



Committee and date

Council

25 September 2014

10.00 am

Item

18

Public

UNIVERSITY CENTRE SHREWSBURY – DELIVERY OF STUDENT RESEARCH AND TEACHING SPACE

Email: clive.wright@shropshire.gov.uk

Tel: 01743 252007

1. Summary

This report updates Council on the progress made in creating University Centre Shrewsbury since its last consideration in July. As agreed, it then brings forward specific proposals and recommendations to deliver on the Council's contribution to the University in the form of teaching accommodation and student residential provision.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that Council:

- 1) Makes available the use of the following buildings namely, Guildhall, 1 A Castle Gates and Rowley's House, for initial occupation by the University of Chester from 1 January 2015, in order to develop University Centre Shrewsbury and delegates the authority to agree terms to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader. .
- 2) Delegates authority to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to procure and deliver alteration and refurbishment of the Tannery and other buildings to accommodate staff.
- 3) Delegates authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to go out to procurement as required for student living accommodation in order to enable delivery of an appropriate number of units by September 2015.

REPORT

3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

1) Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

Development of a successful university for Shropshire is dependent on generating sufficient income through student numbers and research awards, and on attracting and retaining the academic staff necessary to facilitate this. Success will therefore be a reflection of market conditions, quality of offer (including accommodation and the wider student experience of Shrewsbury as a place), reputation (initially conferred by association from University of Chester), but rapidly gained through student experience.

Another important consideration is Government policy towards Higher Education, in particular funding and support for growth of new university provision, and for stimulation of a wider market-place, addressing so-called 'education cold-spots'. Government recently announced its intention to remove artificial caps on student numbers in 2015, opening undergraduate numbers entirely up to market-forces. The then Minister of State for Higher Education, David Willetts MP championed Shrewsbury as a location 'champing at the bit' to establish a university - for sound educational reasons as well as it being 'the best way to revive great towns and cities'. Long-term national Higher Education policy is inevitably subject to some risks.

Risk of market failure is being mitigated by development of a highly differentiated academic model, closely integrated with research that has local, national and international relevance, and by moving swiftly to take advantage of the current funding context and Government support for widening access to high quality higher education.

The Council's exposure to risk in developing student accommodation is similarly mitigated by these factors, as well as ensuring that accommodation is only provided, as proportionate as possible to the projected level of initial demand. In effect the Council is stepping in to kick-start provision of accommodation at a point where the private sector will not. Should the institution be unsuccessful, it is assumed that this accommodation provision could, however, be converted to properties for offer to the general market. Further work will be required to consider the management and funding of any under occupancy of student accommodation to mitigate the financial risks.

4. Financial Implications

- 1) Joint venture arrangements between Shropshire Council and Chester University are being developed.
- 2) Following any procurement of the student living accommodation a business case identifying all financial implications will go to the next Council Meeting or extraordinary meeting if necessary prior to any commitment being made.
- 3) Costs of securing living accommodation will be incorporated into the Council's Financial Plans once cost plans have been fully developed.
- 4) Costs of relocating staff further to the decanting of buildings to be utilised by the University and any associated refurbishment or alteration to existing Council property to accommodate these staff will be absorbed into the approved budget (see paragraph 5c below). Any further costs of remedial works will come back for further approval once final specification and costs have been identified.

5. Background

Progress since Council's consideration in July:

On 17 July 2014, Shropshire Council **RESOLVED:**

- a) That the continuance of the work to establish a University in Shropshire as set out in the report be approved.
- b) That work to further investigate the potential Council owned sites detailed in section 8 of this report for their appropriateness as either university teaching, research or residential accommodation for students be authorised.
- c) That a project budget of up to £1,000,000 to be spent and financed as outlined in section 4 of this report with authority delegated to the Chief Executive to approve spend against this budget, in consultation with the Leader of the Council be approved.
- d) That a further paper to be brought back to Council in September 2014, detailing the business case for the Council's involvement in the Project, preferred sites, estimated construction costs and timescales and proposed planning and legal arrangements in relation to their use, seeking appropriate financial approval.
- e) That authority be delegated to the Chief Executive to undertake further discussions and negotiations with the University of Chester to formalise, as required, the future relationship with the University, subject to arrangements being brought back to Council for approval.

- f) That on-going discussions by University of Chester for funding to support the project, via the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) be endorsed.

Since then progress has been made on all these issues. The detail of the joint arrangement between the Council and the University is still being developed and will be brought back to Council for approval.

Development of University Centre Shrewsbury

Name and status of the University

Since the Council's last consideration of this matter, rapid and significant progress has been made in creating the University Centre Shrewsbury. This title is now being confirmed with the Privy Council as one that is acceptable to them. It is a simple, straightforward name that reflects our shared aspiration to ultimately become a free-standing university. Alternative names such as 'institute' and 'college' were ruled out by the Privy Council as being unavailable to the university at this stage in its development.

Curriculum development

Creation of the Post-graduate and Undergraduate curricula has also been swift and significant. An initial cohort of Public Health post-graduates will have commenced their studies by the time of this Council meeting, representing the very first tangible impacts from this arrangement between University of Chester and Shropshire Council. These will soon be joined by a Shrewsbury Business Masters (MBA) type course offered to local employers.

A number of stakeholder events have been held with the Shropshire business and voluntary sector, engaging them in curriculum design and development. This is the start of an enduring and powerful way of shaping and continuously reviewing the course content and design for UCS to ensure that it is aligned with and responding to the needs of employers. Through initial sessions, a valuable insight was gained about the strengths and limitations of graduates for Shropshire employers, particularly around their 'work-readiness'.

As an entrepreneurial university, UCS is being designed to have a very distinctive and different offer for students that emphasises employability, transferable skills and practice-based learning (in the workplace as well as the lecture theatre) at its heart. It is already exploring options for work-based experience as an integral part of courses, bringing real-world experience into the academic programme as well as benefiting Shropshire businesses through placement of students with skills, enthusiasm and impact.

The Undergraduate curriculum is going through the final stages of authorisation. An initial website – www.ucshrewsbury.co.uk has been launched, highlighting the range of proposed courses and harvesting initial expressions of interest. Courses cover a range of life science, social science, business and humanities subject areas. Depending on take-up, these will form the year one mix of study. Work has already

commenced, however, on the 2016-17 curriculum and University of Chester are now moving rapidly to recruit to posts within the UCS structure.

The Chester database of students is being harnessed to target potential student applicants. Work is commencing across Shropshire schools and colleges to promote the opportunities soon to be on offer to students already, or about to make choices about their university. The October open days at Chester will have a strong UCS presence and applicant events in Shrewsbury for potential students will be provided in early 2015, coinciding with accommodation being made available.

Advisory Board

Two meetings of the UCS Advisory Board have now taken place, chaired by Sir David Lees, former Chairman of the Bank of England Council, bringing together an exceptional range of experience to guide the University's development. The Board has been very constructively challenging around issues such as curriculum development and will ensure that investment and implementation proceeds as effectively as possible.

Teaching, Research and Learning Support Accommodation

Following investigation, it is proposed that the Guildhall will form the main site for academic teaching for the first phase of University development. The basis for this decision is that this site is strongly in-keeping with the overall approach to high quality and uniqueness. Although the Tannery building was also under consideration, this is not recommended to be taken forward, instead being more suitable for aspects of Shropshire Council's future use.

It is therefore recommended that Guildhall is made available to the University for fitting out and occupancy by the University from 1 January 2015. As part of this arrangement it has been agreed that some residual use of the Guildhall is required by Registrars for already booked ceremonies. Part of Guildhall is already empty and is available with immediate effect, enabling development of a number of the research centres at the heart of the University Centre Shrewsbury design.

1A Castle Gates has been identified as the initial Learning Resource Centre – the academic library for students.

Rowley's House is being established as the initial contact centre with part of the building to be used for access by the local community, potential students and anyone interested in the development of the university. It is recommended that the building is considered further for the potential for teaching space and potential post graduate delivery.

Student Accommodation

The July Council paper recommended exploration of options for student accommodation to provide for students needing residential provision in the town. Two specific options were identified – using part of Frankwell and Abbey Foregate car-parks. Exploration of both of these have highlighted significant issues which mitigate against their use in the first instance but do not rule out consideration in the

longer term. In the case of Frankwell, management of flood-risks would be problematic and costly, particularly given the required timeframe to deliver ready for September 2015. For Abbey Foregate, preparation for a planning application is progressing but initial investigation work has highlighted that feasibility to take account of certain environmental issues will take 26 weeks and will be followed by a 80 week build which again rules out delivery for the undergraduate start-date of September 2015.

As a consequence of this exploration, the most viable identified option is therefore to look to provide year one accommodation through refurbishment of existing premises in the town. Alternative options have been explored to meet the September 2015 deadline and work is underway on a number of conversion options. Delegation is therefore sought for the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader to go out to procurement (as required) for such accommodation in order to enable an appropriate number of units by September 2015.

6. Conclusions

In order to continue the progress made to date in discussions with the University of Chester and towards the delivery of student research and teaching space the Council is asked to agree the three recommendations at paragraph 2 of this report.

<p>List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)</p>
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<p>University College Shrewsbury – Towards a university of Shropshire, for Shropshire: Shropshire Council, 17 July 2014</p>

<p>Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)</p>

<p>Cllr Keith Barrow, Cllr Steve Charmley</p>

<p>Local Member</p>

<p>All Shrewsbury members</p>

<p>Appendices</p>

<p>None</p>
