**Minutes of the 18th Meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on Wednesday 29 July 2020, by Zoom Teleconferencing**

**Present:** Keith Smith,Shaunagh Lambe, Catherine McBride, Dr Graham Gault

**Apologies:** Emma Loughridge, Brendan Morgan, Siobhan McElhinney, Majella Mathews (on leave) and Sam Gallaher.

**In Attendance:** Gerry Devlin (GD), Sima Gondhia (Temporary Finance Accountant) (SG), Lesley Dickson (LD) PA, Alan Boyd (DE – Host)

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| 1. **Welcome, Introduction and Apologies**   Apologies were noted. The Chair thanked AB for hosting today’s meeting and informed members that the CEO was off ill.   1. **Declarations of Interest**   There were no declarations of interest.     1. **Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising**   Members discussed the pensions’ liability and asked AB if there had been any developments. He advised that a meeting is to be held with the Department and that the CEO is to follow up with Gary Fair.  SL asked that it be noted in the previous minutes that MM had been having trouble with the sound during the meeting and had been unable to participate.  CMcB enquired if we had received any more news on the position with the other ALBs and if they had received pension invoices similar to the GTCs.  SG advised that the NIAO were looking at this and will come back to us to advise further on the position.  CMcB enquired if the report on whistleblowing had been provided. AB advised that DE is in the process of finalising letters to whistleblowers and the final report should accompany this. CMcB highlighted that it had been suggested that there were 70 issues to be dealt with and enquired if this was right. AB advised that the the whistleblowing submissions were confidential and that some individuals had raised multiple issues. CMcB enquired about the confidentiality of whistleblowing and FOIs. AB explained the difference advising that whistleblowing carried its own legal protections and that an FOI usually applies to documents. He highlighted the processes of these including why items were redacted.  CMcB highlighted there were a lot of corporate risks and noted that the staff are not happy and the Committee do not know the reasons and also there is a need to know why the Council is in special measures.  The Committee moved on to accommodation which the Chair advised would be covered later in the agenda. He enquired if any details on Springvale had been forthcoming from SMcE but SG advised she had not received any.  Under AOB it had been discussed about a Post Project Evaluation on the website to be done. The SEO advised he did not know if any arrangements had been made as yet. SG advised that these evaluations usually took place about 9 months after the project had been completed so this should probably take place around September.  GG enquired about the role of the observer at a Committee meeting and SG advised that it was another member of Council which wished to attend a Committee meeting to observe.  Members advised that the action point outstanding was the issue of a letter to the Permanent Secretary regarding special measures and asked that this item would remain on the minutes until dealt with.  SL enquired about the training new members were promised and SG said she would flag this up as a priority.  The minute were agreed as a correct record and:  Proposed: SL  Seconded: CMcB   1. **Accommodation**   The Chair highlighted the Business Case and paper and said that other properties were to be investigated as 3 members had submitted options. He asked if SG had been in touch with estate agents and if she had checked the requirements.  The Chair enquired if anything else on the market had been investigated. SG said she had just narrowed it down to what the Committee members had provided. CMcB asked if estate agents did not do this work. SG advised that she was able to see from the brochures and a lot of the buildings were just shells and would have to be fitted out.  The Chair said it might be an idea to draw up a tight spec and send it round to about 6 agents. SG said that there are not many places out there that were already fitted out and one possibility is staying where we are at Albany House and reducing the current size.  The SEO added that the business case was developed on the notion we would be located in Albany House. Staff are now working from home and all work is being done. A post Covid review is important.  CMcB said there could be a huge relocation cost just to move to a different property. SG added that there would be dilapidation costs and refitting of new accommodation and provided estimated totals.  CMcB said it is not a good time to get the right place and enquired if buying was an option. The Chair said that would be discussed later and asked if MM had a chance to look at the figures yet. SG advised that MM had not seen the figures yet and these have to be reviewed.  The Chair then indicated Option 2 and SG took members through giving costs for Stranmillis. CMcB discussed the fact that GTCNI was no longer classed as a charity. SG explained the background to the loss of charity status and discussed the James House project, advising that James House would not have worked for the GTC owing to the confidential nature of our business.  AB advised that DOF undertakes to periodically examine property usage to save money and there is a need to find somewhere with a saving as they have the legal ability to draw an organisation into one of their schemes.  The Chair said it was in the GTCs interest to keep its location under review with a view to ensure best value in the property market.  The Chair discussed shortlisted options. SG asked whether members wanted to move or reduce floor space and reduce costs. The Chair enquired what the rent would be for just the third floor. SG advised it would release about 25K, but there would be problems with space. The Chair asked if the third floor option was out and SG said she would look to see if the other tenants are looking to extend their lease and if everyone moved to the fourth floor we would need to look at costs for refitting. The Chair advised that the fourth floor footage was bigger than Stranmillis. CMcB enquired if the third floor would be suitable if the other tenants were not there. SG said she would have to get costings. CMcB said it would be more effective to stay in Albany House.  The Chair asked SG to find out rent, rates and service charges for the fourth floor.  SG advised she would speak to the landlord to see if other tenants want to stay after 2022 and could get estimates for a refit for the fourth floor.  SL said emphasised that different accommodation requirements post-Covid and the Chair noted there could be more people working from home. SL said that we are looking at properties and we need to do a total evaluation for Council. GG enquired if we had time to review the needs of the Council and SG said that the lease would last until 2022. The plan was to get the information to DE by September but this will probably now be December. It was emphasised that the current business case is not robust enough as there were still too many unresolved matters. SG further advised she would speak to the landlord and get costings for the fourth floor and speak to DOF. The Chair said we could bring the rent down to nearly half.  *At this point the SEO’s connection became faulty and he was trying to rejoin the meeting.*  SL advised that there is a case for staying at Albany House and CMcB said we would need to see what the circumstances are post-Covid.  Members then discussed the option of purchasing property.  The Chair said availability of properties can change very quickly. CMcB highlighted her proposition of a property on the Antrim Road, Belfast which was small offices over 4 floors of a building.  SG indicated that this building would not be suitable as the Registration Team need to sit together but the offices in this building were split and a lot of building work would need done. CMcB enquired if it would not be more cost effective to buy a property. SG advised that we would need a commercial mortgage and there would be the cost of the upkeep of the building which would fall to us and not a landlord. We would need a 20 year mortgage and we would probably only benefit after the 10th year.  *CMcB left the meeting at 11.30.*  *The SEO connection was broken again.*  *The SEO joined the meeting again.*  In the early days the GTC only had the fourth floor and the Chair asked why was it necessary to take over the third.  *The SEO connection broken again.*  SG asked if the Committee could agree their thoughts on buying or renting as she needed feedback to review options.  The Chair asked SG to find out what a mortgage repayment would be. SG highlighted the costs of the registration database, progress of regulation costs and whether we would be eligible for a mortgage and what criteria we would need to meet as DE would want back up and confirmation we could pay. SL enquired if we were allowed to buy. SG said she could look and it will take time and would need to check what institutions we could go to. SL asked if there would be guidance from the Department but AB said that they are using offices provided by DOF and had no experience in purchasing. SG said she did not think we could afford it at present.  The Chair said it did have to become an option and asked for a rent and buying comparison.  SG discussed the property on the Malone Road, Belfast and highlighted the costs involved. The Chair said this was larger than Stranmillis. SG advised that an office layout of one floor was preferred.  The Chair enquired if we could know mortgage details for the next meeting and SG said she could get an indicative mortgage. The Chair asked her to calculate it on a deposit of 25% over a 20-25 year period.  SL discussed the premises at Crumlin Road Gaol and said it is a Government building. She said that she had been told that if we put in a reasonable offer it would be accepted and asked if we could put in for one unit. SG asked if it would need refitted. SL indicated it would. SG asked who would take responsibility for taking on this space and said that a third party would have to be involved and we would need to fit cabling and computer lines. The Chair advised that all premises would need refits, some more than others. He said that properties would need to be visited. SL said she thought government would work with us of we leased government buildings. SG said that GTC would be responsible for project managing and delivering it.  The Chair asked SL if she knew the price per square foot. SL highlighted the process of buying a unit and said it was out for offers and said we could go in for an offer on one unit. SG advised that it was bricks and mortar and that there were other things to be taken into consideration such as confidential information we carry and also transport links. SL said that we could get in a Project Manager and SG informed her that we have been unable to procure one so the work would fall on the management team. She advised of the need to take on with minimal risk and it was safer to move to readymade offices and the costs would need weighed.  *The SEO returned to the meeting by telephone.*  The Chair asked the SEO why the GTC acquired the third floor. The SEO said they needed the Board Room and an office for the Registrar as the post room had been previously used as a meeting room. The Chair asked if the fourth floor would be adequate for use. The SEO said if people were working from home and only in so many days per week it would work but we would need somewhere to hold meetings.  Members discussed how many meeting approximately there were per year and said some of these could be done by Zoom and outside meeting rooms acquired on an ad hoc basis. The SEO said significant refurbishment would be needed unless staff could work from home. He said we would need to add in cost factors for room hire. He indicated that at present Albany House was fit for purpose and advised that we had done this exercise previously 6 years ago and then stayed in Albany House.  SG said the driving force was that DOF wanted to put the organisation into James House in 2019, and we need to decide what will happen post 2022. The SEO advised that this cost is not to the public purse but will come from teachers’ fees. SG said that direction was needed for the business case. SL enquired that if Council felt Albany House was the best option could we be moved out. SG said if we have DE approval we could not be moved.  GG proposed doing a review on working arrangements post-Covid, then look at the fourth floor and the post room could become the Conference Room. It makes sense to stay.  SG advised we could put a theoretical arrangement in and would need to have Council consultation and approval. The SEO said we would need a post-Covid review of options and working arrangements. SG asked if a paper would go to Council for approval. The SEO agreed and said it could include changes to working arrangements and a consultation with staff and there could be flexible working or a rota basis. SG added that this could take a few months and asked for guidance on the business case.  The SEO advised stepping back and doing a review post-Covid. SL asked who would carry out this review. The SEO said it would be a management review and then brought to the Committee and then on to Council for consideration. SL asked about the timescale and the SEO said it would not take long. SL asked if this could still be undertaken in the absence of the CEO. The SEO said it would be a simple task of doing a post-Covid business case and then get a sense of direction from the CEO.  SG discussed the property at Sydenham but highlighted the travel problems for staff. Members discussed travel arrangements.  SG provided costs of Sydenham and the costs of cabling, IT etc.  The Chair asked the SEO to carry out a high level review of staff working patterns prior to the next meeting.  SG said she would get revised costs of rent and rates for the fourth floor and make enquiries about a 20-25 year mortgage of approx. £500,000 plus costs.  SL discussed Crumlin Road Gaol and SG said it was too much to take on however as it was a government building it could be included in the business case. SL advised members that a tender bid would need to be put in for a unit at Crumlin Road. AB queried whether the deadline had passed for this. SL confirmed it had been the end of June but due to Covid it had been extended. AB offered his opinion that to put a bid in for tender would be extremely risky due to the number of unknowns, It was agreed to exclude Crumlin Road. SG asked if members are excluding Stranmillis but the Chair said it could be used for comparison purposes. SG said the list would be very long and we could be doing nugatory work. The SEO said we would have to be very realistic about the options and comply with the business case and asked if Stranmillis was still the number one option. SG said she needed to check if it was still available. The SEO said it needs to be fit for purpose, have the agreement of staff and provide value for money. SG enquired about the timeline. SL said she would be confident if we could get the groundwork done. The Chair highlighted the difficulty of parking at Stranmillis. SG said we could negotiate extra parking but Council meetings would be a problem. We would need to hire out hotel/function rooms. It was agreed that SG would do an update to members with a paper date set for 7th September and discussed at the next meeting of F&GP on 21 September 2020.   1. **Any Other Business**   SL asked about registration fees for sub teachers and asked if there had been any clarification on the matter discussed at the last meeting. The SEO advised the matter had been dealt with and that we were not expecting payment of invoices until the end of October.   1. **Date of Next Meeting**   21 September 2020.    Signed………………………….. Dated ……………………………. | Action  CEO  LD  Action  Chair  Action  SG  SG  SG |
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