

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON TUESDAY, 11TH JULY, 2017, 19:00

PRESENT:

Councillors: Charles Wright (Chair), Pippa Connor (Vice-Chair), Kirsten Hearn, Emine Ibrahim, Tim Gallagher.

Also Present: Luci Davin

47. FILMING AT MEETINGS

The Chair referred those present to agenda Item 1 as shown on the agenda in respect of filming at this meeting and asked that those present reviewed and noted the information contained therein

48. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

49. URGENT BUSINESS

It being a special meeting under Part 4, Section B, Paragraph 17 of the Council's Constitution, no other business was considered at the meeting.

50. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

51. DEPUTATIONS/PETITIONS/PRESENTATIONS/QUESTIONS

There were no deputations, petitions, presentations or questions.

52. CALL-IN: PROPOSED RELOCATION OF HIGHGATE LIBRARY SERVICE

Stephen Lawrence-Orumwense, Deputy Monitoring Officer, introduced the Monitoring Officer's Report, which advised that this decision fell within the policy and budget framework.

Following an outline of the process for the call-in meeting, and the possible outcomes available, the Chair invited Councillor Carter to present the arguments for why the signatories had called in the Cabinet decision and the alternative action proposed.

Setting out his reasons, Cllr Carter stated that he did not claim that the decision was outside the policy or budget framework. He sought reconsideration by Cabinet of the in-principle decision to relocate Highgate library to Jacksons Lane Arts Centre (JLAC)

and dispose of the existing site, as the proposal was predicated on a feasibility study that had not yet been undertaken and was premature. The decision was therefore premature and had not followed due process. He believed that a full public consultation should be undertaken, especially given that a similar proposal around Muswell Hill Library had been subject to a full public consultation. By failing to follow that precedent, the Council would be vulnerable to a legal challenge on the issue. Furthermore, the local community was strongly opposed to the proposal.

Cllr Carter asserted that, rather than relocating the Library, the £1m of match funding for Jackson Lane Arts Centre's bid to the Arts Council could be found elsewhere in Council's capital budget, such as the £8m unspent allocation for the Marsh Lane site. He asked whether Cabinet would rescind the in-principle decision to relocate Highgate library and dispose of the existing site, if the completed feasibility study considered that the proposal was not viable.

In response to the Committee's questioning, Cllr Carter was unsure what Jackson Lane's motivation for the proposed relocation was, but felt that the drivers were likely to be financial and also commented that the process was being driven by the Council. The Chair enquired what Cllr Carter's comments were on the legal comments contained in the report which stated that there was no legal duty to consult on the matter. Cllr Carter reiterated that he was concerned by the risk of legal challenge and that he believed that the decision on Muswell Hill Library had set a precedent.

The Leader of the Council set out some of the background information in relation to the decision. The decision was taken within the context of continued pressure on the Council's revenue budget and its commitment to retain all nine libraries within the borough. The Committee was advised that the visitor numbers to Highgate Library had fallen from 68k in 2012/13 to 56k in 2016/17, which were the lowest for any of Haringey's libraries.

The Leader advised the Committee that the proposals for relocation came from Jacksons Lane. The Leader also advised that co-location was deemed beneficial because of; the prominence of the JLAC site, the fact that JLAC attracted around 200k visitors a year, the synergies that existed between the activities undertaken at JLAC and at Highgate Library, and the proximity of JLAC to the existing library site.

She went on to say the in-principle Cabinet decision was taken in order to facilitate Jackson's Lane bid for funding from the Arts Council, as the Arts Council required a formal commitment from the Council to provide match-funding. The feasibility study was not due to be completed until July and so an in-principle decision had been necessary to meet the Arts Council deadline.

In order to assuage concerns that the feasibility study was a foregone conclusion a commitment was given at June Cabinet that match-funding would be found regardless of whether the co-location would proceed. The Leader questioned the efficacy of consulting with the public on relocation to a very nearby building, given the Council had a clear view that it was an opportunity to create a better, fully accessible library as part of a co-located service. It was suggested that it would be more meaningful and relevant to consult in the future on the service provided, for the co-production of the new library facility. The Leader set the different circumstances with Muswell Hill

Library, where a potential relocation arose by happenstance and the Council were open-minded about the way ahead. She suggested there was little to compare between the two, other than that they were both libraries.

In response to a question from the Committee, the Leader advised that the proposal from JLAC had been the catalyst for the co-location and that there were no prior plans. However, consideration had to be given to the broader context of diminishing revenue budgets and falling numbers of visitors to the library. She confirmed that, if the feasibility study did not find the relocation would be feasible, then match-funding of £1m would still be found and the library would remain in its present location. The Committee heard there were at least £500k of condition works required at JLAC, which the Council, as freeholder, would need to fund regardless. This was part of the justification behind the match-funding commitment. In the eventuality that the feasibility study was supportive of relocation and the library were co-located at JLAC, then there would also be additional costs to be met in order to fit out the new library facility. Disposal of the current library site would help fund these costs.

In response to a question, the Leader advised that refitting the existing Highgate Library building to make it more accessible was not in the scope of the feasibility study. The Cabinet report set out some clear principles that co-location would have to address in order to make the space work as a library and that these would be considered in conjunction with the outcome of the feasibility study.

In response to further questions from the Committee, the Leader stated that, had the Cabinet not indicated its in-principle preference for co-location, there was a risk that residents would feel that any disposal of the existing site would not be carried out in an open and transparent manner.

The Leader set out that the Council's capital budget was under significant pressure, despite assertions made to the contrary. In response to a question as to whether the proposed relocation was driven by a need to generate saving, the Committee was advised that, apart from the potential for reduced overheads and reduced non-domestic rates as a result of co-location, there were no revenue savings associated with the proposal.

The Committee expressed a view that the issue of visitor numbers had to be considered within the context of the size of the library and its stock levels, as well as the types of visitors and the reasons for visiting. Highgate Library offered, for example, a quiet study location in contrast to say Wood Green library with its busy customer service centre. In response, it was suggested that the value of the library as a facility could be increased with greater numbers of people using it, which was an intention of co-location. These issues would be part of the consideration of the feasibility study.

In response to a request for clarification on the nature of JLAC's bid for Arts Council Funding, the Committee was advised that JLAC's initial bid was developed to fund an upgrade of the facilities at Jackson's Lane. Several months later they approached the Council with a proposal for a relocation of the library, which was subsequently included into the bid to Arts Council.

Following further questions on the reasons behind the urgency involved and why the feasibility study was required at the end of July, the Committee was advised that this was due to the timetable for preparation of a more detailed bid to the Arts Council. The Committee noted that the Arts Council made an award of around £180k on 27th June, the purpose of which was to support further development of the bid for the next funding stage. A further funding stream of around £2.1m had been earmarked to come forward in stages over an 18 month period. The Council was required to provide match funding of £1m should further bids be successful.

Clarification was sought on Councillor Carter's concern that the land adjacent to the existing site was Metropolitan Open Land owned by TfL. It was also listed as a specially designated ecological site. In view of this, the Committee asked whether the land would potentially be sold if the existing library site were disposed of, and whether it could potentially go into the HDV. In response the Committee was assured that neither of those two outcomes would occur.

In response to a question, officers confirmed that the upstairs space at Highgate Library had been taken into consideration in establishing the footprint of the library in comparing the site at JLAC. Officers also refuted visitor numbers had declined due to reduced opening hours, as there had been no formal reduction of hours at Highgate Library – though there had been instances where the library was closed due to staff shortages.

Clerk's note – at this point in the meeting, the Committee passed a motion to exclude the press and public to allow them to move to private session and discuss the exempt section of the report. The meeting then reconvened in public session at 21:40. These minutes follow the order of discussion shown at the agenda.

The Committee AGREED that the decision did not fall out with the policy of budget framework.

The Committee voted four in favour and one against to take no further action. Under the Council's Call-in Procedure Rules, Cabinet's decision could therefore be implemented immediately.

The Committee agreed that further scrutiny work would be undertaken on the relocation of Highgate Library, following the outcome of the feasibility study, and that this would likely include an examination of the potential equalities impact of relocation and what other potential outcomes could be sought.

RESOLVED

That the Committee agreed to take no further action, the original decision was thereby implemented.

53. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

That the Press and Public be excluded from the rest of the meeting by virtue of Paragraph 3, Part 1 of Schedule 12 A of the Local Government Act 1972.

54. CALL-IN: PROPOSED RELOCATION OF HIGHGATE LIBRARY SERVICE

RESOLVED

The Committee noted the information contained in the exempt part of the report.

CHAIR: Councillor Charles Wright

Signed by Chair

Date