



Walsall Council

**REPORT OF THE
REGENERATION
SCRUTINY AND
PERFORMANCE PANEL**

**14 APRIL
2014**

ITEM 5(c)

TITLE OF THE MATTER CALLED-IN: GRANT OF LEASE TO RYECROFT
NEIGHBOURHOOD RESOURCE CENTRE

DATE CONSIDERED BY CABINET: 18 MARCH 2014

CABINET PORTFOLIO HOLDERS: COUNCILLOR A. ANDREW –
REGENERATION; COUNCILLOR I. SHIRES – COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR

DATE OF SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL MEETING:

2 APRIL 2014

Grounds under which the matter was called in for scrutiny:

The call in was made by Councillors: A. Young, R. Thomas, J. Fitzpatrick, K. Phillips and G. Illmann-Walker.

The reasons stated for the call in were:

1. The report to Cabinet was both missing information and contained inaccurate information;
2. There was no consideration of the wishes expressed by the community.

Record here the Scrutiny and Performance Panel's conclusions and proposals:

Members heard a range of opinions from a variety of interested parties including:

- Members who called the decision in;
- The Chair of the Dartmouth Neighbourhood Forum;
- Bob Lloyd – adviser to the Dartmouth Neighbourhood Forum;
- Councillor Pete Smith;
- Local residents who use Dartmouth House.

The Panel considered the following points from the invited interested parties, together with responses from officers and the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration:

- The call in Members explained that the focus of concern for the interested parties was the decision made by Cabinet on 18 March 2014 relating to Dartmouth House;

- The call in Members expressed concern that the submission of 123 letters of support from local residents, regarding the application seeking approval for Dartmouth House to be listed as an Asset of Community Value, were not reflected in the report to Cabinet of 18 March 2014. In response officers explained that the letters of support had formed part of the listing application which was a separate process. It was also explained that approval for listing of Dartmouth House as an Asset of Community Value had occurred after submission of the report to Cabinet and therefore a verbal update had been provided at the Cabinet meeting confirming the listing;
- The maintenance and repair costs of £287,500 identified as required by Dartmouth House were challenged by the call in Members. This included the cost and amount of strip lighting being queried by the call in Members who explained that they had sought separate quotes for this work which were significantly lower than the costs identified by officers. Officers and the Portfolio Holder explained that an independent condition survey was commissioned from CIPFA. The required repairs were itemised and costed using industry accepted schedules of rates;
- The call in Members expressed concern regarding guidance provided in the report to Cabinet of 18 March that the Walsall NHS Trust had determined that Dartmouth House no longer provided suitable accommodation for the rehabilitation service. It was the view of the call in Members that the Walsall NHS Trust had been required to vacate the premises by Walsall Council. The call in Members also referred to a leaflet that they advised the meeting had been distributed to local residents by Walsall Council informing them that the Walsall NHS Trust had chosen to remove its services from Dartmouth House;
- The call in Members expressed concern regarding the fact that the Police had previously occupied a room at Dartmouth House free of charge. It was explained that the local community had found the presence of the Police very reassuring. However, the Police were now required to pay £50 per week for accommodation at the Ryecroft Community Hub, which given budget pressures would be very difficult for the Police to fund. In response the Portfolio Holder explained that he had received guidance from the Police that they were very pleased with how they were working with the local community and people were being referred to the Ryecroft Hub;
- Councillor Smith highlighted that The Bungalow, a former warden's residence, was actively used by the local community and was only around one hundred yards from Dartmouth House. However, the Chair of the Dartmouth Neighbourhood Forum explained that The Bungalow was quite a small building, did not offer the range of services previously provided at Dartmouth House, and whg had attached a significant number of conditions to the lease. This included a recent restriction regarding the use of the cooker which threatened the ability of the community groups to supply hot meals to local residents. In addition, the length of the lease had meant it had proven difficult to raise external funding to help develop services at the site. Panel Members and the Portfolio Holder expressed concern regarding the lease. The Portfolio Holder indicated he would contact whg regarding the lease, while officers agreed to provide advice and guidance to the community groups regarding the conditions contained within the lease;
- Councillor Smith explained that funding had been available for improving local community facilities two years ago. Dartmouth House had not been available for the use of this funding at the time so instead Ryecroft Community Hub had been developed. He expressed the view that it had been important to make use this funding while it was available rather than miss the opportunity. Councillor Smith also suggested that the Dartmouth House site represented a very good

opportunity for the development of one bedroom properties which were in demand;

- Bob Lloyd, adviser to the Neighbourhood Forum, agreed that Walsall Council was in a position to dispose of Dartmouth House as it wished. However, he pointed out that decisions relating to Dartmouth House must still satisfy the Wednesbury Reasonableness test and that the community should have the right to prove that it had a business model to be able to successfully operate from the site. He highlighted that he had been involved with a group that had successfully bid for Big Lottery and other funding totalling more than £1m which had been used to renovate and maintain a community facility in Tipton;
- The Chair of the Regeneration Scrutiny and Performance Panel noted that the Ryecroft Community Hub, New Forest Road also offered local facilities for residents. Councillor Smith pointed out that the Ryecroft Community Hub was no more than a five minute bus journey from the Dartmouth House area. In response the Chair of Dartmouth House Neighbourhood Forum explained that it was the view of service users that the Hub was difficult to access due to the steep incline, together with the need to walk approximately fifteen minutes to get to the site and that there was no bus route. In addition, it was felt that the range of services on offer at the Hub were not suited to the older residents who had previously used Dartmouth House;
- A Panel Member raised a query in relation to a number of consultation events undertaken in 2013 which were noted in the report to Cabinet of 18 March 2014. Officers explained that the consultation related to services at the Ryecroft Community Hub as opposed to proposals for Dartmouth House. Councillor Smith noted that the consultation events had been well attended by the local community and residents had been very positive about the proposed developments for the Hub. This included a range of social, welfare and health based activities for different groups within the community;
- In response to a Panel query officers explained that no decision had been made regarding disposal of the site and no further action would be taken before the conclusion of the scrutiny and associated Cabinet process. It was also explained that it was costing around £120 per day to secure the site. In addition, while an invitation to tender had not been produced by the council at this time it was estimated that the cost of demolition was expected to be around £50,000. A Panel Member expressed concern regarding the overall costs for security which he noted were £26k over a six month period. He also pointed out that redecoration and repair work would always be necessary where a new tenant was sought. A further Panel Member noted the importance of achieving best value for local tax payers and suggested that should Dartmouth House be demolished the site could be used for one bedroom properties with s.106 money be ring fenced for supporting local community facilities;
- A number of Panel Members proposed that the community groups be given the opportunity to put together a business plan to enable them to undertake the operation of Dartmouth House.

It was moved and seconded, that:

- 1. The local community groups, including the Dartmouth Neighbourhood Forum, be given the opportunity to put a business plan together for the operation of community services from Dartmouth House; &**
- 2. guidance be provided to Cabinet setting out the reasons for the 123 letters from residents, supporting the application for listing of Dartmouth House as an Asset of Community Value, not being included in the report to Cabinet of 18 March 2014.**

The recommendations were approved by the Panel with 3 votes in favour and all other Panel Members abstaining.

Record here the specific recommendations of the Scrutiny and Performance Panel:

The Regeneration Scrutiny and Performance Panel recommend that:

- 1. The local community groups, including the Dartmouth Neighbourhood Forum, be given the opportunity to put a business plan together for the operation of community services from Dartmouth House; &**
- 2. guidance be provided to Cabinet setting out the reasons for the 123 letters from residents, supporting the application for listing of Dartmouth House as an Asset of Community Value, not being included in the report to Cabinet of 18 March 2014.**

Explain here how the proposals/recommendations of the Scrutiny and Performance Panel differ from those of Cabinet:

The Panel's first recommendation will need to be considered in the light of the set of options for Dartmouth House agreed by Cabinet on 18 March 2014.

This form provides an accurate record of the meeting of the above named Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

Chair of Scrutiny and Performance Panel

Councillor Louise Harrison



4 April 2014