

Agenda Item	7
Report No	LA/4/20

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Lochaber Area Committee

Date: 19 February 2020

Report Title: Fort William Offices Update

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Housing & Property

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an update in relation to the Fort William Offices Project.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to note the following report.

3. Implications

3.1 Resource: Resource implications are as noted in this report. The additional budget has been accommodated in the Development & Infrastructure (D&I) overall capital programme through a combination of slippage and reprofiling of various projects.

3.2 Legal: There are no legal implications arising from this report.

3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island): This project will have no equality, poverty or rural/island impacts on the community.

3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever: There are no climate change/carbon clever implications arising from this report.

3.5 Risk: There are no risk implications arising from this report.

3.6 Gaelic: There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

4. Background

4.1 Members agreed ¹ with the Fort William Office review recommendation to go with the preferred option of developing the Council owned, listed former Fort William Secondary school site as the Council's new civic hub. This option was to co-locate the Council's main administrative offices, democratic services, Service Point and Registration Offices. The project would also include Partner organisations who would contribute towards the funding of the works.

4.2 By relocating here, the Council would be able to eliminate the need to continue leasing three other properties in the Town, generating annual revenue savings of over £375,000.

4.3 Objectives of Proposals

The vision, as agreed by Local Stakeholders was aligned with the vision from the Lochaber Strategic Property Review:

“The Council must work collaboratively across Services, with staff and with partners to maximise opportunities and invest responsibly in quality, flexible accommodation which supports service delivery for our staff and customers, permits sharing and retains a local identity. The Council should lead by example to deliver practical, innovative buildings at the heart of our communities that we are proud of.”

The ethos of the development is to create modern flexible office accommodation which supports service delivery for our staff and customers.

4.4 A Public exhibition in the West End Hotel brought some very positive comments from the public with the majority being very supportive of the Council's proposals to bring the old historic school building back into use.

4.5 Benefits

The implementation of the project was expected to deliver the following benefits:

- Fit for purpose office accommodation
- Reduced running costs
- Sustainability objectives met
- Modern, flexible working environment
- Efficiencies for both staff and customers of co-location working
- Supports Highland's urban centres
- Supports Corporate Improvement Programme
- Is accessible for customers and staff
- Working with Partners.

4.6 **Buildings**

The former Fort William Secondary School at Achintore Road Fort William was built circa 1876. Its listing category changed from C(S) to B in 2004 when it was established that Alexander Ross (1834-1925) was the architect. The building had lain derelict for a significant number of years.

4.7 Fort William Primary School, a B-listed building, became vacant during 2015 when the pupils transferred to the newly-built Lundavra Primary School. The community, Local Members, Historic Environment Scotland (HES) and Planning Officers all raised very strong concerns that a further B-listed building could lie unused for the foreseeable future and the Council was asked to consider redevelopment of the property as part of the development of the former Fort William Secondary School project. This was welcomed as the site forms a high-profile gateway to Fort William as it borders the A82 trunk road. Members approved the inclusion of these works to the programme².

4.8 The former old primary school was developed in a manner that would see the building converted to provide a new Archive and Search Room (then situated in Lochaber College), records store, meeting room and offices for two partners. By relocating the Archive and Search Room, annual revenue savings of around £27,000 per annum would be achieved. The works were part funded by contributions from both Historic Environmental Scotland and HIE (HIE for their offices) and further income would be generated by leasing out one area of the building.

5. **Construction**

5.1 Working in dilapidated buildings can be extremely challenging, in particular not knowing exactly how structurally sound walls and foundations are until work commences and areas are fully cleared, made safe and then opened up to allow detailed structural analysis to be carried out.

5.2 It was established that in order to improve the structural stability of the main building various areas had to be reconfigured and strengthened to ensure that the building could cope with future loads imposed on it.

Identified below are some of the structural issues that were encountered during the course of the refurbishment works:

- The South Gable had to be re-aligned as it did not sit flush with the wall below. This involved taking down stonework to a certain level and rebuilding the gable.
- Requests by the Conservation Architect acting on behalf of Historic Environmental Scotland to ensure the historical accuracy of the restoration. This often-involved stonework adjustment.
- Taking down external stonework and re-building porches.
- Additional structural lintels had to be replaced.
- Taking down and rebuilding the North Gable to lintel level. After detailed investigation it was established that the gable had been pulled out of alignment as a result of shoring works carried out in 1982. Additional shoring and steel supporting works were subsequently required to stabilise the affected elevation.

- Stabilisation of existing chimneys with lime mortar and aggregate to prevent water penetration.

5.3 There were other issues that were non-structural which caused an increase in costs and delays to the programme. Below are listed some of the factors that were encountered:

- Additional costs were incurred early in the project when additional rock had to be removed.
- Re-positioning Partners within the building and changes to their layouts.
- On removal of protective plastic sheet existing timber dooks in the stone walls were found to have dry rot. Replacement and surrounding treatment were required.
- Conservation Architect changes recommended to preserve the historical accuracy of the restoration and to maintain the Historic Environment Scotland grant conditions. These included items such as the wall harling and window design.
- Amendments to the passenger lift design due to technical regulation changes to ensure compliance.
- The work to the Former Fort William Primary school required SSE to install a new sub-station to ensure that the electrical load was met.

5.4 The lists above are a snapshot of some of the key issues that were encountered during the course of the works.

5.5 The buildings were handed over in phases to allow early occupation and avoid extensions to leases. The new extension at the side and rear were occupied by DWP in November 2017 and several Council staff in December 2017. The remaining Council staff moved into Charles Kennedy House in May 2018.

5.6 Alexander Ross House was occupied by HLH Archive in June 2018. HIE also occupied their area of the building in June 2018. Change Works leased the remaining area of the building and moved in during June 2018.

6. Budget and Outcome

6.1 The Finance team have confirmed that the overall project expenditure was £10.514m. Allowing for the budget allocation and grant income from Historic Environment Scotland, contributions from the Partners, Department of Works and Pensions and Highlands & Islands Enterprise the overall increase in costs on the combined project is confirmed by Finance as being £0.271m. This equates to just over two percent of the project costs.

6.2 The additional expenditure has been accommodated in the D&I overall capital programme through a combination of slippage and reprofiling of projects.

6.3 This re-development of this site embraces the Councils commitment to the local community by investing over £10m in delivering an integrated service hub for local people.

- 6.4 Although the project had its structural challenges the outcome, it is understood, has exceeded expectations, delivering an integrated facility that has proved to be functional along with achieving its anticipated benefits and objectives.
- 6.5 It's had the added benefit of bringing back into use a former historic building which had lain empty for over a quarter of a century, including an adjacent building which may have lain empty for years to come. For some their impression of the town had been tainted by the view of the dilapidated buildings. These new and refurbished buildings should continue to bring a positive contribution to the area.
- 6.6 Service benefits such as collaborative working with other public bodies who partnered with the Council on this project are also being achieved.
- 6.7 To appreciate the visual impact of the project, Appendix A provides some photographs of the buildings taken prior to works commencing and some drone photographs taken near completion.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Housing & Property

Date: 19/02/2020

Author: Allan Henderson (Principal Project Manager)

Background Papers:

- ¹ Finance, Housing and Resources Committee: 27th November 2013
- ² Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee: 2 November 2016

Appendix 1

Photographs Before and After Works

Before Photographs



Front Elevation



Rear Elevation



Gable Elevation



Rear Internal Elevation

After Photographs



Drone Photograph at Front at Completion



Drone Photograph at Front at Completion