

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

ECONOMY AND SKILLS O&S COMMITTEE

1300 hours on 9th December 2020, Online Meeting – Actions

Present:

Councillor Lou Robson (Chair)

Councillors Nicky Brennan, Maureen Cornish, Zaheer Khan, Chaman Lal, Simon Morrall, Julien Pritchard and Lucy Seymour-Smith.

Also, Present:

Meena Bharadwa, Locality

Councillor Phil Davis – Chair of Jewellery Quarter Development Trust

Richard Batley, Community Partnership for Selly Oak (CP4SPO)

Barry Toon, Community Partnership for Selly Oak (CP4SPO)

Janet Down, Third Sector consultant

John Newson, Balsall Heath is Our Planet

Stuart Holt, Javelin Block

Jon Morris, Localise (West Midlands)

Alex McDonagh, Montgomery St Co-Operative

Mohammed Shafique, Ashiana Community Project

Ceri Saunders, Acting Group O&S Manager

Baseema Begum, Scrutiny Officer

1. NOTICE OF RECORDING/WEBCAST

The Chair advised those present that the meeting would be webcast for live and subsequent broadcast via the Council's Internet site and that Members of the press/public may record and take photographs except where there are confidential or exempt items.

2. APOLOGIES

None.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Cllr Robson stated that she knew some of the people speaking today through various channels including Stuart Holt, Alex McDonagh, Montgomery St Co-op and Mohammed Shafique, Ashiana Community Project through political and community work.

Cllr Brennan declared that she knew Mohammed Shafique from community work in the district of Hall Green.

Cllr Seymour-Smith stated that Cllr Davis is her ward colleague.

Cllr Lal confirmed as a councillor for Soho ward he had supported the Jewellery Quarter Development Trust that sits in his area.

4. ACTION NOTES

The action notes of the meetings held on the 11th and 13th November were agreed.

5. CITY COUNCIL OWNED INQUIRY

(See item No.5)

The Chair, Cllr Lou Robson welcomed attendees and outlined the purpose of the inquiry and referred to details contained in the Terms of Reference (TOR) shared with attendees.

It was added that queries and points raised through the submissions received and heard at the meeting today would be put to officers and the Council's Executive at the final session in January where possible or in writing for a response. It was also clarified that the session was for the Council's scrutiny inquiry and not a court hearing. There was no legal privilege for this meeting as is the case for all Council meetings.

A report of the findings of the inquiry with recommendations is expected to be presented to a Full Council meeting in April.

Cllr Robson added that the work of the inquiry has been welcomed by the Leader and it is hoped that it will complement the new delivery plan agreed at a recent cabinet meeting on how all assets can be better used to meet the Council's objectives.

The Committee heard a variety of perspectives and experiences from those that have had dealings with the Council in relation to its assets either as tenants, owners or perspective buyers and the following key themes were noted: -

- **Better partnership working between the Council and communities including collaboration & consultation on community assets is needed.** Members heard that empty or unused assets could be utilised wisely in particular by community organisations and SME's. The Council could support this by offering low rent to help and support new and small businesses to start up and grow (particularly in the current climate) and supporting young people into entrepreneurship and self-employment opportunities. In this way the Council would be meeting some of its key aims and objectives. Furthermore, in the

current climate unused buildings or repurposing assets in local centres and in other key areas of the city would support the economic recovery process helping to stimulate economic growth and support community wealth building. Examples given included reimagining the use of space in Digbeth that hosts a number of arts, culture and creative businesses and using space in local centres such as hubs that could provide meeting space as people may continue to work from home and more flexibly in the future due to the pandemic.

Attendees also noted that a procedure was required that covered a wider range of assets particularly those that allowed the Council to preserve assets of community value, heritage sites and those left in its trust. Evidence also presented to the Committee suggested that transferring assets to local groups could be part of a holistic strategy that would support a long-term partnership approach between local authorities and their communities.

- **The role of community organisations and assets in supporting economic recovery and responding to the pandemic.** Members learnt that research undertaken on behalf of the Council's Neighbourhood Development & Support Unit showed that community buildings acted as co-ordinating points and housed multiple services during lockdown providing much needed support led by community organisations who in the role of conduit responded very well to local need. This was enabled by good community relations in place built up over a long period of time. In particular well-established organisations such as Ashiana Community Project were working to a community anchor model whereby they were supporting smaller organisations in their area who in turn were able to provide support to those most in need who otherwise would have fallen under the radar. Members heard that some of these were micro groups that had no way of linking into the Council and often operated in deprived areas.
- **A more joined up approach within Council service areas.** During the meeting contributors told Members that they often had a difficult time navigating a way into the Council for queries relating to empty or unused buildings. Community organisations also relayed that the process of agreeing a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) or making a bid for an asset of community value (ACV) was bureaucratic and time consuming and they found that dealing with different Council departments frustrating as in some cases there was no communication between them and this resulted in lengthy delays resulting in a duplication of effort not only the groups themselves but often by Council officers too.

Representatives of groups at the meeting highlighted that a lot of resource was being put into making a case for an ACV for example with nothing guaranteed and often being done on a voluntary basis. One example of this was the explanation given in relation to Stechford Baptist Church who found that it took in the region of 18 months for the Council to reach a decision on its ACV application and felt that a lack of joined up working within Council departments meant that one section of the Council did not know what the other was doing. This resulted in a waste of resources for the Council and for the organisations as there was a case of having to keep starting over.

It was suggested during discussion with Members that a framework was needed for officers to improve working practices especially for those applications that are more complicated.

- **Better engagement is needed** in relation to the disposal of assets and the value of these to local communities. Attendees emphasised the need for a clear policy process to be put in place that is transparent and linked the two and for this to be made clear and accessible to all with proposed changes consulted upon. Members heard that people are often not clear on what the process is in relation to the disposal and acquiring of assets.

It was suggested during the committee's discussions that local Councillors and others such as Business Improvement Districts (BIDS) and community development trusts could be utilised to improve this as they have knowledge of the local community and commercial value of sites in the area and this could be fed into a wider asset disposal process and strategy. The policy could also be used to bring together key partners to improve assets for example where there are repair and maintenance issues.

- **Poor communication** with people, businesses and other stakeholders was highlighted. Those giving evidence emphasised that a lack of communication and feedback on failed bids was of major concern especially when compared to their dealings with other core cities. Members heard that those interested in acquiring a building for charitable and community benefit would find it helpful if a list of available assets and buildings are published ahead of being put up for sale. This would enable those interested (such as community groups, SMEs, entrepreneurs and others) to make an informed choice in advance. It would also help transparency as it was felt that currently there was no community or tenant consultation before buildings appear on an auction site.

During the discussion Committee Members and attendees made a number of other points: -

- With the Council under severe financial pressure there is a key tension between revenue savings and capital receipts through the sale of Council assets. With assets sold it relieves the ongoing costs of maintenance associated with ownership and it was felt that this was an option that was favoured by the Council in most cases.
- There are examples of Council owned buildings not in use due to health and safety related issues and so community groups can't use the asset. However, upon investigation the costs associated with repair and maintenance are prohibitive to local groups as they would need to use the Council's procured provider, and this has proved to be too expensive in comparison to the market price for the same service. In addition to this continuing maintenance problems on assets leased from the Council such as those occupied by the Montgomery Street Co-Operative (and the impact of this on the SME) were shared. It was emphasised that there was a lack of clarity on the charges that SME's were being asked to pay for.
- BAME inequality in relation to ownership of assets was highlighted. The Council's priorities and objectives include improving inequality and

encouraging growth in deprived areas such as East Birmingham and it was suggested that the city could use CAT as a way of addressing this and improving local regeneration.

- There seems to be a bias towards inward investment and bigger rather than smaller organisations however smaller companies could grow and employ local people. In the current climate businesses need support to start up and providing them with local meeting spaces (as there is a shift away from using the city centre) would be the opportunity for local centres to step up and provide this whilst becoming more vibrant. Other businesses in the area would also benefit therefore generating local wealth.
- Javelin Block, a local design company highlighted their experience in the city (in comparison to other core cities) and detailed a lack of response and feedback from the Council on a proposal to acquire an empty property for use as a gallery. It was felt that there was a distinct lack of joined-up thinking on what could be achieved by such an asset for the city by the Council working with others to realise such a vision.
- There are examples of good practice in local authorities (such as Preston and Manchester) that Birmingham can learn from. A joined-up approach with a strong asset transfer policy is imperative to successful asset transfers and this includes good principles based on long term partnership collaboration and commissioning.
- Clarity on what assets are eligible for ACV status for example those buildings left in Trust to the Council but still of value to the local community and whether there was a remit for transferring the use of a building rather than the building itself in such cases.

In summing up the Chair thanked all attendees and stated that a further session in January would allow for some of the issues highlighted to be raised with officers.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

(See item No.6)

Cllr Robson confirmed that the next meeting would be the final evidence gathering session as part of the Inquiry as outlined earlier.

It is anticipated that the Committee will start some work on the daytime/night-time economy in February.

The next meeting is scheduled for a 10am start as per the original schedule of meetings and Members will be consulted on timings for future meetings.

RESOLVED: -

1. Members noted future items for discussion.

7. REQUEST(S) FOR CALL IN/COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION/PETITIONS (IF ANY)

None.

8. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

None.

9. AUTHORITY TO CHAIRMAN AND OFFICERS

Agreed.

RESOLVED: -

That in an urgent situation between meetings the Chair, jointly with the relevant Chief Officer, has authority to act on behalf of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 16:07 hours.