

FORMER RIVER STREETS COMMUNITY CENTRE, BUCCLEUCH STREET, BIRKENHEAD

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report seeks approval for a transfer by lease of the Former River Streets Community Centre, Buccleuch Street, Birkenhead under the Council's Community Asset Transfer Policy.

2. Background

- 2.1 The property, shown edged black on the attached plan, was previously leased to the River Streets Community Association. The Association ran into financial difficulties, and as there was no prospect of the facility reopening, the Council repossessed the property in October 2008.
- 2.2 It comprises a former social club, which has suffered extensive fire damage, together with a modern extension to the rear, which was intended to be used as a sports hall. The 900 sq m (9,700 sq ft) hall was never completed internally and is a basic shell although, if fitted out with all services and changing facilities, would make an ideal indoor sports facility. The fire damaged section is beyond economic repair.
- 2.3 Approval was granted in a Delegated report, in April 2009, for the property to be declared surplus and disposed of in accordance with the Council's disposal policy. This policy requires that, initially, assets are offered for Community Asset Transfer. Accordingly, the property was advertised in accordance with the Community Asset Transfer Policy.
- 2.4 The Community Asset Transfer Policy ensures that transfers are approached on a consistent basis. This requires interested parties to submit initial Expressions of Interest in a standard format so they can be appraised and a recommendation made as to which applicant(s) should proceed to a second stage. The second stage requires a much more detailed application to be submitted including a business plan.
- 2.5 In accordance with the policy, The Former Rivers Street Community Centre was advertised in the local press on 15th and 22nd July 2009 and on the Council's internet which resulted in two Expressions of Interest being received.

3.0 Initial Expressions of Interest

- 3.1 Two Expressions of Interest were submitted by the deadline of 26th August 2009. One from Wallasey Gymnastic Club and the other from The Women's Enterprising Breakthrough. The applications were scored in accordance with the policy criteria and on 24th September 2009, Cabinet endorsed the recommendation that both Wallasey Gymnastic Club and The Women's Enterprising Breakthrough be invited to proceed to the second stage.

3.2 Wallasey Gymnastic Club and The Women's Enterprising Breakthrough agreed to proceed to the second stage, with a joint application for the building. However, The Women's Enterprising Breakthrough has subsequently found alternative premises and has withdrawn its application.

4.0 Second Stage application

4.1 The Wallasey Gymnastic Club has submitted its second stage application which has been assessed in accordance with the policy criteria.

4.2 Wallasey Gymnastic Club was founded in 2007 and is a voluntary, non profit making, community led organisation offering and organising gymnastic training, coaching and competitions. The Club currently has a short term lease of a church hall on Rake Lane Wallasey from the Church Diocese. Approximately 450 children use the facilities each week with a waiting list of nearly 200. The existing premises are no longer large enough to meet the increasing demand and the Club's aim is to increase the number of children to 1,000 per week. Another major objective is to increase the range of activities to include competitions, dance/drama, disability/multi-activities; mums and tots groups, cheerleader groups and adult keep fit classes.

4.3 Wallasey Gymnastic Club's proposal is to refurbish the rear sports hall with an initial investment estimated at £125-150,000. The work will include fitting out with all services, new toilets, changing facilities, reception, new heating, new security including roller shutters doors and CCTV security cameras, external ground clearance, new sports hall floor and general refurbishment of the building. The cost of the work will be met from both Club reserves and grant funding.

4.4 The refurbishment of this property will provide a community activity facility from a derelict and unused building in a deprived area. It will also save the Council having to secure and defend the building from frequent vandal attacks.

4.5 As the Club's business plan, submitted as part of its second stage application, is robust and soundly based, it is recommended that the building is transferred by the grant of a lease whose terms are set out below.

5.0 Transfer Proposals

5.1 The Community Asset Transfer policy advises that the Council will not normally seek a market rent for the transfer of a building to community based groups, unless substantial commercial use of the building generates large profits in excess of the running costs of the property. However, the Council will normally expect community based groups to be responsible for the running costs of the building, including repairs, maintenance and all insurance.

5.2 In light of the benefits to both the community and the Council, it is proposed that the transfer takes place in line with the Community Asset Transfer policy, whereby the Council will grant a lease to Wallasey Gymnastics Club on the terms outlined as follows:

- Term: 99 years.
- Rent: Peppercorn.
- Liabilities: The lessee to be responsible for all outgoings and maintenance.

- User clause: Sports hall and social centre for Wallasey Gymnastic Club.

5.3 Members will be aware of the Council's obligation to obtain the best price reasonably obtainable on the disposal of its land and property. However, under the General Consent, the Council does have the power to restrict the value of land by imposing restrictions as to its use on the grounds that to do so is in the interest of the economic and / or environmental and / or social well being of the inhabitants of the Borough and provided also that any such restriction in value does not exceed two million pounds, per transaction. Members should be aware that The Former River Streets Community Centre, if offered for sale without restrictions, would produce a capital receipt.

6.0 Financial implications

6.1 The Community Asset Transfer Policy advises that the Council will, subject to the availability of funding and the anticipated economic life of the building, carry out essential repairs to the main elements of the building. Funding has been identified within the Community Fund for this purpose.

6.2 The front section of the Former River Streets Community Centre building has been extensively damaged by fire and is beyond economic repair. The rear extension was constructed as a sports hall but never completed internally. The lessee has agreed that it will undertake the full refurbishment of the sports hall at its own cost. However, the Wallasey Gymnastics Club has requested the Council demolish the front part of the building and re-route the services into the sports hall. It is estimated that this work will cost no more than £25,000. The cost would be met from Community Fund monies allocated to support Community Asset Transfer.

6.3 If the Council were to sell the property it could achieve a capital receipt which would not be expected to exceed £100,000.

6.4 As the property has been surplus to requirements, there will be no budgetary saving in running costs, although there are potential savings in respect of future unforeseen costs such as security/vandal repair costs.

7.0 Staffing implications

7.1 There are no staff currently employed to look after these premises, therefore there are no staffing implications arising directly from this report.

8.0 Equal Opportunities implications/Equality Impact implications

8.1 The proposal will have benefits for younger people as described in the report.

8.2 An initial Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken in respect of the wider Community Asset Transfer process.

9.0 Community Safety implications

9.1 The occupation of this property will assist in maintaining security of the premises which could otherwise potentially attract anti social behaviour.

10.0 Local Agenda 21 implications

10.1 None arising directly from this report.

11.0 Planning implications

11.1 The site is designated as a Primarily Residential Area and any future planning application would be subject to Policies HS15 and RE10 in the Wirral Unitary Development Plan, which make provision to protect neighbours amenity.

12.0 Anti-poverty implications

12.1 None arising directly from this report.

13.0 Human Rights implications

13.1 None arising directly from this report.

14.0 Social Inclusion implications

14.1 None arising directly from this report.

15.0 Local Member Support implications

15.1 The property is located within the Bidston and St James Ward.

16.0 Background Papers

16.1 Delegated Report - April 2009 Former River Streets Community Centre, Buccleuch Street, Birkenhead.

16.2 Cabinet reports - 24 September 2009 – Former River Streets Community Centre, Buccleuch Street, Birkenhead.

17.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

17.1 That a transfer by lease of The Former River Streets Community Centre, Buccleuch Street, Birkenhead to The Wallasey Gymnastic Club be agreed and the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management be authorised to complete the necessary lease on the terms set out in this report.

17.2 That the agreed works to the property be funded from the Community Fund.

Bill Norman

Director of Law, HR and Asset Management