

Call in Notice – Cabinet Decision – 27 May 2021 – The Council’s Accommodation Strategy and the Harrow New Civic Centre

We would like to Call-in the decision made by Cllr. Graham Henson, Leader and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, Regeneration, Partnerships & Devolution and Cllr. Natasha Proctor, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance & Resources which was made at the Cabinet meeting on Thursday 27th May 2021.

The decision is question was The Council’s Accommodation Strategy and the Harrow New Civic Centre.

We believe this decision should be called-in for the reasons listed below.

Inadequate consultation with stakeholders prior to the decision

This decision will change the facilities the Council operates from and the way in which the Council will work for decades to come. As such, we believe the Council should run a meaningful consultation of Harrow residents as well as Council staff before making a decision. At present there has not been any open forum for residents to formally comment on the Accommodation Strategy. Also, residents should have been thoroughly consulted on the proposals to move Council offices to Forward Drive. No such consultation is mentioned in the reports for this decision.

At present the only consultation on which the Strategy is based was conducted on a previous proposal several years ago. It is not sufficient to rely on the consultation for the previous new Civic Centre plans when the current proposals are materially different, and the passage of time has also reduced the relevance of the previous consultation.

There also seems to have been very limited consultation with staff, with no evidence shown in the report of the views of staff on the Strategy, which will have a profound effect on their working environment.

The absence of adequate evidence on which to base a decision

The Accommodation Strategy is focused on the new ‘flexible futures’ scheme. This new way of working has not been finalised, employees have not been properly

consulted on the final proposals and nor have they been trialled. Hence this strategy is based on an incomplete, unscrutinised, and untested 'flexible futures' scheme, which the Council may find is unfit for purpose once implemented. As there has been no meaningful trial, there has been no proper evaluation of their impact on productivity or cross Council working.

Furthermore, the proposed parking at both the new Civic Centre and the Forward Drive site is not backed up with evidence. There is no analysis in the report of how staff travel to work and whether public transport is a viable option for significant numbers of staff. In addition, no analysis has been undertaken on how Councillors or residents attending meetings travel to the Civic Centre.

The current working situation both at the Council, and across the country, is very fluid. We are still in a pandemic and the current working situation is unlikely to last as things settle down. Therefore, it is not possible to truly gauge how many staff will need parking bays at the new Civic Centre or at Forward Drive, there for this part of the decision is without evidence.

There is a lack of proper evidence when it comes to the safety of staff, Councillors and residents leaving the Civic Centre after meetings at night. There will not be enough parking for Councillors, let alone staff and members of the public at the new Civic Centre. This means many people will have to park away from the Civic Centre, walk or rely on public transport. Given that a number of meetings keep Councillors, staff and the public in the Civic Centre well after dark, this Strategy has not addressed concerns over people's safety. In the wake of Sarah Everards murder, and the Council's duty of care to its staff and residents, this concern should be properly addressed in the Strategy.

No business plan has yet been presented for this Strategy for the new Civic Centre. The report states that the business case will be prepared in the next stage of the project. But that as it may be, how can Cabinet make an informed and evidenced decision, which will have a generational effect on Harrow, without having a business case?

The action is not proportionate to the desired outcome

The initial driver for a new Civic Centre in Wealdstone was to aid in the regeneration of that area. These new proposals, as made clear in the Voltrera report, will have minimal impact on regeneration in Wealdstone with the bulk of the staff now being

located at Forward Drive. This means that the Council will be spending tens of millions of pounds without significantly contributing to its desired outcome.

To be clear, this scheme is not cost neutral. It has only been made to seem cost neutral by taking many costs out of the scope of the Accommodation Strategy. For example, the cost of the Forward Drive development.

The decision and its appendices repeatedly call the proposed building at the Peel Road site a 'new Civic Centre'. The definition of a Civic Centre is a facility where all civic functions and services are centred. It is clear from this decision that this Strategy will fail to deliver a 'new Civic Centre'. Most Council officers will be based out of Forward Drive, a separate location from the Peel Road site, and ancillary sites will be based permanently in locations which have not been finalised. The 'new Civic Centre' will be nothing of the sort, as it will only host Council meetings, Councillors and Group Offices. Therefore, this strategy proposes action that is not proportionate to the desired outcome. It will not deliver a 'new Civic Centre', but instead we will only get a glorified Town Hall with separate offices in Forward Drive.

In effect, the Council is spending over £22 million on some meeting rooms.

Potential Human Rights Challenge

The Equality Impact Assessment (Appendix 4 of the Cabinet papers) shows the Council has at least 80, and potentially over 800 (including prefer not to say and unknown), disabled members of staff. This Strategy will reduce the 24 disabled bays (not 12 as stated in the report) at the current Civic Centre to just 5 at Forward Drive, it will also reduce the overall amount of parking by over 70%. This would mean there would not be an opportunity for people with disabilities to park at either the Forward Drive site or the HNC when the disabled spaces are fully occupied. There is no analysis in the EqIA of how many staff, who have classified themselves as having a disability, need to drive to work and how feasible a public transport alternative may be.

Also, the Strategy makes no allowance for the fact that parking in the streets surrounding both the HNC site and Forward Drive is already a significant problem. The recent construction of two high-rise developments in Palmerston Road, which have very limited parking facilities, has already strained parking in the area. The belief that all staff, residents in the area (in the car free developments) will walk, cycle, or take public transport to work is unrealistic and unsubstantiated.

Contrary to the Policy Framework

The Council passed a Borough Plan in February which does not refer to this significant change in its way of working. Previous references in Corporate Plans have always referred to Peel Road as being the main location for staff and civic meetings. This proposal splits the two functions and in effect means the Council will have two Civic Centres.

At the February Council meeting responsibility was delegated back to Cabinet for approving a Council Delivery Plan, this has not occurred. Until the Cabinet approves a Council Delivery Plan, it is difficult to see how this Accommodation Strategy would fit within the policy framework of the Council.

Contrary to, or not wholly in accordance with the budget framework

The budget makes clear that a new Civic Centre should be cost neutral. This strategy and the Council's current plans are only cost neutral by ignoring or placing out of scope many significant costs, including but not limited to:

- Cost of Forward Drive - £44 million
- Fit out of Forward Drive - £10.217 million
- Fit out of HNC – Unknown but likely to be millions
- Manage the decant - £225,000
- Rehouse ancillary services elsewhere in the borough - £500,000
- Future costs and loss of productivity from maintaining and serving residents from multiple ancillary locations – Unknown
- Modernisation and Additional Capacity Funding – Over four million

Signed by

Councillor Paul Osborn

Councillor Marilyn Ashton

Councillor John Hinkley

Councillor Chris Mote

Councillor Janet Mote

Councillor Anjana Patel