

Minute from the Cabinet meeting on 4 October 2013

Ca.10 Office accommodation: proposed lettings of The Abbey House, Abingdon

Cabinet noted that Councillors Richard Webber and Yvonne Constance (both present at the meeting) were also county councillors.

Cabinet considered the report of the head of economy, leisure, and property on a proposal to let part of The Abbey House offices in Abingdon and relocate significant numbers of staff to South Oxfordshire District Council's offices at Crowmarsh Gifford. The proposal included letting part of the ground floor of The Abbey House and the whole of the first and second floors to Oxfordshire County Council, including shared use of the reception area. Also, part of The Abbey House might be let to the Citizens Advice Bureau. The report sought approval in principle to these proposals, and sought delegated authority for the strategic director to finalise the agreements, and appoint a consultant to manage the project, plan space requirements, and specify and oversee works at The Abbey House.

The report set out the benefits and the costs of the proposal. Cabinet noted that the costs could change as negotiations progressed; these would need to be kept under control. Other options included retaining The Abbey House for staff accommodation as at present, and letting a smaller area of The Abbey House.

The chairman invited non-Cabinet Councillors Richard Webber and Jim Halliday to address the meeting. Councillor Webber referred to the resolution at the last Council meeting where councillors agreed that when sharing accommodation with others, this council should continue to be based at Abbey House, Abingdon. He believed this proposal went against that decision. He urged Cabinet to be aware of the implications of agreeing this deal and asked for careful consideration and handling. He believed that there was no longer the need to make these savings. This move would give the perception of the council abandoning Abingdon, moving staff to a much less accessible location, and leaving only a skeleton staff presence. He questioned whether Cabinet had properly analysed the costs of the other options, as this was not evident in the report. He urged Cabinet not to be driven by the county council's urgency.

Councillor Jim Halliday spoke as chairman of the Scrutiny Committee. He believed this decision was too important to determine without knowing the detail. There had been minimal interaction with other councillors on this. He questioned whether a councillor could be a member of the project group, acting as a critical friend, and why had there been no serious consideration of the other options. The public perception of this proposal would be that the council was leaving Abingdon and moving to Crowmarsh. This would make

services less accessible, as there was insufficient public transport link from Abingdon to Crowmarsh. As a Vale council taxpayer, he did not want to pay for improvements to the Crowmarsh offices. He urged caution as this decision would be difficult to reverse.

Cabinet considered that the proposal presented an opportunity to work with Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, and the Citizens Advice Bureau to provide several public services in one building and improve customer service. It would allow the council to make better use of its office accommodation, whilst saving public money, and would generate greater economic activity in Abingdon. The refurbishments planned for Abbey House to accommodate the county council would also improve the council's asset. Staff located at Crowmarsh would still be accessible by telephone and by email and would be able to meet customers and councillors at Abbey House by appointment. Vale Council, Cabinet and committee meetings would still be held in the Vale.

Cabinet believed that the project team should work further on the detail and bring the final proposal to Cabinet for approval.

RESOLVED: to

- (a) approve the principle of a letting of part of the ground floor and the whole of the first and second floors of The Abbey House in Abingdon to Oxfordshire County Council, including shared use of the reception area, and request the strategic director in consultation with the Cabinet member for property to bring the final agreement back to Cabinet for approval;
- (b) approve the principle of a letting of part of the ground floor of The Abbey House to the Citizens Advice Bureau and request the strategic director in consultation with the cabinet member for property to bring the final agreement back to Cabinet for approval; and
- (c) authorise the strategic director, in consultation with the head of legal and democratic services, as an exception to the Vale Council's contract procedure rules to appoint a consultant to undertake project management, detailed space planning, and specifying/overseeing proposed works to The Abbey House.