

Report for: Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Panel, 2nd March 2021

Title: Accommodation Strategy Update

Lead Cabinet Member: Cllr Charles Adje, Cabinet Member for Finance & Strategic Regeneration

Ward(s) affected: All

**Report for Key/
Non Key Decision:** N/A

1. Describe the issue under consideration

1.1 An update about the Accommodation Strategy has been requested for Scrutiny Panel in March 2021. This report summarises information available in the most recent reports agreed by Cabinet which provide the latest position on the accommodation strategy:

- Wood Green sites – September 2020
- Future Use of Civic Centre and Proposed Capital Works – December 2020
- Asset Management Plan – February 2021.

1.2 The next steps on the Civic Centre project will be reported in due course at Cabinet during 2021 and this is the next time there will be an update about the accommodation strategy.

2. Recommendations

To note the report.

3. Background information

3.1 Cabinet considered a report in September 2020 about its corporate buildings in Wood Green. The report outlined the need to reassess the business case for new accommodation and set out a timetable for decisions about this – with a report due to Cabinet in December 2020 about the Civic Centre and further reports in Summer 2021 about other Wood Green accommodation sites.

3.2 The business case reassessment is based on two changes since the previous report on the accommodation strategy in 2019: the acquisition of Alexandra which was required to support Council accommodation changes over the medium term; and the Covid-19 pandemic which has required a period of reflection to consider the longer term implications for office accommodation, new ways of working, and the use and style of future customer services including sports facilities. The September report referenced:

- the likely need to consolidate Council accommodation to a smaller number of buildings over a 5-7 year period which would result in savings in accommodation costs in the longer run;
- the need to carry out basic repairs to Alexandra House and River Park House in as it was envisaged that these buildings would remain in use as Council accommodation for at least 5 years; and
- the need to do initial safety protection of the Civic Centre itself

3.3 The first decision in this plan was taken in December 2020 by Cabinet with approval of a proposed project to repair, restore, refurbish and extend the Civic Centre and bring the building back into use by the Council as its new Headquarters and Civic functions building. The rationale for this was set out in that report and includes:

- the estimated cost of basic repair work was c£12m and, given Council's responsibility for ensure the listed building does not deteriorate further, it was considered more cost effective and better use of the building long term to invest in a full repair and refurbishment, including extended space.
- Speed of delivery without any need for temporary moves while work is completed. The decision was not dependent on waiting to see the potential longer-term impact of Covid 19 on public service space, which has paused the completion of the accommodation strategy and specifically the project to replace the Wood Green library for now.
- The report indicated that the decision to invest in the Civic Centre does not preclude a project coming forward at a future point to improve the library and other customer services in Wood Green.
- The report highlighted that investing in the Civic Centre will also enable the Council to move more quickly to a position where it can reduce its use and costs of its existing office buildings on River Park Road over the next two to four years will contribute to financial savings that the Council will need to make over that time.

3.4 The report indicated that during 2021, as the Civic Centre project develops and more is understood about the Council's longer term accommodation requirements, it will be possible to know the extent to which the Council's HQ functions can be met in the new Civic Centre and by making better use of George Meehan House; and that it would become clearer over time what future public facilities might look like in future, including libraries and sport. The report also set out that as part of the work which is ongoing and will be reported during

2021, consideration will be given to how the car park of the Civic Centre should be developed now that the Civic Centre will become the Council's civic and office headquarters.

- 3.5 In February 2021 Cabinet approved the first annual update to the Asset Management Plan 2020 – 2025. The Asset Management Plan summarised the shifts in the accommodation strategy thinking that had been included in the September and December Cabinet reports and indicated the plan to report back to Cabinet during 2021 to firm up the extent to the Civic Centre and George Meehan House would be able to meet all of the Council's headquarter accommodation needs and the plan to consolidate the Council's accommodation buildings in Wood Green in fewer buildings over time;
- 3.6 The AMP highlighted that there would need to be a separate decision will be required about investment in the Library, and a possible sports centre, which in the report to Cabinet in July 2019 was identified as the preferred site for customer facing services in Wood Green, due to the complexity and uncertainty of this decision.

4. **Next steps**

- 4.1 Work is continuing to ensure that savings from accommodation can be identified over the course of the current Medium Term Financial plan, whilst also ensuring that any site which the Council ceases to use for accommodation as part of its plans is used in ways which will support economic growth and regeneration of Wood Green as well as the underlying business case for any capital investment.
- 4.2 Priorities for the next twelve months include:
- moving forward with the Civic Centre project and deciding how and when the car park element could be developed;
 - reviewing use of George Meehan House to ensure that its use is optimised and works well with the refurbished and expanded Civic Centre spaces;
 - reviewing and outlining best steps for other Council buildings in Wood Green.