

Business, Employment and the Local Economy Scrutiny and Performance Panel

**Agenda
Item No. 5**

25 March 2015

Call in: Decision to dispose of the Allen Centre

Ward(s) All

Portfolio: Councillor M. Nazir – Regeneration

Report:

At its meeting on 18 March 2015 Cabinet approved the following recommendations:

1. That approval be given to the disposal of the Council's freehold interest in the Allen's Centre as shown edged in bold on plan number EPMS 4104/6 extending to 3.33 acres (13,470 square metres) (or thereabouts).
2. That authority for the approval of the terms of the disposal be delegated to the Executive Director for Regeneration acting in consultation with the portfolio holder for Regeneration.
3. That prior to marketing for sale on the basis of informal tender, the Allen's Centre be demolished and the site cleared.
4. That the Executive Director for Regeneration acting in consultation with the Executive Director for Children's Services be required to consider the viability of transferring management/ ownership of the former caretaker's/ assessment house to a partner organisation or community group and determine if it should be included in the disposal or retained.

A copy of the Cabinet report from the meeting is appended to this report. (Appendix 1).

In line with provisions contained within Part 4.5 of the Walsall Council Constitution the decision was "called in" on 18 March 2015 by the following Members:

Councillor M. Bird
Councillor A. Andrew
Councillor E. Hughes
Councillor C. Towe
Councillor O. Bennett
Councillor M. Arif

The reason for the call in was:

That there is significant public interest to retain the Allen's Centre as a community facility.

A copy of the received call-in notice is appended to this report. (Appendix 2).


The Business, Employment and Local Economy Scrutiny and Performance Panel are invited to review the decision taken in the light of the call-in. The Panel is able to make recommendations to Cabinet on alternative courses of action should Members wish to do so.

Recommendations:

That Members consider the call-in relating to the Allen's Centre and consider whether they wish to make any recommendations to Cabinet.

Contact Officer:

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Cabinet –18th March 2015

Disposal of the Allen's Centre, Hilton Road, Willenhall

Portfolio: Regeneration; Councillor M Nazir

Related portfolios:

Service: Development and Delivery

Wards: Willenhall North

Key decision: No

Forward plan: No

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report proposes that the Allen's Centre is declared surplus to Council requirements. The building was vacated in August 2014 when Social Care and Inclusion staff relocated to the Civic Centre. This move was made as part of the Smarter Workplaces office rationalisation programme agreed by Cabinet in April 2011.
- 1.2 In principle, the site is considered suitable for a residential development scheme. It is proposed therefore that the site is marketed for sale by informal tender.
- 1.3 To reduce void costs and to mitigate against the risk of trespass/malicious damage/anti-social behaviour on site it is proposed that the Allen's Centre is demolished prior to sale of the site.
- 1.4 It is proposed that relevant Executive Directors consider whether the former caretaker's/assessment house is retained. The budget reductions agreed by Cabinet on 4th February 2015 for Children's Centres and Youth Support services mean that there is no funding to continue or develop provision at the Allen's Centre site. Officers are exploring a transfer of management/ownership to a partner organisation or community group. Several parties, including Walsall Housing Group, Age UK and Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust, have expressed interest. It is hoped that a strong lead partner can be identified to take on responsibility for the management and maintenance of the house enabling it to be used by a number of providers for the benefit of the local community.

2. Recommendations

That Cabinet:-

- 2.1 Approves the disposal of the Council's freehold interest in the Allen's Centre as shown edged in bold on plan number EPMS 4104/6 extending to 3.33 acres (13,470 square metres) (or thereabouts).
- 2.2 Delegates authority for the approval of the terms of the disposal to the Executive Director for Regeneration acting in consultation with the portfolio holder for Regeneration.
- 2.3 Agrees that, prior to marketing for sale on the basis of informal tender, the Allen's Centre will be demolished and the site cleared.
- 2.4 Requires the Executive Director for Regeneration acting in consultation with the Executive Director for Children's Services to consider the viability of transferring management/ownership of the former caretaker's/assessment house to a partner organisation or community group and determine if it should be included in the disposal or retained.

3. Report detail

- 3.1 The closure of the Allen's Centre was agreed in principle by Cabinet in April 2011. Following completion of a refurbishment programme, the Social Care and Inclusion teams based at the Allen's Centre were able to relocate into the Civic Centre and are now located on the third floor. This will achieve revenue savings of £25k per annum on premises management costs and has enabled the implementation of more efficient working practices.
- 3.2 The site has gone through the development team process. This has indicated that in principle a residential development scheme would be supported and that a case could be made for some development of the former playing field area provided compensatory enhancement is made to other open space(s) (particularly Allen's Rough which immediately borders the site).
- 3.3 A footpath that enables access onto the site from Sherringham Drive would be retained and linked to the access roads that would serve the new development. This would preserve the current informal access for local residents across the site from Sherringham Drive to Hilton Road.
- 3.4 It is proposed that the Allen's Centre site is marketed for sale by informal tender in Spring 2015 to achieve a capital receipt in 2015/16. Prior to this it is proposed that the main building is demolished. This will reduce void costs (business rates £1,000/month and security costs £120/day) and reduce the risk of trespass/malicious damage/anti-social behaviour on site.
- 3.5 Before demolition a bat survey will be commissioned and a Part 31 notification, as required by the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 Schedule 2, will be made to Planning Services.

- 3.6 It is proposed that the former caretakers/assessment house will be excluded from the site offered for sale. In January 2014 it was renovated to enable use by Lighthouse Children's Centre for daytime activities and by the Youth Support Service for positive activities. It is also used for meetings by the Allen's Rough Residents Association.
- 3.7 Youth Support Services currently deliver one session per week, on Thursdays, which focuses on building self esteem including team building and music workshops. This is attended by a core group of around 10 young people and workers utilise the bottom floor of the building. The area's detached/outreach youth worker may use the building when the weather is unsuitable for outdoor/street based activities.
- 3.8 The proposal to use the Assessment House assumed that the Lighthouse Children's Centre would make regular use of the house however, this has been very limited to date, and will cease altogether when Lighthouse Children's Centre building transfers to Beacon School for the delivery of much needed 2 year old childcare places as part of agreed budget saving reductions.
- 3.9 The budget reductions agreed by Cabinet on 4th February 2015 for Youth Support Services mean that there is no funding to develop provision at the Allen's Centre site. The reductions agreed which will impact on Council delivered youth work from September 2015, severely limit that service's ability to operate from fixed bases.
- 3.10 Due to these funding pressures officers have sought expressions of interest in the future management/ownership of the Assessment House from partner organisations and community groups. Two community groups, Frank F Harrison Community Association and Darlaston Jet, have made initial expressions of interest. They are reluctant to take on responsibility for future management/ownership but would welcome the opportunity to be included in any planning of services for local residents within the New Invention area. Three partner agencies, whg, Age UK and Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust, have also expressed an interest in the property. Officers will engage with these partners to develop a sustainable plan for future use of the Assessment House. This outcome of this engagement will be presented to the relevant Executive Directors by the end of March.

4. Council priorities

- 4.1 The proposal to dispose of the Allen's Centre site does not itself impact upon the delivery of the Council's priorities as set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy "the Walsall Plan".

5. Risk management

- 5.1 The disposal of the site shall be managed by suitably qualified surveyors in the Strategic Asset Management team, with support from colleagues in Legal Services.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 Should Cabinet resolve to dispose of the site, a capital receipt would be achieved. Such a receipt could be anticipated in the financial year 2015/16 and would be ring fenced to the Smarter Workplaces programme, to pay for borrowing used for the Civic Centre refurbishment.
- 6.2 The expected demolition costs of approximately £100k will be funded from the existing Smarter Workplaces capital budgets. Any security costs borne until demolition will be funded from the existing Smarter Workplaces revenue reserve.
- 6.3 Budgets for property running costs that are now savings (i.e. rates, water, cleaning, caretaking etc) have already been transferred to the Smarter Workplaces cost centres. The value of these savings were £12k for 14/15, with the full year future effect being £25k per annum. These unused budgets will be utilised to fund future revenue moves costs for properties within the scope of Smarter Workplaces.

7. Legal implications

- 7.1 It is proposed that the site shall be offered for sale by informal tender. Any terms agreed will be in accordance with the Council's obligation under S.123 Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) to achieve Best Consideration when disposing of its assets.

8. Property implications

- 8.1 The proposed disposal of the Allen's Centre site is consistent with the Council's property strategy as set out in the Corporate Asset Management Plan 2014-19

9. Health and wellbeing implications

- 9.1 The proposal to dispose of the Allen's Centre site does not itself impact upon health and wellbeing.

10. Staffing implications

- 10.1 There are no employment issues arising from the proposals set out in this report.

11. Equality implications

- 11.1 There is no direct effect on people with protected characteristics so no equality impact assessment is required.
- 11.2 Disposal of the site on the open market would provide all potential purchasers with the opportunity to acquire the property.

12. Consultation

- 12.1 Legal Services and Planning Services teams have been consulted on the proposals for the site.

Background papers

Plan no. EPMS 4104/6


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Simon Neilson
Executive Director
Regeneration

18 March 2015



Councillor Nazir
Portfolio holder
Regeneration

18 March 2015



Walsall Council

**Councillor Mike Bird
Conservative Group Leader**

Wednesday, 18 March 2015

Mr John Garner

Democratic Services

Dear Mr Garner

Please accept this letter as a formal "call in" of the Cabinet decision to dispose of the Allen Centre.

We request that this be debated at the relevant Scrutiny Committee as there is significant public interest to retain this as a community facility.

We request that this item be debated within the requisite period as designated in the constitution.

Yours faithfully

Councillor Mike Bird

Councillor Eddie Hughes

Councillor Oliver Bennett

Councillor Adrian Andrew

Councillor Chris Towe

Councillor Mohammed Arif

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