

MEETING POINT UPDATE REPORT

Improvement and Innovation Committee - 4th October 2022

Report of: Detlev Munster - Strategic Head Commercial and Property

Status: For Consideration

Also considered by: N/A

Key Decision: No

This report supports the Key Aim of:

Increased economic growth making Sevenoaks District a location of choice for business and providing local jobs - Community Plan 2022-2032

Encouraging businesses to locate within the District and West Kent - Economic Development Strategy 2022-2027

Ensuring businesses are able to access suitable support to develop and grow - Economic Development Strategy 2022 - 2027

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Peter Fleming

Contact Officer: Emily Haswell, Ext. 7261

Recommendation to Innovation and Improvement Committee:

To note the progress in the delivery of the Meeting Point project.

Reason for recommendation:

In July 2021, construction commenced with 27-37 High Street project. The project is a mixed use scheme with 17 residential units and a business hub on the ground floor. Practical completion is due in November 2022 and the business hub, to be known as "Meeting Point", is scheduled to open in December 2022. Meeting point is a co-working centre that will also provide local businesses/entrepreneurs with business support in Swanley. Plans to open the Centre are progressing well and this report provides an update.

Overview

1. In 2017 a feasibility study was completed for a workhub/co-working centre to be located on the ground floor of a new development at 27-37 High Street, Swanley. Planning permission for a mixed-use development was granted in May 2020, and grant funding from the Government's Getting Building Fund was obtained to facilitate the project's delivery. The construction of the building started in early 2021 and is now heading towards completion. The development of detailed plans around the co-working centre are in place.
2. The Co-working element of the build will retain the name Meeting Point, which has long been associated with the previous use of the site within the community and matches the ethos of the centre as providing a collaborative and welcoming co-working space.
3. Meeting Point will offer to the market a 'gym-style' membership of flexible workspace, incorporating a mix of desk hire, private offices, meeting rooms and collaborative working areas. The vision is for Meeting Point to be '*A vibrant, collaborative community of businesses who feel supported and satisfied with their engagement with the hub, and are able to grow and be successful*'
4. At the outset of the development the designs created a space which could have had a number of alternative uses, however co-working was favoured and therefore featured in the Getting Building Fund submission as part of the Economic Development commitment to supporting local businesses. The location of the building makes it ideal for this use type, which will create an impetus for wider regeneration in the area. The master vision for Swanley and Hextable (2016) reported that the consultation with local residents showed a commitment to supporting local businesses and the creation of opportunities for small business spaces and hubs where local businesses can be supported and grow.
5. Consideration was given to alternative models for running the centre such as appointing a centre operator, however as this is a shared use building with the Council retaining the freehold it is more efficient to directly run the centre in the initial phases. This also allows the benefit of economies of scale and use of existing knowledge and expertise from within the Council to set up the centre. A draft business plan and risk assessment has been completed with an exit strategy in place, which includes the option to review and reconsider the operating model after 3 years of operation.
6. The staff being recruited currently to run the centre will be part of the Economic Development Team. This Team has an excellent record in supporting businesses through the 'Team around your business' approach which will become central to the business support services offered within the centre.

Features of the Hub and Proposed services

7. Meeting Point will have a reception area to meet and greet users, a boardroom, 3 small offices, 23 desks (a mixture of fixed and flexible) together with informal meeting, collaboration and relaxed seating areas. The centre comes with all the expected features including, kitchen area, shower facilities, wifi, printing, cycle parking and access to a shared garden area as well as virtual office services.
8. Meeting point will have core business hours of operation during which staff will be present and will offer extended hours through a secure fob entry system for some customers. The space can also be adapted to create a flexible events space and, it is expected that a community and business focused events programme will be established.
9. Businesses located in the centre and in the local area will also be supported with networking events that will be curated by the Hub Manager. Wrap around business support will also be provided by staff at the hub and by the wider economic development team.
10. The project team are developing full branding guide, operation manual, website, marketing plan, and ensuring that the furnishings are in place with proposed opening in early December 2022. Recruitment for a Hub Manager and an Assistant is currently taking place.
11. Initial interest has been received from businesses keen to take a place in the centre following an article contained within In Shape magazine. Meeting Point aims to attract small, micro and start-up businesses, home based businesses, as well as larger firms looking for a local base and can also accommodate staff from corporates looking for a well-connected local professional location to work from and meet with clients.
12. Meeting point is a practical demonstration of the objectives within the Economic Development Strategy 2022-27 supporting the Strategic priority of Business Resilience and Growth and links closely to the [#SoMuchMoreSevenoaks](#) place campaign supporting the key pillars of 'Work' and 'Invest'. The innovative approach taken to directly build, run and deliver Meeting Point shows the Council's commitment to supporting local businesses, as well as creating an active high street frontage and bringing footfall to support local town centre and contributing to regeneration in the area.

Milestones

13. The key milestones for the business hub can be summarised as follows:

Milestone	Envisaged Date
Recruitment of key staff	October 2022
Business plan refinement and completion of marketing plan	October 2022
Practical Building completion	17 th November
Open for pre tours	28 th November
Opening Meeting Point	2 nd December
Soft launch	6 th December

Milestone	Envisaged Date
Formal Launch event and commencement of events programme	Jan/ Feb 2023
6 month review of business plan and programme	May 2023

Other options Considered and/or rejected

Not applicable to this report

Key Implications

Financial

Not applicable to this report

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

Not applicable to this report

Equality Assessment

Not Applicable to this report

Net Zero Implications

Not Applicable to this report

Conclusion

- Plans for the opening of the new business hub are progressing as planned and the Meeting Point is scheduled to open in December 2022. The business hub will not only provide local businesses and entrepreneurs with supported co-working space, but also with a programme of business support services and networking opportunities.

Appendices

Appendix A - Artist Impressions

Background Papers

None

Detlev Munster

Strategic Head of Property & Commercial