

Scrutiny of Vacant Properties and the SPACES Programme – Scoping Board

4 MARCH 2019

PRESENT: Cllr Darren Grover and Cllr Chris Dowling

ALSO PRESENT: Kevin Foster, Chief Operating Officer (KF)
Graham Glenn, Acquisition and Disposals Manager (GG)
Simone Cuthbert, SPACES Programme Manager (SC)

1 The purpose of the meeting was clarified, as an initial exploration of the need for a Scrutiny Review of vacant properties and the SPACES Programme, brought about by a discussion at the November Places Scrutiny Committee meeting [Minute 21.4].

2 Councillor Dowling set out his expectation for an update on the principles and objectives of the SPACES programme and recent transactions, and an understanding of the context of the programme. Councillor Grover explained his concerns, arising principally from examples of long-standing vacant or under-utilised properties within his division (the Meeching Centre and Newhaven Library), and whether there was a more systemic question to be explored.

SPACES Programme

3 Kevin Foster (KF) set out the background of the Strategic Property Asset Collaboration in East Sussex (SPACES) Programme which aims to identify and realise opportunities for co-location and collaboration between public sector and community and voluntary sector partners. The partners include the County Council, all district and borough councils, Brighton & Hove City Council, three emergency services, representatives from the voluntary and community sector, NHS including CCGs, Trusts and NHS Property Services and some central government departments such as Job Centre Plus (DWP) and Department for Transport.

4 Simone Cuthbert (SC) explained the recent shift in activity, now that the easier to deliver projects had been completed, with more ambitious projects under consideration. This includes seven projects involving the emergency services which have progressed to the feasibility stage.

5 KF set out the role of One Public Estate (OPE), as the central Government initiative between the Local Government Association and the Office of Government Property within the Cabinet Office. OPE offers funding rounds and invites bids for grants and loans to explore the feasibility of projects. SPACES Programme has a track record of successful bids, including the most recent Phase 7. This has secured £450k for four projects in Hailsham, Hastings, Eastbourne and Newhaven. KF explained that the Programme was also aimed at technical solutions, to create greater opportunities for remote working and shared work space. Some of the drop-in centres that have been developed by the partners are also available to central Government staff, which helps during travel disruption.

Estates Management

8 KF highlighted the suite of property policies that the Council has in respect of its estate. This includes the Community Asset Transfer Policy, which is being used in respect of 12 Claremont, the building next door to Hastings Library. This became too expensive to convert to form part of the Library, so it is in the process of being transferred for conversion to community usage.

9 GG set out the various classes of assets that the County Council holds, and that different considerations are required for each type of asset, to align with the Council's business objectives:

- Office portfolio – County Hall, St Marks House, St Marys House, Ocean House
- Operational estate – Libraries, Children's Centres
- Non-operational estate – highway verges
- Investment portfolio
- Schools
- Highways

GG explained that there are usually 30-60 projects ongoing at any one time, 80% of which are open to discussion within SPACES.

10 In respect of the Office portfolio and Operational estate, these are largely subject to decisions regarding how the authority wishes to run its estate, and where to accommodate its staff, taking into account local demographics and demand. GG and KF explained the move to a corporate landlord model, as a way of encouraging a "one council" approach, and corporate responsibility for health and safety, together with efficiencies of scale when contracting services.

11 KF and GG outlined the Property Asset Disposal and Investment Strategy that had been agreed by Cabinet in April 2018, and highlighted the focus on investment within the County to support service need as being the preferred approach. GG set out the details of some of the projects which were also covered in a report to the Audit Committee.

12 GG went through the office accommodation currently occupied by the Council, and the considerations involved in each one, in particular the leases at St Marys, St Marks and Ocean Houses. These three properties accommodate 1500 staff in the centre and east of the County. In particular regard to Newhaven Library, it was acknowledged that there had been a number of negotiations with various bodies to occupy the first floor, but these had all been unsuccessful.

13 GG explained that much of the Estates Team's work was affected by external factors, such as the complexity of establishing title, and unpicking covenants and charges over land, especially where property has transferred from the NHS. KF and GG confirmed that officers would always be willing to respond to concerns raised by Members in respect of specific properties.

Recommendation

14 The Scoping Board recommend that the Places Scrutiny Committee request an update report from Orbis/Business Services Department (BSD) in respect of Estates management, and that no Scrutiny Review is required.