

Motion On Notice – West Suffolk Archives

- As part of its budget proposals for 2024/25, Suffolk County Council has recently suggested the closure of local archive branches in Bury St Edmunds and Lowestoft and the centralisation of the service to Ipswich.
- In June 2022, as part of its long-term planning for the service, the County Council's stated position on the future of an archive in West Suffolk was as follows:

"We need to ensure that our archives service is fit for the future, operates efficiently and provides value for money for our residents. It also needs to be accessible to all our visitors, whether that is at our existing branch in Raingate Street or elsewhere in Bury St Edmunds.... We are committed to continuing to provide an archives branch in Bury St Edmunds, as well as preserving and storing archive documents from the area going back centuries, safely for future generations. Our archives branches are open to everyone, and we want to share the Suffolk stories and histories we hold spanning more than 900 years of history, with as many local people as possible."

- In February 2023, the County Council reiterated this commitment in the context of its Cabinet considering options for the archive either remaining at its current location in Raingate Street or moving to the planned new Western Way Development (and adopting the latter as its preferred position).
- This same review identified that closing the West Suffolk branch and consolidating the Ipswich Branch at the Hold was considered to be the least desirable option because:
 - the County Council had already made a commitment to retain a full archive service in West Suffolk;
 - there would be practical implications for the wider service because there was insufficient space to accommodate the Bury archive at the Hold;
 - any such move would reduce the County's accrual capacity to eight years, which is below the 20-year minimum standard specified by the National Archive and agreed with the National Lottery; and
 - an alternative solution would also have to be found to accommodate Bury St Edmund's local studies collection as there is no additional shelving space available in the public search room in Ipswich.
- For these reasons, the option of closing the Bury St Edmunds branch, with consolidation to the Hold, was discounted by the County Council in its 2022/23 review. The County Council has not yet identified to stakeholders how these operational issues would be overcome or what it might cost in capital and revenue terms to incorporate and then manage the West Suffolk archives from Ipswich.
- Furthermore, when the Western Way project was cancelled in September 2023, West Suffolk Council agreed to work with the County Council under the One Public Estate (OPE) Programme to support alternative delivery options for

the archive and proposed pre-school, including examining whether they could still form a part of any new project for the Olding Road site. This offer was subsequently made to the County Council in the latter part of 2023, alongside a suggestion that the two councils might also consider an adaptation of West Suffolk House to incorporate an archive facility in some form.

- It is recognised that the County Council is facing unprecedented financial pressures and has not taken this decision lightly. Differing political views may also be expressed about how the proposal arose. Nonetheless, given all of the above, and in the interests of full transparency and engagement with stakeholders, it is felt that every effort should be taken to explore alternative options before any irreversible change is put into effect. Not least to examine what could be achieved within the capital and revenue budgets which the County Council will still need to identify to implement any proposed changes and/or if any alternative external funding could be found.
- For that reason, it is proposed to Council that:
 1. recognising the severe financial pressure faced by Suffolk County Council, West Suffolk Council nonetheless expresses its sadness at the County Council's proposal to close the West Suffolk archive and centralise this service to Ipswich; and therefore
 2. calls upon Suffolk County Council to suspend the implementation of this change until such time as it has worked with all local stakeholders, including West Suffolk Council and Bury St Edmunds Town Council, to explore all alternative options within the County Council's available capital and revenue budgets for keeping access to local historical records within West Suffolk.