

# Public Document Pack

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18 March 2024

Dear Member,

## **County Council - Friday, 22 March 2024**

Please find enclosed the briefing notes for the motions to be debated at the meeting of the County Council to be held on Friday, 22 March 2024.

<b>Agenda No</b>	<b>Item</b>
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<b>16(a)</b>	<b>Motion on Property Disposal</b> (Pages 3 - 4)
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Briefing note on factual background information attached.

<b>16(b)</b>	<b>Motion on Digital Exclusion</b> (Pages 5 - 8)
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Briefing note on factual background information attached.

Yours sincerely

Tony Kershaw  
Director of Law and Assurance

**To all members of the County Council**

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## County Council 22 March 2024

### Item 16(a) – Notice of Motion from Cllr Milne on Property Disposal

#### Briefing Note

Disposals of land by councils are governed by a duty to obtain the best value consideration. Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972 states:

*123. Disposal of land by principal councils (England and Wales)*

- (1) Subject to the following provisions of this section, a principal council may dispose of land held by them in any manner they wish.*
- (2) Except with the consent of the Secretary of State, a council shall not dispose of land under this section, otherwise than by way of a short tenancy, for a consideration less than the best that can reasonably be obtained.*

A general consent for disposals of land for less than best consideration was issued by the Secretary of State, and allows a local authority, if it wishes, to dispose of land for less than best consideration if it considers the disposal will contribute to the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of its area and the undervalue is no more than £2m.

The Council has delegated authority to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Property to declare assets surplus and, to the Assistant Director (Property and Assets), in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Property, authority to dispose of property declared surplus and not required by another service of the Council or other appropriate body up to £500,000 in value. Disposal decisions above that value are for the Cabinet Member.

#### **Asset Management Policy and Strategy**

The Council Plan 2021-25 includes as one of its priorities: Making Best Use of Resources. The plan sets out the objective “to maximise the use of our assets by disposing of surplus assets and looking creatively at how we might use our assets to support economic growth”.

The [Asset Management Policy and Strategy](#) 2022/23 to 2025/26 which is aligned to the Council Plan has a key objective to manage, maintain, acquire and dispose of surplus property effectively, efficiently and sustainably, together with optimising financial return. Its objectives include - To ensure an options appraisal of all potentially surplus assets giving due consideration to a range of options including social, community or environmental use, particularly where this could complement the Council’s ambitions relating to climate change where it is viable.

#### **Declaring property surplus to requirements and disposing of property**

When a property or piece of land is no longer required for Council operational use, the asset is declared surplus by the Cabinet Member for Finance and Property. All surplus declarations are published as key decisions, are available for scrutiny and the local member is advised if an asset in their division is to be declared surplus.

Once an asset is declared surplus the Property and Assets team will work through the options for the asset in line with Our Objectives as set out in the Asset

Management Policy and Strategy. After the options have been explored a further decision is made on either a sale of the asset (for a capital receipt), let it for a rental income, transfer to the joint venture or to retain it for non-service purposes such as redevelopment for investment, regeneration, or for viable social, community or environmental use, particularly where this could complement the Council's ambitions relating to climate change.

If a decision is made to sell the asset and the value is above £500,000 there will be a second key decision by the Cabinet Member for Finance and Property, to approve the disposal, once again available for scrutiny and again the local member is advised at an early stage. The asset is marketed to ensure best value consideration through a fair and transparent process and the key decision will be taken following the conclusion of the marketing.

It can be seen from the options appraisal process that a surplus declaration does not mean an asset will automatically be sold, or even allocated to the Joint Venture for development. A decision to transfer an asset to the Joint Venture will be through a second key decision and available for scrutiny (as per the paragraph above). The Joint Venture (JV) is just one of a number of disposal options available and all other options will be considered. An asset will only transfer to the JV if this route is deemed the most beneficial overall.

### **Set out below are some variations to the general process**

In the case of property or assets acquired or designated for highway use, the authority to declare surplus to highway requirements is delegated to the Director of Place Services. Once surplus the property is passed to the Property and Assets team to assess options although in most cases disposal on the market is the most likely outcome for this type of asset.

In most cases of land previously used or held for education purposes, formal written consent to dispose is also required from the Secretary of State for Education. Such consent can impose conditions on the sale.

### **Planning and Local Plans**

Consideration of planning implications or the Local Plans of local planning authorities and matters such as the form of any proposed development would be carried out as part of engagement with the relevant planning authority in accordance with standard planning requirements. This would be the case for any development proposal, whether within the JV or otherwise.

### **Lee Harris**

Director of Place Services

## County Council – 22 March 2024

### Item 16(b) – Notice of Motion from Cllr McGregor on Digital Exclusion

#### Briefing Note

#### Understanding the position

The County Council's Community Safety and Wellbeing Service, within the Communities Directorate, working with Citizens Online has developed an in depth understanding of digital inclusion, access and safety issues and barriers across West Sussex.

From research undertaken by Citizens Online in 2023 it is estimated that:

- 13% (82,953) of adults in West Sussex either do not use the internet or need support to do so.
- Of these, 6% (38,286) are not online. This is higher than the national average which is at around 4%.

From the research, 29% of West Sussex residents told us that local government should support people with digital skills (the second most popular response after friends and family).

In West Sussex digital exclusion disproportionately affects older people, those on low income and those who are disabled.

- Older people - West Sussex residents aged 75+ are much more likely to not use the internet than younger people. Research suggests a lack of digital skills and confidence is a significant barrier stopping many of today's over-75-year-olds going online, alongside the associated costs.
- Those on low income - Residents in West Sussex with lower incomes are more likely to not use the internet. Nationally, those with lower incomes have less skills in the Essential Digital Skills groups, compared to those on higher incomes.
- Those who are disabled - People with a long-term physical or mental health condition, or disability, are less likely to be frequent internet users. Local research for West Sussex mirrors national statistics.

#### Action within the Library Service

Libraries offer the space, equipment and trained staff and volunteers to support residents who are digitally excluded. All libraries offer free access to computers or Wi-Fi for those using their own device. Any resident in need can contact the Library Digital Support service for initial help with digital enquiries, this can be via the helpline 0330 222 3455, email [library.digital.support@westsussex.gov.uk](mailto:library.digital.support@westsussex.gov.uk), or by directly visiting a library.

All library staff have been trained to provide in-person help and support, and most libraries also have Digital Volunteers who are able to provide more targeted one-to-one support for individuals in greatest need. The volunteers can offer free support in libraries by appointment, on a range of digital enquiries from setting up an email account, to help with online shopping, or being safe online. Libraries currently respond to over 2,000 enquiries each month for digital support.

## **Digital Safety and support**

In 2023 the West Sussex Staying Safe Online E-newsletter was sent to over 7,000 residents monthly and reshared to an estimated 30,000+ residents via partners. Anyone can sign up to receive the newsletter by visiting [westsussex.gov.uk/staying-safe-online](https://westsussex.gov.uk/staying-safe-online). There were 3,481 people trained and supported by the Digital Safety Team, with 422 professionals trained on digital safeguarding. The Digital Safety Volunteers (formally Digital Ambassadors) delivered a range of digital safety awareness and engagement activity to residents. The volunteers regularly share information via their networks, deliver talks to local community groups and raise awareness by attending and supporting local events.

Alongside this, a Digital Inclusion, Access, and Safety focused website ([westsussex.gov.uk/digitalinclusion](https://westsussex.gov.uk/digitalinclusion)) resource was developed with partners, including a directory of organisations that offer digital skills, data, or devices support. A partnership of key stakeholders was formed, including local government and the voluntary sector, with regular meetings taking place to share ideas, best practice and develop future approaches.

Digital Inclusion Awareness Training has started to be piloted within the county, a key focus of training involves considering alternatives to digital engagement for residents as part of programmes of delivery, projects, and services. A marketing campaign to raise awareness of the digital skills support available is taking place with adverts in local press and in over 80 buses throughout the county. A digital skills and confidence survey has been undertaken across all County Council staff, the findings of which will be used to highlight priorities for internal learning and development.

## **Approach to digital inclusion**

As a result of all this work we are developing a draft Digital Inclusion, Access and Safety strategic approach that will inform the County Council's wider Digital Strategy. The vision for this strategic approach is that everyone in West Sussex can benefit from being online and is able to access and experience safely the wide-ranging opportunities that being online gives them. Everyone in West Sussex should be able to fully participate in our digital society. To achieve this, we will focus on four priorities and state our ambitions and commitments. The four priorities include:

- Making digital inclusion part of the culture.
- Supporting residents to safely access the benefits of the internet.
- Building digital skills, confidence, motivation, and trust.
- Connectivity and access to devices.

## **Digital connectivity**

The delivery of technologies such as gigabit-capable broadband and advanced mobile infrastructure is predominantly a commercial activity. However, the County Council has long recognised the importance that fast and reliable digital infrastructure has on the daily lives of our communities and businesses. We continue to work with government and commercial telecoms suppliers to increase and accelerate the availability of this vital infrastructure. In particular, we continue to target our resources at supporting our hardest to reach and rural communities which are least likely to be the recipient of commercial investment.

Our Better Connected project played a key role in enabling 97% of all premises being able to receive a Superfast connection. Currently 69% of all premises can receive a gigabit-capable connection. The County Council has invested £5m via our West Sussex 'Top-Up' to the UK Gigabit Voucher Scheme resulting in 10,000 premises being able to receive a gigabit-capable connection by the end of 2024.

We have worked with the Government to ensure that West Sussex has been included in the early phases of Project Gigabit which will result in multi-million investment in our digital infrastructure. We will continue to identify new opportunities to improve digital connectivity throughout West Sussex and we have identified opportunities to improve mobile connectivity. For a comprehensive overview of our approach please refer to the Digital Infrastructure Strategy found on these pages: [Gigabit-capable broadband - West Sussex County Council](#).

### **Customer Engagement and Access to Services**

Work is underway to develop a strategy that will set our ambitions for developing and increasing the channels in which we engage with all our customers and deliver services. This will include increasing the offer of accessing our services using digital tools where appropriate and will be underpinned by digital inclusion, access and safety – focusing on improving the customer experience. The draft strategy is expected to be presented to Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee in June.

### **Lee Harris**

Director of Place Services

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