

MEETING OF HIGHWAYS AND COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE POLICY AND SERVICE COMMITTEE: MINUTES

Date: Tuesday 6th October 2015

Time: 10:00am-10.40am

Present: Councillors Ashwood, Bates (substituting for Councillor Palmer), Butcher, Connor, Criswell, Hickford (Chairman), Hunt, Kavanagh (substituting for Councillor Moghadas), Reeve (Vice-Chairman), Rouse, Scutt and Taylor

Apologies: Councillors Gillick, Moghadas (Cllr Kavanagh substituting) and Palmer (Cllr Bates substituting)

Also present: Councillors Ashcroft, Nethsingha and Orgee

The Chairman and other Members thanked the Conservative Group Members for agreeing to hold this meeting during their Party Conference.

138. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Connor declared a non-pecuniary interest, as his wife was a County Council employee, who was currently based at Noble House.

139. MINUTES AND ACTION LOG

The minutes of the meetings held on 1st September 2015 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The Action Log was noted.

140. PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

141. CAMBRIDGESHIRE ARCHIVES – NEW ACCOMMODATION

The Committee considered a report on options and updated costs to convert Strikes bowling alley in Ely to accommodate historical records and associated public access, and to seek views from Members on the most appropriate option.

At the Highways & Community Infrastructure (H&CI) Committee in September 2015, Members had noted in a Capital Finance report that the estimated costs of the proposed Archives relocation had increased from approximately £4M to over £6M, and Members had expressed strong concerns regarding this escalation, and asked for further detail.

The Committee was reminded that the National Archives (TNA) had ruled that the Shire Hall basement was no longer suitable accommodation for the Cambridgeshire Archives, and work had been undertaken to identify appropriate alternative accommodation, culminating in the identification of Strikes Bowling Alley as a potential site. At its meeting in September 2014, the Committee had supported the relocation of the Archives Service, at a maximum cost of £4M (identified costs of £2.5M plus an estimate to cover exclusions of £1.5M) to that site. At that stage, the scheme included a mezzanine floor in order to accommodate other services.

The reasons for the increase in estimated costs were set out in the report, along with the following three options:

Option A: continue the scheme but for Archives only;

Option B: continue scheme and include Ely Registration Office;

Option C: continue scheme and include both Ely Registration Office and CFA staff offices.

In addition there was the option of abandoning the scheme completely.

It was clarified that Option A would not include a mezzanine, but would provide sufficient archives storage for around 20 years.

Arising from the report, Members:

- whilst being disappointed by the escalation in estimated costs, expressed continuing support for the archives proposal. However reassurance was sought that none of the other options, which had been rejected previously due to the lower cost estimate of the Ely site, would provide a cost effective alternative. Officers confirmed that this was the case, advising that originally, a number of alternatives including Hereward Hall had been explored, but rejected on the basis of cost or suitability, most notably on the grounds of either accessibility and/or conversion costs. The original evaluation included all available Council and commercial buildings within the county. In particular, Hereward Hall would require demolition and rebuild if it was used to accommodate archives. It was noted that a separate exercise was taking place, which would be reported to the General Purposes Committee, on Hereward Hall's suitability for other purposes. The Strikes Bowling Alley option was unique in terms of the type of space it offered, requiring minimal structural changes, and accessibility i.e. proximity to public transport and parking;
- a number of Members expressed support for the Archives only option (Option A) as they saw no value in the relocation of CFA office accommodation and the Registration Office. They commented that they had supported the original proposal in September 2014 on the basis of the urgent need to find an alternative home for the archives, and the suitability of the proposed site for archives purposes. There was no urgency to identify new accommodation for the Registration Office or CFA staff in Noble House, and the site was not necessarily the best available location or building for those purposes. Whilst appreciating that there could be savings by relocating Registration and CFA staff, Members felt that given future uncertainties, particularly around staffing levels and funding, these were not a priority;

- noted that the exclusions included at the end of the feasibility report (Appendix 1) had all been factored into the cost profile. The Section 151 Officer commented that whilst he could not give categorical assurances that the actual contract values may be different to those costed, all known exclusions had been included in those cost profiles;
- a number of Members commented that moving the Registration Office at a cost exceeding £1M could not be justified, especially as there had been no meaningful discussions with East Cambridgeshire District Council or Ely City Council: those authorities could have other buildings that may be more suitable;
- noting the statement in the report that *“the graph clearly demonstrates that if considered as a purely property related matter an Archives only option is the only proposal that makes economic sense”* commented that they agreed with this statement, and pointed out that finding a more suitable site to accommodate archives had been a pressing problem for over twenty years;
- commented that the project appeared to have suffered from ‘mission creep’. The Member added that the focus should be on archives, with the Cambridgeshire Collection being considered separately. On a more general point, how the authority undertakes feasibility studies needed to be reviewed, as the discrepancies in the figures were remarkable e.g. professional fees increasing from £13,000 to £213,000. In response, officers commented that the original scheme submitted to General Purposes Committee had included the wider office accommodation, the key changes were the cost estimates, not the proposed use of the site;
- in response to Member questions, officers confirmed that in terms of accessibility, the site was much better than the Shire Hall facility, specifically public transport, parking provision and disabled access;
- commented that the overriding concern must be housing the unique archives collection, and congratulated Alan Akeroyd, the Archives and Local Studies Manager, for the wonderful job he performed in managing the archives in the current, inadequate accommodation. The Member added that the risk of TNA acquiring the Cambridgeshire archives should not be underestimated;
- welcomed the relocation of the archives to Ely, especially given the excellent accessibility of the site and the improving transport links, particularly rail, between Ely and Cambridge, and further afield. The Member also cautioned on the potential reputational risk that not going ahead with this project would involve;
- queried the number of visitors to both archives and the Cambridge Collection. Officers advised that there were 10,000-12,000¹ visitors per year, which was quite low by Shire authority standards, but it was expected that this would increase when the new accommodation was available. It was noted that when

¹ The 10-12,000 figure includes both personal visitors and remote enquirers, and covers the whole of the Archives and Local Studies service per annum, of which the figure for Cambridgeshire Archives is around 5,000.

Huntingdonshire Archives relocated to more suitable premises, visitor numbers increased by around 50%;

- observed that although there had been some negative comments regarding the site i.e. a modern building which had accommodated a bowling alley, it was important to not be dismissive of the site, as it was an integral part of the social fabric of the county;
- noted that the County Council had a responsibility and duty of care to preserve the County's historical record;
- commented that the accommodation of archives was a long-running issue, and it was vital that something was done, and Option A (Archives only) was the right way forward;
- asked if Option A was progressed, which did not involve a mezzanine floor, if there was anything to preclude building a mezzanine floor in future. Officers advised that they were unaware of any practical or physical constraints to building a mezzanine floor at a later stage other than obviously the cost of temporarily decanting the contents.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- (i) agree that Option A, continuing the scheme but for Archives only, should be recommended to General Purposes Committee.

142. HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE MEMBER WORKING GROUP

The Committee received a report proposing the establishment of a working group to review the County Council's approach to highway maintenance.

Following discussion at Spokes, it had been proposed to set up a Member Working Group with the support of relevant officers, to take a detailed look at the County's approach to highway maintenance, and in particular identifying and building community resilience. Members noted the draft Terms of Reference, which were similar to those for the Library Service Transformation Member Reference Group, and agreed that they were suitable with the exception of the maximum membership of nine, which could be increased to a reasonable number.

It was agreed that membership should be opened up to all Members, and nominations sought through the political groups. It was agreed that nominations should be forward to the Committee Chairman and the Executive Director (Economy, Transport & Environment). If the number of nominations were excessive, the Committee Chairman and Executive Director would discuss them with Group Leaders.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) agree to establishing a Working Group with terms of reference as set out in Appendix 1 of the report;

- b) agree that each political Group should forward their nominations for Working Group to the Committee Chairman and Executive Director (Economy, Transport & Environment) by close of play Friday 16th October, with the Chairman and Executive Director discussing the membership with Group Leaders if the nominations received exceeded a reasonable number.

143. AGENDA PLAN AND APPOINTMENTS TO OUTSIDE BODIES

Members noted the Agenda Plan.

It was agreed to appoint Councillor Samantha Hoy to the Highway Improvement Panel Fenland vacancy.