

# STRATEGIC OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

## MINUTES

MONDAY 13 JANUARY 2020  
GIPPING ROOM - GRAFTON HOUSE  
6.00 PM

**Present:** Councillors C Allen, S Gage, J Gibbs, T Grant, S Handley, D Heaps, D Maguire, C Shaw, C Smart, J Smith, E Harsant, R Pope and T Lockington

**32. Apologies for Absence**

There were no Apologies for Absence.

**33. Declarations of Interest**

There were no Declarations of Interest.

**34. To Confirm or Vary the Order of Business**

**It was RESOLVED:**

**that the Order of Business be as printed on the agenda.**

**35. OS/19/12 - Call-In Report - E/19/37 4 College Street**

35.1 The Chair welcomed all present, including Councillor Ellesmere, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Property and Development, Councillor Fisher, Lead Signatory for the Call-In, Martyn Fulcher, Head of Development, and Mark Hunter, Operations Manager - Major Capital Schemes.

35.2 The Chair reminded Councillors that the Strategic Overview & Scrutiny Committee was a non-political Committee and commented that the first duty of a Councillor was to do what they thought was right for Ipswich, the second duty was to the residents they represented and then only after these duties were discharged did they have a duty to their party. She therefore assumed that all present wanted what was best for Ipswich regardless of party and that vigorous questioning of the Executive would come from all sides.

35.3 The Chair explained that a scope for the Call-In had been circulated and that this had been agreed by Councillor Fisher and herself and legally cleared by the Monitoring Officer.

**It was RESOLVED:**

**that the Scope for the Call-In which had been circulated be agreed.**

**Lead Signatory's Opening Statement – Councillor Fisher**

35.4 Councillor Fisher noted that 4 College Street was a very old building and was a good example of what the Waterfront had once looked like. Councillor Fisher commented that the Council was lucky to own the building and that it had a duty to protect and preserve it, but that the Council also had a moral duty to highlight the building and ensure it was used well.

35.5 Councillor Fisher explained that the reason he had submitted the Call-In was that he was concerned that the proposed use of 4 College Street was uninspiring and that the cost of the works to achieve that use were excessive. Councillor Fisher noted that previous reports in the Ipswich Star had suggested that the building could be turned into a Visitor's Centre or that a design competition might be held for a new use; Councillor Fisher commented that it was disappointing that neither of these suggestions had been taken forward in the Executive report.

35.6 Councillor Fisher confirmed that he thought it was important that the building be brought back into a viable state as soon as possible, with works done to remove 4 College Street from the Buildings at Risk Register. Councillor Fisher noted that the Construction Cost Estimate included in the papers for the meeting assumed that the various stages of works were carried out at different times and so there would not be a cost implication in doing the necessary works immediately and doing the additional works required for a future use once the Masterplan for the site had been developed.

35.7 Councillor Fisher noted that the Condition Survey stated that the building was "generally weathertight and secure from intruders" and that the building had been vacant for 39 years and on the Buildings at Risk Register for 28 years. Councillor Fisher therefore did not understand the perceived urgency for works to bring the building back into use and suggested that what he described as a fifth option ought to have been considered by Executive and that the option should have been to carry out the works necessary to remove 4 College Street from the Buildings at Risk Register and to commit further funds to bring the building back into use once the Masterplan for the site had been agreed.

35.8 Councillor Fisher expressed his concern that the information which had been provided to the Executive had been insufficient to enable them to make a reasonable judgement. Councillor Fisher noted that the report had not referenced previous Executive reports which were related to the site, and that it

did not explain that the costs of removing the site from the Buildings at Risk Register represented only £35k of the £423 total cost estimate.

- 35.9 Councillor Fisher commented that the logic behind the original decision was flawed, and said that whilst some works were necessary to protect the 4 College Street the additional works to turn the building into offices could be postponed until after the Masterplan for the whole site had been completed without any additional costs beyond those set out in the report being incurred.

### **Portfolio Holder's Opening Statement – Councillor Ellesmere**

- 35.10 Councillor Ellesmere noted that 4 College Street was a Listed Building which was on the Buildings at Risk Register and currently unusable. The works proposed were the minimum required to bring the building back into use and thereby get and keep the building off of the Buildings at Risk Register.
- 35.11 Councillor Ellesmere commented that the reason for the Call-In seemed to be a difference in opinion as to whether Option 1, to bring the building back into a viable state as soon as practically possible, or Option 2, to do minimal works but enough to justify its removal from the Buildings at Risk Register should be pursued. Councillor Ellesmere noted that all Councillors on Executive had agreed that Options 3 and 4, which would leave 4 College Street on the Buildings at Risk Register for an as yet unknown period should be rejected and commented that there was no difference between Option 2 in the original report and what Councillor Fisher had outlined as a new fifth option.
- 35.12 Councillor Ellesmere explained that Executive had agreed to bring the building back into a viable state as soon as practically possible and that the vast majority of the works which would take place were necessary for any imaginable future use of the building. Councillor Ellesmere explained that whether the building was an office, a Visitor's Centre or indeed anything else, it would still require utilities to be installed, the asbestos would still need to be removed, data connections would be needed, a ground floor toilet would be required, and a new entrance at the rear of the building would have to be built as the door onto College Street was narrow, heavy and poorly accessible.
- 35.13 Councillor Ellesmere explained that if the works which had been agreed by Executive were carried out there would be the potential for the building to be let, which would bring in a rental income and reduce the total cost of the scheme. Occupation would also be of benefit for the fabric of the building, as heating would prevent some forms of deterioration whilst the risk of arson would be dramatically reduced.
- 35.14 Councillor Ellesmere reported that planning permission had been granted for the brick warehouse on the Burtons site to be converted and provide a new base for the Gecko Theatre Company, but that the completion of the Masterplan for the whole area was still some way off.
- 35.15 Councillor Ellesmere commented that the decision to bring 4 College Street back into use had been based on sound judgement, but that the decision

Councillor Fisher had made to call it in had not been. Councillor Ellesmere commented that the primary reason for the Call-In seemed to be that other Councillors on the Executive disagreed with Councillor Fisher at the meeting of the Executive on 29 October. Councillor Ellesmere also commented that had the other Councillors who had signed the Call-In heard the answers given to Councillor Fisher at that meeting they may not have decided to Call-In the decision and thereby delay works to 4 College Street by months at the time of year when the Weather was at its worst.

### **Committee Questions**

- 35.16 Councillor Pope asked when Councillor Ellesmere had been aware that the costs of the works to remove 4 College Street from the Building at Risk Register were £35,000. Councillor Ellesmere explained that in preparation for the report being taken to Executive he had discussed various options with officers, including doing the bare minimum to remove 4 College Street from the Building at Risk Register.
- 35.17 Councillor Pope noted that the Council had owned 4 College Street since 2016 and that it had been on the Buildings at Risk Register since 1992 and asked why it had taken so long for a report to be taken to Executive. The Operations Manager – Major Capital Schemes, explained that the survey had been instructed once a broad idea of the future use of the building and site had been established.
- 35.18 Councillor Allen asked who determined which buildings were included on the Buildings at Risk Register. The Head of Development explained that English Heritage set guidelines for inclusion which officers assessed buildings against. The Buildings at Risk Register was compiled on a Suffolk wide basis.
- 35.19 Councillor T Lockington noted that the condition of 4 College Street had not been fully assessed by the Condition Survey as intrusive works might reveal additional issues and asked if the scheme would be able to progress if further work was needed. Councillor Ellesmere explained that there was an adequate contingency in the project budget. Councillor Fisher noted that the figures in the Construction Cost Estimate had been subject to 20 months of inflation which had not been allowed for in the Executive report.
- 35.20 Councillor Gage noted that the sooner works were done, the sooner the building could be occupied and rent collected. Councillor Gage asked what the cost would be in missed rent if the Council were to wait until the Masterplan for the whole site was completed. Councillor Ellesmere explained that it had taken the Council a lot of effort to assemble the land at the Waterfront and that the masterplan would take some time to develop. There was a particular difficulty in that a specialist contractor needed to be hired to clear the asbestos and pigeon guano from the former Paul's Silo before a plan could be established for that building. There had however already been some interest in 4 College Street but any potential occupiers who saw it in its current state would very quickly be put off. Councillor Ellesmere noted that the sooner the building was occupied the better, both for the building and financially for the Council.

- 35.21 Councillor C Smart asked Councillor Fisher which of the proposed works would prevent the building from being converted to an alternative use, considering that works to 4 College Street were already subject to the restrictions which arose from its Grade II listing. Councillor Fisher noted that the exterior of the building was unlikely to change significantly but said that there was a significant cost attached to converting the building to office accommodation.
- 35.22 Councillor Handley noted that it would be cheaper to carry out all of the works in one project and asked Councillor Fisher why he thought the Council ought to split the works into different phases which would cost more. Councillor Fisher noted that the Construction Cost Estimate had split the works into three phases which could, assuming the report was accurate, be carried out for the costs approved by Executive. Councillor Fisher commented that by not splitting the works further expenditure might be necessary if the Masterplan came up with a more ambitious use than another office. Councillor Ellesmere commented that, as he had already explained, the additional cost of making 4 College Street suitable for use as office accommodation was relatively low as a proportion of the total works required and that the rent which could be charged would reduce the overall cost of the project to the Council.
- 35.23 In response to an invitation from the Chair, the Operations Manager – Major Capital Schemes explained that the works had been split into 3 phases as part of the Construction Cost Estimate but that the cost of procuring these works would be greater if they were done separately. The Operations Manager – Major Capital Schemes reported that construction cost inflation was currently approximately 3% per year.
- 35.24 Councillor Fisher noted that his Call-In was not based on the future usage of the building but on whether the four options in the Executive report were given fair consideration and whether the decision was based on sound judgement.
- 35.25 Councillor Pope asked what the cost of converting the building for alternative uses would be if the proposed works had already been completed. Councillor Ellesmere explained that the works proposed were the minimum to allow the building to be occupied and that he expected that all of the works would be required for any potential use for the building.
- 35.26 Councillor Pope noted that there was a significant amount of vacant office accommodation in Ipswich and asked whether it was sensible to add to this. Councillor Ellesmere noted that whilst there was a surplus of second hand office accommodation in large blocks there was high demand for new offices in modern buildings, giving examples of the new Birketts Building, the Connexions Building and the Maltings. The Chief Executive confirmed that the building was likely to be more easily let because of its relatively small floor space, location and the fact that it was an historic building.
- 35.27 Councillor Pope asked why the proposal for a Waterfront Visitors Centre was not being proceeded with. Councillor Ellesmere explained that the Council had

- suffered significant funding reductions over the past few years and so was not able to provide new facilities which would require a subsidy.
- 35.28 Councillor Allen asked Councillor Fisher to explain what additional information would have needed to have been available to Executive for him to consider that a sound decision could have been made on 29 October. Councillor Fisher said that the Condition Survey and the information which had been made available to the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding the cost of the works to remove 4 College Street from the Buildings at Risk Register would have been very useful in considering the decision.
- 35.29 Councillor Allen asked whether Councillor Fisher considered that the building was at risk. Councillor Fisher noted that buildings could be included on the Buildings at Risk Register for a variety of reasons and that the Condition Survey did not suggest that 4 College Street was in any immediate danger, although some works were clearly needed.
- 35.30 Councillor Allen asked whether Councillor Fisher thought that the additional information which had been provided to the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee would have persuaded the Executive to come to a different decision. Councillor Fisher said that he couldn't speak for other members of the Executive but confirmed that his thoughts on the proposal would have been very different.
- 35.31 Councillor Pope asked Councillor Ellesmere why there was now a sudden rush to do works to a building which had been empty since 1981 and owned by the Council since 2016. Councillor Ellesmere noted that the longer 4 College Street was left in its current state the worse it would be for the building. Councillor Ellesmere commented that it was important to show that the Council would do what it needed to in order that owners of other at risk buildings took their responsibilities seriously.
- 35.32 Councillor Pope said that he understood that the Council had initially waited for the whole site Masterplan before commissioning the Condition Survey and asked what had changed since then to make the works more urgent. Councillor Ellesmere explained that the Masterplan would be delayed by the issues around accessing and determining the future of the R.W. Paul Silo and so it was better to get on and do the works.
- 35.33 Councillor T Lockington asked Councillor Fisher whether he regretted the delay to the works to 4 College Street which the Call-In he had lead had caused. Councillor Fisher commented that he wanted the works required to remove 4 College Street from the Buildings at Risk Register to take place as soon as possible but commented that, in his view, the original Executive decision was flawed and could not be allowed to stand. Councillor Fisher also noted that the delay would normally have been much shorter but that a General Election had been called, which had delayed the hearing of the Call-In.
- 35.34 Councillor Gage noted that a delay of almost three months had been caused to the works as a result of the Call-In and that for that time 4 College Street had

been at additional risk because it had been left vacant. Councillor Gage asked Councillor Fisher whether he thought he ought to have withdrawn his Call-In once the General Election was known about. Councillor Fisher commented that the delay caused by the Call-In had been 10 weeks, whilst the Council had owned the building for more than 3 years, and suggested that the administration therefore had caused far greater delay than he had by trying to hold the Executive to account.

### **Portfolio Holder's Summing Up – Councillor Ellesmere**

35.35 Councillor Ellesmere commented that Councillor Fisher didn't seem to know what he thought should happen to 4 College Street but noted that by using the Call-In process he had caused delays. Councillor Ellesmere explained that the administration wanted to get the building back into use as soon as possible, both because that would benefit the building and because it would generate income for the Council. Councillor Ellesmere asked members of the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee not to allow further delay by requiring the report to be considered by Council and then Executive but instead to allow the original decision to be implemented. Councillor Ellesmere noted that the scheme would cost money but commented that returning 4 College Street to use was the right thing to do.

### **Lead Signatory's Summing Up – Councillor Fisher**

35.36 Councillor Fisher commented that he agreed that 4 College Street was an important building but said that the options open to Executive had not been given fair consideration. Councillor Fisher said that the decision to carry out all of the works required immediately had been based on insufficient and partially erroneous information and that he had changed his view as a result of seeing the additional papers provided to the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Fisher commented that had the additional information been in the original report to Executive the decision probably wouldn't have been Called-In. Councillor Fisher commented that the building would only be worth £15,000 to £20,000 a year in rent as an office and so it did not make sense to do the additional works to convert it before the Masterplan for the site was complete.

35.37 Members of Executive left the meeting at this point.

35.38 A Motion to refer the decisions taken by Executive on 29 October 2019 in relation to report E/19/37 back to Executive was proposed by Councillor Pope, and seconded by Councillor Harsant. This Motion was **PUT** to the meeting and was **LOST**.

35.39 As there were no further proposals the Chair explained that the decision made by Executive on 29 October 2019 in relation to report E/19/37 would stand and could be implemented immediately.

The meeting closed at 7.25 pm

**Chair**