

**MINUTES of the meeting of Cabinet held at THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, BROCKINGTON, 35 HAFOD ROAD, HEREFORD on Thursday 7 May 2009 at 2.00 pm**

**Present:** Councillor RJ Phillips (Chairman)

**Councillors:** LO Barnett, AJM Blackshaw, H Bramer, JP French, JA Hyde, JG Jarvis and PD Price

**In attendance:** Councillors PA Andrews, PJ Edwards, TM James, RI Matthews, SJ Robertson, WLS Bowen, PM Morgan and JD Woodward

**LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Leader informed Cabinet of the death of former Councillor June Pickering who had held the post of Cabinet Member for Education during a previous administration.

Partners and staff were formally thanked for their support and hard work provided as a result of the recent swine flu pandemic. The considerable amount of time given to ensure the preparedness of the County was acknowledged.

**109. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillor DB Wilcox, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation.

Apologies for absence were also received from Councillors: ACR Chappell, Labour Group Leader and GFM Dawe, Herefordshire Alliance Group Leader.

**110. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor RJ Phillips declared a personal interest in agenda item 5 : Response to the Review of Community Engagement in Community Safety and Drugs Partnership.

Councillor PJ Edwards declared a personal interest in agenda item 6 and 7 : Office Accommodation Strategy Options Appraisal

**111. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED:** That the Minutes (both open and exempt) of the meeting held on 2 April 2009 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**112. ANNUAL AUDIT AND INSPECTION LETTER 2008**

The Leader introduced the report and advised Members that whilst an invitation to attend Cabinet had been extended to Liz Cave from the Audit Commission, unfortunately other commitments had precluded their attendance. The Director of Resources outlined key points of emphasis from the report and reminded Members that it provided an overall summary of the Audit Commission's assessment of the Council following their audit, inspection and performance assessment work over 2007/08. The delay in reporting back to the authority had been as a result of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process, which had now

been superseded by the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). Members were informed that in the future the areas covered by the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter would form part of the CAA reporting framework, with the 2008/09 report expected during November 2009.

The Director of Resources stated that the assessment was positive with the Council assessed to be 'improving well' which was reflected in the performance of most priority areas. The Direction of Travel judgement confirmed the Council's improvement since last year. It was highlighted to Members that whilst the authority had been assessed as improving well, the overall corporate assessment score had formally gone down due to the end of the authority's formal 'protected' status.

In the particular area of value for money, the Director of Resources advised Cabinet that whilst the Audit Commission had acknowledged that improvements had been made, the authority was working to strengthen improvement outcomes in this area. The Audit Commission identified five issues that it felt required action with the Council's proposed response to these issues presented in an action plan (attached as an appendix to the report).

In discussion the following points were raised:

- Members were informed that significant work had been progressed in relation to the waste contract which had been highlighted as a required action.
- The important roles of the Executive and the scrutiny functions in highlighting areas of concern and in supporting the authority in its continuing progress were emphasised.
- The ability of the scrutiny function to scrutinise partner organisations was confirmed and it was suggested that the Safer Roads Partnership be scrutinised in light of the views expressed by the Audit Commission.
- It was recognised that whilst progress had been made within the authority relating to Children and Young People, and Social Care, challenges remained both locally and nationally with both areas. It was noted that a recent government announcement sought to encourage a graduate pathway to social care careers which would, in time, increase the numbers of individuals entering positions in local authorities.
- It was important to replicate where possible the good work of those areas that scored strongly, it was additionally stated it was important to maintain strong performance and to ensure that they did not recede. It was also recognised that as methodology sometimes changed it was important for officers and Members to be aware of the possible consequences.

**RESOLVED That:**

- (a) **the Audit Commission's Annual Audit and inspection Letter for 2008 be noted, and;**
- (b) **the response to the action points in paragraph 9 of the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter for 2008 be approved.**

**113. RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITY SAFETY AND DRUGS PARTNERSHIP**

In welcoming the report from the review group of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee, the Cabinet Member Environment and Strategic Housing thanked all those involved for the work undertaken. It was stated that the report outlined a number of recommendations for both the Environment and Strategic Housing, and Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources portfolios and an action plan had been developed, which outlined a proposed response for each recommendation. The following additional points of clarification relating to the action plan were made:

- R1: Arrange a presentation to councils via HALC (including non members) on the work of the partnership.
- R3: Action Owner to be amended to read Deputy Chief Executive (Interim)
- R6: additional words to action to read 'and build database for involvement in consultations'.
- R9: It would be proposed that the Community Services Scrutiny Committee would monitor progress of the action plan.

The Leader invited the Chairman of the Scrutiny Review, Councillor Patricia Morgan to speak on the report and she commended it to Cabinet for their consideration and stated that there was a huge opportunity to strengthen and improve community engagement.

In discussions the following points were raised:

- Available grant funding to combat anti-social behaviour should not concentrate solely on the city and market towns, but additionally should support larger villages on the fringes.
- Volunteers who had strong connections to their communities were undertaking much valuable work.
- The Community Access Points established across the county had been well received.
- The strengthened engagement with the Youth Council was agreed to be beneficial.

**RESOLVED That: the proposed response to the recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Review be approved.**

#### 114. OFFICE ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY OPTIONS APPRAISAL

The Leader, in introducing the report, proposed amendments to the recommendations as follows (amendments underlined):

- Recommendations a-c remained unchanged.
- Recommendation (d): 'the Chief Executive be delegated authority to proceed with the preparation of a detailed design specification, subject to a satisfactory business case, and the development thereafter of shared office accommodation at Plough Lane'.
- Recommendation (e): 'the overall Accommodation Strategy, which should include the retention of the Shire Hall and Town Hall, be brought to cabinet by the end of 2009.
- Recommendation (f) 'proposals for the long term use of the Shire Hall and Town Hall to be brought back to Cabinet in four months time.

The Cabinet Member Resources welcomed the amendments to the recommendations which emphasised the importance of the Shire Hall and Town Hall as valued iconic buildings to be retained in the Council's portfolio. Members were reminded of the original decision in 2005 to progress the purchase of the Plough Lane site as part of the then current accommodation strategy, which due to changing circumstances was not implemented. Following the recommendations of the Strategic Monitoring Committee, the consultants Knight Frank (KF) were appointed to carry out a full options appraisal on a number of specific sites, the outcome of which supported the Plough Lane site as the most beneficial in financial and deliverability terms. Knight Frank's options appraisals had been revised by the Council's external financial consultants (Capital) who had deemed the KF report reasonable. The Cabinet Member Resources stated that the Plough Lane option for shared office accommodation would provide many benefits including; improvement in service delivery, long term revenue savings, reduce carbon footprint and provide a catalyst for regeneration. Members were advised that the

current owners of the Plough Lane site had expressed an in principle agreement to sell the site (which comprised of a larger area than that discussed in 2005).

The Leader stated that local government needed to address carefully how it was going to provide quality public services in the future when government cuts in public finance occur from 2010 onwards. He said a preferred course of action would be to seek savings through efficient administration of services in the first instance before making cuts in valued public services and facilities. Cabinet was informed by the Leader that the evidence presented in the open report was substantially backed up by both the exempt and the consultant's reports. He expressed his thanks to the Chairman of SMC who had been made aware of the progress with the negotiations.

In discussion the following points were raised and clarified:

- The benefits to the environment of a shared office accommodation at Plough Lane were articulated and it was stated that the wider business case for its purchasing was strong. Procuring a site with an existing suitable office accommodation was considered to be a positive contribution to reducing the possible carbon footprint impact.
- It was emphasised that the decision before Cabinet would be to add to the Council's asset portfolio during a strong buyers market and did not relate to the disposal of any Council assets.
- The rationalisation of the Council's office accommodation had been a long standing issue to resolve, with the option for Plough Lane taking account of flexible ways of working, including peripatetic working and touch down desks.
- On the point of purchase, the lease on the current Plough Lane building would cease which would secure the current office building beyond 2010. It was stated that for the duration of the development of additional accommodation, employees would remain in their current locations.
- In recognising that the Plough Lane site did not rate highest in the consultant's assessment criteria (at appendix 2 of the report) the Head of Asset Management and Property Services stated that in his view, the Plough Lane site should have scored higher on the criteria.

**RESOLVED that:**

- a) **progress made in the development of a business case supporting an integrated back office accommodation strategy for the council and NHS Herefordshire be noted;**
- b) **Plough Lane be endorsed as the preferred option;**
- c) **the decision taken by Cabinet in 2005 to purchase Plough Lane be reaffirmed in light of the findings of the recent options appraisal, and authority be delegated to the Chief Executive to conclude negotiations for the property acquisition;**
- d) **the Chief Executive be delegated authority to proceed with the preparation of a detailed design specification, subject to a satisfactory business case and the development thereafter of shared office accommodation at Plough Lane;**
- e) **the overall Accommodation Strategy, which should include the retention of the Shire Hall and Town Hall, be brought to Cabinet by the end of 2009; and**
- f) **proposals for the long term use of the Shire Hall and Town Hall be brought back to Cabinet in four months.**

**RESOLVED:**

**That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Schedule 12(A) of the Act as indicated below.**

**115. OFFICE ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY OPTIONS APPRAISAL (EXEMPT)****Summary of proceedings during which the public were excluded:**

Cabinet considered an exempt report on the Office Accommodation Strategy Options Appraisal. This included information of a commercially sensitive nature in addition to the information contained within the publicly available report which was the subject of the previous agenda item, as reflected in minute number 114 above.

The recommendations agreed during discussion of the publicly available report were considered by Cabinet in the light of the additional information and endorsed.

**This item disclosed information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).**

**RESOLVED that:**

- (a) progress made in the development of a business case supporting an integrated back office accommodation strategy for the council and NHS Herefordshire be noted;
- (b) Plough Lane be endorsed as the preferred option;
- (c) the decision taken by Cabinet in 2005 to purchase Plough Lane be reaffirmed in light of the findings of the recent options appraisal, and authority be delegated to the Chief Executive to conclude negotiations for the property acquisition;
- (d) the Chief Executive be delegated authority to proceed with the preparation of a detailed design specification, subject to a satisfactory business case and the development thereafter of shared office accommodation at Plough Lane;
- (e) the overall Accommodation Strategy, which should include the retention of the Shire Hall and Town Hall, be brought to Cabinet by the end of 2009; and
- (f) proposals for the long term use of the Shire Hall and Town Hall be brought back to Cabinet in four months.

The meeting ended at 3.45 pm

**CHAIRMAN**