

**Decision Maker:** Resources Portfolio Holder

**Date:** **For Pre-Decision Scrutiny by the Executive and Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee on Thursday 8 October 2015**

**Decision Type:** Non-Urgent                      Executive                      Key

**Title:**                      **THE PRIORY AND FORMER LIBRARY, CHURCH HILL, ORPINGTON**

**Contact Officer:** Heather Hosking, Head of Strategic Property  
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**Chief Officer:** Director of Regeneration & Transformation

**Ward:** Orpington;

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1. Reason for report

This report provides information on work undertaken to establish whether the Council could relocate services to the Priory and Former Orpington Library and retain its ownership.

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2. **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

**2.1 The Executive and Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee is requested to consider the proposed decision of the Portfolio Holder and**

**2.2 The Resources Portfolio Holder is requested to note the outcome of the feasibility study undertaken to establish whether the Priory and Former Library, Orpington, is suitable for Council use and to reaffirm the Executive's decision to offer the property for sale on the open market**

**2.3 The Portfolio Holder is recommended to agree that the property be offered for sale on a long lease**

### Corporate Policy

1. Policy Status: Existing Policy: maximising the Council's assets
  2. BBB Priority: Excellent Council:
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### Financial

1. Cost of proposal: Estimated Cost: Cost of advertising – say £2,500
  2. Ongoing costs: Recurring Cost Non-Recurring Cost Not Applicable: Further Details
  3. Budget head/performance centre:
  4. Total current budget for this head: £
  5. Source of funding:
- 

### Staff

1. Number of staff (current and additional): N/A
  2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours:
- 

### Legal

1. Legal Requirement: Statutory Requirement: S123 Local Government Act 1972
  2. Call-in: Applicable:
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### Customer Impact

1. Estimated number of users/beneficiaries (current and projected):
- 

### Ward Councillor Views

1. Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? Yes
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments: Any comments received will be reported at the meeting.

### 3. COMMENTARY

3.1 The Executive resolved at its meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> June to cease the use of the Priory for the museum service and to declare it surplus to requirements subject to further work being undertaken by the Strategic Property Service to establish whether the building could be used by other Council services.

3.2 Following this decision, Strategic Property has undertaken a feasibility study to establish whether the building could be used to house other Council services. The June report made specific reference to the possibility of relocating the Registrars' Service and Electoral Services from the Civic Centre to the Priory. In addition, all Council services were requested to advise whether they had a property requirement which could be met at the Priory, but none was identified. A feasibility study was therefore undertaken to establish whether The Priory and former library building was suitable for use by the two identified services.

#### Backlog Maintenance and Operating Costs

3.3 As Members are aware, considerable work has been undertaken in the preparation of a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to identify the costs associated with putting the Priory and the Library into good repair and in running the building in the future. This work was reviewed by consultants appointed by Heritage England (formerly English Heritage) who confirmed that investment of approximately £1.7million is required to address the backlog maintenance issues and to refurbish and upgrade the building to provide acceptable public access and to meet the requirements of its Grade 2\* listing. It has also been estimated that the annual operating costs of the building will be in the region of £120,000. This includes utilities, business rates, repairs and maintenance, insurance etc.

#### Registrars' Service

3.4 The Registrars' Service is currently located at the Civic Centre and employs seven administrative staff and seven registration staff. The team occupies 365m<sup>2</sup> (approximately 3,900 sq ft) of accommodation. It also uses other accommodation within the Civic Centre, such as the Wedding Rooms, Committee Rooms, Council Chamber and function suite in the Bishop's Palace for weddings and ceremonies. The Civic Centre facilities management team provides staff to assist in the setting up of accommodation for ceremonies as part of its wider rôle in the management of the Civic Centre. It is estimated that 25,000 people visit the Registrars' office every year, excluding guests attending wedding and citizenship ceremonies. The income generated from the activities assists in off-setting the cost of the service.

3.5 The Registrars' Service requires good public accessibility, both in terms of public transport and parking facilities. There is also a statutory requirement to provide secure storage facilities for the retention of original birth, death and marriage registers.

3.6 The accommodation at the Priory and former library has been reviewed to consider whether the requirements of the service could be met.

3.7 The facilities available at the Civic Centre are capable of accommodating a range of weddings, from small scale ceremonies to large celebrations of up to 130 people. There is also ample room for wedding parties to wait prior to ceremonies and congregate after the ceremony. The rooms at the Priory are generally smaller and do not offer such flexible options or as much circulation space. It is understood that only wedding parties of less than 50 people could be accommodated. This will restrict the number and size of weddings that can be held and, therefore, reduce revenue.

3.8 As mentioned above, the Registrars' Service receives a very large number of visitors and it is considered important, therefore, to locate it in an accessible area of the Borough. The Priory

does not offer the high levels of accessibility for residents across the Borough when compared with the Civic Centre because of its location on the eastern side of the borough. Locating the Registrars' Service here could result in the need to provide outreach centres in other parts of the Borough to provide an accessible service, and so increase costs.

3.9 There are also issues about accessibility within the building, which has seven changes of level across the interior. In order to meet the requirements of the 2010 Equalities Act it would be necessary to carry out wide ranging internal adaptations and to build an extension.

3.10 The Registrar relies on a good level of public car parking within a reasonable proximity, both for wedding parties and for those registering births and deaths. There are 13 parking bays in the pay and display car park at the front of the Priory, and the access to this area is narrow and not suited to constant movements of cars in and out as one wedding ends and another begins. The nearest alternative car parks are at The Walnuts Shopping Centre.

3.11 As a result of these issues the facilities that could be provided following investment at the Priory are not considered to be as good as those offered at the Civic Centre.

### Electoral Services

3.12 There are seven members of staff in this department and they currently occupy an area at the Civic Centre of 116m<sup>2</sup>. (approx. 1,250 sq ft). However, staff numbers increase to around 80 in the run up to and immediately following an election. At this time space within the Civic Centre is made available for the management, storage, collection and administration of electoral votes and counts. At this time approximately 825m<sup>2</sup> (8,900 sq ft) is used by the Service.

3.13 The Priory could provide the space required by the permanent staff complement. During election periods the former lending library and children's library could be used, but this totals 382m<sup>2</sup> (4,110 sq ft) and therefore is unlikely to offer sufficient accommodation, requiring the provision of additional facilities, such as marquees.

### Conclusion

3.14 In order to accommodate Council services, the Priory and former Library would require considerable internal modifications and the provision of an extension to ensure compliance with relevant legislation. As stated above, the feasibility work already undertaken on the building as part of the Council's bid to the HLF and the subsequent review by Heritage England's consultant has identified the need for expenditure of approximately £1.7million and annual running costs of £120,000. The feasibility work undertaken has identified that the facilities that could be created at the Priory would not meet the current needs of either service and relocation would add to the costs of service provision and almost certainly reduce the revenue earned by the Registrars' Service. It is not, therefore, considered financially worthwhile for the Council to commit to the expenditure required on the building or to incur the estimated annual running costs in order to house these services at the Priory.

### Marketing of the Priory

3.15 The Executive resolved in June to give authority to offer the property for sale, either on the basis of the disposal of the freehold or a long leasehold interest, subject to consideration of alternative Council uses. In the light of the feasibility work undertaken, it is, therefore, recommended that the marketing of the property be progressed.

3.16 Heritage England have provided advice on the marketing of the property and have suggested a targeted marketing exercise. It is suggested that this approach could be adopted in tandem with its advertisement on the open market. This should enable Members to make an informed decision on the future of the property. The Priory has been listed as an asset of

community value and the timescale for the marketing will, therefore, be guided by statutory requirements.

3.17 The property could be offered for sale freehold or on a long lease. As it sits within the park and will be sharing access routes it is recommended that it be offered on a long lease of 125 or 250 years to enable the Council to retain some elements of control.

#### Save the Orpington Priory Campaign Group

3.18 The Portfolio Holder will be aware of the interest in this historic building expressed by many people, particularly in the Orpington area. A campaign group, Save The Orpington Priory (STOP) has been formed and has started to prepare a business plan to demonstrate how a charitable trust could take over the operation of the building. They have indicated that their preference would be to be granted a lease of the building and adjoining land on a peppercorn rent on an internal repairing lease with the Council retaining responsibility for external and structural repairs. As an alternative, they have suggested that they could work jointly with the Council to raise the funds required for the external repairs.

3.19 If the Portfolio Holder agrees that the Priory and Library is no longer required for Council use, as it has been listed as an asset of community value local community groups will have a six week period in which to advise whether they wish to submit a bid. If notice is received of an intention to bid the balance of the six month moratorium period prescribed under the legislation will be given to enable a bid to be prepared. The marketing of the Priory could be run to coincide with this period so that bids are received from community groups and other bidders at the end of the moratorium period. This would allow community groups such as STOP to submit detailed proposal for consideration by members alongside the results of marketing exercise.

## **4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 The Council's aims include being an authority which manages its assets well.

## **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 As advised in paragraphs 3.4 to 3.14 above, the feasibility work that has been undertaken has shown that the facilities at The Priory are not suitable for the relocation of the Registrars' Service or the Electoral Service. As was reported to the Executive in June, the cost of carrying out the work required to the Priory to address the backlog maintenance issues and to refurbish and upgrade the building to provide acceptable public access and to meet the requirements of its Grade 2\* listing has been estimated as being in the region of £1.7million. It has also been estimated that the annual operating costs of the building will be in the region of £120,000.

5.2 If it is agreed to market the property it is estimated that the cost of advertising will be approximately £2,500. This will be funded from the Strategic Property budget.

5.3 A sum of £44K has been retained in the museum budget for 2016/17 to meet the costs of ownership. Any costs incurred after 31.3.2017 will have to be contained within the surplus property budget until the property is sold. Officers are investigating the options available for securing the property while it is marketed, but it should be noted that these could be significant, particularly as the building is Listed.

5.4 It is critical that all surplus property is sold as soon as possible to ensure that on-going costs are kept to a minimum given the small budget of £10K allocated.

## 6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The Priory has been listed as an asset of community value and the timescale for any disposal exercise will reflect the statutory requirements.

6.2 Section 123 of the 1972 Local Government Act requires a local authority to secure the best consideration reasonably obtainable when it disposes of land (other than on a lease of seven years or less) unless it has the benefit of express or general consent from the Secretary of State. If the Priory is marketed it would be advertised for sale on the open market to ensure compliance with this requirement.

<b>Non-Applicable Sections:</b>	Personnel Implications
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	Report to Executive dated 10.6.2015. Draft business plan prepared by STOP. Feasibility Study for Civic Office Relocation to The Priory, Orpington. Priory Bromley: HLF bid review and information for prospective owners