

County Hall Move and Agile Programme Task Group, 13 January 2021

Members: Will Forster (Chairman of the Task Group), Ayesha Azad, Tim Hall, Nick Harrison, Rachael Lake, Chris Townsend

Witnesses:

- Dominic Barlow, Assistant Director – Corporate Landlord
- Peter Hopkins, Assistant Director – Commercial
- Brendon Kavanagh, Portfolio Lead – Corporate
- Matthew Pizii, Client Account Manager
- Leigh Whitehouse, Executive Director of Resources

Agile Office Estate Strategy

1. Leigh – on Agile Office Estate Strategy, we are being clear around the next steps that are required in order for us to have a definitive view on which office spaces we will use. Working with staff to embed agile ways of working and capture any additional exceptions to their property requirements is essential to inform the form of the new estate. We need further engagement with teams based in some of the leasehold properties at the moment. Have done lots of work with Surrey County Council staff – particularly the people working at County Hall and will now need expand this engagement to teams based in district and borough offices particularly. Second part is engagement with partners, who may also be looking at office requirements in light of Covid. Expectation there is that they will look to significantly rationalise their office estate. Looking to encourage colocation across organisations (e.g. SCC and NHS). Currently, the estate is relatively expensive and there's a potential to have savings over time. Providing more coherent set of locations across county. Opportunity in environmental sustainability by becoming owner-occupiers and having more modern buildings. Need to ensure offices are of requisite quality and align with agile working styles. Strategy sets out objectives and targets. One that needs most work right now is environmental sustainability and ratings for the buildings. There is some nervousness around rationalising the estate, particularly Ashely Park House, would want to ensure suitability of any new location before moving the children's team from Ashley Park House. This is set out in the relative priorities given to future actions towards the end of the strategy document.
2. Tim – thinks strategy is good. In the past 20 years or so, there have been other similar strategies, but progression on these stopped due to changes of Cabinet Members or officers. Do you think it ought to be reflected that we have been there before and a concern is that previous strategies have not been seen through to the end? Rachael would also like assurance on this. Leigh – has insisted that this strategy requires a Cabinet decision, so it's all done on the public record. **ACTION – make sure that the comment about historical points is taken on board.**
3. Nick – this is a good paper. Working collaboratively with other organisations is difficult. Trying to generate a single location for different organisations can be impossible as organisations have different needs and priorities. Generally, districts and boroughs have a building in the middle of their main town, and they will want to maintain that. What will collaborative working achieve? Leigh – colocation would largely be with Surrey Heartlands ICS, and there is the possibility of some other

partners. Agrees it would be less likely with districts and boroughs. We're working on agile and joint hubs with Surrey Heartlands. Opportunities to work between buildings.

4. Nick – how can we get to carbon neutral? Air conditioning, which most modern buildings have, and computer electricity usage will mean that the Council's offices use a lot of energy. Can we truly get to carbon neutral? Using solar panels etc. Need concrete measures such as solar panels to ensure this is realistic.
5. Rachael – When we talk about carbon neutral, do we factor in staff travel? It seems that lots of people will be travelling by car to Woodhatch. How realistic is carbon neutral? Matthew – we're looking at this as a complete portfolio, the totality of individual buildings' contributions. To make an office building completely carbon neutral on its own is difficult, but we are looking at making them as efficient as possible (offsetting excess with measures elsewhere). There is a wider travel strategy of this. The next stage of the Agile Office Estate Strategy is to get funding for the wider business plan, so then we would look in more detail at the travel carbon issue and additional measures. Dominic – we're looking to achieve carbon neutral across whole portfolio. Ease of this varies across different buildings. The measure of carbon release from travelling has not been included in this paper, currently it's just the footprint of the building. Looking with Brendon as to how to tackle this as part of wider agile programme. Leigh – on freehold properties, we can look at new technology such as installing solar panels at Woodhatch car park. Dominic – we also know that our buildings systems can be improved, such as reducing the amount of space we need. This can also help reduce carbon usage.
6. Nick – understands driving carbon usage down and reducing buildings, but we do say our target is net zero, which strikes me as unlikely. Would suggest the paper is revised to reflect this as carbon neutrality may not be possible. Dominic – noted. We know that as a council overall we have to achieve carbon neutrality, but this won't be achieved just through the office estate. Matthew – it's worth noting that again because of the timing with the agile transformation, part of the approach in the strategy is about standardisation, meaning we have a greater degree of flexibility between buildings, meaning we'll buy and dispose of fewer buildings in the longer term, allowing adaptation between different services. Dominic – we don't currently have the option not to go through this change, so we've got to go through with it and find ways to work differently along the way. We cannot sustain the running of the estate on the current budget. Think there's a momentum that's driving through.
7. Will – we'll need some scrutiny and ongoing monitoring of carbon neutral targets. Any idea from Leigh how Members will be involved? Leigh – idea in the strategy is to have measurable objectives, and this can be included in Resources and Performance Select Committee's regular performance report. Also, part of the idea of presenting the strategy on a public basis is so that we can return to it through scrutiny if needed. Seeking to make sure that this is delivered and that will continue to be worked on for years to come.
8. Will – a possible recommendation is to ask the Resources and Performance Select Committee to annually review the Agile Office Estate Strategy, particularly the carbon neutral aim, so there is a strategy that remains and evolves over time.

9. Will – how does that fit in with Ashley Park House in Walton-on-Thames? Does Covid/home working help? Brendon – we've looked at various contingencies as we have to finalise the closure of County Hall by 15 February 2021, so we're putting contingency business continuity plans in place, such as moving some staff to Quadrant Court. Most staff are currently working remotely. Our business space requirement post-Covid is quite small and the Dakota building in Weybridge provides plenty of space. Most staff will start being vaccinated in the summer, and we have planned to ensure that staff return to the office is gradual.
10. Nick – page 7 talks about four-hub model. What are the potential hubs? Leigh – **ACTION – to make this clearer in the strategy.** Quadrant Court would be the hub in the west of the county; Woodhatch Place would be the eastern hub; we're looking at Dakota being the northern hub; and we're in the process of looking for a southern hub. Will likely redevelop Consort House for residential rather than office use. Nick – suggests we clarify this in report.
11. Dominic – we're working on engagement with staff on agile working. This is why it's a little vague for now. We want it to develop.
12. Will – has there been a study of similar local authorities and their office estates in terms of cost and size? Dominic – we have taken the measurements in the report against industry standard. We measure our estate per square metre of space. Central government are undertaking a transformation of Whitehall and have written guidelines based on this work, which have been useful. In terms of comparing to other local authorities, we haven't done that yet, but are ensuring our estate within guidelines. Will – it would be good to discover comparative size and cost of other local authorities' strategies.

Woodhatch Place travel survey and Ways of Working survey results

13. Brendon – we have sent to you Woodhatch focused surveys as completed by staff whose new administrative base will be Woodhatch and by Members. These surveys tell us the frequency with which they will travel to Woodhatch and how they'll be travelling and now we need to know when that frequency will be, e.g. which two days a week people will go in, so that we can look at parking and public transport. We want to improve public transport and ensure we're sustainable in terms of transport.
14. Chris – point about once or twice a week is interesting. The once or twice a week won't be every week; it depends on the week. Also, you may get people going to another hub on the days they don't go into Woodhatch. Brendon – the next stage of work in the Agile Organisational Programme is an intelligence driven stage of work to see what travel patterns will be. Those segments will be more complex and we're working to understand this.
15. Nick – the Woodhatch survey was a very good survey. If we're to try to combine home and office working, are we looking at enabling hybrid meetings and installing the appropriate hardware for this? Brendon – yes, we've put Surface Hubs into a number of the rooms at Woodhatch. The challenge is hybrid meetings. They are possible, but it's a different way of working, so we need to figure out how that will work and we're looking into this at the moment.

16. Tim – thinks that we will need several review dates as teams work out where they're based and whether it's working. For much of this year, we will probably not be back to anything resembling normality. We will need to look at how things will work and to put in fixed review timescales, to check in January 2022, for example, that a team hasn't been left behind. Regular reviews of the reality, not just of the plan. Brendon – yes, we don't view the end of the project as the end of this work. We are getting sighted on other projects and portfolios and we have monthly checkpoints throughout the year.
17. Rachael – excited about hybrid meetings, although equipment and software are generally expensive. Districts and boroughs will probably also be trying to set up hybrid meetings. A partnership could be made with districts and boroughs to link up so they're offering the same thing. Our meetings are much better attended since meetings went remote. Doesn't want to see districts and boroughs going back to old system of only offering in-person meetings. Partnerships could also be financially beneficial. Leigh – this is an interesting issue. We've found working remotely when everyone is remote is much more functional than using previous experience even using Surface Hubs, for example. Hybrid meeting are quite complicated, even more so when the room is not kitted out properly. Have worked on the idea that unless there's a reason for the meeting to be face to face, the meeting should remain remote. In a hybrid meeting, there can be an imbalance about who gets heard, due to difference on screen and in room. Chris – we've been running hybrid governors' meetings at Ashted and it can be very difficult. Can be very difficult for the chairman to check that the people in the room are listening and have the chance to interact. Rachael – running a hybrid Full Council meeting would be a challenge, but it could work for smaller meetings or for presentations without a huge amount of audience interaction. The Resources and Performance Select Committee has worked very well being fully remote. However, has to use multiple devices to be able to see the agenda, meeting and notes at the same time, which isn't ideal. Has to use hard copies, which isn't good for the environment.

Ayesha Azad left at 12:00.

18. Brendon – we're working on this. Rachael just listed a lot of the harder challenges of hybrid meetings. It may be possible to overcome a number of the issues. Where you start getting difficulties is inconsistency of bandwidth, infrastructure, devices, as well as the scale of meeting (number of attendees). Have someone working on this. Will – has made a note of this, clearly something we need to consider and look into.
19. Will – some staff expressed in the staff survey that one negative of working from home was the lack of office space, an office chair etc. Will there be a budget for providing equipment like this for home working? Some other councils have done this, e.g. bulk buying chairs. Leigh – challenges when working from home might include having an appropriate desk and chair, childcare/home schooling and having sufficient space, which can be one of the biggest issues. Have made provision for people who need to go into the office to work due to a lack of space at home. Looked into blanket allowance for all staff to cover the cost of necessary equipment but decided against this. Home working issues will be handled case-by-case with line managers. This is consistent with other councils.

20. Rachael – works well for the most part and we all are willing to adapt. Chris – it can work as long as there is the option of going into the office as a backup contingency.

Sale of County Hall

21. Discussion continued in Part 2 on the disposal of the County Hall in Kingston upon Thames.
22. Members agreed the Task Group's recommendations for action by officers coming out of this meeting.
23. In response to a query, Will clarified that that he did not envisage that the Task Group was coming to an end now. When the Task Group does conclude eventually, after Woodhatch Place is fully functional, any relevant final comments or recommendations can be reported to Cabinet. However, the Task Group is not at that stage at present.
24. **ACTION – Will Forster, the Chairman of the Task Group, and Leigh Whitehouse to arrange a future meeting of the Task Group at an appropriate time.**

Recommendations:

The Task Group recommends:

1. That the Resources and Performance Select Committee considers viewing the office strategy on an annual basis, especially ensuring that the carbon neutral targets are achieved;
2. That officers consider studying the cost and size of office estates in similar authorities;
3. That, as the Council continues to promote agile working post-pandemic, the Council should discuss and study how attendance at meetings can still be possible remotely;
4. The Task Group is satisfied about the bidding process for selling County Hall;
5. That Officers continue to work on plans to get value for money from the Bittoms car park.

Actions/further information to be provided (in bold in the main text):

1. Leigh Whitehouse to ensure that the point about previous strategies similar to the Agile Office Estate Strategy being created but not delivered due to changes in Cabinet membership or staff is reflected in the Agile Office Estate Strategy.
2. Leigh Whitehouse to make it clearer in the Agile Office Estate Strategy which buildings will comprise the four hubs.
3. *[From Part 2 section]* Peter Hopkins to consider talking to Surrey-based universities about the possibility of using Woodhatch Place for graduation ceremonies in future.
4. Will Forster and Leigh Whitehouse to work together to decide the date of the next meeting of the Task Group at an appropriate time.

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