

CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 12 January 2009

Present: Councillor L Fraser (Chair)

Councillors C Meaden K Wood
C Teggan P Southwood
J Crabtree J Keeley

In attendance: Councillors J Green

39 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST / PARTY WHIP

Members were asked to consider whether they had personal or prejudicial interests in connection with any item(s) on this agenda and, if so, to declare them and state what they were. Members were reminded that they should also declare, pursuant to paragraph 18 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with any item(s) to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

No such declarations were made.

40 MINUTES

Members were requested to receive the minutes of the meetings of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 2 and 17 December, 2008.

In response to a comment from a Member on minute 34 (2/12/08) the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management reported on the number of employees, around 170, who would be affected if Cabinet were to approve all the proposals in the Strategic Asset Review and the efforts which would be made to identify solutions for those staff.

Resolved – That the minutes of 2 December be approved and the minutes of 17 December be approved, subject to an amendment on page 3, minute 37, “.....seconded by Councillor Wood”, to read “.....seconded by Councillor Keeley”.

41 UPDATE ON LISCARD HALL

At the request of the Chair, the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management submitted a report on the current position regarding Liscard Hall which was subject to an arson attack in July 2008.

Four options were presented to Cabinet in a report on 16 October, 2008. These were:

Option 1 - to leave the cleared site of the Hall to become absorbed into Central Park as an additional grassed area.

Option 2 - to expose the external and basement walls as features to show the original structure and physical footprint of Liscard Hall.

Options 3 and 4 - to look at whether the site could be redeveloped in isolation or in a larger scheme that would include the existing depot buildings.

Once the necessary information had been compiled a planning application would be submitted to the Secretary of State for retrospective consent to demolish the Hall, as it was a Listed Building. The opinion of English Heritage, with regard to the Council's actions, would be paramount in enabling the Secretary of State to reach a decision. Accordingly, additional information was being assembled in respect of all of the 4 options, as well as the evidence of how the Council had tried to get the building refurbished, by means of the Development Brief and a tendering process.

When the planning application had been determined, the merits of the respective options would be addressed again in light of any suggestions or recommendations made by the Secretary of State arising from his decision on the Council's Listed Building planning application. These would then form part of a future report to Cabinet. In any event, the Liscard Hall Steering Group would be consulted further with regard to any possible alternative uses for the site and the depot buildings.

In response to comments from Members, the Director reported upon the valuation of the building in its condition immediately prior to the fire. He would also bring a report to a future Committee clarifying future timescales and prior to the next meeting provide members with the insurance 'excess' figure.

Resolved - That a further report be submitted to Cabinet and this Committee, following the determination of the Listed Building planning application.

42 UPDATE ON CORONER'S BUDGET

At the request of the Chair, the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management submitted a report updating the Committee on the current position of the Coroner's Service and its budget.

The report set out the duties of the Coroner along with the current budget position and that of recent years. The Coroner's budget formed part of the local authority's funding (RSG). There was no separate or specific budget allocated to the Coroner in the RSG and therefore the Coroner's budget had to be treated as part of the departmental budget.

The Director reported that the Head of Legal and Member Services had attended a seminar in Manchester arranged by the Home Office for local authority officers responsible for the coroner's service. The purpose of the seminar had been to share best practice and consider the proposals for Coroner's reform. He summarised a number of key points which had been made at the seminar and stated that virtually all authorities represented reported significant budget issues.

An additional £150,000 was added to the budget in 2008/9 as unavoidable growth to address an historic overspend. The expenditure for this financial year was currently forecast to be in line with the budget. However, this forecast was based on a straight line projection of spending. Therefore, this would need to be monitored for the remainder of the year in case there was any upward trend in expenditure over the remainder of the financial year.

In response to comments from Members, both the Director and Director of Finance's representative explained how variations might arise in some of the budget headings for the Coroner's service and why there had been an increase in specialist reports.

Resolved – That a further report be brought back to the Committee when the outturn for the 2008/09 budget is known.

43 **ASSET MANAGEMENT - OFFICE ACCOMMODATION COSTS**

At the request of the Chair, the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management submitted a report on how the council intended to achieve a 20% reduction in administrative accommodation by 2011.

On 27 November 2008 the Chief Executive reported to Cabinet with proposals arising from the Strategic Asset Review (SAR) for the consolidation of the Council's asset base. Part of his report dealt with administrative accommodation. This advised members that, with a programme of workspace change, it would be reasonable to expect to save at least 20% of the council's annual expenditure on office accommodation.

This figure of 20% represented a reasonable estimate of savings that would be delivered through a change programme that would include a number of elements and the report gave details of these. It also made clear that for this scale of savings to be achieved significant initial investment would be required both to create new and more efficient working environments and to provide the necessary IT infrastructure and equipment.

The proposals arising from the SAR were currently subject to consultation and it was intended that they would be the subject of a further report to Cabinet on 15 January 2009. If the proposals relating to office accommodation were agreed, the Director would report to a future meeting of Cabinet on more detailed proposals for accommodation change, including the centralisation of current facilities management arrangements.

Also at the request of the Chair, the Asset Manager circulated a list of municipal accommodation with asset valuations (this being a depreciative cost evaluation not a market value) and revenue expenditure for each. He drew the Committee's attention to those seven buildings identified in his report for initial vacation and responded to Members' comments on the buildings identified.

In response to comments from Members and the leader of the Conservative Group, the Director reported that he had held some discussions with the Head of IT and gave an indication of the costs per person to introduce a scheme of agile working. These costs would reduce with economies of scale leading to greater savings being generated the more people who were working from home or on the road. Savings of

£1m could be made after all IT etc was taken into account with a reduction in administrative accommodation, although these savings would not necessarily form part of the 2009/10 budget setting process.

A member suggested that a more substantial piece of scrutiny work could be undertaken on the issue of office accommodation by a sub-group of the Committee which could then report back to the Committee.

The Director stated that he would be happy to bring a more detailed report back to the next meeting of the Committee at which point the Committee would have a clearer picture and could decide whether it wanted to pursue a more in-depth piece of scrutiny work. He would also report upon the leasehold arrangements for buildings such as Cheshire Lines.

Resolved - That a further report be submitted to the next meeting of this committee following a Cabinet decision on the implementation of the Strategic Asset Review and the development of an implementation programme for accommodation change.

44 **LEGAL SECTION AND EXTERNAL LEGAL FEES**

At the request of the Chair, the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management submitted a report detailing the funding of the Council's legal service which was based within the Legal and Member Services section in his Department. The section provided advice to the council, councillors and council officers and representation in court hearings and tribunals on behalf of the Council both prosecuting and defending cases.

The Department employed 12 qualified solicitors (including the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management and the Head of Legal and Member Services). 2 of the solicitors worked part time so this amounted to 10 Solicitor FTEs within the legal section itself (including the Head of Legal and Member Services). It also employed another 11 non-solicitor fee earners (10FTE) some of whom had legal qualifications as legal executives.

In line with most other authorities the Council's legal section was staffed to deal with the normal day to day legal activities experienced by a local authority legal department. It was necessary to externalise some areas of work which came outside of this or where there was a lack of internal capacity and/or expertise. The principal areas where this expenditure arose were:

- (1) the use of barristers; and
- (2) the use of external solicitors on major projects.

and the report gave details of the budget and expenditure for the current year on external legal fees.

The Director responded to a number of comments from Members regarding legal work for standards board complaints and also upon the need to ensure adequate provision of legal support for child care cases.

(At this point, Councillor Meaden declared a personal interest in what was being discussed by virtue of her daughter's employment in Children's Services and left the room.)

Resolved – That the report be noted.