

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

ECONOMY AND SKILLS O&S COMMITTEE

1000 hours on 10th January 2024, Committee Room 2, Council House

Present:

Councillors Katherine Iroh (Deputy Chair), Bushra Bi, Jon Hunt, Richard Parkin, Jamie Tennant and Lisa Trickett

Also Present:

Paul Kitson, Strategic Director, Places, Prosperity and Sustainability

Councillor Sir Albert Bore, Chair of Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Amelia Wiltshire, Overview and Scrutiny Manager

Baseema Begum, Scrutiny Officer

1. NOTICE OF RECORDING/WEBCAST

The Chair, Councillor Iroh, advised those present that the meeting would be webcast for live and subsequent broadcast and that Members of the press/public may record and take photographs except where there are confidential or exempt items.

2. APOLOGIES

An apology was received from Councillor Akhlaq Ahmed.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest submitted.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 6th December 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair, Councillor Iroh.

5. ACTION TRACKER

RESOLVED: That the action tracker be noted.

6. COMMISSIONER'S REVIEW AND COMMENTS ON THE AGENDA

RESOLVED: It was noted that no comments had been received.

7. ASSET DISPOSAL PROGRAMME AND CABINET PROPERTY COMMITTEE – SCRUTINY APPROACH

Paul Kitson, Strategic Director, Place, Prosperity & Sustainability was in attendance for this item.

The Chair, Cllr Iroh, outlined the purpose of the item explaining that it was about how the Committee could add value to the asset disposal programme. Cllr Iroh emphasised that there was a balance to be struck between providing effective scrutiny but also ensuring that this did not delay the timescale set for disposals to ensure that budget savings are met. It was added that this item followed on from comments made by the Lead Commissioner that was discussed at the last meeting relating to the work programme.

Cllr Iroh explained to Members that she had met with Cllr Brigid Jones, Cabinet Member for Finance who, in her capacity as a member of the Cabinet Committee – Property, agreed that it would be beneficial for the Committee to consider relevant reports such as specific asset disposals in advance of Cabinet decisions. Cllr Iroh advised that this may need to be in a private setting noting the confidentiality needed for commercial purposes. It was also stated that due diligence be undertaken by Scrutiny before Cabinet makes a decision could minimise any decisions 'called in'. Cllr Iroh added it would also be beneficial for the Committee to consider and review the performance of the asset disposal programme in due course as other Councils in a similar situation have done.

Finally, Cllr Iroh highlighted it was important to note that members of the Committee were not representative of the whole city and did not possess local knowledge. Therefore, there is a need for a process that can share proposed assets for sales in local areas with local councillors where local communities are impacted.

Amelia Wiltshire, Overview & Scrutiny Manager gave examples of how other local authorities under intervention had dealt with pre-decision scrutiny relating to the disposal of assets.

Cllr Bore added that a challenge for scrutiny committees moving forward in setting their work programmes is to ensure that they are able to capture the impact of budget decisions being made on service delivery. The process how scrutiny committees can do this effectively is being discussed.

Members then held a discussion, and the following were among the points made: -

- Commissioners have set a target for the disposal of assets and the Council is working towards this. Officers are meeting with them on a weekly basis to review key issues. Several larger assets have already been prepared for the market with the most immediate auction schedule for early February.
- Process needs to be agreed on how committee members will undertake pre-decision scrutiny on disposal of specific assets, this includes ensuring that members comments are noted and reported back to officers in a timely fashion.
- Officers suggested private sessions would need to be held in advance of Cabinet decision to discuss disposal of specific assets due to the commercial sensitivities. Members proposed holding informal meetings online for pre decision scrutiny to allow greater member participation and flexibility. It was understood that requests could be made at short notice with an immediate response required, and this would avoid any delays in the timescale set for disposals.
- Concern about the capacity and cost to administer the amount of sales required. There may be a need to buy in additional expertise alongside the fees to sell.
- There was support for ensuring greater transparency in decision making for the disposal of community assets. It was highlighted that such Cabinet discussions should be held in public. Officers should refer to specific neighbourhood plans in decision reports to ensure that they are aware of all possible issues and are able to address concerns ahead of engagement with residents.
- Local Members should be notified of proposed disposals as they have the best local knowledge. It would be beneficial to also have one point of contact both in notifying and receiving Member responses. Deadlines should be set for Members to respond by as there will be occasions where a speedy response is needed. Members were assured that there is a process to engage ward members.
- Residents should also have some means of sharing their views on assets of community value before decisions are taken.
- Further information on the schedule of sales and forecast sale and value rate will also be included at the proposed workshop, as well as more detail on the approach from officers. Members were assured that relevant officers were involved in the process including planners in ensuring the suitability for market.
- Notification of where there are delays to sales outside of the envisaged timeframe and the impact of not meeting targets would be beneficial in enabling the scrutiny committee to undertake its role more thoroughly.
- The Committee was assured that tracking of progress against targets is taking place operationally.
- There was concern about the loss of corporate memory loss in relation to particular sites with staff leaving the organisation and the impact of this. This was acknowledged and the Strategic Director for Place, Prosperity and Sustainability stated that the initial approach may require adapting and improving as the city moves through the programme of sales.

RESOLVED: -

1. That the report be noted.
2. That a workshop be set up on Asset Disposal with relevant officers in attendance. This should include a list of assets by ward, clarity on the process being carried out including notification to ward members and the role of the scrutiny committee.
3. That examples of reports detailing progress made on the disposal of assets in other Councils be shared with the Committee.

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

There were no requests for Call In received.

9. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of other urgent business.

10. AUTHORITY TO CHAIR AND OFFICERS

Agreed.

The meeting ended at 11:03 hours.