

CABINET

THURSDAY, 25 AUGUST 2022

PRESENT: Councillors Andrew Johnson (Leader of the Council; Growth & Opportunity) (Chairman), David Cannon (Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime, and Public Protection), David Coppinger (Environmental Services, Parks & Countryside & Maidenhead), David Hilton (Asset Management & Commercialisation, Finance, & Ascot), Donna Stimson (Climate Action & Sustainability) and Ross McWilliams (Digital Connectivity, Housing Opportunity, & Sport & Leisure)

Also in attendance: Councillors Baldwin, Bhangra, Bond, Brar, Davey, Price, Rayner, Sharpe, Singh, Taylor; Mike Piggford (LTA); Ian Brazier-Dubber (MD, RBWM PropCo)

Officers: Emma Duncan, Andrew Durrant, Adele Taylor, Alysse Strachan, Kevin McDaniel, Karen Shepherd, Louise Freeth, David Wiles and David Scott

CEDAR TREE HOUSE WINDSOR

Cabinet considered options for the property at Cedar Tree, 90 St Leonards Road, Windsor.

The Cabinet Member for Asset Management & Commercialisation, Finance, & Ascot explained that the property was purchased by the Council in May 2021 with a view to using it as temporary accommodation. It had been used as such by the previous owners from March 2021 and before then as a bed and breakfast. The intention had been to refurbish the property to provide much needed temporary accommodation for those in need in the borough. The property had been vacant whilst a planning application was prepared. As a result of due diligence, it had become clear that construction costs had grown which exceeded the originally agreed capital budget. To proceed with the original proposal would now cost an extra £490,000. The Cabinet Member referred Members to the options detailed in Table 1 which included the original proposal with additional costs; an alternative proposal to convert the property into affordable/key worker accommodation (with similar additional expenditure required); or sale of the property on the open market (which would minimise financial exposure and planning risk). An independent valuation had been provided that indicated the property would achieve £800,000 as is or £1.15m fully restored. The council would need to invest £150,000 to refurbish the property to a saleable condition resulting in a loss of £429,000.

The public consultation on the planning application had raised the issue with local residents who had expressed a number of concerns.

Councillor Johnson commented that the decision on planning would lay with the Development Management Committee, but Cabinet needed to be mindful of the significant planning risk. There were also significant inflationary impacts on the construction sector. National policy would increase demand for temporary accommodation therefore the challenge needed to be addressed but it did not mean that every proposal was the right one to take forward. He was strongly minded to proceed with option C.

Councillor Stimson commented on the escalation of building costs and uncertainty in relation to planning permission.

Councillor Rayner stated that she supported the new recommendation for option C. she had met with residents and local businesses and was fully aware of their concerns. The borough needed temporary accommodation, but the business case also needed to be robust.

Cabinet was addressed by Karin Falkentoft, James Waud and Rhian Thornton.

Karin Falkentoft explained that she lived next door to Cedar Tree. She had provided lots of information already to Cabinet members. She was very happy that residents' concerns had been listened to; option 1 would have been detrimental to residents' lives and livelihoods.

James Waud explained he was the manager of The Windsor Trooper which was opposite the property. He was delighted with the new recommendation but felt a further option to divide the property into three individual flats had been missed. There was no garden which families would want so flats seemed more sensible. He had undertaken some research which showed that most similar 2 bedroom properties were valued lower than £300,000. He acknowledged the council needed to find a solution for those who found themselves homeless, but he felt the £0.5m could be used more appropriately for something else.

Rhian Thornton explained she was the headmistress of Upton House School which was located 40metres from Cedar Tree. She was pleased to hear the new recommendation but as she had only just heard it, she wished to make some comments.

Upton House school was proud to play an active part in the Windsor community. It was a hugely diverse school with a keen focus on charity and support for the vulnerable. For example, a number of Ukrainian refugees were being supported through the school's bursary scheme. She felt it was reasonable for the school to challenge and seek assurances if there was any risk to the children, however low. The school had found out about the development by default rather than being informed. It seemed the council had been unaware there was a private school close by and it had not been included in any risk assessment. Councillor McWilliams had been unable to attend two meetings held with governors until one on 3 June 2022. When he had been asked about vetting procedures, he had been vague but had pledged to create an appropriate policy, which had thus far not arrived. The school had requested a copy of the risk assessment from the Chief Executive, but this had not been received so it could only be assumed it had not been undertaken. The school was not saying that all homeless people were a risk to children, it was just asking for a guarantee that any occupant would not pose a risk. Given the new recommendation, Rhian Thornton requested a guarantee that should there ever be a revisit of plan a, there would be no risk to the children.

Councillor Johnson thanked the public speakers. He explained that no absolute guarantee could be given that any of the occupants would not pose a threat, as was the case with any resident in the area. However, it was recognised that those with additional complex needs would more appropriately accommodated elsewhere.

Councillor McWilliams confirmed that he had recently visited the school. He felt he had answered all the questions, but he appreciated it was a complex issue. He explained that when a property was purchased it was not necessarily determined how it would be used therefore there was no requirement for a risk assessment at that stage in the way described. However, he acknowledged the wider point of concerns about the previous use of the building. The government had required all rough sleepers to be housed at the time for the protection of those individuals and society at large during the pandemic. The property had been managed by private landlords at that time. Councillor McWilliams commented that anti-social behaviour was taken very seriously in all council managed properties.

There were 1000 borough residents on the housing register therefore it was clear people were being priced out and there was a lack of sustainable accommodation. The council did not want to rely on out of borough temporary accommodation as this stretched people's support networks.

The Executive Director of People Services commented that it was important to distinguish between the allocation of temporary housing and the rough sleeper pathway. The pathway was for those with additional needs, to be supported to make adjustments rather than simply being put in a property and left without any support. The rough sleeper pathway had never been the intention for Cedar Tree.

Councillor Price commented that she recollected that the decision to purchase the property had been taken very quickly as it had come up at auction. She felt that more care should have been taken as the decision would now result in a financial loss. The shortage of labour and increasing costs was known at the time of the purchase.

Councillor Johnson commented that the council did have to move quickly at the time. No one would have anticipated the rampant inflation; build costs had started to go up significantly at the end of last year.

Councillor Hilton commented that the planning risk was severe therefore he did not feel it was appropriate to proceed.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That Cabinet noted the report and:

- i) Noted the risk in relation to the grant of planning consent**
- ii) Approved the option to sell Cedar Tree House (option C) as a family dwelling for best market consideration.**