

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 7th July, 2022

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Bill Hartnett (Chair), Councillor Joanna Kane (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Salman Akbar, Imran Altaf, Michael Chalk, Brandon Clayton, Sid Khan, Timothy Pearman and Gareth Prosser

Observers: Councillor Joe Baker

Officers:

Peter Carpenter (on Microsoft Teams), Kevin Dicks, Claire Felton (on Microsoft Teams) and Chris Wells (on Microsoft Teams)

Democratic Services Officers:

Jess Bayley-Hill and Gavin Day

21. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

No apologies for absence were received.

Apologies were received from Councillor Altaf who was running 10 minutes late.

22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no Declarations of Interest nor of any Party Whip.

23. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 9th June 2022 were submitted for Members' consideration.

RESOLVED that

.....
Chair

the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9th June 2022, be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

24. PUBLIC SPEAKING

There were no public speakers registered on this occasion.

25. ASSET RATIONALISATION FOR EASEMORE ROAD - PRE-DECISION-SCRUTINY (REPORT TO FOLLOW)

The Head of Legal, Democratic and Property Services presented the report in respect of declaration of land surplus to requirement at Community House, Easemore Road.

Officers reported that following a recent detailed condition survey and report, it was envisioned that over the following 5 years a minimum sum of £340,000 needed to be spent on planned preventative maintenance. Members were informed that the tenants, mainly from Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations, would be displaced and that alternative properties had been located for all the tenants.

Officers also informed members that Where Next, which occupied the site adjacent to the property, had been encroaching substantially on the site. Where Next were aware of this and understood the need to vacate this encroached area. To assist with this, Officers had agreed to work to improve accessibility to their entire site from their main entrance on Wellesbourne Close.

Following the presentation of the report Members queried the following areas.

- The financial details, which Members suggested could have been improved in the report and members asked for further information about the financial data.
 - Officers confirmed that income for the Community centre was £17,000 in total, which was well below the market rate. In some cases, this was because tenants had originally taken up a lease as a meanwhile use, or temporary arrangement, that had subsequently been extended over the years.
 - The sum of £350,000 would be for repair work and was not intended for modernising or improving the building.
 - Officers confirmed that the capital receipt from the sale of the land would be far greater than the income for the building.

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- The current tenants and if they had been found alternative accommodation. Officers replied that all tenants were VCS organisations and had all been found alternatives. The tenants included Talking Newspapers, Blue Whale Community Transport, Gemini Dance Studio and Home-start.
- The reasons why the building had been allowed to deteriorate to such a level with no intervention sooner. Officers replied that they had only recently undertaken a survey to assess the building. There was a planned assessment of the whole of the council's portfolio of buildings to identify which buildings to retain and which to dispose of. This would be to ensure there was a manageable portfolio for maintenance purposes.
- Reference was made to the climate change implications listed in the report and the energy performance certificate rating. Members enquired if that would be an A rating or a lower rating. Officers clarified that they would attempt to obtain the highest rating, however, until proposals had been made for the site it was unknown what would be possible and practical in terms of the energy rating.
- How many other properties had received a low level of income for their size. Officers informed members that they were reviewing other assets in the financial year to find other such properties.
- That there was very poor accessibility for disabled users to the community centre, especially access to the upper floors which was only possible via a staircase.
- The importance of the community centre to the local community.
- Members commented that commercially sensitive information, regarding the anticipated capital receipt for sale of the site, should have been included in the report as an exempt appendix, rather than be omitted from the report altogether.
- Some Members expressed the view that a better solution would be to sell part of the site and use that income to improve the existing building.

During consideration of this item, Councillor Michael Chalk moved the recommendation as printed in the report and he also proposed the following additional recommendation:

“The Executive Committee consider the financial and social implications of using the land for social housing”

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These recommendations were proposed by Councillor Chalk and seconded by Councillor Brandon Clayton.

In making this proposal, Members were asked to note that it would be helpful to explore the potential for the land to be used for social housing as part of the Council's Housing Growth Programme. There was general agreement amongst Members that there was a need in the Borough for more social housing, including more Council houses to meet the needs of Redditch residents.

However, Members were advised that the site did not fall under the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), and the funding arising from sale of the land could not be vired from the general fund to the HRA. In addition, Officers working in the Housing Department had been consulted about the potential for this land to be used and had advised that this was not considered suitable for social housing. Officers had therefore concluded that the land would be more suitable for commercial development.

Members subsequently commented that it would be ideal if the council performed a survey of all the authority's property assets and brought this forward as a whole rather than piecemeal. Members commented that it was difficult to make an informed decision when taking items one at a time. Instead, Members suggested that they needed to know where the properties and the communities they served were located.

In this context, Councillor Hartnett made the following proposal:

“that the Executive Committee defer making a decision on the disposal of the land at Community House, Easemore Road, until a full review of Council assets had been completed.”

The recommendation was proposed by Councillor Hartnett and seconded by Councillor Altaf.

Officers informed members that it was important to understand that stock condition surveys could be financially costly. The Community Centre received a very low rent and the £350,000 maintenance costs would just be for emergency repairs and not investment in improvement works. Officers also reminded members that the tenants themselves were reporting that the building was not fit for purpose. Sale of the property would result in a capital receipt for the Council.

Some Members raised concerns that it would not be wise to postpone whilst reviewing all other assets due to problems with the

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building. However, other Members raised concerns that it would be inappropriate to make a decision on the disposal of the building at this time until further information regarding the review of the Council's assets was available.

On being put to the vote, the recommendation proposed by Councillor Hartnett and seconded by Councillor Altaf was carried.

Following the vote, Councillor Chalk raised the potential for a minority report and a majority report to be put forward by the Committee in respect of this matter. Officers advised that, as the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had not prepared a report but was, rather, making recommendations, this would not be possible on this occasion. However, it was agreed that a detailed minute should be drafted, to include reference to the proposals that were not taken forward.

RECOMMENDED that

the Executive Committee defer making a decision on the disposal of the land at Community House, Easemore Road, until a full review of Council assets had been completed.

26. FUTURE USE OF THE TOWN HALL AND CUSTOMER ACCESS - PRE-DECISION-SCRUTINY (REPORT TO FOLLOW)

The Interim Section 151 Officer presented the report in respect of the future use of the town hall and closure of the cashier service.

Members were informed that in person payments had fallen by 90% since the pandemic and with the introduction of Allpay for the majority of services. A test period of two weeks in March was conducted which resulted in only 202 visitors.

Officers highlighted the different ways to pay mentioned in the report, and highlighted there were 44 possible alternative pay locations for the public to access, including the post office less than 100m away.

Members were informed that there would be a dedicated manned customer service desk opened and the telephone and internet access would be retained. This would allow colleagues to assist the public to access alternative forms of payment after the 3 Month period had elapsed.

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Members were informed of the proposal to sublet the cashier area to public sector tenants, which would generate approximately £150,000 in revenue for the council.

Following the presentation of the report, Members queried the following areas.

- Why the two weeks were chosen in March which was a rent-free month and thus would be expected to generate lower numbers. Officers replied that although that was the case there were also a large number of late payments, so it was felt to still be a suitable time period to get an indication of how busy the cashier desk was.
- Whether there were any redundancies planned. Officers clarified that there would be no redundancies. Everybody who worked on the cash desk would be given employment in other roles within the town hall. The jobs initially intended to be filled were on the customer service desk and manning the telephones, which the cashiers did as part of their current role.
- The report mentioned a potential income of £150,000, and Members questioned how many square meters this represented. Officers replied that the proposed areas would be the current cash office area and part of the first floor which amounted to approximately 2000sq meters in total.
- Whether the prospective tenants were from the public or private sector. Officers clarified that all prospective tenants were public sector organisations. The council would be looking to combine District, County and Health services in one building.
- What the car parking provision would be for tenants. Officers clarified that tenants would be able to use the car park on Trescott Road. The car park on the town hall site would be retained for its current usage.
- How the council intended to improve IT literacy for those who currently used the service. Officers outlined the council's intent to use the following 3 months to educate the general public on payment via other methods, such as by phone, on site computer terminals and their own devices using WiFi or pay points such as the post office.
- The timing of the report. Officers explained that the discussions had progressed very quickly with prospective tenants, however, before Officers brought the proposal to Committee they had to ensure the cashier service would not be needed, This had only just been decided.

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The following comments and statements were also made in relation to the report:

- Members commented that even with access to digital technologies increasing there was still a need for face-to-face interactions. Officers clarified that there would still be a face-to-face provision via the customer service desk.
- Officers further commented that Redditch Borough Council was the last authority in the Midlands to still offer a cashier service to process payments.
- Members commented that they were happy that there would be no intention to lose any staff as employees were leaving the council and there was a need to retain the workforce. Officers commented that there were general recruitment challenges which were being reviewed, the council would be looking at the whole package of benefits for employees, including agile working.
- Members commented that the Council needed to learn from the one stop shop closures and ensure that the process was given enough time.
- Some Members expressed the view that two weeks was not enough time to come to a recommendation and queried why there were not several months of data for April, May and June, so that a decision could be made on the basis of more up to date information

The Chair explained to Members that this was a resolved matter so after recommendation the matter would go to Executive Committee to be decided and not full Council.

The recommendations contained within the report were proposed and seconded and it was

RECOMMENDED that the Executive Committee

- 1) Approve the Closure of the Cashiers Service on the 30th September 2022;**
- 2) Note the alternatives for Customers to make payments and the training and guidance that would take place up to the closure date.**
- 3) Approve the proposals to sublet parts of the Town Hall**
- 4) Delegate authority to the Head of Legal Democratic and Property Services and the Section 151 Officer following**

consultation with the Leader to negotiate terms and enter into the lease arrangements necessary to enable 2.3.

27. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY TRAINING EVENT JUNE 2022

Officers informed the Committee that the Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) Work Programme Planning Event was well attended and all Non-Executive Members were invited.

Officers reported that during the event a series of items were raised by Members to add to the O&S work programme, Officers then drew Members' attention to the suggestions, as detailed on page 17 of the main agenda pack.

The Chair highlighted to Members the current staffing challenges within the Democratic Services Team and proposed some of the suggestions be reviewed by the Performance Scrutiny Working Group.

Members expressed concern that any items not selected would be forgotten until the exercise was undertaken again, Therefore, Members agreed that the remainder of the items could be reconsidered later in the municipal year, so that Members could determine whether there were further items Members wished to add to the O&S Work Programme.

In relation to the items identified during the training, Members requested that a report be produced consolidating information on what benefits were available to help the general public with the current cost-of-living crisis. Members also commented that the report would be beneficial to assist the Council in sharpening their services and response. It was acknowledged that there were a range of organisations helping to address the cost of living crisis and that this was a wide topic to review. However, Members agreed that an update could be provided as an overview, at a meeting of the Committee, on the existing services provided by the Council to help customers manage the impact of the cost of living crisis. The Committee requested that the communications team also attended the same meeting of the Committee to highlight how they were distributing information about these services to eligible residents.

Finally, Members noted that before the Covid-19 pandemic there was a task group formed to review parking enforcement. As this subject had also been identified during the training, Members asked for the findings of this work group to be circulated for the consideration of the Committee.

RESOLVED that

- a) housing repairs, landscaping and void housing be reviewed by the Performance Scrutiny Working Group;
- b) the services provided by the Council to assist residents with the cost of living crisis be considered at a forthcoming meeting of the Committee as an overview item;
- c) The items identified during the training to be reconsidered at a future meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
- d) the report on Parking Enforcement be circulated for the consideration of Members of the Committee for information.

28. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MINUTES AND SCRUTINY OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE'S WORK PROGRAMME - SELECTING ITEMS FOR SCRUTINY

The Chair highlighted the extra Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) meeting on 21st July 2022 to consider and pre-scrutinise the draft of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund report.

The Chair commented that the Executive Committee had arranged an extra Committee date for 27th September 2022 to consider the Redditch Town Investment Plan Business Case for the library, and proposed an extra meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22nd September 2022 to pre-scrutinise the report.

RESOLVED that

an extra Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting be booked to take place on 22nd September 2022.

29. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair noted that a report concerning the new cemetery had been due to be considered by the O&S Committee on 25th August 2022. However, this date was not suitable for Officers and a new date was yet to be decided.

RESOLVED that

The Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme be noted.

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30. TASK GROUPS, SHORT SHARP REVIEWS AND WORKING GROUPS - UPDATE REPORTS

Councillor Kane, in her role as Chair of the Budget Scrutiny and Performance Working Groups informed Members that the Budget Scrutiny Working Group would meet on 4th August 2022.

RESOLVED that

the updates be noted.

31. EXTERNAL SCRUTINY BODIES - UPDATE REPORTS

Councillor Chalk informed Members that there were no written reports due to there being no meetings since the last Committee meeting. However, the West Midlands Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Worcestershire Heath Overview and Scrutiny Committee were due to meet in July 2022.

It was confirmed that Councillor Chalk would continue to provide written updates to the Committee.

The Meeting commenced at 6.30 pm
and closed at 8.28 pm