

PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Place Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room - County Hall, Lewes on 11 June 2019.

PRESENT Councillors Bob Bowdler (Chair) Councillors Godfrey Daniel (Vice Chair), John Barnes, Martin Clarke, Nigel Enever, Pat Rodohan, Stephen Shing, Andy Smith and Barry Taylor

LEAD MEMBERS Councillor Nick Bennett

ALSO PRESENT Kevin Foster, Chief Operating Officer
Graham Glenn, Acquisition and Disposals Manager
Bethan Bolland, Executive Officer/SPACES Programme Support

1 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

1.1 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 19 March 2019 as a correct record.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Chris Dowling and Darren Grover. Apologies were also received from the Lead Members Councillors Bill Bentley and Claire Dowling.

3 DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

3.1 There were none.

4 URGENT ITEMS

4.1 There were none.

5 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

5.1 The Committee recorded its thanks to Councillor Richard Stogdon the former Chair, for his contribution to scrutiny and chairing the scrutiny committee over the last ten years.

5.2 The Chair advised the Committee that as a result of changes in the Committee's membership announced at the Annual Council meeting on 14 May 2019, it was necessary to replace members of the Countryside Access Review Board and appoint a new Chair of the Review Board.

5.3 The Committee RESOLVED to appoint Councillor Martin Clarke as Chair of the Review Board and that Councillor Bob Bowdler would join the Review Board.

6 SPACES PROGRAMME UPDATE

6.1 The Chief Operating Officer introduced the report and outlined that the purpose of the report is to update the Committee on activity under the SPACES Programme. This and the following report were requested as a result of the initial scoping work the Committee carried out on vacant and surplus property.

6.2 The acronym SPACES stands for “Strategic Property Asset Collaboration in East Sussex” and is a partnership of a group of public bodies and third sector organisations, which was established in 2013. The work of the SPACES Programme is guided by a Board made up of representatives from each of the constituent organisations, with the Chair of the Board rotating each year between the partners. The Chief Operating Officer introduced Bethan Bolland (ESCC) who will be taking up the role of SPACES Programme Support from 15 July 2019.

6.3 The group does not manage or have responsibility for any property assets, but seeks to get better use of public sector estate. This is done by reviewing the use of assets, and by partners exchanging information on their assets in order to achieve best value. For example, by sharing information about surplus property and property or office space needed, property assets can be shared to the mutual benefit of the partners. One key area of work is the interface to the One Public Estate (OPE) programme. The SPACES Programme has included work to create collaborative shared work space such as hot desks or ‘touch down’ space, which can be used by staff from the various partners and Civil Service staff from central Government departments (e.g. Department for Work and Pensions).

6.4 The Committee discussed the report and asked a number of questions or sought clarification as summarised below.

Shared Workspace

6.5 The creation of collaborative shared work space is intended to enable greater flexible working for individual staff members in situations where they may find it more efficient, or where it is necessary to use alternative facilities. This can reduce travelling; deal with travel or other disruptions (e.g. offices being out of use) and; enable staff to collaborate with partners. Participating organisations have to sign up to information security standards and Health and Safety standards for the shared work spaces.

Building Utilisation and Efficiency

6.6 Each partner uses their own methodology for measuring building utilisation, which takes into account the strategic importance of the building use or activity. Most local authorities have introduced flexible or ‘agile’ working so they can be more flexible about their use of space, whereas the Police and other services may have less flexibility in the way they provide services.

6.7 When East Sussex County Council (ESCC) carried out the Agile review of buildings between 2013 and 2016 it used a ratio of six desks for every ten staff. It is now starting a utilisation survey to test the occupation of floors in each of the buildings. This will produce a utilisation figure as a measure of building productivity. This can then be used to assess whether there is scope to locate further staff in the building. This process ensures ESCC is making the maximum utilisation of space. If at the end of this process there is spare capacity then ESCC can go back to the SPACES partners to see if there is a match with other partners’ needs or whether there is an opportunity to reflect service provision synergies.

6.8 The SPACES Programme initiated a location based approach in 2014/15 to proactively review partners' property assets and services on geographic basis within a particular area. This work resulted in the shared use of assets, such as the Registration Service moving into the Town Hall in Hastings. Under this approach the assets remain the responsibility of the owning organisation, but partners seek to work together to take advantage of opportunities or surplus assets which are offered to them.

6.9 The running and maintenance costs of older buildings are taken into account when reviewing existing property assets. ESCC has an operational efficiency target of £148.46 per square metre (2019/20) for the running costs of buildings in its operational estate. If a building moves outside this target, ESCC would seek to review the use of the building.

One Public Estate

6.10 The sums of money outlined in paragraphs 2.6 to 2.8 of the report were obtained from the One Public Estate (OPE) programme. This is collaboration between the Local Government Association (LGA), the Office of Government Property (within the Cabinet Office) and the Treasury to help local authorities and others make the most efficient use of their property estate. The SPACES Programme has been successful in obtaining funding from OPE to develop the business case for the co-location of services, service relocation and site development. In the latest bidding round, SPACES successfully secured a £350,000 grant and a £100,000 loan. This approach also looks at property assets as an opportunity for regeneration (e.g. the planned move of fire station in Lewes to release land for a regeneration project).

Health and Social Care integration

6.11 The development of the estate for Health and Social Care integration is outside the remit of the SPACES Partnership, but it does include opportunities to facilitate this through work for the Adult Social Care department and joint partnership working (e.g. the inclusion in the West St. Leonards site of the potential to develop a medical centre). It was noted that the NHS funding of new medical centres has been suspended due to the comprehensive spending review. So there are some challenges to the investment activity in medical centres, as rents may not be guaranteed in the future. This may mean they do not provide such a good opportunity for ESCC to obtain a secure return from investment as well as further its policy goals by investing in such facilities.

SPACES benefits and project details

6.12 The Committee asked how the financial benefit to ESCC outlined in paragraph 1.5 of the report matched up with the delivery of the projects listed in Appendix 1. The Chief Operating Officer agreed to provide further information on the savings that ESCC has made from participation in the SPACES Programme outside of meeting. He also agreed to provide a worked example of one or two of the projects listed in the appendix.

6.13 The Committee RESOLVED to note report and the current programme activity taking place.

7 VACANT AND SURPLUS PROPERTY UPDATE REPORT

7.1 The Acquisition and Disposals Manager introduced report. ESCC has a relatively low number of surplus and vacant property assets in comparison with other local authorities who own more property. Some of the surplus properties are former school sites which have additional constraints such as the requirement to get Secretary of State approval prior to disposal or redevelopment. The diagram at the bottom of page 20 gives an overview of the

processes ESCC goes through when a property becomes surplus. The options appraisal process involves a substantial number of activities, with each property asset requiring a different set of activities depending on the nature of the property or site.

7.2 The work undertaken on vacant and surplus property is informed by the Council's Property Asset Disposal and Investment Strategy, and the requirement to achieve best value for the Council. The outcomes from the appraisal process range from a straight forward disposal or sale of a surplus property asset, through to the development of an asset for sale or retention for revenue generation purposes. Assets may also be retained for strategic purposes. Each surplus asset will require different activities which will take varying lengths of time to complete.

7.3 The Committee discussed the report and raised the following points.

7.4 The Committee expressed concern about delay between declaring a property asset surplus or a property becoming vacant, and the development or disposal of the asset. The Committee highlighted the additional building security and maintenance costs that are incurred in such cases, and the likelihood of severe damage through arson and vandalism (e.g. the recent fires at Pinehill and Mount Denys in Hastings). The Committee asked if there is a target or standard timeframe for disposal, as five years in this example would appear to be unacceptable due to the additional costs and the visible sign of neglect which impacts on the local community.

7.5 The Acquisition and Disposals Manager responded that there is no standard or normal disposal timeframe as it will depend on the level of risk (planning risk, site risk, title, market etc.) attached to each asset. The more problematic sites noted are subject to a number of hurdles that frustrate a speedy disposal that secures best value, often influenced by such matters as the planning process or obtaining Secretary of State Approvals where required. It is understood that five years is not acceptable, but in the case of the Helensdown Campus there have been challenges as the Council still has an operational building on this site. Although it may appear that there has been little progress in this example, there have been active discussions with the Adult Social Care department to explore the development of this site.

7.6 The Chief Operating Officer outlined that there is a balance between holding a property asset vacant to allow for discussions and options to be explored, and getting the best value from that asset. Officers also recognise the impact on the local community that empty buildings can have.

7.7 The Committee suggested that it would be helpful in the future to have an exception report on all buildings vacant for more than three years, with an explanation of the reasons for any delay and the current status. The Chief Operating Officer confirmed that such a report could be provided to the Committee.

7.8 It was clarified that Library buildings are within the remit of the Property Services and that the Communities, Economy and Transport Department do hold a specific capital budget for the maintenance of library buildings. The Committee noted that some of the agreements for Community Libraries were taking a long time to put in place.

7.9 The Committee RESOLVED to:

- 1) Note the contents of the report; and
- 2) Request an update report be presented at a future meeting on the vacant and surplus building that have not been disposed or developed within 3 years from the date of being declared surplus.

8 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

8.1 The Committee agreed to exclude the press and public for item 8 on the meeting agenda.

9 VACANT AND SURPLUS PROPERTY UPDATE - ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (EXEMPT)

9.1 The Chief Operating Officer introduced report and outlined that the detailed additional information contained in this report is exempt for reasons of commercial confidentiality. The priorities contained in the Property Asset Disposal and Investment Strategy are to develop and dispose of assets to maximise the value to the Council, or yield a revenue return where this is possible. The Strategy does not currently prioritise investment in commercial property.

9.2 The Acquisition and Disposals Manager outlined the activities that have been undertaken for a number of the property assets and gave explanations where there have been delays in the development or disposal of a particular property or site.

9.3 The Committee had a general discussion concerning the role of various property vehicles, such as separate property companies, that some local authorities have established. It also discussed the possibility of using other approaches to develop property assets, such as Clear and Sustainable Futures, that could help to reduce costs and develop other opportunities.

9.4 The Committee also discussed the maintenance arrangements for public libraries. It was clarified that ESCC does own the Eastbourne Library building where there was a recent roof leak. The Chief Operating Officer will let the Committee know what caused the problem at Eastbourne Library. Condition surveys of library buildings are undertaken every three to four years. These are used to develop planned maintenance programmes for libraries, which are funded by a specific provision within the Council's capital programme. The Council does prioritise the maintenance of libraries which are maintained to higher standards as they are high profile public buildings. Reactive maintenance work is also carried out throughout the year where the need arises.

9.5 The Committee RESOLVED to note the additional information contained in the report.

10 ANY OTHER EXEMPT ITEMS PREVIOUSLY NOTIFIED UNDER AGENDA ITEM 4

10.1 There were none.

11 WORK PROGRAMME (INCLUDING FORWARD PLAN)

Forward Plan items

11.1 The Committee reviewed the Forward Plan and discussed the report going to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment on 17 June 2019 on the public consultation on parking fees. The Committee agreed that it would like to examine the consultation results and give a view on the parking fee proposals before consideration by the Lead Member. As the proposals affect Eastbourne, Hastings and Lewes it was agreed to form a Board comprised of one committee member from each of these areas plus one other committee member to examine the proposals. It was agreed that Councillor Godfrey Daniel (Hastings), Councillor Andy Smith (Lewes), Councillor Pat Rodohan (Eastbourne) and Councillor John Barnes would make up the Board.

Potential Scrutiny Review topics

White Lines and Road Markings

11.2 The Committee discussed a possible review of white lines and other road markings. The issue is that some white lines and road markings, particularly at zebra crossings, are wearing out but may not be renewed for some time as part of a planned maintenance programmes (e.g. until 2020). This may lead to community safety issues and increased liability if markings are not visible. The potential review would examine the existing programme for renewing white lines, the techniques used and longevity of markings. The committee noted that this was a county wide issue and agreed to form a Scoping Board to examine the feasibility of undertaking a scrutiny review on this topic. It was agreed that the Scoping Board would be comprised of Councillors Barry Taylor, Stephen Shing and Godfrey Daniel.

Climate Change

11.3 The Committee discussed the issue of climate change and whether the Committee could undertake some scrutiny work on this topic. The Council has an Environmental Management policy and there is an Environment Strategy for East Sussex. The Committee would like to examine what actions the Council is taking against the policy and Strategy, including the Council's carbon footprint (CO² emissions), use of single use plastics, and providing a leading example to others. It was agreed to form a Scoping Board comprised of Councillors Martin Clarke, Stephen Shing, Bob Bowdler and John Barnes to explore this scrutiny review topic.

Work Programme

11.4 The Committee noted the items on the current work programme and RESOLVED to add the items in paragraphs 11.1, 11.2 and 11.3 to the work programme.

The meeting ended at 12.00 pm.

Councillor Bob Bowdler (Chair)
Chair