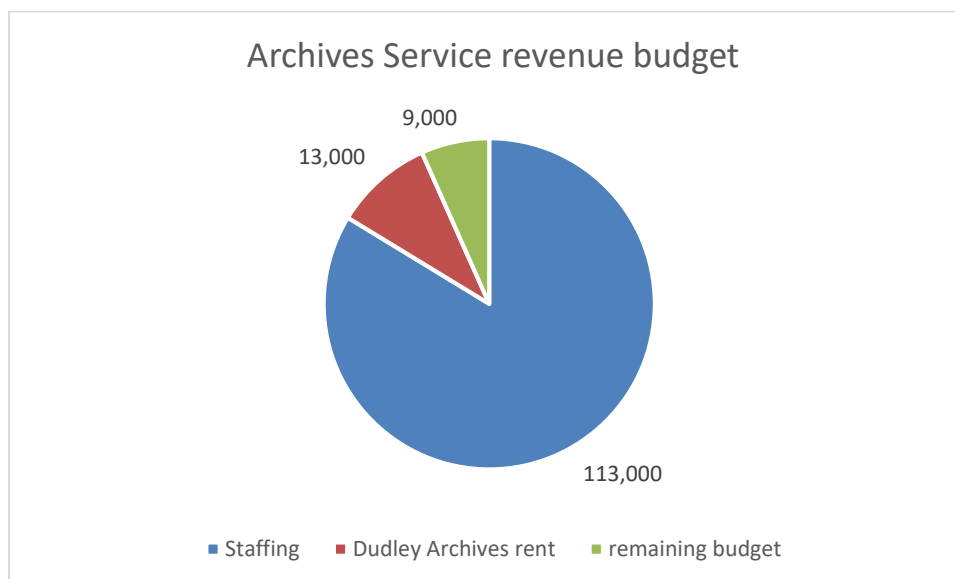
Summary of costs incurred by Sandwell MBC – since 2016

Budgetary area	Cost's incurred
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restoration and preservation of flood damaged archival collections. • Professional drying services. • Professional cleaning services. • Replacement of flood damaged conservation equipment and materials. • Replacement of electronic devices e.g. archival digitisation facilities, dehumidifiers and oral history equipment. 	£25,765
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Damage to the fabric of the building e.g. repair or replacement of flooring, doors, drains and guttering. 	£2,481
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building adjustments e.g. raised parapet wall above the front fire exit. 	£1,636
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacement of disaster management equipment. 	£2,658
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacement of flood defence equipment. 	£1,039
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storage of Sandwell's Public Records at Dudley Archives 	£86,000
Total Cost to Sandwell MBC	£119,579

4.9 The accommodation at West Bromwich Town Hall is currently creating difficulties and incurring costs as work to the fabric of the building is affecting the climactic stability which has led to an outbreak of mould on some of the collections. This will need to be professionally treated and cleaned at a cost of c. £10k.



4.10 The archives budget is very small - £137k per annum and we pay £13k per annum (almost 10%) to Dudley. See below for breakdown.



4.11 This shows that there is only £9k per annum to pay for conservation, digitisation, resources, etc, meaning we are unable to deliver an adequate archives service.

4.12 The attached report from Ellis Williams Architects of November 2023 (Appendix C) was funded by the New Burdens funding from TNA at a cost of £30k. It identifies and details the following: -

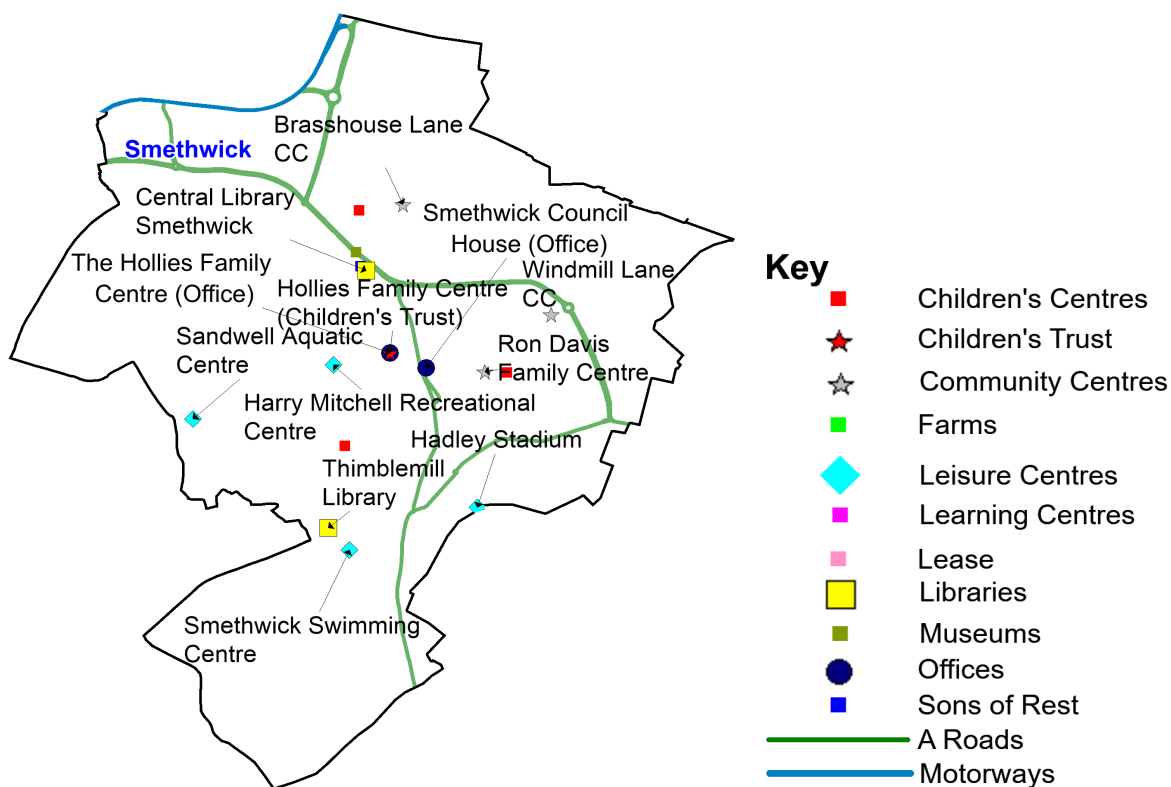
- Overview of the chosen site and its surroundings
- How a new centre could fit on the site and its relationship to the existing building
- How the centre would be visible from Victoria Park (it will be obscured at the front by the existing building)
- Indicative parking areas and access to and from the site, whilst leaving space for potential future expansion of the building if required
- An original appraisal of 4 options and how it was narrowed to 2 options (A and C).
- How the two options can be split up in terms of space with archives storage and staff areas on the ground floor and public areas on the first floor as this is more cost effective
- Artists impressions of the appearance of the building and how it might look in relation to the existing building
- No windows on the ground floor to protect the archives and how light would then come into the building



- Initial and updated costs, all benchmarked against existing projects and current construction costs
- Schedules of accommodation, benchmarked against current archive centre projects (e.g. Crewe, Cheshire) and comparing to existing accommodation in Sandwell with provision for at least 25 years expansion
- Identification of option C as the preferred choice
- Inclusion of refurbishment required to the existing Council House to accommodate the Archives reception along with a relocated Smethwick Library (agreed by cabinet 18/10/23).

4.13 The accommodation detailed in the report could be scaled down to make the costs more achievable, but this needs to take account of the fact that it may limit the lifetime of the centre as further expansion could be required.

4.14 Moving Smethwick Library into the new scheme gives an opportunity to dispose of the existing library building. Other assets in the areas could also be considered for disposal and inclusion in the new scheme. See plan below for options to consider.



5 Alternative Options

5.1 Previous attempts to identify appropriate accommodation for archives over the last 20 years have not been developed, either because the sites were not suitable or because the proposals remained unfunded. Recent options considered and rejected include:

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

See also appendix A and B

6 Implications

Resources:	The cost of the project will be significant and based on the feasibility, design and specification expected to cost c. £20 million. There may be some funding available from external sources e.g Arts Council England or National Lottery Heritage Fund, but substantial capital is likely to be needed from and/or secured by Sandwell Council. To mitigate an increase in annual revenue it is planned that the new site includes the relocation of Smethwick Library (because there are financial and operational management
-------------------	--



	<p>advantages of sharing a space with a library which would be lost if the centre was in a stand-alone building). Moving the library into Smethwick Council House would bring the building back into greater use.</p>
<p>Legal and Governance:</p>	<p>Sandwell Council would be able to comply with required standards and retain its place of deposit status. It would also be more likely to achieve mandatory accredited status from TNA.</p> <p>Further assessment of the legal implications will be contingent on funding sources, including any potential grant conditions, restrictions and clawback provisions will be undertaken once the project proposals are progressed. This would extend to include any arrangements for the procurement of contractors and supplies for design and construction of the facility which would need to be undertaken in accordance with relevant procurement legislation and regulations.</p>
<p>Risk:</p>	<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>
<p>Equality:</p>	<p>No issues – the building would be accessible for all.</p>
<p>Health and Wellbeing:</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 facilities.</p>



Social Value:	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. The project will help to put Sandwell 'On the Map' as a place that values its archives and heritage.
Climate Change:	New build would meet required standards.
Corporate Parenting:	No issues

7. Appendices

Appendix A – Feasibility report 1

Appendix B – Feasibility report 2

Appendix C – Report from Ellis Williams Architects

8. Background Papers

N/A -

