

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET 25 February 2025

City Centre Accommodation Strategy – Disposal of Old and New County Hall Report of Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and determine its response to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and
 - b) Agree that, once Cabinet has responded, relevant officers will continue to provide each meeting of the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee with a brief written update on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations for 12 months, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. At its meeting on 05 February 2025, the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the City Centre Accommodation Strategy – Disposal of Old and New County Hall.
4. The Committee would like to thank all those who attended to present the report and to answer the Committee's questions. Cllr Dan Levy, the Cabinet member for Finance, Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and s.151 Officer, and Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets, as, too, did Michael Smedley, Head of Estates and Charles Butters, Strategic Property Advisor.

They were accompanied by Charles Rowton-Lee, Head of Commercial Agency, as well as Jonothan Holmes, Investment Director and Development Funding Head, and Sophie Holder, Surveyor in the Commercial Agency team from Savills.

SUMMARY

5. Cllr Levy reminded the Committee that the Council had been reviewing the city centre accommodation held by the Council. The Council had been working to reduce the number of county council buildings to reduce expenditure and to reflect contemporary working practices. In addition, the carbon inefficiency of the current estate meant that significant expenditure would be needed were County Hall to be retained.
6. The Director of Property and Assets took the Committee through a powerpoint presentation providing an overview of the background to the decision being proposed. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) had undertaken a strategic review of the Council's city centre accommodation and, following its assessment of options with a recommended view, a report to Cabinet on 23 January 2024 recommended that option 2 be progressed. That option was to consolidate into Speedwell House and to dispose of New County Hall and to engage the market to inform a decision on Old County Hall.
7. Savills had been engaged by the Council to engage the market and to seek bids. Nineteen bids had been received with 16 of those being for both New and Old County Hall together whilst three were for either New County Hall or Old County Hall alone. The Committee was provided with the information in draft that was expected to be before Cabinet on 25 February 2025 when it will be recommended to, inter alia, "agree to the freehold disposal of New and Old County Hall, on the terms set out in exempt Annex 4."
8. The Committee was advised that both the disposal of County Hall and the transformation of Speedwell House provided the Council with the opportunity to use its assets, covenant and influence to be the 'place-shaper of choice' in Oxford city centre and to be at the heart of social regeneration. The capital receipt from the disposal of County House would be sufficient to fund the delivery of the refurbished Speedwell House complex and would also enable the wider regeneration and placemaking initiatives envisaged in and around Speedwell Street.
9. After the presentation, the Committee resolved to exclude the public for the duration of the meeting as the information provided in Annexes 2, 3, and 4 to the Cabinet report were deemed to contain exempt information and the public interest was weighted in favour of considering the information in private as the information related to a current commercial negotiation. This means that this report cannot set out all of the detail of the Committee's discussions but topics explored included which scrutiny committee should most appropriately have considered the proposal; the assessment of alternative options; potential socio-economic benefits; redevelopment strategies for Speedwell House; market engagement and bid processes; issues related to public access and

heritage conservation; planning considerations; the implications of local government reorganisation.

10. The Committee makes two recommendations to Cabinet. The first is about the importance of maximising and safeguarding public access to Old County Hall and the second is about ensuring that councillors are clear about how and when they can engage with the development of regeneration plans for the city centre.

RECOMMENDATIONS

11. The report to Cabinet notes, at paragraph 40, that the “[recommended] developer has satisfied concerns that the heritage value of Old County Hall will be preserved and enhanced for Oxford and Oxfordshire residents.” The Committee noted that the Savills marketing brochure explained that the Council welcomed “proposals for exciting new uses for Old County Hall which respect and enhance its heritage.” The Committee welcomed these assurances.
12. Regardless of the nature of the repurposed New and Old County Hall, the Committee is keen that the Council works with any approved developer to ensure easy access for the public into Old County Hall. Given that a public building on a relatively large site in the centre of Oxford is being disposed of, the Committee considers it important that as much of the repurposed site as possible is of use to the community.

Recommendation 1: That the Council should work to ensure that public access to New and Old County Hall is maintained insofar as is possible.

13. The title of the report referenced the City Centre Accommodation Strategy but the Committee was conscious that its focus was on the second part of the title, namely the disposal of New and Old County Hall. The Council’s ambitions around regeneration, renewal, and restoration of the city centre were mentioned but not set out in detail. The Cabinet report set out that New and Old County Hall “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.”
14. The Committee considered that the Council should develop and present a strategy for the city centre which would set out the Council’s place making ambitions. It should describe where, when, and what changes the Council foresees and how it seeks to achieve them. It would also include the Council’s commitment to the maintenance of public access as referred to in the first recommendation. The Committee would expect this to have an integrated land use and transport lens and to be written taking the Central Oxford Movement and Place Framework into account.
15. The Committee recognises that the County Council does not have sole responsibility or power for place making and that no council will have such

even after local government reorganisation. It will be for the Council and its successor body to work with partners across the city and county to regenerate the city centre. Such a strategy would set out how this is envisaged to work.

Recommendation 2: That the Council should set out its strategy and action plan for the city centre's redevelopment and regeneration.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

16. The Committee does not intend to consider the City Centre Accommodation Strategy again during this municipal year. If accepted, it would expect to consider the strategy recommended above once it is available.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

17. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Overview and Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.' This power is derived from the Local Government Act 2000 (LGA 2000).
18. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees which reflects the requirements set out in LGA 2000.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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