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Paul Hodson, Town Clerk and Chief Executive

Date: 8 September 2023

Dear Councillor,

You are hereby summoned to attend an Extraordinary Meeting of **Dunstable Town Council** which will be held on **Wednesday 13 September 2023** at **Grove House in the Council Chamber commencing at 6.00 pm**. Members of the public and press are welcome to attend in person or online via MS Teams. Those who wish to attend online are asked to request an invite by emailing [democratic@dunstable.gov.uk](mailto:democratic@dunstable.gov.uk) by 4pm on Tuesday 12 September 2023.

### **AGENDA**

*This meeting will be filmed by the Council and broadcast live on the Internet and will be capable of repeated viewing. If you are seated in the Council Chamber it is likely that the cameras will capture your image. By your presence you are deemed to consent to be filmed, and to the use of those images and sound recordings for webcasting or training purposes.*

*If you address the committee in person or via Teams, your contribution will be recorded and broadcast, unless this is during a private session, as permitted by the Access to Information provisions.*

1. Apologies for Absence.
2. Declarations of Interest
3. Public Question Time
4. To discuss Central Bedfordshire Council's proposals for Watling House and agree a response, if required.

A report and two appendices are included, which have been issued Central Bedfordshire Council's Members of that Council's [Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee](#) to be held on Thursday 14 September, prior to consideration by CBC's Executive Committee in October.

Yours faithfully

*Members are reminded when making decisions that the Public Sector Equality Duty 2010 requires Members to have due regard to the need to: Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Act, advance equality of opportunity between people who share a characteristic and those who don't, and to foster good relations between people who share a characteristic and those who don't.*

Paul Hodson

Town Clerk and Chief Executive

To: All Members of Dunstable Town Council

Copies to: Central Bedfordshire Councillors for Dunstable for information

# Central Bedfordshire Council

14 September 2023

## Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny

### Disposal of land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices

#### Report of:

Cllr Watkins, Executive Member for Business, Housing and Public Assets,  
[Steven.Watkins@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Steven.Watkins@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

#### Responsible Director:

Lorna Carver, Director of Place and Communities,  
[Lorna.Carver@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Lorna.Carver@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

#### This report relates to a key decision

#### Purpose of this report

To provide Members the opportunity to review and comment on the Disposal of land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices draft Executive Report before it is considered by the Executive Committee in October.

#### RECOMMENDATION(S)

The Committee is asked to:

1. Consider and submit comments on the Disposal of land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices draft Executive Report.

#### Executive Summary

1. The draft Executive paper recommends the disposal of land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices on the open market.
2. When reviewing the Council's service needs in the Dunstable area that this site could support, the Meeting the Accommodation Needs of Older People (MANOP) confirmed they require a Council-owned care home to secure long-term access to affordable care home places in the area.

3. There are no other live viable service requirements.
4. The draft Executive Report requests authority be delegated to the Director of Place and Communities, in consultation with the Executive Member for Business, Housing and Public Assets, the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Resources, and the Executive Member for Finance, to approve the terms of the disposal (whether it be part or all of the area) and to authorise the completion and execution of all related legal documentation.

## **Background**

5. On 6 December 2022, Executive approved the Council's Accommodation Plan reflecting the decision in October, that Watling House was no longer required as an office for Council staff and is therefore considered surplus.

## **Options for consideration**

6. There are three services with accommodation requirements in the Dunstable area:
  - a. The Housing Revenue Account have a requirement for additional housing stock, Dunstable being an area of intense pressure. Viability assessments were carried out to consider redevelopment of the site to deliver affordable housing. No scenario resulted in an acceptable payback period therefore it is not viable for the Housing Revenue Account;
  - b. Children's Services require additional places for children with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) identified in the Specialised School Plan adopted at Executive. However, Watling House is not within scope as vacant education sites are to be explored; and
  - c. MANOP require a Council-owned care home to secure long-term access to affordable care home places in this area. They require approximately 1.25 acres to accommodate a 70-bed care home. There is funding available for land acquisition and design fees in the 2023/24 budget.
7. A viability assessment for a Council-owned care home is being progressed considering both conversion and new build, however this would only utilise a portion of the land available.
8. Therefore, disposal of the land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices on the open market is recommended to deliver a capital receipt.
9. If a Council-owned Care Home is viable and a portion of land is to be retained for it, a further paper will be presented to Executive.
10. Appendix A is a map showing surplus land and buildings identified for disposal.

## **Reason/s for decision**

11. See draft Executive report.

## **Council priorities**

12. See draft Executive report.

## **Implications**

### **Legal Implications**

13. See draft Executive papers.

### **Financial and Risk Implications**

14. See draft Executive papers.

### **Equalities and Fairness Implications**

15. See draft Executive papers.

### **Sustainability Implications**

16. See draft Executive papers.

## **Conclusion and next Steps**

17. The Committee is asked to consider and comment on the draft Executive report.

18. The Executive will be asked to consider the Executive report at its meeting in October. The Committee's comments will be presented to the Executive to inform their decision making.

## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Executive report - Disposal of land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices

Appendix B: Map showing surplus land and buildings identified for disposal.

## **Background Papers**

None

### **Report author(s):**

Iain Berry, Assistant Director Assets, Place and Communities  
[Iain.Berry@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Iain.Berry@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

## Appendix A

### Central Bedfordshire Council

14 September 2023

**Executive – this report is draft only at this stage**

## **Disposal of land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices**

**Report of:**

Cllr Watkins, Executive Member for Business, Housing and Public Assets,  
[Steven.Watkins@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Steven.Watkins@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

**Responsible Director:**

Lorna Carver, Director of Place and Communities,  
[Lorna.Carver@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Lorna.Carver@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

**This report relates to a decision that is Key**

### **Purpose of this report**

To approve the disposal of land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices on the open market.

### **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

The Executive is asked to:

1. Authorise the disposal land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices on the open market.
2. Delegate authority to the Director of Place and Communities, in consultation with the Executive Member for Business, Housing and Public Assets, the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Resources, and the Executive Member for Finance, to approve the terms of the disposal (whether it be part or all of the area) and to authorise the completion and execution of all related legal documentation.

## **Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations**

1. This section will be completed following Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

## **Executive Summary**

2. Executive received papers in October 2022 following a public consultation about in-person customer services in the Dunstable area, and a further paper in December 2022 that led to Watling House being designated as surplus.
3. When reviewing the Council's service needs in the Dunstable area that this site could support, the Meeting the Accommodation Needs of Older People (MANOP) confirmed they require a Council-owned care home to secure long-term access to affordable care home places in the area.
4. There are no other live viable service requirements.
5. Therefore, this report recommends to Executive the disposal of land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices on the open market.
6. The report requests authority be delegated to the Director of Place and Communities, in consultation with the Executive Member for Business, Housing and Public Assets, the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Resources, and the Executive Member for Finance, to approve the terms of the disposal (whether it be part of all of the area) and to authorise the completion and execution of all related legal documentation.

## **Background information**

7. On 11 October 2022, the results of a consultation about in-person customer services in the Dunstable area were presented. Executive agreed that services should continue to be delivered in the modern, responsive way that the public is requesting. It also agreed that there will always be need for face-to-face services, which can be delivered at a variety of locations across the Dunstable area, including the library/leisure centre and the Health and Care Hub. This change to service delivery has been implemented.
8. On 6 December 2022, Executive approved the Council's Accommodation Plan reflecting the decision in October, that Watling House was no longer required as an office for Council staff and is therefore considered surplus.
9. A project to vacate Watling House started in mid-January 2023 and was successfully completed in three months.
10. Closure activities included the relocation of staff who required a fixed desk, relocation of all retained paperwork and equipment, digitisation of paper files and microfiche, and removal of paperwork, equipment, and furniture.
11. The building was closed to staff on 24th March and the building was considered vacant from 1<sup>st</sup> April save for temporary use of a small area by the Ambulance Service.

## **Options for consideration**

12. There are three services with accommodation requirements in the Dunstable area:
  - a. The Housing Revenue Account has a requirement for additional housing stock, Dunstable being an area of intense pressure. Viability assessments were carried out to consider redevelopment of the site to deliver affordable housing. No scenario resulted in an acceptable payback period therefore it is not viable for the Housing Revenue Account.
  - b. Children's Services require additional places for children with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) identified in the Specialised School Plan adopted at Executive. However, Watling House is not within scope as vacant education sites are to be explored; and
  - c. MANOP require a Council-owned care home to secure long-term access to affordable care home places in this area. They require approximately 1.25 acres to accommodate a 70-bed care home. There is funding available for land acquisition and design fees in the 2023/24 budget.
13. A viability assessment for a Council-owned care home is being progressed considering both conversion and new build, however this would only utilise a portion of the land available.
14. Therefore, disposal of the land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices on the open market is recommended to deliver a capital receipt.
15. If a Council-owned Care Home is viable and a portion of land is to be retained for it, a further paper will be presented to Executive.
16. Appendix A is a map showing surplus land and buildings identified for disposal.

## **Reason/s for decision**

17. Watling House is surplus to requirements. It has been closed to the public and staff since April 2023. There is a significant cost burden associated with maintaining and securing a vacant building with efficiencies built into the Council's MTFP based on nil cost to the Council.
18. The MTFP pipeline identifies a Council requirement in the area, Care Home 5 – Chiltern Vale.
19. Executive authority is required for disposal of any estate or interest valued over £500K.

## **Council priorities**

20. Disposing of a surplus site on the open market aligns with the Council priority of "Making best use of resources" because it will maximise the capital receipt and bring a disused site back into active use.



## **Implications**

### **Legal Implications**

21. Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972 provides that the Council may dispose of its land as it chooses but, except in the case of a short tenancy, the consent of the Secretary of State is required if it is intended to dispose of land at an undervalue of more than £2 million.
22. To ensure the Council complies with its 'Section 123 duties', commercial property agents would be instructed to market the site on the open market, manage the offers received and assist the Council in agreeing the best available sale terms.
23. Pathfinder Legal Services will be instructed to deal with the legal documentation relating to the disposal, providing advice throughout to ensure the transaction proceeds as envisaged and in accordance with the heads of terms agreed.

### **Financial and Risk Implications**

24. MTFP capital receipts targets assumed c£6M capital receipt for Watling House and adjacent land holdings (Brewers Hill depot, 'The Beach' Car Park) in 2023/24.
25. C£600K of revenue efficiencies have been realised in the MTFP associated with closure and vacation of the former Watling House offices.
26. The ongoing costs of retaining Watling House have been minimised as the Council is not liable for rates on the building while it is vacant. However, there are still costs associated with managing a vacant property, for example, security, grounds maintenance and Health and Safety compliance checks.
27. The Ambulance Service are meeting all costs associated with keeping Watling House open whilst they make temporary use of it.
28. MTFP pipeline contains £14.7M for construction / purchase of Care Home 5 – Chiltern Vale across 2024/25 to 2026/27.
29. Brewers Hill depot has a budget income of £15K pa which will not be achieved should the site be disposed of however this will be offset by other unrelated efficiencies.
30. A disposal on the open market will maximise the capital receipt. The timing of the capital receipt would be dependent on market conditions and the time required to negotiate the terms of the sale.
31. Specialist disposal advice has been commissioned to provide expert advice on the most advantageous strategy for disposal.

### **Equalities and Fairness Implications**

32. The Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimization and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. The site would be properly marketed with equal opportunity with all offers invited before the closing date.
33. The equalities and fairness implications have been considered in the two prior Executive papers relating to Watling House and careful consideration has been given to the range of accommodation needs in the Dunstable area.

34. On 11 October 2022, the results of a consultation about in-person customer services in the Dunstable area along with an Equalities Impact Assessment were presented to Executive. Due consideration was given to the information provided and to the Public Sector Equality Duty in making the decision. Executive agreed that services should continue to be delivered in the modern, responsive way that the public is requesting. It also agreed that there will always be need for face-to-face services, which can be delivered at a variety of locations across the Dunstable area, including the library/leisure centre and the Health and Care Hub.
35. On 6 December 2022, Executive approved the Council's Accommodation Plan reflecting the decision in October, that Watling House was no longer required as an office for Council staff and is therefore considered surplus.
36. The Accommodation Plan includes a focus on delivering an improved offer for residents with them accessing more cohesive and joined up services. This includes bringing together services and meeting spaces, incorporating a variety of uses and co-locating health and social care services. The plan also includes consideration of provision for older and disabled people and future educational requirements.
37. The sale of land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices on the open market could provide additional housing or employment opportunities in Central Bedfordshire.

### **Sustainability Implications**

38. On 14 September 2020 the Council's Executive endorsed the Central Bedfordshire Sustainability Plan 2020 – 2030 and recommended its adoption to full Council.
39. Improving the utilisation of Council buildings is one of the actions in the Council's Sustainability Plans. Rationalising use of Council buildings makes better use of the Council's existing estate, as well as reducing the Council's overall energy consumption and carbon footprint.
40. Watling House performs poorly with respect to energy consumption, the buildings boilers are overdue replacement, and the changes brought about by hybrid working and how customers access services (and from where) mean that disposal will make a significant contribution to reducing the Council's greenhouse gas emissions.
41. Whilst what happens next is yet to be decided it is likely it will involve redevelopment of the site in one form or another, which would need to be done in line with the sustainability and climate change policies in the local plan.
42. The sustainability implications of any proposed development would be assessed as part of the planning consent decision.

### **Conclusion and next Steps**

43. The former Watling House offices present a revenue burden as a vacant premise. Disposal of the land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices delivers a Capital Receipt, but part of the site can be retained if it be viable to deliver Care Home 5 – Chiltern Vale on part of the site.

44. Should Executive approve disposal of land and buildings at and adjacent to the Council's former Watling House offices on the open market the next steps are:
- a. To conclude viability for delivery of Care Home 5 – Chiltern Vale.
  - b. To market and dispose of land and buildings in accordance with disposal advice received and with regard to any land to be retained for Care Home 5.
  - c. If Care Home 5 is viable and land is to be retained for it, a further paper will be presented to Executive.
45. If Executive do not approval the disposal, they are requested to provide direction on how they wish to proceed.

## **Appendices**

Appendix B: map showing surplus land and buildings identified for disposal.

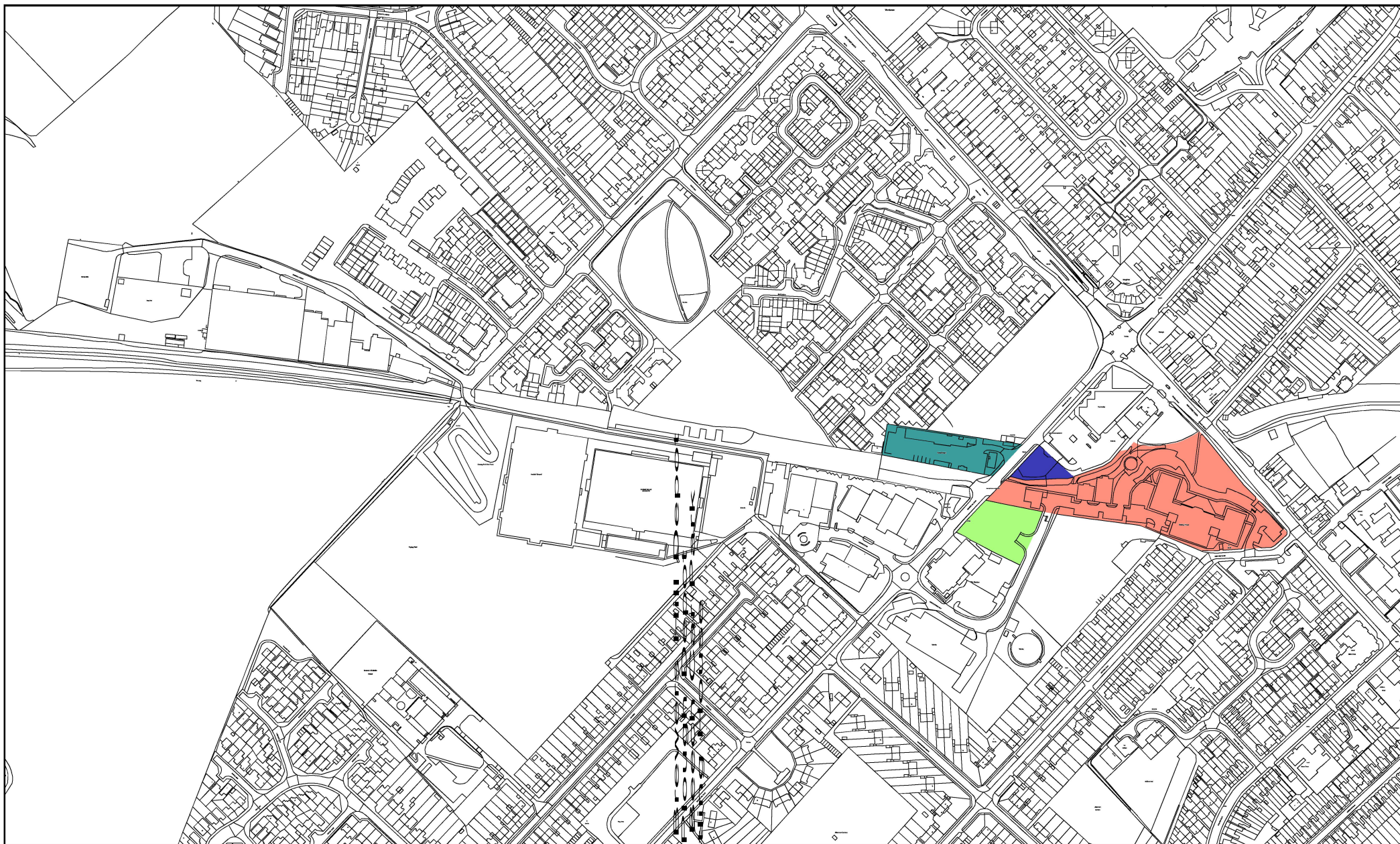
## **Background Papers**

None

### **Report author(s):**

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# APPENDIX B



Date: 06 June 2019

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## Assets at Watling House & Brewers Hill Dunstable

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