



Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 29th August, 2024

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Matthew Dormer (Chair), Councillor Craig Warhurst (Vice-Chair) and Councillors William Boyd, Claire Davies, Joanna Kane, David Munro and Paul Wren

Also Present:

Councillor Joe Baker (Leader of the Council)

Councillor Ian Woodall (Portfolio Holder for Finance)

Officers:

Peter Carpenter, Claire Felton and Sue Hanley

Democratic Services Officers:

Jess Bayley-Hill and Jo Gresham

19. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Andrew Fry and Rita Rogers and it was confirmed that Councillor Paul Wren was attending as Councillor Rogers's substitute.

20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest nor of any party whip.

21. PUBLIC SPEAKING

There were no registered public speakers on this occasion.

22. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 25th July 2024 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

Chair

23. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED that:

Under S100 A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following matters on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12 of the said act, as amended.

24. **Minute Item No. 24 – Award of a Contract to Upgrade the Town Hall and Update on Towns Fund – Pre-Scrutiny** **AWARD OF A CONTRACT TO UPGRADE THE TOWN HALL AND UPDATE ON TOWNS FUND - PRE-SCRUTINY**

The Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer presented a report concerning the awarding of a contract to upgrade the Town Hall and providing an update on the Towns Fund award to Redditch.

The Committee was advised that, following the Executive Committee's decision to endorse the proposals detailed in the previous report on the subject of the Town Hall Hub, which had been considered in July 2024, Officers had completed a number of actions. This had included notifying Worcestershire County Council that the library would no longer be moving into the Town Hall Hub.

The floor designs in the Town Hall Hub had been reviewed. The Council Chamber and civic suite would now remain on the ground floor, rather than moving to the second floor of the building. Some aspects of the previous designs, including the new entrance and additional stairwell, had been removed from the plans, although the building would still be upgraded.

Seddons, the Council's contractor, could continue to undertake work on behalf of the Council under a framework agreement. This would entail a strip out of the building. The Council had also arranged for Seddons to undertake design work for the authority moving forward, as this was considered to be more cost effective than involving additional architects. Final designs were expected to be available by mid-October 2024.

A significant portion of the Towns Funding that had been allocated to Redditch had been due to be allocated to the move of the library

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into the Town Hall. As this would no longer be happening, alternative potential uses of that funding needed to be considered. A number of options had been considered and use of a portion of the funds on public realm works had been identified as a potential suitable route forward. As part of this process, Members were asked to note that up to 20 per cent of the Towns Funding could be allocated to public realm works without the need for further Government approval.

Other options that had been suggested by the former Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) had been:

- To invest the £4.2 million funding in the Digital Manufacturing and Innovation Centre (DMIC).
- To invest in a building that would result in similar outputs to those that had been intended when the library had been due to move into the Town Hall Hub.

The Towns Board was in the process of considering the available options. Members were represented on this Board by Councillor Bill Hartnett. Consideration was being given to requesting an extension for use of the funding and the MP for Redditch was liaising with DLUHC in respect of this matter.

Once the report had been presented, Members discussed the following points in detail:

- The value of the loss of revenue for the Council arising from the decision not to move the library into the Town Hall Hub. Officers clarified that the Council's present ongoing loss of revenue was valued at £220,000 per annum.
- The potential design costs (up to £400,000) that now could not be attributed to the project that would need writing off.
- The potential for the Council to attract tenants in future that would lease space in the Town Hall Hub, thereby helping to address the budget gap.
- The risk that the Council could receive a Section 24 Notice from the external auditors as a consequence of the change to the plans for the Town Hall Hub and use of Towns Funding. Officers confirmed that until agreements had been reached with tenants, this risk remained.
- The extent to which the Council's new external auditors had already been made aware of this situation. Officers confirmed that the new external auditors had been notified but would not issue an official response until they formally took over as the Council's auditors.

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- The fact that the Council would have to write off previous design costs for work undertaken prior to the decision to no longer relocate the library into the Town Hall Hub.
- The division between revenue and capital costs arising from the works on the Town Hall Hub. Members were advised that the strip out costs for the building would be paid for using capital funding as would design costs. Previous design costs that had been written off would need to be paid for from revenue funds.
- The extent to which DLUHC were likely to agree to an extension on the use of the £4.2 million funding originally allocated to the relocation of the library. Officers clarified that DLUHC would require further information about potential schemes before making any decisions.
- The six-month extension that would have needed to have been requested in relation to the previous plans for the Town Hall Hub.
- The level of investment that had already been allocated to public realm works as part of the project.
- The role of Worcestershire County Council in undertaking public realm works and the extent to which allocating further funding for this purpose represented the best use of resources.
- The likelihood that the MP for Redditch would be able to encourage DLUHC to grant an extension. The Leader advised that the MP for Redditch was optimistic about the potential for an extension and Members were asked to note that lots of Councils were requesting extensions, meaning that this was not unusual.
- The possible tenants that might agree leases with the Council for use of office space in the Town Hall. The Committee was informed that there was some optimism about the potential for tenants to be in place by 2026.
- The potential for the current planning application for the DMIC to still be submitted with an alteration subsequently submitted at a later date if an extension was granted for an additional floor, subject to this being the agreed route forward for the use of the existing “library funding”, which would provide more time to work on this option. Officers noted that this would be possible to do, however, the Council would still need to go out to tender in December and that process could be complicated by any changes at a later date to the plans.
- The accessibility of the facilities at the upgraded Town Hall Hub and the potential for a changing places toilet to be installed as part of this process. Members were advised that whilst there would be disabled toilets on site, changing places toilets had not been included in the designs. However,

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Members were asked to note that there was a changing places toilet in the Kingfisher Shopping Centre.

- The extent to which the Council's telephone systems in the new Town Hall Hub would be accessible for customers who were deaf and hard of hearing. The Committee was advised that the Equalities Officer at the Council would be consulted on final designs, including in respect of accessibility.
- The requirements in respect of Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) ratings for public buildings, which would need to reach a minimum grade C by 2026 and the potential for a valid extension to be applied to the Town Hall Hub. Members questioned why an extension might be required. Officers clarified that the legislation had allowed organisations to apply for extensions in valid circumstances, however, given all of the action that had already been taken to date in respect of energy efficiency at the Town Hall, including in respect of the new windows in the building, it was suggested that this was unlikely to be needed for this building.
- The potential for the civic suite on the ground floor to be used as a conference centre. Officers clarified that the civic suite was unlikely to be large enough to use as a formal conference centre facility.
- The timescales for completion of the works by Seddons and the extent to which these works were likely to be completed according to deadline. Officers explained that the original intention was to complete the works within 46 weeks and Officers were aiming for these timescales to continue to apply.
- The consultation that had been held with the public in respect of the original plans to move the library into the Town Hall Hub.
- The views of younger residents in respect of the future facilities that would be available to access in the town.
- The plans for the public realm and the impact that additional facilities within the town centre could have on the night time economy in particular.
- The vacant units in Redditch, including in the Kingfisher Shopping Centre, and how increased occupancy of these units could have a positive impact on the vibrancy of the town centre.

At the end of the debate, Members considered and voted on each of the recommendations detailed in the report in turn. Whilst discussing these recommendations, an alteration was proposed by Councillor Matthew Dormer to the wording of the fourth recommendation detailed in the report. This alteration was proposed as follows:

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“Members continue to note and approve the consequential risks associated with the revised proposals detailed within the report, *subject to more action being taken to mitigate those risks.*”

This alteration was seconded by Councillor Craig Warhurst.

On being put to the vote, the alteration was defeated.

RECOMMENDED that

- 1) the progress towards the new Town Hall Hub design be noted;**
- 2) revised works to RIBA stage 4 as per the report be agreed as the best route forward;**
- 3) work continue to determine the most effective alternative use of the Towns Funding as set out in the report;**
- 4) Members continue to note and approve the consequential risks associated with the revised proposals detailed within the report; and**
- 5) authority be delegated to the Interim Director of Finance and Resources and the Head of Legal, Democratic and Property Services to enter the consequential contractual arrangements following consultation with the Leader.**

(During consideration of this item, Members discussed matters that necessitated the disclosure of exempt information. It was therefore agreed to move to exclude the press and public prior to any debate on the grounds that information would be revealed which related to the financial and business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)).

The Meeting commenced at 6.30 pm
and closed at 8.18 pm