

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

15 DECEMBER 2014 - 2.30PM



PRESENT: Councillor Mrs French (Chairman), Councillors Broker, Mrs Bucknor, Butcher, Clark, Sam Clark, Hodgson, King, Owen, Skoulding, Tierney and Tunley

OBSERVING: Councillor Murphy

APOLOGIES: Councillor Swan

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Jane Bailey (Member Services and Governance Officer), Rob Bridge (Corporate Director), Jo Blackmore (Executive Officer), Anna Goodall (Head of Legal and Governance) and Paul Medd (Chief Executive)

*** FOR INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL ***

OSC23/14 ACCOMMODATION REVIEW

Councillor Mrs French asked officers to clarify why the final appendices to the report are confidential. Paul Medd confirmed that officers sought legal advice and the financial information contained within the appendices was considered to be commercially sensitive.

Councillor Skoulding stated that it is public money and that he felt that the document should be open to the public.

Councillor King stated that the legal advice is that the document contains commercially sensitive data, and therefore should remain confidential.

Paul Medd stated that due to the commercially sensitive nature of the document and because some of the data is from the County Council, they have requested that it remains confidential.

Members agreed that the confidential appendices should remain confidential and that they would exclude the public and the press during discussions on this information.

Members considered the Accommodation Review Report presented by Councillor Clark who explained this Council were not looking, but that the opportunity came up to consider a move to Hereward Hall. It would appear at first to be a positive move and to tick a lot of boxes for this authority but as time moves on and more detailed information has come to light; the feelings from members are that it might not be so attractive as it first looked. The question is, are the savings worth the move in the long term.

Members asked questions, made comments and received responses as follows:

1. Councillor Owen asked what the Leader sees as the long term future for local government. Councillor Clark stated that at the moment the outlook for local government is that anything could happen, and suggested that the only way that anyone would know what the future holds would be if they had a crystal ball;

2. Councillor Owen stated that he is curious whether we should be incurring a lot of expenditure at this time, either on Fenland Hall or on another building, as he does not feel that in the current climate we as a Council have a long term future. Councillor Clark stated that this is an overview function for this Panel, the decision has not already been made, the purpose of this meeting is to ask this panel their views;
3. Councillor Tierney stated that he was hoping that officers would come to the meeting today with a strong case as the documents do not make a strong case either way on their own. He added that he is worried about the unknowns, and concerned about the costs spiralling out of control. Councillor Clark agreed stating that these are his concerns too, there are a lot of uncertainties and confirmed that this is why we are seeking the views of this panel;
4. Councillor King asked if we have considered going ahead with the move to Hereward Hall but retaining the Civic part of this building to address the loss of the Council Chamber. This would leave the remainder of the Fenland Hall site to be redeveloped. Councillor Clark stated that this suggestion was previously made at a member seminar, but after discussion it was decided that this would result in a loss of value to this site, he added that he feels that it is an 'all move' or 'all stay here' decision to be made;
5. Councillor King stated that this option should be investigated as looking at the layout of Fenland Hall it would be quite easy to divide the building. Councillor Clark stated that the concern is that it would affect the overall value of this site, he added that he can see the merits of staying and of moving; he agreed that there are many scenarios that could be looked at, but the more we look into the options the less compelling it seems to be to decide to move;
6. Councillor King stated that he agreed that the value of this site would diminish, but still believed that it is worth investigating by how much as we would then not be required to build a new Council Chamber on the new site at Hereward Hall;
7. Councillor Hodgson stated that in his opinion Fenland Hall should be in Wisbech, he added that we should use the Boathouse as the main Council building and that a building for staff could be built alongside it. He stated that he felt that there should be a further option of moving to alternative premises. Councillor Mrs French stated that the option of moving to the Boathouse is not an option for discussion today;
8. Councillor Broker stated that he does not feel it is a good time to be considering the option of moving, as we are very close to a general election and in the middle of austerity, and asked if the County Council are pushing us for a decision. He informed members that he is a traditionalist and loves the Fenland Hall building, but that basically it is a dinosaur when compared to modern buildings that some other councils are using. He added that he appreciates the information contained within the report and noted that it would be sometime before we would realise the savings. Councillor Clark stated that we are considering this at this time as the opportunity has come up and for no other reason, he confirmed that the County Council will sell the Hereward Hall site whether we decide to buy it or not and that there is no pressure for us to make a decision from them what so ever;
9. Councillor Tunley stated that out of the two buildings Fenland Hall is a far more attractive asset and that he is concerned by the motivation to move. He added that he is also concerned by the way that the scheme would be financed because of the use of reserves, and questioned if this was the right thing to be doing at this time. He asked, with reference to the letting potential and estimate of income detailed in the report, where this information had come from, and if the figures could be relied on. He stated that when you compare the overall figures there is a saving of approximately £30,000 over 10 years. Councillor Clark reiterated that the County Council are not pushing us at all to make a decision; they simply need to know what we want to do so that they can decide how they will proceed. Rob Bridge stated that with regards to using reserves there are all options within the report and with regards to the figures for income from letting we had an expression of interest to move in here and those figures were based on what they would be prepared to pay. Paul Medd confirmed that there are live discussions behind the scenes, but no firm plans at this time;

10. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if this is the best value for Council Tax payers, she stated that it should not matter that there is an election approaching, but just what offers the best value. She stated that she had asked for some rough figures with regards to hot desking, but has been told that this could not be quantified at this time. She added that Hereward Hall is a more modern building but in her opinion not a very pleasant working environment and there would be concerns around access for staff especially with school run clashes. Initial figures showed savings of £100,000 but the figures provided to the panel today show that this might not be the case as the savings by comparison to the cost of alterations and changes that would be needed simply do not add up. It is due to these variables that she feels we would not be benefiting from the move to Hereward Hall. Councillor Clark agreed that there are risks to the potential move. Rob Bridge stated that there are various ways to cover the cost of the move, but as with everything there are variables to take into account;
11. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she would like to see continued investigations made into better use of Fenland Hall;
12. Councillor Skoulding asked how long the lease for the Ambulance Station is, and what the financial penalties would be. Councillor Mrs French stated that this is a good point as there is no indication with regards to financial penalties in the report. Rob Bridge confirmed that this is a complex calculation that is yet to be investigated;
13. Councillor Mrs French stated that she is concerned regarding the plans for the highways depot and the Base adding that it would have been useful to have had a breakdown of staffing numbers for these sites. She suggested that some of the staff from the Base could move to Fenland Hall and the depot staff relocated to the Base. She stated that officers repeatedly say that finances are stretched and for this reason she would not support a move when there are other options that have not been investigated properly. She added that she supports the plans for the Base but not for the move to Hereward Hall. Councillor Clark confirmed that the plans for the Base will go ahead as they are independent of this decision.

OSC24/14 CONFIDENTIAL ANNEXE TO THE ACCOMMODATION REVIEW REPORT

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel discussed the Confidential Annexe to the Accommodation Report.

Members AGREED to Option 3 - To recommend to Cabinet that FDC Remain at Fenland Hall with limited improvements.

(Councillor King asked that his vote against this decision be noted as he is strongly opposed to closing the door on the option of moving to Hereward Hall as he feels there could be substantial savings made in the future)

3.35pm

Chairman