

CABINET held at COMMITTEE ROOM - COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, ESSEX CB11 4ER, on TUESDAY, 9 JANUARY 2024 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor P Lees (Chair)
Councillors A Coote, J Evans, N Hargreaves and N Reeve

Officers in attendance: P Holt (Chief Executive), B Ferguson (Democratic Services Manager), D Hermitage (Strategic Director of Planning) and N Katevu (Monitoring Officer and Head of Legal Services)

Also present: Councillors S Barker (Conservative Group Leader), N Gregory (Chair of Scrutiny Committee) and G Sell (Liberal Democrat Group Leader)

CAB55 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received from Councillor Sutton (Portfolio Holder for Communities) and Councillor Pavitt (Leader of the Uttlesford Independents).

There were no declarations of interest.

CAB56 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

The Leader proposed the exclusion of the public and press due to the consideration of reports containing exempt information within the meaning of section 100I and paragraph 3 (Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person, including the authority holding that information) part 1 Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972.

RESOLVED to exclude the public and press for the following item on the grounds that they contained exempt information within the meaning of section 100I and paragraph 3 (Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person, including the authority holding that information) part 1 Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972.

CAB57 FUTURE HOUSING OPTIONS

Councillor Coote presented the report regarding Future Housing Options, specifically the contractual arrangements in relation to Uttlesford Norse Services Ltd (UNSL), which provided maintenance and capital improvement works for the authority's 2,800 council houses, as well as the estates and facilities work for council office buildings. He said the provision of safe and affordable homes was fundamental to ensuring that all individuals were given a chance to develop and flourish, and he considered the Council's obligation to be a good landlord a

moral duty. The arrangements which had led to the joint venture with the Norse Group in 2020 were not adequate and, whilst the Chief Executive and officers had made great efforts to turn things around, it was now time to start looking at alternative options for the future. He detailed the timetable relating to ending of the joint venture, which stipulated that a decision would be required by March 2024, in order to not extend the contract beyond its natural conclusion in March 2025. Future options had been set out in the report for members information but the primary decision before Cabinet tonight was to decide whether to officially serve notice of the Council's intention to not extend the current UNSL joint venture beyond the end of its natural five year agreed term in line with the officer recommendation. He proposed the recommendations set out in the report.

Members discussed the report and the following points were raised:

- The report set out efforts made through 2023 to reset the UNSL arrangement, to provide a fresh start and improve ongoing performance.
- The report concluded that notwithstanding such efforts, officer advice to Members was to end the UNSL arrangement at the natural conclusion of its five year term.
- There was consensus that the contract should not be continued due to the performance of UNSL.
- Data should be kept in-house, although it was confirmed that UDC had access to the stock survey information.
- A workshop on Housing should be held for all members; the decision was too great to be made by Cabinet alone.
- The report detailed alternative future provision options, reflecting expert market and legal analysis of those options. The report also included expert advice on market conditions, to give reassurance that better alternative providers were available on the market.
- Further work was required on the Options Appraisal, with a need for specificity and detailed targets.
- Options 3-11 contained in the report would be considered in the coming months, subject to Cabinet agreeing not to continue the contract. This would be progressed via an exit management strategy and consultation had already taken place to scope such a plan.
- Scrutiny worked best when applied prior to a decision being made; it was confirmed that Scrutiny would be involved in the formulation of future arrangements.
- The recent Stock Survey had given confidence that the Council was aware of any potential issues. However, it was acknowledged that “unknown, unknowns” could still arise and the recent RAAC concrete problem faced by the public sector across the country was cited as an example.
- Any new arrangements should look to utilise new technology and innovate the way in which tenants engage with the Council e.g. mobile self-service apps.

Councillor Hargreaves seconded the proposals.

The proposals were approved unanimously.

RESOLVED:

- I. To note the situation regarding performance of the current UNSL joint venture arrangement.
- II. To note the independent external expert advice on the state of the market and options for alternative future provision.
- III. To note the independent external expert legal advice regarding the authority's legal position.
- IV. To agree to officially serve notice of the Council's intention to not extend the current UNSL joint venture beyond the end of its natural five year agreed term [ie to end March 2025].
- V. To proceed, by mutual agreement with Norse, to end the smaller General Fund estates and facilities arrangements at end March 2024, transferring those functions and associated staff directly to the Council.
- VI. To give delegated authority to the Director of Housing, Health and Communities, the Chief Executive, and Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services in consultation with the Cabinet Members for Housing and Finance to go straight to the market in 2024 to appoint a roster of suppliers available to 'step in' to provide any individual elements of work necessary during 2024 and early 2025 ahead of the end of the UNSL Joint Venture in the event of any shortfall of provision by UNSL during this transition period.
- VII. To give further delegated authority to the Director of Housing, Health and Communities, the Chief Executive, and Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services in consultation with the Cabinet Members for Housing and Finance to appoint resources as necessary to develop the specification ahead of bringing back for Member decision the long term procurement process in the summer of 2024.

The meeting was ended at 8.04pm.