

MINUTES of the meeting of Strategic Monitoring Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Thursday, 9th June, 2005 at 10.00 a.m. and reconvened at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Wednesday 15th June, 2005 at 10.00 am.

Present (on 9th June): Councillor T.M. James (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs. P.A. Andrews (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors: B.F. Ashton, H. Bramer, A.C.R. Chappell, J.H.R. Goodwin, Mrs. M.D. Lloyd-Hayes, J.P. Thomas and W.J.S. Thomas

Present (on 15th June) Councillor T.M. James (Chairman),
Councillor Mrs. P.A. Andrews (Vice-Chairman),

Councillors B.F. Ashton, H. Bramer, A.C.R. Chappell, J.H.R. Goodwin, Mrs. M.D. Lloyd-Hayes, J.P. Thomas and W.J.S. Thomas

In attendance on 9th June: Councillors Mrs L.O. Barnett, J.W. Edwards, D.J. Fleet, Mrs J.P. French, R.I. Matthews, J.C. Mayson R.J. Phillips, D.W. Rule, D.B. Wilcox, and R.M. Wilson.

In attendance on 15th June Councillors Mrs L.O. Barnett, J.W. Edwards, Mrs J.P. French, J.G.S. Guthrie, R.I. Matthews, Mrs J.E. Pemberton, R.J. Phillips, D.W. Rule, and R.M. Wilson.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Mrs P.A. Andrews, A.C.R. Chappell, D.J. Fleet, Mrs M.D. Lloyd-Hayes and J.P. Thomas declared personal interests in agenda item 4: Call –in of Cabinet decision on office accommodation.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 28th April, 2005 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4. CALL-IN OF CABINET DECISION ON OFFICE ACCOMMODATION

(The Committee had been recommended to exclude the public and press during consideration of this item.

A discussion took place about the balance to be struck between the presumption that scrutiny of the executive should take place in public and the need to preserve the confidentiality of commercial negotiations. A view was expressed that the general

strategic principles of the office accommodation strategy could be debated in public, with the press and public subsequently being excluded during discussion of any commercially sensitive details, and with the report itself not being made public.

The Chief Executive formally advised that it would be difficult for officers to provide answers as full as they might wish to the Committee's questions if the meeting were to be held in public. He further advised that whilst he would seek to assist the Chairman as best he could, the responsibility to avoid disclosing commercially sensitive information rested on individual Members. The likelihood of it being possible to pre-empt inappropriate disclosure was necessarily remote.

The County Secretary and Solicitor advised that Members of the Committee had a duty of confidentiality, both to third parties with whom the Council was negotiating and to the Council, being mindful that there was a risk that disclosure of information could damage the Council's negotiating position to the Authority's financial detriment.

A motion that the public and press should be excluded was defeated.)

The Committee considered Cabinet's decision on 19th May, 2005 to agree an office accommodation strategy and business case for the potential centralising of office accommodation at Plough Lane, Hereford, which had been called-in by five members of the Committee, in accordance with the Scrutiny Committee Rules.

The stated reasons for calling in the decision were:

- Inadequate Business Case
- Lack of Detail
- Lack of independently costed (alternative) proposals
- No proper assessment of traffic implications

In the ensuing discussion in public the following principal points were made:

- There was consensus that the Council did need to centralise its office accommodation. However, it was asserted that the report to Cabinet was lacking in detail and had not offered sufficient alternatives to Plough Lane for consideration.
- That the decision should have involved more Councillors and was not transparent.
- Evidence from a recent consultation exercise had shown public support for a centralised headquarters on the Edgar Street Grid and this appeared to be being ignored. There was a strong argument that the Civic Centre should be in the City Centre.
- That whilst it was perhaps inappropriate to describe one section of the report as a business case the document did appear to present a reasonable case for the move to Plough Lane, although the substantive evidence was not included.
- The opportunity to accommodate the Council and partners such as the Police, the Primary Care Trust and Voluntary Sector bodies on one site appeared to have fallen by the wayside. There seemed to be limited flexibility to respond to structural and organisational changes which might befall the Council and its partners.

- Whilst some concerns were expressed, it was generally accepted that the office accommodation at Plough Lane was fit for purpose.
- There were concerns about increased traffic levels. It was suggested that far more people would travel to the site than had done so when Bulmers was fully staffed. A traffic impact assessment should be required.

In reply the Leader of the Council welcomed the support for centralising accommodation. This had been the Council's policy since July, 2000. That policy had been reaffirmed in the report on the Council's Property Strategy, also considered by Cabinet on 19th May, 2005, which the Committee had not chosen to call-in.

There was detailed evidence to support Cabinet's proposed decision to centralise accommodation at Plough Lane. He added that in making that proposal Cabinet recognised the need for the Council to have a contact point in the City Centre. The strategy provided for an Info Centre and Library to be located in the City Centre, a decision in principle which Cabinet had already taken.

He noted that the following other options had been considered: the existing livestock market site, the "civic quarter" as defined in the Edgar Street Grid study (Blueschool Street), land at Rotherwas Industrial Estate and land at Moreton on Lugg.

In relation to the livestock market site, he noted that a building on such a prestigious high profile location would have to be designed to a high specification, incurring additional cost. The site also had a high land value and it was to the Council's financial advantage to build on a less valuable site. There were other options for developing the site, which would provide a greater economic contribution to the City Centre than office accommodation.

He added that the desirability of accommodating partners in the same offices as the Council was recognised and, to an extent, this was already happening at Plough Lane.

The risk of Government initiatives leading to structural changes to the Council and its partners was ever-present, but in proposing to move to Plough Lane the intention was that the office accommodation should be as flexible as possible.

The Director of Environment commented that the report presented to Cabinet had represented the final stage of a lengthy process, which had concluded that the Plough Lane site was the best option and the question was on what basis the Council might want to secure the site. There was voluminous supporting evidence relating to the other options considered.

The Cabinet Member (Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources) commented on the way in which moving to the Plough Lane site would be in line with the Government's desire to focus resources on the front line and would meet a number of the Council's objectives, including using space economically and encouraging flexible working. The provision of an Info Centre in the City Centre, staffed by Council employees, would complement this move, the intention being amongst other things to facilitate longer opening hours for the benefit of the public, something which was impossible while the Council operated from so many sites. She reiterated that the proposal was in line with the Property Strategy approved by Cabinet, to which Members had not objected, and in line with the findings of the Committee's own Property Review.

(At this point it was proposed that the Committee should exclude the public and press to allow the Committee to explore the commercially sensitive aspect of the proposal.)

RESOLVED That under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting at this point on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of any terms proposed or to be proposed by or to the Authority in the course of negotiations for a contract for the acquisition or disposal of property or the supply of goods or services.

(The meeting adjourned between 11.00 am and 11.10 am, adjourned again at 12.10pm and reconvened at 10.00 am on Wednesday, 15th June, 2005).

Summary of Proceedings during which the Public and Press were excluded

The Committee considered the financial aspects of the proposed centralisation of office accommodation at Plough Lane, Hereford and possible alternative courses of action. It acknowledged Cabinet's proposed course of action whilst requesting that it kept the Council's options under review.

The meeting ended at 11.05 a.m.

CHAIRMAN