

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 28th June, 2012

Present:- Councillor Ian Matthews – in the Chair
Councillors Miss Baker, Cairns, Holland, Lawton, Studd and Taylor.M

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Fear and Councillor M. Olszewski.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. PROPOSED REFURBISHMENT AND RE-USE OF THE FORMER ST GILES AND ST GEORGES SCHOOL

The Committee received a report to consider the options available to the Council to bring forward the refurbishment and re-use of the former St Giles & St Georges School building in Newcastle Town Centre, following the decision of the Board of Choices Housing not to take their interest any further. Choices had been looking for a new headquarters and had considered the former St Giles and St Georges School. Choices had joined with the Wrekin Housing Trust and did not want to proceed at this time.

The report proposed three options for the site for the Committee to consider. These were:

- A. Market the building again without a requirement for community use or public access. It was recognised that the town centre had many available buildings that could be leased or bought, most of which did not have such a large upfront refurbishment cost.
- B. Offer the site to the market with the option of it being cleared for redevelopment (as long as the Council was satisfied with the design of the replacement building) i.e. accept the demolition of the building. The building was not listed but it did lie within the Town Centre Conservation Area and demolition would not be permitted until there were detailed plans agreed for a replacement building. There would almost certainly be objections to this for both historical and townscape reasons. However, as a cleared development site it would almost certainly be a more marketable proposition than seeking a user which needed to spend significant monies to bring the building back into use.
- C. Explore a simple refurbishment of the building, funded through Council borrowing (if Cabinet was prepared to countenance this) and use the building for the Council's own purposes. There may be a range of candidates for this but such a proposal would have to be seen as part of a wider review of the Council's property needs. It may be possible to off-set some of the cost of this

option by selling or leasing existing Council-owned premises elsewhere in the town.

Officers were looking for comments from Members prior to reporting to Cabinet at its meeting on 18th July 2012. Officers stated the current economic climate was very different from when the property was purchased. When the Council acquired the building, there was funding available from such bodies as Advantage West Midlands and North Staffordshire Regeneration Partnership. Members noted that the Council needed to act quickly at the time of purchasing the site and there was no reason at that point in time that proposals for it could not work. It had been felt that there was a need for a communal room in Newcastle that could accommodate 200 people, and at the time of purchasing the former school, the building had the capacity to provide this, with an auditorium included in the proposals for Choices to relocate there. It was an interesting building that sat adjacent to the Queens Gardens and when the building was purchased, the original idea had been to open the building out on to the gardens for community use.

It was stressed that because the property was in a Conservation Area there was a requirement to have an approved plan before the property could be demolished. Members felt that Borough residents would not be happy if the building was demolished.

Members proposed that if the idea of a 200 seat auditorium was to be pursued, an adequate business plan would be required before the idea was taken too far. It would be necessary to ascertain who would actually use a 200 seat meeting room when there were facilities at Keele University. This point was supported, with agreement that further research would need to be undertaken. It was felt however, that a 200 seat meeting room was not a realistic idea. Not all Members concurred, and stated that Keele University wanted to expand from the main campus and there could be possibilities for the town centre as a result of this. Officers and Members confirmed that it would be beneficial to see more Keele University involvement in the town centre. The University were aware of the former school site and the situation, and Officers resolved to contact the University again.

There were differing views from Members as to which option would be the best. Some Members considered that option 'C' should be explored. The possibility of grant funding could be explored with the sale of other council properties a further option to fund refurbishment. This was supported by other Members who felt the building would not sell in a stagnant market. However, they felt the way forward was to refurbish the building for the rental market, with Burslem School of Art given as an example that could be followed. With rental units, there would be a return on investment.

Other Members felt that none of the proposed options adequately met where the Council was at in the current market. Borrowing should not be an option in the current economic climate. Option 'A' was favourable as Members would like to see the building being used; however selling the property would be difficult with the market in its current state and it would be difficult to compete against other vacant properties in the town centre. It was felt that a combination of options A and C with a very simple refurbishment of the property would be preferable, in order for the Council to recoup some money and also Members were not comfortable with one single option being put forward. It was felt that option 'B' regarding possible demolition should be ruled out.

The question of the building's security was raised by Members. Officers confirmed that money had been spent on securing the building in the last year, and it was

thought that the building was checked every day. It was not possible to prevent all unauthorised activity, but the vandalism experienced 18 months to 2 years ago had been sorted.

Members resolved to inform Cabinet that a combination of options 'A' and 'C' should be investigated further, but option 'B' should be discounted completely.

RESOLVED: (a) That the information be received.

(b) That Cabinet be informed the Committee would support further investigation of a combination of options 'A' and 'C', but that option 'B' should be discounted completely.

(c) That Keele University be approached regarding the St Giles and St Georges building.

4. **Proposals for the Redevelopment and Disposal of the Former Knutton Recreation Centre**

5. **URGENT BUSINESS**

There was no urgent business considered.

COUNCILLOR IAN MATTHEWS
Chair