

Case Study

The Project

Fenland Learner Centre, Wisbech

The Authority

Cambridgeshire County Council

Key Practice Areas

Acquisition of fit for purpose premises



The Challenge

Fenland has more people living in poverty than in most other districts in the country. The poorest areas are around Wisbech. Unemployment levels are higher than most areas, wages are a lot lower and fewer people have qualifications so a key objective is to raise educational attainment in the area. There was a further requirement to reduce transport costs for the authority as small groups of 11-16 year old pupils were travelling out of the area on a daily basis to go to school.

Strategy & Estates were tasked with finding suitable premises in Wisbech to accommodate the Education Other than at School (EOTAS) Service who provide education for children who cannot attend mainstream school.

The Key Steps

An option appraisal was to be undertaken by Strategy & Estates. In order to inform this process a detailed accommodation brief was supplied by the service providers to define the features of the accommodation requirement. These include factors such as location, environment, proximity to public transport, proximity to other Council services, size of accommodation, site area and budget parameters, etc.

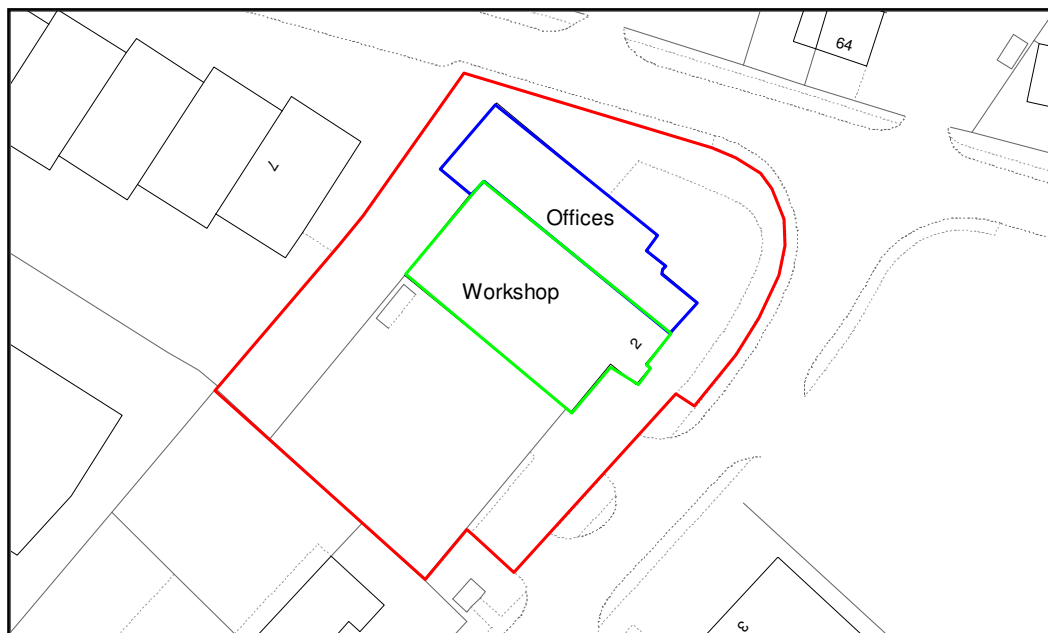
The activities to be undertaken at the facility were conventional classroom teaching combined with partly vocational training in trades such as mechanics, brickwork and other trades. A workshop, offices or light industrial type of facility would lend itself to this sort of environment. Similarly a light industrial area helps to emphasise the work ethic that the pupils are likely to experience as adults employed in the relevant trades.

The proposed use of the educational facility falls within Class D1 of the current edition of the Town & Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987. Light industrial and office units fall within Class B1, so it was likely that planning consent would be required to use office or light industrial premises for educational purposes.

The Council's own portfolio was checked to establish whether any existing assets had potential to accommodate the requirement, but no suitable premises were identified.

A thorough search was then undertaken to identify potential opportunities from the commercial market. Some business premises at 2 Algores Way, Wisbech appeared to be the most compatible but the accommodation was limited to offices with no workshop facility available. The site was shared with a light industrial user which meant that the accommodation failed to provide exclusive possession and would therefore be ruled out.

Further investigations revealed that the neighbouring tenant had less than 3 years remaining on their current lease with no legal right of renewal at the end of the tenancy. Negotiations were held with the landlord and the adjoining tenant to establish whether the adjoining tenant was willing to surrender their interest to enable the Council to take a lease of the whole premises. A deal was brokered and the tenant vacated enabling the Council to provide both classroom accommodation from the office element, and workshop accommodation from the light industrial element.



This deal provides an excellent example of how the Council is viewed as an ideal tenant by property investors because the Council is unlikely to fall into liquidation in times of recession. In addition, the Council took a long-term view and was willing to invest significant capital into modifying the premises for the proposed use. These factors were utilised during negotiations to secure a more favourable deal.

A condition survey was commissioned and CYPs colleagues planned a minor works project to make the premises suitable for the proposed use.

The Council then entered into an agreement to lease the premises that was subject to obtaining planning consent for the proposed use. This enabled the Landlord to accept an early surrender from the existing tenant. On receipt of planning consent the lease commenced and contractors were able to take occupation of the premises and commence work.

Budget limitation meant that only the office element could be converted for classroom use at the time of acquisition, but the additional workshop element is available for minor adaptation when required. Exclusive occupation of both the workshop and office element also provided the additional benefit of the large car parking area that can be used as a playground, and a grassed area behind the workshop that can be used for practical horticultural education.

The additional workshop element:



The Outcome

The Fenland Learner Centre opened for the 2008 autumn term providing education for pupils from the local area. Positive feedback has been received from the Head of Service and staff.

Learning Points

- An accurate brief is essential and should include basic information such as site area, accommodation requirement, location, proximity to infrastructure, type of environment and catchment of service users.
- Creative thought can identify asset management solutions that are not apparent.
- Commercial market offers opportunity to provide cost effective solutions.
- Flexibility can be incorporated into leases through effective negotiation.

For further information please contact:

✉ Nick Sweeney
☎ 01223 699090

✉ nick.sweeney@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

Date published: 25 February 2010