Stage 3 Complaint case Number 423022

Thank you for your reply to our Stage 3 Complaint – HBC Office Accommodation Strategy – dated 6th November 2013 and received 13th November 2013.

We are pleased to finally have the requested floor area of the various properties involved and three documents –

- Property Options Appraisals, Appointment of specialist consultants 24th May 2010
- Accommodation Strategy January 2010
  Appendix 1 on the contents page is entitled ‘Bibliography’ but on page 18 it is a diagram of the Hub & Spoke office model. Also, appendices 2, 3, 4 & 5 are not included, but no reason is given for their omission.

We see that the author of the development brief is not credited on the document. Also APPENDIX 2 ‘Assumptions’ was missing, but no reason was given for not copying this to us. Your letter notes that the Council Constitution and decision making process has been carefully followed. Also noted is the public involvement in this process.
However, your letter continues the pattern of a disinclination to answer almost all of our questions. The current Leader of the Council has failed to answer our questions, and the Chief Executive has dismissed our enquiries, in an extremely short email of 30th September 2013.

The problem we see is that a decision making process can be followed, but the information and content available during that process can be sadly lacking. You say that Councillors have a duty to satisfy themselves that all material issues have been included in reports or brought to their attention before making their decisions. Council Members to a considerable extent rely on the professionals – the Executive and officers - for their information. The professionals surely have a duty to put as complete a picture as they can before Councillors.

We believe that some important aspects of the relocation studies have not been put before councillors.

The Local Plan has been agreed and the draft sent forward to the Inquiry next year. The fact that the Knapping Mount/Brandreth House site is a housing allocation (as is the previously favoured site for relocation – the Old Police Station) does not feature.

The Harrogate conservation area is not considered. Brandreth House, according to the development guidelines for housing development, should be kept and converted, along with the adjoining designated open space.

The old police station was likewise noted as a building to be retained and converted as a housing site – not demolished as previously proposed by the Cabinet. We presume that, if a private developer proposed to build offices on any allocated housing sites - or to demolish valued buildings in the conservation area, their proposals would be firmly rejected. (See our letter to the Chief Executive dated 20th September 2013.)

No consideration has been given to the historic administrative and spa facilities centred around Crescent Gardens. We have the Royal Hall, the Royal Baths, the Pump Room Museum, the Mercer Gallery and the Crescent Gardens Offices. This latter building, prior to remodelling to its present form, was the Victoria Baths, which contained accommodation for the administrative functions of the Borough.

The Accommodation Strategy of January 2010 under ‘strengths’ in the SWOT analysis para 4.1.7 notes the ‘Universally recognised HQ at Crescent Gardens, with traditional Council chamber. Quality building capable of undergoing alterations/refurbishment.’ Despite this ‘strength’, section 4.3 – ‘Opportunities’ – does not offer Crescent Gardens as a possible HQ but Knapping Mount and Claro Road are specifically mentioned in this context.

The whole thrust of the Accommodation Strategy and the Brief for Appointment of Consultants is the ‘Business Case’. We would emphasize once again that the Civic Society is wholeheartedly of the view that consolidation of Council administrative functions is appropriate. Capital can be released from the sale of Council properties and running costs saved at the same time as observing the Local Plan and treating our Heritage with respect. The ‘Business Case’ is reiterated several times in the Development Brief, but the decision of the Council to opt for
'Option 8’ – demolition and rebuild at Knapping Mount/Brandreth House – does not seem to offer a good financial outcome. Why would there be a desire to build offices at vast expense on the Council owned site that is the most valuable to sell for housing? (and thereby fail to respect the draft Local Plan). To demolish and build new offices here, according to the favoured scheme, relies on the sale of assets and savings on staffing and running costs over a period of 25 years. The Accommodation Strategy at para 6.3 says that ‘total cost should not exceed the disposal proceeds from current offices which could be freed up plus an additional sum to represent the capitalised value of any net revenue savings that could be achieved e.g. from staff reductions plus savings in property running costs’. Staffing costs could/would be saved, no matter where the office accommodation was situated, of course. It would seem a more reliable plan to refurbish Council owned buildings with funds raised only from the sale of assets. Running cost savings over time would then be available to reduce expenditure each year, rather than being squandered in repaying loans. If revenue savings were less than predicted (entirely possible!), and not capable of servicing the loans, then our services would suffer because of the shortfall.

Finally, in terms of procedure, despite being lobbied directly and through the media prior to Cabinet, Scrutiny, Full Council and afterwards, our concerns of anomalies and omissions in the reports related to Options 5, 6, and 8, plus the lack of briefing over the future for local government, still remain unanswered.

We note that you do not uphold our Complaint, and also your failure to answer the questions and concerns in our Formal Complaint and in our letter to the Chief Executive dated 20th September 2013. In addition, as noted above, no reasons are given for not including various Appendices to the Accommodation Strategy and the Development Brief.

This Society has in the past had commendable communication with most members and officers, and we are reluctant to proceed to the Ombudsman, but feel duty bound to do so, due to the lack of communication in this case.

Yours sincerely,

Henry Pankhurst
Chairman
Harrogate Civic Society