

Cabinet

Minutes



Monday 4 November 2024

NOTE: A recording of the meeting can be watched at on YouTube at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWxyMQzlr-Y&t=505s>

PRESENT

Councillor Stephen Cowan, Leader of the Council
Councillor Wesley Harcourt, Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Ecology
Councillor Andrew Jones, Cabinet Member for The Economy
Councillor Sharon Holder, Cabinet Member for Public Realm and Lead Member for Inclusive Community Engagement and Co-production
Councillor Rebecca Harvey, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Community Safety
Councillor Rowan Ree, Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform
Councillor Alex Sanderson, Deputy Leader (with responsibility for Children and Education)
Councillor Frances Umeh, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness
Councillor Zarar Qayyum, Cabinet Member for Enterprise and Skills

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Adronie Alford
Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler

1. MINUTES OF THE CABINET MEETING HELD ON 7 OCTOBER 2024

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 7 October 2024 be confirmed and signed as an accurate record of the proceedings, and that the outstanding actions be noted.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillor Bora Kwon.

3. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest.

4. CREATING A HOUSING COMPANY

Councillor Rowan Ree, Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform introduced the report proposing to establish a council-owned housing company to help to address the borough's affordable housing shortage. This company would give the Council additional flexibility in offering a broad range of affordable housing products to meet the varied needs of residents and to promote inclusive economic growth.

Councillor Adronie Alford asked what type and qualities of properties the company would be looking for. Her concern was about the suitability of the properties and the potential increase in the rental market if rents were at a higher rate than the Council's rates. This could provide a knock-on effect on raising all the local rents.

Councillor Ree replied that each investment would be assessed on a case-by-case basis and the scale of picking up properties off the market would not be significant enough to move the local housing market. The rates would be higher than the Council's rent in properties where a lot of work was necessary to restore it. This would help paying off the cost of the development and to bring it back to the Council's housing stock. Therefore, this would not have an impact on the private sector market or local rents.

Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler asked where the idea to create this company come from and how it would be financed.

Councillor Ree replied that this had been successfully tried and tested by many other local authorities. He added that the Council would borrow money at a discounted rate from the Public Works Loan Board, a government body, into this council-owned company. Each investment would be accessed individually to determine the value of the borrowing.

Councillor Ree added that the Council was not aiming at building up a large property portfolio. This company would give the Council extra flexibility and an option to take advantage of competitive housing market conditions in the future.

The Leader spoke about the concerns related to temporary accommodation, the unregulated private rented sector, and rents rising in line with market forces. The housing sector was not working for large parts of the population.

The Leader praised Councillor Andrew Jones for the robust negotiations with property developers, leading to hundreds of millions of pounds coming from CIL and Section 106. The Council currently had more social housing being built than anywhere else in London, and possibly the UK. However, more housing was needed to accommodate the population in the borough. Therefore, the Council wanted a legal mechanism that would step into the marketplace and be able to take wise judgments and make decisions backed up by a very strong business case. He reiterated that this company would make investments on a case-by-case basis.

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY BY THE CABINET MEMBERS:

Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Approve in principle the establishment of a wholly owned housing company limited by shares.
2. Delegate to the Executive Director of Finance and Corporate Services in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform and the Director of Legal Services:
 - a. to incorporate the company, establish its article of association and such other documents that are necessary to enable the establishment of the company, its board and governance structure.
 - b. to take any necessary steps including procuring and appointing any consultants or suppliers to support the governance of the company, and support feasibility studies on any trading activity that company may undertake subject to future decisions.
 - c. Appointment of company directors.
3. Note that the company business case/s prior to incorporation of the company will be brought back to Cabinet for approval.

Reason for decision:

As set out in the report.

Alternative options considered and rejected:

As outlined in the report.

Record of any conflict of interest:

None.

Note of dispensation in respect of any declared conflict of interest:

None.

5. CIVIC CAMPUS - STRATEGIC OPTIONS

The Leader noted that this was a late report added to this agenda due to its urgency. Cabinet accepted it as an urgent report.

Councillor Andrew Jones, Cabinet Member for the Economy, updated on the Civic Campus Regeneration Project following the report presented at the last Cabinet in October. The campus project involved private sale/affordable homes, as well as office facilities and the refurbishment of the historic town hall. In May 2022 a significant health and safety issue had been reported, halting work for a significant period.

The exempt appendix set out the progress to date and suggested options available to the Council to further the objectives of completing the project in a timely period, to the appropriate technical standards and at the lowest cost.

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY BY THE CABINET MEMBERS:

To agree that appendix 1 and the recommendations contained therein are not for publication on the basis that it contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) as set out in paragraph 3 of schedule 12a of the local government act 1972 (as amended).

Reason for decision:

As set out in the report.

Alternative options considered and rejected:

As outlined in the report.

Record of any conflict of interest:

None.

Note of dispensation in respect of any declared conflict of interest:

None.

6. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The Key Decision List was noted.

7. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED:

That under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public and press be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the exempt items of business on the grounds that they contain information relating to the financial or business affairs of a person (including the authority holding that information) as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), and that the public interest in maintaining the exemption currently outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Meeting started: 7.00 pm
Meeting ended: 8.00 pm

Chair