

**TITLE OF REPORT: ITEM REFERRED FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:
20 SEPTEMBER 2016 – COMMUNITY CENTRE LEASES**

The following is an extract from the Draft Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 20 September 2016.

57. COMMUNITY CENTRE LEASES

During the item being debated Councillor Bill Davidson declared a Declarable Interest as he was a Trustee of Coombes Community Centre, Royston. He advised that this interest was of such significance he would leave the room for the remainder of the debate.

During the item being debated Councillor Jean Green declared a Declarable Interest as she was a Trustee of Coombes Community Centre, Royston. She advised that this interest was of such significance she would leave the room for the remainder of the debate.

The Head of Finance Performance and Asset Management presented the report of the Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance entitled Community Centre Leases.

He reminded Members that the approach taken during negotiation of renewal leases had been guided by the Community Halls Strategy, which included that “When community centre leases come up for renewal the Council will seek opportunities to agree a renewal on a repairs basis that is appropriate for the operation of the facility and provides value for money to the local taxpayer”.

This update report had been requested by Cabinet on 30 March 2016 when they resolved that “The deadline for the conclusion of the discussions/negotiations referred... above be fixed as August 2016, and if no agreement between the parties is reached by then, the matter be reported back to Cabinet.”

Most Community Centre Leases had either been resolved or were near resolution, but there were three Centres that would require more time for negotiations as follows:

Coombes Community Centre, Royston

Negotiations were continuing and it was felt that there was potential to achieve a lease that was broadly in line with the requirements of the Community Halls Strategy and therefore more time was being requested.

St Michaels Mount Community Centre, Hitchin

There was some potential to achieve a lease that was in line with the recommendations of Cabinet and therefore more time was being requested.

Walsworth Community Centre, Hitchin

This was the least modern of the Centres therefore a condition report had been prepared, which would be shared with the community group as soon as possible.

An application had been received for this Centre to be made an Asset of Community Value and this would be considered shortly.

In all cases it was necessary to assess the value of Community Centres to the community against the cost to the Council.

Members noted that, if negotiations with Walsworth Community Association were unsuccessful, one of the options was to close the Centre. They were concerned that, should this option become a strong possibility, Cabinet be consulted before any final decision was made.

The Head of Finance, Performance and Asset Management advised that he would expect to report to Cabinet with any final options.

Members asked for clarification regarding the deadline dates quoted in the report. They sought reassurance that the additional time requested could result in positive resolutions and queried whether a sufficient amount of time had been requested, particularly in respect of the Walsworth Community Centre.

The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance advised that the last time this issue was presented to Cabinet they had requested that work continue until 31 August 2016 and that this report asked for that deadline to be extended.

The Head of Finance, Performance and Asset Management confirmed that the aim was to reach a positive resolution and that progress could be made in the time requested.

Members queried whether the Council had continued to maintain the buildings during the period of negotiations and asked what maintenance work had been completed during this period and asked for this information to be circulated to Members.

The Head of Finance, Performance and Asset Management reminded Members that there was a fund, totalling £1 million that was available for all Community Centres to make bids to for capital works.

One Member suggested that the Council should consider selling some assets and using the income to maintain other assets, such as community centres.

The Head of Finance, Performance and Asset Management advised that consideration was being given to ways in which capital assets could be best used and that a report regarding this would be presented to Cabinet in November 2016.

The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance reminded Members that the Council was in a tough financial position and had to make some tough decisions about where it could continue spend its revenue funding. The Medium Term Financial Strategy identified that the Council had to save £2.75 million over the next 4 years and was in addition to using £3.4 million of balances to bridge the gap

Following the debate it was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Head of Finance, Performance and Asset Management be requested to refer the report regarding use of Capital Assets, due to be considered by Cabinet in November 2016, to the Chairman of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee;
- (2) That the Head of Finance, Performance and Asset Management be requested to circulate to all Members and Substitutes of this Committee, details of maintenance work undertaken on Walsworth Community Centre during the negotiation period together with a comparison of work undertaken in previous years and, how that compares to any other similar Community Centres (if applicable)

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (1) That recommendations 2.1, 2.2 and 2.4 be supported;
- (2) That Cabinet agree to more time for similar negotiations (to Coombes and St Michaels Mount) to be undertaken with Walsworth Community Association. Should there be no substantive progress by 31 January 2017 then Officers be authorised to consider alternative management arrangements and uses for the community centre;
- (3) That, should the option to close a Community Centre become a strong possibility, a report be presented to Cabinet prior to any final decision being taken.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to comment of the report entitled Community Centre Leases prior to consideration by Cabinet.

[NOTE: The report to which this referral relates is Item 14 on this agenda.]