

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a **Special Meeting of Cabinet** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Wednesday 27 April 2022 at 9.30 am**

Councillor A Hopgood, Leader of the Council, in the Chair

Cabinet Members:

Councillors R Bell, T Henderson, S McDonnell, J Rowlandson, E Scott, P Sexton, A Shield and M Wilkes

Apologies:

An apology for absence was received from Councillor J Shuttleworth

Also Present:

Councillors E Adam, B Bainbridge, A Bell, J Blakey, T Duffy, L Holmes, C Hood, G Hutchinson, P Jopling, J Nicholson, A Reed and D Sutton-Lloyd

1 Declarations of interest

Councillor E Scott advised that although she did not have interest to declare she would not be taking part in the discussion or decision making in relation to the two items on the agenda relating to Durham County Council headquarters. She would withdraw from the meeting during consideration of those items.

Councillor Scott left the room.

2 Durham County Council Headquarters Alternative Options Assessment [Key Decision: REG/04/22]

The Cabinet considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth and Corporate Director of Resources which reviewed the plans to occupy the newly constructed building on The Sands in Durham City. It considered options for the location of the Council's Headquarters and the use of the estate to support wider economic objectives for the county should the Council not occupy The Sands site. The report set out the proposal to dispose of The Sands site, (excluding the surface car park area and new multi storey car park), subject to planning (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Councillors R Bell responded to the questions from Councillors D Sutton-Lloyd, L Holmes, C Hood, and P Jopling about the common land de-registration process, the conference facilities, the number of jobs aykley heads site could create, and staffing accommodation at Crook.

Councillor M Wilkes responded to the questions from Councillor E Adam about the statements relating to climate change and building research establishment environmental assessment method standards.

Councillor R Bell thanked the Corporate Director and all officers who had been involved in this work which had been and continued to be a significant piece of work. He provided the background to the review, and the current position explaining that the need for value for money and that decisions were in the public interest had run through all of the work . He explained that the sands building was now complete with the costs being inflated due to the common land public inquiry. He provided the costs of the sands development. Durham University was the interested party in acquiring the sands building, and in seeking to use this for the development and expansion of its business school would safeguard and create new roles.

He explained that the preferred alternative accommodation strategy was to sell the sands building and take forward the proposals in the report in relation to the buildings, which would provide significant flexibility for the council going forward.

He explained that the sale of the sands building to the university would facilitate other benefits arising from the preferred accommodation proposals. This included the provision of conference facilities for use by other organisations, and that by the development of the sites proposed, together with bringing back into use the dli museum which had already been agreed, would kick start aykley heads redevelopment, and would bring the former Stanley customer access point back into use. The proposals allowed the demolition of the existing county hall building to progress at the earliest opportunity and did not unduly delay the development of the aykley heads strategic site. He outlined the effect on the council's staff, and engagement with staff.

The University have provided clear evidence and readiness to move forward with the purchase which was subject to planning consent in relation to the change of use. He advised that the recommendations in the report demonstrated value for money and satisfied the public interest tests, and although he couldn't advise of the amount of surplus this would generate, the council would be significantly better off with its preferred alternative accommodation strategy than by moving into the sands building.

In summary he explained that the proposals were a viable alternative option for the council, that there was a compelling case to do this. It further demonstrated the cabinet's bold and ambitious vision for the county, and he concluded by emphasising his enthusiasm for moving forward in this way.

Councillor J Rowlandson advised that he had a final look around the completed sands site the previous week. He thanked both Kier and the council's staff involved for the high-quality build, that it had been completed on time, and for the build to budget albeit that the common land issue had resulted in additional costs having to be incurred. He explained how it demonstrated the council's ability to deliver on large complex builds on time and that the council was in a really good position to deliver on the forthcoming accommodation builds. The University is an ideal occupier of the sands building, and as a Russel group member their business school was world renowned.

Councillor M Wilkes explained that this was an exemplary plan, and stated that the public had not wanted the council building on the sands site, and that they wanted levelling up across the county. He explained that the sands building now complete is not appropriate for the council's use, and how the council's workforce had changed post covid. He advised that the new council building at aykley heads would be multi-purpose, had the potential to bring in significant income, would provide flexibility for the future, and how the strategy provided for the accommodation not just in Durham city centre but also elsewhere in the county. He explained that by providing mixed use facilities we would encourage businesses to invest in the county and save money for the council. He was delighted to support the strategy which would bring jobs, save money and was the right thing to do.

Councillor Sexton referenced recent correspondence from Kevin Jones MP that had been sent to the Leader, and stated it was disappointing that he hadn't waited for the response from the Leader before the MP had publicised his comments. Cllr Sexton rebuked the comments made by the MP, and that the decisions being made were not political they were practical, he pointed out the reasons for coming to this decision, and that the financial information on the strategy which was commercially sensitive was contained in the private report to Cabinet.

Councillor A Hopgood advised of the review that had taken place, and that post covid the council had changed the way it worked. She advised that the accommodation strategy proposals had been fully costed, were value for money, and that the detailed financial information was set out in the private report which opposition members had access to.

She highlighted that the proposals would enhance Stanley front street, and that with the conference facilities being brought to the aykley heads site, alongside bringing the dli museum back into use, which had previously been agreed, would kick start the redevelopment of the aykley heads site.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

Councillor Scott returned to the room.

3 Council Plan 2022 – 2026 [Key Decision: CORP/R/22/04]

The Cabinet considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which presented the draft updated Council Plan, covering the period 2022 to 2026, prior to submission for consideration and approval by Full Council in June (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Councillor Hopgood thanked the Corporate Director and his team in preparing the updated council plan. She emphasised the wide-ranging public services provided by the council and had a significant role in providing for everyone who lived, visited, and worked in the county. In acknowledging that there were many issues to address she advised how important it was to do this in partnership with others in the public and private and voluntary sectors. Strong community cohesion was required and focus on what happens the most to its residents and businesses. She advised of the work that had been undertaken in refreshing the council priorities since the local elections last year and advised of those decisions that had been undertaken in line with these priorities. She welcomed that going forward the plan would be refreshed annually at the February council meeting, and would ensure full incorporation of corporate and financial planning, and by doing it would keep it focussed and relevant.

Councillor Shield welcomed the refreshed and updated plan and thanked the corporate director and his team for the work undertaken. He welcomed the revised plan which set out the actions that the council would lead on which had a revised focus. He explained how it was underpinned by a series of corporate strategies and delivery plans, however the focus on the document was the key issues giving the example of the poverty strategy action plan agreed earlier in the year by cabinet. He advised of his support for the annual refresh of the plan, and how by moving towards updating this annually in future any issues could be picked up and the plan re-focussed more often than previously.

Councillor Wilkes supported the plan, and he was delighted it now included the environment and climate change at its core.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

4 Exclusion of the public

Resolved:

That under Section 100(a)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

5 Durham County Council Headquarters Alternative Options Assessment [Key Decision: REG/04/22]

The Cabinet considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth and Corporate Director of Resources which reviewed the plans to occupy the newly constructed building on The Sands in Durham City. It considered options for the location of the Council's Headquarters and the use of the estate to support wider economic objectives for the county should the Council not occupy The Sands site. The report set out the proposal to dispose of The Sands site, (excluding the surface car park area and new multi storey car park), subject to planning (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.