

## Overview and Scrutiny Committee questions to the Combined Authority Board: 25 August 2021

### Item 2.4: iMET Opportunity and Combined Authority Needs

Q: Does the Combined Authority have an accommodation strategy; and if not, why not and what plans are there to develop one? If it does have an accommodation strategy how does the suggestion of purchasing a freehold for a premises at Alconbury align with this strategy?

A: With the impact of Covid, the strategy to leave Alconbury to review future office requirements at an appropriate point has saved the Combined Authority from having to continue to pay for an expensive office that it would not have been able to use.

With the prospect of organisations returning to offices with appropriate Covid mitigations, I am keen to see the Combined Authority identify and secure its future office base. Hence the option of looking now at iMET in case the Board considers this appropriate, or starting a search exercise to see what options are available more widely in the market.

There are a number of principles that are emerging post-Covid. The Combined Authority wants to accommodate working from home, having a central base for Members and being carbon neutral if possible. These principles have not yet been captured in a formal strategy, but we would be happy to involve the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in that discussion if it wishes.

Q: The Combined Authority surrendered the lease on the previous accommodation at Alconbury due to public transport access. Therefore, what has happened in the interim to change that view?

A: The decision to leave Alconbury previously was based on a variety of factors, including the previous Mayor's preferences for location and an opportunity to get out of a lease that seemed expensive in terms of rental outgoings. With the occupation by Cambridgeshire County Council, public transport access to the site is expected to improve.

Q: What analysis has been done to suggest Alconbury is a suitable venue for the Combined Authority?

A: Alconbury is an established office location and if either the iMET or other premises were considered at Alconbury for the Combined Authority's future office needs, the proximity to the new County Council offices at Alconbury should offer benefits for more collaborative working.

Q: What are the overall costs for surrendering the lease of the previous premises at Alconbury?

A: The net financial impact of vacating the Incubator 2 building as of August 2021, including the costs incurred by the Combined Authority directly due to not having a large office base, is a saving of £65,000. I'm happy for officers to share a breakdown of this figure with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee outside of this meeting.

As the monthly costs incurred in the absence of an office are substantially less than the monthly costs avoided, the 'saving' will increase each month the Combined Authority continues to work remotely and to use my office in Ely as an operational hub.

The cost of acquiring and fitting out new premises won't be known until the purchase or lease of a new office proceeds. The report before the Board recommends that an offer of £3.15m for the iMET should be considered. If the Board decides not to make an offer on the iMET then officers have requested an indicative budget of £20k in order to undertake a market search and associated works. The cost of an acquisition beyond this is unknown as it will depend on the properties available on the market.

Q: General question: The Committee is concerned that three of the four substantive items on the agenda for the Board have been placed on the agenda by way of general exception notice. What plans does the CA have to ensure that adequate notice is given for significant decisions in future?

A: The Mayor shares your concerns. As part of a Governance review, the Combined Authority will be examining the process of report preparation, stakeholder engagement, and consultation. Among the expected outcomes, this will deliver better horizon scanning and timely entry on to the Forward Plan.