

Divisions Affected – All

PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

05 February 2025

City Centre Accommodation Strategy – Proposed Disposal of New and Old County Hall

Report by Director of Property and Assets

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
 - i) **NOTE** the report, and
 - ii) **AGREE** any recommendations it wishes to make to Cabinet

Executive Summary

2. In January 2024, as part of the city centre strategy, Cabinet approved the resolution to consolidate into Speedwell House and to dispose of County Hall, as the preferred option and “To engage the market to assess interest in both New and Old County Hall to inform a final decision on Old County Hall’s future”.
3. Following a detailed and comprehensive tender process in accordance with Council procurement regulations, Savills were appointed in July 2024 as the Council’s investment advisors and to market the properties and assess interest.
4. A comprehensive marketing campaign has been undertaken to understand and assess interest in both New and Old County Hall. Reflecting the wide range of potential uses and purchasers, the approach did not dictate or pre-determine the end use and was designed to encourage as wide a breadth of interest as possible. The properties were presented as a regeneration opportunity in the context of Oxford West End and the city as a whole and aimed to capture the full gamut of redevelopment, refurbishment, and re-positioning potential.
5. This marketing approach adopted was aimed to ensure the Council maximised its chances of generating the highest possible value from the site in accordance with its obligations to deliver ‘best consideration’ under s123 of the Local Government Act 1972, whilst also positioning the site as an opportunity to deliver positive change delivering social benefit for the city.

6. In total, 19 parties submitted bids, and each party was then invited to provide a more detailed response and to resubmit their bids. From these revised bids a shortlist was produced, and these parties were invited to attend an interview and present their proposals. Feedback was provided to each party, and they were invited to resubmit their final proposal.
7. The Cabinet is now at the point where it may determine which, if any, option it wishes to pursue and is expected to do so at its meeting on 25 February 2025. At Annex A, the Committee is provided with the draft of the report being sent to Cabinet, including Annexes 1, 2, 3, and 4 to Annex A. This means that members of the Committee are being provided with the same information as is expected to be provided to Cabinet when it is asked to make its decision.

Exempt Information

8. Information in the annexes 2, 3, and 4 to Annex A (the Cabinet report) is supplied in commercial confidence and disclosure would prejudice the commercial position of the parties involved. It would also prejudice the position of the authority's investments to the detriment of the Council's ability to properly discharge its fiduciary and other duties as a public authority.
9. In the event that any member or officer wishes to discuss the information set out in annexes 2, 3, or 4 to Annex A, the press and public should therefore be excluded because discussion of these annexes in public would be likely to lead to the disclosure to members of the public present of information in the following categories prescribed by Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended):
3 Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information);
10. It is considered that, in all the circumstances of the case and for the reasons set out in paragraph 8 of this report, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Financial Implications

11. All financial implications are included within Annex A (the Cabinet report) and its annexes.
12. The financial implications are set out in detail within Annex A and in its exempt Annexes 2, 3, and 4. The process undertaken at this stage of the project has determined the best value consideration that can be obtained for the disposal of New and Old County Hall, therefore the recommended option would be in compliance with s.123 of the Local Government Act 1972. The recommended option would provide a capital receipt to fully fund (based on current estimates) the delivery of the refurbished Speedwell House complex.

