

Wyre Forest House - the story so far...



As part of a bold and multi faceted transformation, four existing offices were distilled into a brand new purpose built £10.6 million 'New HQ' for Wyre Forest District Council. The council's focus was on commercialisation, and the property estate provided the impetus to change not only the culture of the organisation, but its fortunes for years to come.

A new way forward

Transformation is now at the centre of all Wyre Forest District Council projects but in 2010, it was clear to the leadership team that efficiencies alone would not bridge a funding gap of around £2m across the Financial Strategy. The transformation journey into proactive commercial operation started as the council set out on its project to build from scratch a new single site for its 200 plus office-based employees.

The £10.6 million project started in 2010 when a parcel of land was purchased by the council. The land was located equidistant between the towns of Kidderminster and Stourport on Severn – two of the three main towns in the Wyre Forest district.

The location of the 'New HQ' is at Finepoint, a newly developed business park in one of the most deprived wards in the district and therefore ripe for regeneration. Planning permission was secured and the tender was put out for a design and build contract.

To deliver the project, an in-house 'New HQ' project team was put together headed by the Chief Executive of the Council. This team included legal, finance, IT, procurement, facilities, transformation and communications officers. Councillors were engaged in the process from the start and were involved in strategic discussions about what the building should deliver.

Chief Executive, Ian Miller said: "Our vision was to consolidate four offices into one generating savings of more than £500,000 year on year in rent and running costs. From the start, it was our intention to generate income from the new building by offering work and meeting space to tenants from the public, private and third sector.

“Our design brief was for a flexible, modern building which could be modified easily to accommodate changes of use including desk and work space, capacity in the data room, and external storage stores. We also wanted a separate ‘public’ part of the building which could be hired out. This included a specification for a multi use council chamber, meeting rooms and a public cafe. We also wanted the building to be as ‘green’ as possible to ensure its sustainability in the future.”

In preparation for the move, a cross directorate Making Information Manageable (MiM) group was set up. The group was responsible for culling the paperwork mountain the council had accumulated over the years. This involved taking on temporary staff to scan and record documents and hiring an external waste management company to take away more than 27 tonnes of excess paperwork!

Alongside this work, the council designed and implemented a Mobile and Flexible Working Policy to provide better work life balance for staff and increased resilience for managers in times of emergency planning.

We now have 140 employees set up to work from home. Teams across the authority have embraced the change and now work out their own flexible working arrangements to suit the needs of their service.

ICT provision was a major factor for the new building and investment in the latest telephony technology, Shoretel – has provided further flexibility as colleagues can seamlessly work from home or offsite using the new technology.

Dave Johnson, Wyre Forest District Council’s Head of IT said:“Investing in a modern ICT infrastructure underpinned the move, enabling staff to work more flexibly and it has also allowed us to offer these ICT facilities to tenants.”

Work on site started in June 2011 and at the end of September 2012 employees started moving in and the ‘New HQ’ was christened Wyre Forest House (WFH).

The Big Move!

Local company, Thomas Vale plc won the contract to build WFH. The council’s tender for the project included the provision for local job creation opportunities and new apprenticeships in the building trades. This was fulfilled, delivering further investment into the local area.

From the outset, Wyre Forest District Council employees were engaged in the WFH project and consultations were held on everything from what the building should offer right through to the internal decor and furnishings. Employees were invited to go on tours during the build so they could clearly envisage their new work environment. This proactive engagement made a big difference to how people felt about the move, and kept colleagues interested all the way through the 12 month build programme.

As well as the move to WFH, the project team managed the move from the existing offices including their decommissioning. This was a herculean task that included countless (unpaid) extra hours for the project management team – all done with focus on the end game and through lots of tea and good will!

Despite the enormous task of moving 200 people and all their accoutrements into the new building, the transition, carried out in tranches over a two week period, was a painless experience for employees.

Tracey Southall, Chief Financial Officer of the Council said:“The day we moved in, we were up and running by 11.00 am and it was like we had always been here. In our job it is critical to have no down time. The move into WFH was so smooth.”

More than a money making scheme

In addition to saving £500,000 year on year on rents and running costs, a review of WFDC’s future space requirements demonstrated capacity to rent out additional space in the building. From day one, tenants included a Town Council and a few desks for two shared services.

Following the review it took just under 12 months to generate an additional income of £161,000 from additional tenants.

Ian Miller, Chief Executive said:“The majority of our tenancy agreements are for 5 years so we are on target to achieve more than £800,000 of income over the next 5 years giving some financial security in times of great change for local authorities.

There is no doubt the establishment of WFH and its commercial approach has had a hugely positive financial impact on Wyre Forest District Council and there are many more benefits for employees, businesses and residents.”

Feedback from private and public sector tenants demonstrates how this has helped them attract top candidates.

Andrew Hartlebury, Senior Partner at Chartered accountancy firm DHJH said:“The three new staff we have employed since moving to Wyre Forest House have all commented that the modern IT friendly working environment was a factor in deciding to join DHJH.”

The flexible ICT offer, from having access to the council’s infrastructure right through to providing a full service ICT solution has also played an important part in making WFH an attractive proposition for incoming tenants.

Ivor Pumfrey, then Head of Worcestershire Regulatory Services (WRS) said in a letter to WFDC’s Chief Executive:

“Following successful completion of the project to transfer ICT hosting to Wyre Forest District Council I wanted to place on record our appreciation for the outstanding efforts of your team. Several colleagues have reported levels of ICT service they have never previously experienced. Praise indeed from a group of demanding professionals and proof that the best in the public sector is as good as any.”

Since moving into WFH, the New HQ project management team has continued working together to develop the logistical arrangements for working efficiently in the building and is adept at producing speedy turnaround of bespoke packages for prospective tenants.

Just2Easy, an education service provider, went from viewing an available office to moving in, in just four weeks.

James Green, Head of Development for Just2easy, said: “We are delighted with the way we have been welcomed into the building and our staff are impressed with the quality of facilities here.”

The council’s in-house communications team has marketed the facilities for public and private sector hirers and potential tenants. This included creating and launching a bespoke website, using social media in a proactive way, and producing printed marketing literature – again in-house.

Building WFH has enabled the facilities team to establish corporate contracts. For example one cleaning company now covers all of WFDC’s facilities and we have consolidated six different service providers for intruder and fire alarm contracts to one. The Council now has a more commercial approach to procurement too. Ordering is done centrally generating savings through economies of scale.

Working together

Wyre Forest District Council employees are key to the success of Wyre Forest House. Their working environment has changed beyond recognition and now they are happily sharing office space with public and private sector organisations.

Employees are still coming up with ideas to make the building more commercial. Workshops are held on ‘Systems Thinking’ to embed the new culture and colleagues are aware that no ideas are off limits.

One example of this is the suggestion to relocate certain council committee meetings, traditionally held in the chamber, into alternative rooms within WFH, freeing up the premium hireable council chamber for hire by those who want to webcast their meetings or cater for up to 150 delegates. We now do this as a matter of course and our council chamber is a popular venue for public and private sector hirers. We recently hosted a very successful weekend consultation event for the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Fire Service.

The onsite cafe is tendered out and the contract gives WFDC a percentage of takings. Income has increased as the number of people working at WFH has gone up. We are using social media to promote their offer to local companies and neighbouring businesses. We have also helped them set up a take-away buffet service.

WFDC initially occupied just over 200 desks at WFH and this has been reduced by more than 25% achieved through remodelling of desk spaces, smarter ways of working, desk sharing and home working.

WFH is now home for a number of shared services which we host as part of our contribution to the service contract, which is another way of saving tax payers' money. These shared services include North Worcestershire (NW) Water Management, NW Emergency Planning and NW Economic Development and Regeneration teams.

Now, the council's own leadership team is moving to free up an executive suite for business tenants.

The health and wellbeing of all employees is important to WFDC. We sign up to Worcestershire Works Well, an initiative to improve these aspects of colleagues' lives. Groups at WFH include a choir (inspired by Gareth Malone and his work place choir featured on BBC TV) a walking group and various keep fit classes. All tenants are invited to join in and are also members of the User Forum, which meets monthly to discuss the use of WFH.

Melanie Williams, Assistant Accountant at WFDC said: "I love Thursdays at work. I do a keep fit class and have choir practice at lunchtime. Our flexible working and wellbeing policies encourage people to achieve a work/life balance. I feel more productive and generally better as a result."

Looking after our future...

Commercialisation is now an accepted part of everyone's job. Moving forward WFDC is exploring more ways to increase income from WFH and Ian Miller, Chief Executive confirms, "We will continue to review and adapt WFDC's footprint in the building to ensure we are getting the most from the investment and to help secure the future of services that local communities value."

The council has used its experience of rationalising its offices and applied the learning from it on another major project – a new leisure centre. It is closing two existing centres to create one modern environmentally friendly facility for the district. This will generate savings in excess of £500,000 a year. The council's strategic and commercial approach to the new leisure centre project helped secure a £2million grant from Sport England.

Cllr Marcus Hart is the Leader of Wyre Forest District Council. He concludes, "We are very proud of our new commercial approach and our landmark building. It provides residents with a sustainable and flexible civic asset and an outstanding environment for our employees, tenants and visitors. It is also a statement that we are confident and equipped to make bold decisions to make Wyre Forest a great place to be."

Simon Downing, Chief Executive, Civica

"Wyre Forest House is one of the best public sector buildings I have ever been in."