

CHARLOTTE COXE TRUST COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Thursday, 22 August 2024 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 11:20am

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Geoff Saul – in the Chair
Councillor Robin Bennett (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Freddie van Mierlo

Officers: Jack Ahier (Democratic Services Officer), Paul Grant (Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer), Richard Hodby (Solicitor).

The Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting [, together with a schedule of addenda tabled at the meeting/the following additional documents:] and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports [agenda, reports and schedule/additional documents] are attached to the signed Minutes.

7 **ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR THE 2024/25 COUNCIL YEAR**

(Agenda No. 1)

The Democratic Services Officer invited nominations for Chair of the Charlotte Coxe Trust Committee for the 2024/25 council year. Cllr Bennett proposed Cllr Saul and Cllr Van Mierlo seconded the nomination.

With no other nominations and no objections, Cllr Saul was **ELECTED** Chair for 2024/25.

8 **ELECTION OF DEPUTY CHAIR FOR THE 2024/25 COUNCIL YEAR**

(Agenda No. 2)

Having taken the Chair, Cllr Saul invited nominations for Deputy Chair of the Charlotte Coxe Trust Committee for the 2024/25 council year. Cllr Van Mierlo proposed Cllr Bennett and Cllr Saul seconded the nomination.

With no other nominations and objections, Cllr Bennett was **ELECTED** Deputy Chair for 2024/25.

9 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

(Agenda No. 3)

Apologies were received by Councillor Jane Murphy.

10 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(Agenda No. 4)

There were no declarations of interest.

11 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 5)

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2024 were approved as an accurate record.

12 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda No. 6)

There were two public addresses from Karyn Buck and Gill Bindoff to the Committee.

13 33 HIGH STREET, WATLINGTON LIBRARY, AND THE TRANSFER OF TRUSTEESHIP OF THE CHARLOTTE COXE TRUST TO WATLINGTON PARISH COUNCIL

(Agenda No. 7)

Richard Hodby introduced the report to the Committee in 3 strands: firstly by looking at 33 High Street, secondly by looking at the transfer of the Trust and lastly, looking at the library and arrangements for its use.

Richard Hodby confirmed that due to the generosity of the sponsor and because of local efforts, 33 High Street has been transformed into a fully occupiable property, enabling refugees from Ukraine to stay there in the past 12 months.

Richard Hodby noted that the property had been empty since the 31st July 2024.

Richard Hodby stated that up until May 2024, a formal tenancy to the property could not be granted due to low energy efficiency performance, which has been subsequently upgraded and tenancies can now be granted.

Richard Hodby noted that the County Council felt it would be inappropriate for direct tenancy agreements to be made with the Ukrainian families, but that the local sponsor had agreed to take the tenancy in his name and then sub-let out the property. It was noted that there will be a clause to ensure that the local sponsor cannot live in the property himself, and thus, this minimized risk of creating a Secure Tenancy.

Moving onto the transfer of the Trust, Richard Hodby noted that the expectation was originally that Watlington Parish Council would directly take over the Trust from Oxfordshire County Council, but that it had now indicated it was only willing to act as a "custodian trustee". Local people would have to take on trusteeship.

Richard Hodby noted the concern that this might not create stability going forward as individuals cannot provide the longevity a permanent institution can and stated that

Oxfordshire County Council has the responsibility to ensure that its successor would be as good as it.

If Oxfordshire County Council remained the Trustee, a question likely to arise is whether non-elected people could be co-opted onto the Charlotte Coxe Committee. Richard Hodby noted that most committees at Oxfordshire County Council are made solely out of elected members and pointed out that there would be no electoral accountability if members of the public were appointed to executive roles in managing the Trust and allowed to take decisions that expose the County Council to risk.

Moving onto the issue of the library, Richard Hodby noted that the library service was occupying a Trust asset without any formal arrangement.

Richard Hodby explained that the Council felt there should be clear understanding between the Trust and the County Council, as libraries authority, regarding the terms of the occupation of the building.

Richard Hodby stated that the County Council could not grant itself a lease on the property, as the County Council is also the trustee, but suggested that a memorandum of understanding between the library service and the Trust would be useful.

Richard Hodby explained that Section 121 of the Charities Act 2011 stated that before charity trustees make any disposal of a property, they are meant to have a public consultation about it. Signing a memorandum of understanding should be treated as equivalent to a disposal.

Members thanked officers for their report and raised the following points:

- The importance of 33 High Street being occupied to Watlington and to the Charlotte Coxe Trust.
- There was a need to have detailed discussions about governance arrangements.
- The possibility of having proper functioning of the Trust well into the future with custodians who are responsible.
- Noting the lack of appetite to manage the Trust long-term from the County Council's point of view.
- The importance of sorting this issue before the next electoral cycle.
- A need for further work into understanding the model proposed by Watlington Parish Council.
- That the current set-up of a 'temporary committee' was unsustainable.
- That a pros and cons paper for the different models proposed would be helpful for the Committee to greater understand the decision being taken.
- Members noted the County Council's policies around devolution and community wealth building
- The importance of Watlington representation on the Trust bodies.
- Members noted that there were other Council committees with outside representation.

- The need to involve the local community in the decision-making process as much as possible.

The Committee invited representatives from Watlington to give their views.

The Committee discussed alternative recommendations to pass, to allow for further engagement with Watlington Parish Council and to understand the pros and cons of each available option.

Richard Hodby noted the option of bringing back externally commissioned report(s) with the pros and cons of each available option outlined clearly. The Chair agreed this would be a good way forward, but that a tight timeline would need to be adhered to. It was agreed that the report(s) would also need to address the concerns around creating a Secure Tenancy.

Paul Grant noted that the Committee seemed to be in favour of exploring options on community involvement and put forward an alternative to recommendation (b) for members to discuss.

Members and officers noted the time constraints surrounding the pre-election period before the County Council elections in May 2025.

Following discussion with officers, members proposed to amend recommendation b) to read as follows:

'To instruct the Director of Law and Governance to provide a further report on the legal governance and practical options available to the Trust, including the benefits and disadvantages of the options, that would explore community involvement (which could involve Watlington Parish Council) in the future working of the Trust'

Members agreed to put on hold recommendation c) for the time being.

The amendment to recommendation b) was agreed and the Committee agreed unanimously to the recommendations as amended.

RESOLVED:

- a) To resolve to enter into a year long tenancy of 33 High Street starting on 1 September 2024 with a named local sponsor which will stipulate that the property is to be occupied by Ukrainian refugees and to delegate authority to the Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer to negotiate and conclude the terms of the lease in consultation with the Director of Property and Assets;**
- b) To instruct the Director of Law and Governance to provide a further report on the legal governance and practical options available to the Trust, including the benefits and disadvantages of the options, that would explore community involvement (which could involve Watlington Parish Council) in the future working of the Trust.**

..... in the Chair

Date of signing 200