

Business, Employment & the Local Economy Scrutiny and Performance Panel

25 March 2015 at 6.00 p.m. at the Council House

Panel Members Present:

Councillor D. Anson (Chair)
Councillor A. Andrew
Councillor M. Bird
Councillor A. Ditta
Councillor G. Illmann-Walker
Councillor R. Worrall
Councillor E. Hazell
Councillor M. Arif
Councillor K. Phillips
Councillor D. James
Councillor L. Harrison
Councillor D. Barker

Officers Present:

Simon Neilson – Executive Director – Regeneration
Jackie Hodgson – Team Manager: Asset Management
Matt Underhill - Committee Business and Governance Manager

Portfolio Holder

Present: Councillor M. Nazir – Regeneration

Leader of the Council: Councillor S. Coughlan

Invitee: Councillor I. Shires

53/14 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received for the duration of the meeting from Councillor Clews, Councillor Craddock and Councillor Sohal.

54/14 SUBSTITUTIONS

The following substitutions were made for the duration of the meeting: Councillor Hazell for Councillor Craddock; Councillor Arif for Councillor Sohal; Councillor Phillips for Councillor Clews.

55/14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

Council Hazell declared an interest as a member of New Invention Local Community Forum.

56/14 MINUTES

The Panel considered the minutes of the previous meeting on 25 February 2015.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting, held on 25 February 2015, be approved as a true and accurate record.

57/14 CALL IN: CABINET DECISION TO DISPOSE OF THE ALLEN'S CENTRE

The Chair introduced the item and the Team Manager: Asset Management provided a background report. The following is a summary of the report and subsequent discussion:

It was explained that a report to Cabinet on 18 March 2015 proposed that the Allen's Centre was declared surplus to council requirements. The building was vacated in August 2014 when social care and inclusion staff were relocated to the Civic Centre. The move was made as part of the Smarter Workplaces office rationalisation programme agreed by Cabinet in 2011.

It was further explained that the report also proposed that the Executive Directors for Regeneration and Children's Services consider whether the former caretaker's/ assessment house is retained. The budget reductions agreed by Cabinet in February 2015 for Children's Centres and Youth Support Services mean there is no funding to continue or develop provision at the Allen's Centre so officers are exploring a transfer of management/ ownership to a partner organisation or community group.

It was also explained that there is indicative support from the Development Team for a residential development scheme. It was further explained that a footpath providing access to 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. A number of Members expressed support for the retention of these access points, particularly for elderly residents.

It was explained that in January 2014 the former caretaker's/ assessment house 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. The Lighthouse Children's Centre will shortly cease using the building and budget reductions mean that there is no funding available to develop council service provision from the site. As a consequence use of the building will cease from 1 September 2015. To enable some form of community provision to continue Community Development sought expressions of interest in the house from partner organisations/ community groups. It was further explained that one of the interested parties, Age UK, are willing to take over premises management responsibility and have requested a breakdown of running costs. They are also willing to act as an umbrella organisation and make the premises available to other partners/ groups on a sessional basis. As the range of activities proposed will meet local residents needs as identified in the Area Community Plan for New Invention, Age UK are currently Community Development's preferred partner.

The organisations that have expressed interest in the building will be given until 31 March to confirm their proposals. These will be analysed and a preferred option presented to the two Executive Directors.

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 which will reduce void costs and the risk of malicious damage and anti social behaviour at the site. In response to a Panel query it was explained that the capital receipt generated would be ring fenced to the Smarter Workplaces Programme to pay for borrowing used for the Civic Centre refurbishment. 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.

The Chair invited the Call-in signatories to speak. Councillor Bird explained that in his previous role as Leader he had been involved over a significant period of time in determining the most suitable use of the Allen's Centre site. He further explained that he had been moved to act on this issue at this stage given the strength of feeling from members of the local community. He suggested that a community facility could be integrated within the redevelopment of the site. However, he acknowledged that he was uncertain as to whether local community groups would wish to operate such a facility. He further suggested that it would be a wasted opportunity not to look at the option of offering the site for sale to include the requirement to retain and extend the former caretaker's building as a community facility.

Councillor Hazell, a member of New Invention Community Forum, explained that the local community had fought for community buildings in the area for a number of years. She also explained that New Invention was a densely populated area and a further housing development would place an additional demand on local schools, with many local children already having to attend schools outside the local area, as well as other infrastructure. Councillor Hazell implored the Panel not to approve the sale of the site and instead consider it for alternative use, such as small units as office space for start-up companies. In response to this and other Panel queries the Team Manager: Asset Management explained that a refurbishment of the current Allen's Centre would cost around £650k, while undertaking a 900 square feet extension to the caretaker's house would cost around £200k. She added that the existing structure was at least 40 years old and was very energy inefficient which meant that refurbishment would be particularly costly. A Member highlighted a local construction firm which specialises in modular buildings. He explained that it was likely that this company would be able to undertake the 900 square feet extension to the caretaker's house for significantly less than £200k. A further Panel Member noted that a lot of public money had been spent on the maintenance of the site and that as a result consideration should be given to continuing to operate the site.

In response to the Chair's observation, officers confirmed that the caretaker's house sat in one corner of the site and therefore it could be considered for community use without effecting development of the remainder of the site. This would enable the council to achieve a significant capital receipt and the local community to retain a facility. Councillor Illmann-Walker explained that he had attended a number of meetings, going back to 2010, which had been led by another Member. The purpose was to seek to retain local amenities for elderly

residents, including those living in Hilton Road and Sherringham Drive. However, those meetings ceased around March 2013. He explained that many local residents stated that they had been promised some sort of community facility. It was also his understanding that Age UK were very keen to operate a facility from the former caretaker's building. He further explained that responding to the housing shortage in Walsall was one of the reasons Cabinet had chosen to sell the site for redevelopment. The decision of Cabinet would therefore achieve the goal of a community facility and the provision of much needed housing. Councillor Illmann-Walker proposed a motion which was supported by the Chair as follows: "That the Panel support the Cabinet decision of 18 March 2015 in relation to the Allen's Centre". In response Councillor Hazell explained that she remained opposed to a residential development. However, if it was the will of the Panel to approve residential development she requested that support be specified for sheltered housing. A further Panel Member highlighted that work was currently being undertaken to identify potential assets to form community hubs. He suggested that the Allen's Centre could be considered for that function. Councillor Bird proposed an amendment to the motion, which was seconded by Councillor Andrew, as follows: "That the Panel support the Cabinet decision of 18 March 2015 in relation to the Allen's Centre site. However, the Panel also requests that a 90 metre extension of the caretaker's building is included in the disposal document".

The Portfolio Holder observed that the meeting had discussed much of the background that had led to the Cabinet decision regarding the site. He noted that there were a number of organisations who had expressed interest in operating from the former caretaker's building. The anticipated capital receipt would be used to help fund the Smarter Workplaces Programme introduced in April 2011. A Panel Member noted that there were previous examples of ring-fenced commitments being removed and he suggested the same could be done in this instance.

Councillor Shires explained that previous work in identifying a community facility in the North Willenhall area had focused on the Square at New Invention. However, the scoping work had considered a number of buildings in the North Willenhall area. He also explained that a number of meetings had been held locally to discuss the merits of the Allen's Centre building operating as a community facility. Councillor Shires felt that the shape of the site meant that it would be potentially difficult to develop for housing. However, he suggested that development for the site should be for an extra care facility as there was a shortage of this type of facility in the Willenhall Area.

The Executive Director explained that for any recommendation for the disposal document to include a requirement for an extension to the former caretaker's building would potentially put at risk ongoing discussions with organisations interested in operating from the building. In particular it would inevitably change the terms of any agreement and cause delays.

The Leader explained that he was sympathetic to all the views expressed at the meeting. He further explained that funding was required to meet the costs of the Smarter Workplaces Programme, while funding was simply not available to refurbish the Allen's Centre. He also agreed that a housing development would put pressure on local schools. However, the council was under a statutory duty to build more homes in the borough. The Leader noted that the coalition agreement of the previous administration had included agreement to sell off this

site. However, the Cabinet decision would enable a community facility to operate from the site.

The Chair invited the Panel to vote on the motions put forward. The outcome was as follows:

In relation to the amended motion: "That the Panel support the Cabinet decision of 18 March 2015 in relation to the Allen's Centre site. However, the Panel also requests that a 90 metre extension of the caretaker's building is included in the disposal document", the Panel voted as follows: For: 5; Against: 7. As a result the amended motion was not approved by the Panel.

In relation to the motion: "That the Panel support the Cabinet decision of 18 March 2015 in relation to the Allen's Centre", the Panel voted as follows: For: 6; Against: 6. The Chair used his casting vote to support the motion which was therefore approved by the Panel.

Resolved:

That the Panel support the Cabinet decision of 18 March 2015 in relation to the Allen's Centre; &

the report be noted.

58/14 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair noted that the Panel's next meeting would be on 23 April at 6:00pm.

The meeting closed at 7:00 p.m.

Chair:

Date: