

Working Group on School Buildings

Notes of Meeting held on Thursday 10 November 2005 at 6.00.pm.

PRESENT

Councillor Bird (Lead Member)
Councillor Cassidy
Councillor Chambers
Mr. A. Butterworth

ALSO PRESENT

Keith Stone (Assistant Director for the Built Environment)
Andrew Hill (Interim Head of Asset Management)
Susan Lupton (Education Walsall)
Denis O'Rourke (Education Walsall)
Stuart Bentley (Scrutiny Support Officer)

APOLOGIES

Apologies for non-attendance were received on behalf of David Brown and Helen Denton.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest identified at this meeting.

MATTERS ARISING

Councillor Bird informed the group that he had received a request from Councillor E.E.Pitt to call-in the Cabinet decision on Fibbersley Park Primary School dated 9 November 2005. Councillor Bird had informed Councillor Pitt that, as it was not a key decision, it could not be called-in. However, he had agreed to add the item to the agenda for the next Children's Service and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING – 23 SEPTEMBER 2005

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the previous meeting, held on 23 September, copies having been previously circulated to each member of the working group, be approved as a correct record.

ADDRESSING PRIORITY ONE CONDITION BACKLOG

Councillor Bird updated the Officers as to the feelings of the working group. Councillor Cassidy referred to the letter from the Chief Executive, tabled by Councillor Bird, stating that it would appear sensible that programmes should be with Cabinet by May. However, Members had express concerns, in May 2005, that the work may not be completed, but were assured by Susan Lupton (Education Walsall) that it would be. She asked why the work had not been done. Were there lessons to learn from the last 6 months.

(annexed)

Keith Stone stated that there were three broad areas to be noted: Current position; How the current position was reached; and what lessons could be learnt.

Andrew Hill referred to the previously circulated report on the Education Capital Programme – Priority 1 Scheme and noted that there were a number of background issues, most notably: that this was the first time the authority had been allocated specific funding for priority one backlogs; that, although a significant amount of work had been undertaken between asset management and Serco to prioritise the schemes, the money available was still insufficient to cover the backlog; that work was delayed until the proposals had been put forward to Cabinet in August, 2005 for sign-off; that much of the work, outlined in the report, was either electrical, boiler replacement or fire alarm related, all of which can cause significant disruption to a school in session; that significant design work was required to produce a tender document.

(annexed)

Andrew Hill further stated that the electrical work was in the process of going out to tender and it was the aim to have the work planned for Easter or, at the very latest, the summer break 2006. In any event, the money would be committed in the current financial year.

Councillor Bird stated that he was still not happy and still required an explanation for the year delay.

Andrew Hill stated that the timescales for the competitive tender procedure had to be taken into account, with the added time taken to design the work for the tender document. This could typically take 3 to 4 months.

Councillor Bird stated that Members had previously been advised that the tenders needed updating and he asked if this meant that much of the design work had already been done.

Andrew Hill stated that, although conditions surveys had been done, the condition surveys for some schools dated back as far as 1999. The more detailed work, needed for the tender process, had not been done and had only started when the specific funding had been allocated. There was, therefore, the 3 month cycle time needed for each school. Efforts to reduce this time are being made by either grouping similar schools or by out-sourcing the design process.

Councillor Chambers sought clarification in that asset management had inherited paperwork indicating that there were problems, but that it was insufficiently detailed to be able to put out to tender and that a significant amount of work was needed in order to complete a tender document.

Susan Lupton agreed that there was a huge amount of work needed between identification of problems and being in a position to address them.

Councillor Cassidy was not surprised by this position, but stated that it clashed with previously supplied information.

Andrew Hill stated that the process of further assessing assets was ongoing and would be followed by a prioritisation process.

Councillor Bird requested assurance that money be committed to order by the end of the financial year.

Andrew Hill stated that this would indeed be the case.

Councillor Chambers asked if Andrew Hill could confirm that the contingency figures were adequate.

Andrew Hill stated that past performance against similar projects had been taken into account when assessing predicted costs.

Councillor Chambers asked when discussions for next financial year's budget should begin in order to be in a position to award contracts for the summer period.

Keith Stone stated that it was important that the process of preparing next year's Capital Programme should begin now. He reported that these discussions had been initiated and they would be progressed with a view Cabinet approval in good time to allow projects to be programmed for implementation at the worst appropriate time.

Mr. Butterworth asked if it would be possible to receive monthly progress updates.

Councillor Chambers also asked if an extra column relating to the actual on-site start time for each scheme could be added to the report table.

Keith Stone replied that the report was a live document and that it should be possible to produce regular updates for Members.

Councillor Bird referred to the minutes of the School Buildings Working Group, dated 10 May 2005, specifically the report to Cabinet on 11 May 2005.

Susan Lupton stressed that the Cabinet report of 11 May 2005 was the Capital programme which included some priority backlog schemes and that those schemes had been progressed.

Councillor Bird also asked if the establishment team had received additional capacity as minuted.

Andrew Hill reported that significantly extra capacity had been gained through agency staff due to the whole team's imminent move to United Utilities. The delay in the move to United Utilities had not helped the process.

Councillor Cassidy stated that, on a more positive note, she had received positive feedback from Greenfields School on the work completed there. Keith Stone requested that the school be asked to confirm these comments in writing.

Councillor Bird stated that it was important that this positive feedback was recorded. The schedule of tenders needs updating and such feedback could be used to reduce the numbers on the schedule and may lead to reduced time-spans for the tender process.

Councillor Cassidy asked if there was an approved list of contractors.

Keith Stone replied that there was and that this was likely to be revisited after the transfer to United Utilities. It was also likely that United Utilities would also look at the procurement process.

Mr. Butterworth stated that partnership working with a preferred contractor might speed the process.

Mr. Butterworth asked if Schools would be given access to the school buildings surveys currently being undertaken.

Denis O'Rourke replied that the schools would be able to view the documents and make comments on the general content. They would not, however, be in a position to make any significant changes.

Councillor Bird asked if the Council was in a better position now and would the work be done.

Andrew Hill confirmed that the monies would be committed to order by the end of the financial year and that sufficient contractors to complete the schemes in a timely fashion would be employed.

Mr. Butterworth asked when the group should start looking at the next financial year's budget.

Councillor Bird stated that there was to be a budget special scrutiny panel meeting on 28 November 2005 and that would be a good place to start.

Susan Lupton stated that there would be a much better set of baseline data to work from for the next financial year.

Andrew Hill further stated that the asset management service have an indicative budget of £3million for the next financial year.

Mr. Butterworth expressed concerns over the status of those schemes awaiting contributions from the schools.

Denis O'Rourke replied that they were merely waiting for confirmation from the schools and that, although there was a slight risk that the schools would not confirm the commitments due to monies committed to other projects, these should be received shortly.

Councillor Chambers asked if the table in the report could also indicate the schools contribution.

Keith Stone replied that this could be added in two columns indicating the expense to the authority and expense to the school.

Councillor Bird asked what moves would be made to claw-back any budget surplus from schools.

Susan Lupton replied that a number of schools had amassed a surplus in order to fund significant capital outlay and it was not always easy to identify what the schools plans were from looking at the level of budget surplus.

In concluding, Susan Lupton reported that it was the intention to circulate a DfES questionnaire, about the school building process, to schools in order to get balanced feedback. This should prove helpful in moving the service forward.

Mr. Butterworth also stated that the Voluntary Aided Schools sector is continuing to use the Council's Establishment Team for some schemes and this must be indicative of the level of service provided.

RESOLVED

That the money allocated to priority one backlogs, for this financial year, be committed to order by the end the current financial year.

That Members receive monthly updates, through the scrutiny office, on the progress of the priority one schemes and that these updates include additional data relating to the start date on site, expense to the authority and expense to the school.

REPORT ON THE OLD CHURCH SCHOOL ROOF

Andrew Hill reported to the Members that the contract had been awarded at £78,000 (down from the initial estimate of £100,000). The asset management service is now awaiting a method statement and health & safety policy documents from the contractor. A controlled strip, due to the presence of Asbestos, is now planned for January so that scaffolding is not left on site over the holiday period.

Members thanked Andrew Hill for his report.

There being no further business the meeting terminated at 7:15 p.m.