

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET – 23 SEPTEMBER 2010

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LAW, HR AND ASSET MANAGEMENT

**OFFICE RATIONALISATION**

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**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1.1 This report reviews issues arising from the identification of a preferred option for office rationalisation; informs Cabinet of a possible opportunity to dispose of Westminster House; and seeks approval to the way forward. It also identifies where further work is being undertaken.

**2. BACKGROUND**

2.1 At its meeting on 24 June 2008 Cabinet considered a business case produced by EC Harris for the rationalisation of the Council's office accommodation.

2.2 Cabinet resolved to provide in principle support to option 3 as set out in the report, but recognised that there is still further work to be done to refine the alternatives within this option. It therefore instructed officers to:

- (i) As a matter of priority, bring forward a fully costed action plan to implement those aspects of option 3 that are not dependent on new build. The action plan to be presented to Cabinet for approval at the earliest opportunity.
- (ii) Further investigate those aspects of option 3 that require new build along with Acre Lane, and to produce an options report for Cabinet to consider.
- (iii) Refer the EC Harris report to the Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their consideration.

2.3 The scope of the business case covered 22 buildings. Option 3 recommended retention of Wallasey Town Hall, Solar Campus, Cheshire Lines, Acre Lane and a refurbished Westminster House.

2.4 Administrative accommodation identified for vacation and demolition/disposal is:

- Bebington Town Hall
- Bebington Town Hall Annexe
- Birkenhead Town Hall

- Bedford Road
- Conway Centre
- Devon Gardens
- Finance Municipal
- Moreton Municipal
- Liscard Municipal
- Hamilton Building
- Pennant House
- Rock Ferry Centre
- Old Court House
- Treasury Building
- North Annex
- South Annex
- Willowtree

2.5 The business case proposed that the retained buildings would be refurbished to address disrepair and intensify their use wherever possible. It then proposed that the balance of accommodation required for staff relocated from the vacated buildings would be provided by newly built offices.

### **3. THE CHANGING CONTEXT**

- 3.1 The context in which future accommodation requirements will be considered has been changing.
- 3.2 Nationally there has been a change of government, with the new government adopting a more concerted approach to deficit reduction. The Comprehensive Spending Review is awaited in October, with the expectation that local government will see a reduced financial settlement for the next 4 years.
- 3.3 The Director of Finance reported to Cabinet on 2 September 2010 updating the Council's budget projections for the years 2011-2015. The total projected shortfall for the four years is £108.6m, which will be subject to change following the Comprehensive Spending Review and Local Government Finance Settlement.
- 3.4 Locally, the Council is undertaking its biggest ever public consultation to set budget priorities for the next financial year, engaging with staff, residents, stakeholders, businesses and community groups across Wirral. This will inform the Council's future service priorities. Some service realignment is under way, with consultation taking place on future arrangements for the services of the Regeneration Department. Further realignment is in prospect, for example changes arising from the abolition of Primary Care Trusts and a greater role for local government in public health care. The Council is also considering how services and decision making can be further devolved to a local level.

### 3.5 Taken together these factors suggest

- limited capacity for major investment in accommodation at the present time
- limited priority for investment in administrative accommodation [subject to any feedback from the public consultation exercise]
- uncertainty about the future size and shape of the organisation
- a requirement for further work to clarify which services should be centralised and which should be located in communities for reasons of efficient and effective service delivery
- a need for any proposals implemented at this time to offer flexibility to accommodate future change.

3.6 Some time after the EC Harris report was considered by Cabinet, Wirral Partnership Homes (WPH) informed Officers that they are evaluating a number of options to consolidate their administrative functions in one location and they would like to work with the Council to evaluate the option of their buying Westminster House for this purpose. If this option were to be pursued, upgrading and enhancing both the North and South Annexes in Wallasey would be required to provide the capacity necessary to vacate Westminster House. This report considers this option as well as the previously preferred option of enhancing the accommodation at Westminster House.

## 4. ISSUES ARISING FROM THE PREFERRED OPTION

### **Buildings identified for retention**

- 4.1 Westminster House, Cheshire Lines and, to a more limited extent, Wallasey Town Hall and Solar Campus are the core buildings from option 3 which offer an opportunity without new build to intensify use and free space in other buildings.
- 4.2 Wallasey Town Hall has been identified as the future location for the 'democratic core' of the Borough (i.e. the venue for the meetings of the Council and its committees etc). It is to be kept for the foreseeable future. Further work needs to be done to determine the most appropriate use of space within the building having regard to the potential to intensify the use of administrative space and to develop community use where appropriate. This is currently in hand, but at this stage options with estimated costs are unavailable.
- 4.3 Cheshire Lines is currently the most densely occupied of the Council's office buildings, showing an average space allocation of 7.5 sqm per workstation. There are still areas within the building where there is some potential to install a limited number of additional desks, but the greatest improvement in space use would be by driving forward agility and desk sharing.

- 4.4 Vacant accommodation next to the Council's existing offices may be suitable for expansion. Discussions will be held with the Council's landlord to explore opportunities this may offer in the context of a future strategy, and any suitable opportunities will be the subject of further reports. Capital costs of realising such opportunities are however likely to be high.
- 4.5 Retention of Cheshire Lines means that consideration must be given to the future management of capacity within the Archive Service, and an option appraisal undertaken on the different routes available to meet future storage requirements.
- 4.6 Option 3 proposes more intensive use of the administrative accommodation element at Solar Campus. This will be investigated and will be the subject of a further report. Otherwise, any proposals to vacate this site would not be achievable in near future and would need to take account of appropriate re-use of the buildings. For Acre Lane, it is recommended that options for a replacement facility should be separately examined in more detail. Again, proposals to vacate this site would not be achievable in the near future.
- 4.7 Westminster House is identified within option 3 as providing the opportunity for an early scheme of comprehensive refurbishment and enhancement to create modern open plan accommodation which could be used more intensively than at present and allow the vacation of space elsewhere. Such a scheme would 'kick start' significant change. Intensification of use in this location supports a consolidation of functions within Birkenhead that will help to deliver the unquantified efficiencies identified in the business case such as reduced CO2 emissions, savings in mileage costs, savings in travel time etc. Comprehensive building refurbishment and enhancement also provides the opportunity to create a positive working environment for staff in line with the approach previously agreed.
- 4.8 A proposal to refurbish and enhance Westminster House is set out later in this report.

#### **Buildings identified for vacation**

- 4.9 The schedule attached as Appendix A identifies issues associated with each of these buildings.
- 4.10 Locality based working is developing strongly across the borough and this will be taken into account in the development of a wider programme. When undertaken in the context of overall accommodation requirements locality working can contribute to the rationalisation of building stock. A report elsewhere on this agenda recommends approval of a scheme at Pensby Park that will support the vacation and disposal of administrative accommodation in the scope of the business case.

- 4.11 A wider programme will be developed and will be the subject of a further report.

## **5. ICT PROVISION TO SUPPORT THE ADMINISTRATIVE ESTATE**

- 5.1 Upgraded ICT provision will be essential to support new ways of working. Cabinet has separately considered and approved reports to prepare for necessary changes. In addition to the future of the Council's data centres, Cabinet on 14 January 2010 approved actions to revise the Council's approach to infrastructure and desktop equipment provision. In addition, Cabinet on 27 May 2010 agreed to enter into a new contract for the provision of a replacement telecommunications network. Arrangements have therefore been put in place to move forward with appropriate IT to support rationalisation.
- 5.2 Development of the Council's ICT network was driven in its early stages by the requirements of individual departments. The existing cabling in most buildings has been installed in a piecemeal fashion. Standards have not always been adhered to, which may result in cable failure, extended fix times and poor performance. The existing cable infrastructure may not match desk/seating plans. Existing cabinets are difficult to work on and to upgrade/expand.
- 5.3 To drive agile working, which in turn will realise ongoing savings in building running costs, staff need to be able to communicate and work efficiently and effectively in a variety of locations and, where appropriate, to work away from a fixed workstation. Given the nature of the existing infrastructure it is strongly recommended that where agile working is a key element in intensifying the use of a building the ICT infrastructure is renewed.
- 5.4 It would be impractical to attempt to effect major change to the IT infrastructure in all the retained buildings at the same time. A planned programme of change is required. This will be developed to support the agreed rationalisation programme.

## **6. FINANCIAL ISSUES**

- 6.1 When considering the funding (and, potentially, the affordability) of building refurbishment it should be noted that in recent years there has been a greater focus on the distinction between capital and revenue expenditure.
- 6.2 Capital expenditure is defined as that incurred on the acquisition, creation or enhancement of an asset.

- 6.3 Enhancement works are defined as leading to at least one of the following:
- Substantially lengthening the useful life of the asset.
  - Substantially increasing the open market value of the asset.
  - Substantially increasing the extent to which the asset can be used in connection with the functions of the Local Authority.
- 6.4 Expenditure which purely maintains the useful life or open market value of an asset should be charged to revenue.
- 6.5 A comprehensive refurbishment and enhancement scheme offers the best prospect of substantially lengthening the useful life of a building and increasing the extent to which the asset can be used for the Council's functions.

## **7. REFERENCE TO COUNCIL EXCELLENCE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

- 7.1 Following the referral of the business case to the Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny Committee members of that Committee undertook a site inspection on 16 August 2010 of a sample of buildings affected by option 3.
- 7.2 A special meeting of the Committee on 24 August 2010 considered the business case and preferred option. Members had regard to the costs of the key works that were required, both short term and long term in relation to Westminster House and views were expressed as to whether it should be disposed of and, instead, to retain the North and South Annexes. Members also expressed concern about any proposal to mothball buildings in central Birkenhead, particularly the Conway Building, as it housed the main One Stop Shop.
- 7.3 The Committee resolved that the officers be requested to have regard to the views of the overview and scrutiny committee in relation to office accommodation as follows—
- A recognition of the importance of locality working
  - A recognition of the need to achieve savings as a matter of urgency, including taking some buildings out of use for early disposal, to achieve those savings.
  - The need to progress IT infrastructure/technology.
  - The need for a clear understanding of the level of upfront investment required and the levels of savings that may be achieved.
  - The importance of having a One Stop Shop in central Birkenhead was endorsed.
  - That the views of the Conservation Officers should be sought in relation to the Conway Building.

- That consideration should be given to an increased use of the Solar Campus.
- That consideration be given to the refurbishment of the North and South Annexes in order to accommodate more staff.
- That there should be either effective refurbishment or disposal of Westminster House.
- That more work should be undertaken in relation to savings associated with Facilities Management.
- That new build should not be considered at the present time
- That Wallasey Town Hall should remain as the Council's political centre.
- That there should be an increased use of Agile Working.
- That no further action should be taken at Cheshire Lines, other than to intensify its use.
- That the Council's Carbon Footprint should be reduced as a result of the proposals.

7.4 It further resolved that this report be presented to the meeting of the Committee scheduled for 21 September 2010, in order to allow the views of the Committee to be presented to the Cabinet at its meeting on 23 September 2010.

## **8. THE WAY FORWARD**

### **Option 1 – Intensify the use of Westminster House**

- 8.1 As indicated above, retention and comprehensive refurbishment and enhancement of Westminster House was envisaged in the EC Harris business case as the first element in creating significant additional capacity to facilitate office rationalisation.
- 8.2 Westminster House was built in 1985 and has a net internal area of approximately 3600 square metres. It is currently occupied by approximately 350 staff. Whilst it is the most modern of the Council's office buildings, it is now some 25 years old and many of its components require significant repair or replacement. The building was constructed to provide open plan accommodation, but over the years the floors have been partitioned and individual offices created, thus reducing the building's efficiency and impairing its performance.
- 8.3 Whilst the building requires some repair, if this is coupled with a programme of upgrading and enhancement then, depending on the works agreed, the opportunity arises to accommodate more staff and free up space in other Council buildings.

8.4 A comprehensive programme of work would include the following:

Item	Comment	Estimated Cost	Funding Source
Lift Refurbishment and DDA works		£160,000	Planned maintenance budget
Improvement and enhancement works	Replacement, modernisation and upgrading of boilers and heating, power lighting and electrical services, windows and ancillary improvements (including fees)	£1,910,000	Capital
Agile Working	Physical improvements, fittings and equipment to support agility.	£760,000	Efficiency fund (£266,000) IT revenue (£494,000)
IT infrastructure	Renewal and upgrading of ICT cabling	£445,000	IT capital
Total		£3,275,000	

8.5 The physical works outlined above, together with widespread implementation of agile working would provide for 500 workstations within the building and allow some 250 additional staff to be based there. The final number would depend on the nature of the functions located in Westminster House and the degree to which agility is appropriate to those functions.

8.6 It is judged that the buildings offering the earliest prospects for vacation and savings following refurbishment of Westminster House are the North and South Annexes. Given the serious budgetary position faced by the Council, the focus is on delivering the maximum amount of savings within the shortest possible time whilst at the same time improving service delivery and providing a positive working environment for staff. If the Annexes are vacated it is recommended that they be demolished, pending the development of a comprehensive approach to the future treatment of the wider area within which they are sited.

- 8.7 Savings realised from the closure of the Annexes would include annual running costs which total approximately £210,000; backlog maintenance totalling £742,000 and life cycle maintenance totalling £1,311,000.
- 8.8 Costs to be set against these savings would include removal costs, security, asbestos removal and demolition. These are estimated at a total of £523,500.
- 8.9 Alternative scenarios for Westminster House could see a minimal investment in the building fabric whilst maximising the use of space and investing in IT infrastructure and agility. Estimated costs of such an approach would still exceed £1.6m, and investment of this scale would then be made in a building where major elements are becoming obsolete. Such an approach is therefore not recommended.

#### **Option 2 – Refurbish the Annexes and dispose of Westminster House**

- 8.10 Discussion at Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny Committee explored the possibility of retaining and upgrading the North and South Annexes and disposing of Westminster House as an alternative approach, particularly given that Wallasey Town Hall has been identified for retention.
- 8.11 In the current market, prospects for the sale of Westminster House are limited. Nevertheless, an opportunity has now emerged which could allow for the delivery of this approach. Discussions have recently taken place with Wirral Partnership Homes (WPH) who are considering options to meet their future needs for administrative accommodation. WPH have confirmed that they would like to work with the Council to evaluate the option of buying Westminster House and using it to consolidate their administrative functions on a single site.
- 8.12 If this option is pursued, upgrading both Annexes would provide the major element of capacity necessary to vacate Westminster House, increasing the total number of workstations from 281 to 366 and the number of staff based there from 281 to 515 (assuming that agile working is maximised).
- 8.13 The estimated costs of upgrading the two annexes and investing in IT to maximise agility are as follows:

### North Annexe

Item	Comment	Estimated Cost	Funding Source
Lift Refurbishment and DDA works		£80,500	Planned Maintenance Budget
General Repairs		£86,250	Planned Maintenance Budget
Improvement and enhancement works	A comprehensive scheme to upgrade building fabric, including window renewal and ancillary improvements (including fees)	£839,500	Capital
Agile Working	Physical improvements, fittings and equipment to support agility.	£352,500	Efficiency Fund (£222,200) IT revenue (£130,300)
IT infrastructure	Renewal and upgrading of ICT cabling	£161,000	IT Capital
Total		£1,519,750	

### South Annexe

Item	Comment	Estimated Cost	Funding Source
Lift Refurbishment and DDA works		£34,500	Planned Maintenance Budget
General Repairs		£34,500	Planned Maintenance Budget
Improvement and enhancement works	A comprehensive scheme to upgrade building fabric, including window renewal and ancillary improvements (including fees)	£811,900	Capital
Agile Working	Physical improvements, fittings and equipment to support agility.	£345,000	Efficiency Fund (£210,000) IT revenue (£135,000)
IT infrastructure	Renewal and upgrading of ICT cabling	£166,000	IT capital
Total		£1,391,900	

- 8.14 The total estimated cost of physical works and IT investment for both Annexes to maximise their use is therefore £2,911,650.
- 8.15 Disposal of Westminster House would realise a capital receipt which could be used to offset the majority of the cost of physical works to the Annexes, with the balance of the scheme costs being met from the planned maintenance budget, the Efficiency Fund and existing provisions for funding IT investment, as indicated in the tables above.
- 8.16 The sale of Westminster House would deliver annual revenue savings of approximately £350,000; together with savings in backlog repairs of £176,400 and lifecycle repairs of £1,860,000. Removal costs (estimated at £15,000) would be set against these savings.
- 8.17 Critical to WPH's view of this opportunity will be the Council's ability to vacate Westminster House to allow refurbishment and reoccupation of the building to an agreed timescale. WPH wishes to work with the Council to assess in more detail the issues and risks arising from this proposal. The intention would then be for their Board to consider an options appraisal at its meeting on 5 October to enable it to make a final decision.

## **9. RISKS**

- 9.1 Negative economic impacts from withdrawal from existing buildings are considered to be low, but no formal evaluation of these has been undertaken
- 9.2 The rationalisation of the Council's offices will form a major programme linked to other aspects of the corporate change programme. A comprehensive approach to risk management will be developed within the delivery programme. The EC Harris report included an initial 'High Level' identification of risks:
- 9.3 Within the wider rationalisation project, the Council's policy framework to support agile working has been reviewed. Revised policies have been shared with Trades Unions and will be the subject of further discussion with them.
- 9.4 The disposal of Westminster House may not be completed: WPH may choose not to proceed, or they may select a different site.

## **10. CONCLUSIONS**

- 10.1 The business case considered by Cabinet on 24 June 2010 advised that the provision of the Council's administrative accommodation in the present estate with the current level of expenditure is unsustainable. Cabinet resolved in principle to pursue Option 3 for future provision.

- 10.2 The financial context for office rationalisation has changed and the need for significant savings has increased.
- 10.3 Refurbishment of Westminster House was identified in the business case as the catalyst for office rationalisation. A comprehensive investment scheme would substantially increase the use of that building and allow the vacation and demolition of the North and South Annexes.
- 10.4 With the possible interest of WPH in buying Westminster House an opportunity may now exist to realise a capital receipt which could be invested in the North and South Annexes. This is contrary to the approach contained in the business case option 3 which sought to maximise the location of staff in Birkenhead. Nevertheless, against a backdrop of increasing financial pressures it could facilitate an alternative approach to drive building rationalisation which may deliver greater revenue savings. Further work is needed with WPH to thoroughly investigate this option, and it is recommended that this be done before a final decision is made on the office rationalisation programme.
- 10.5 Whichever option is chosen, comprehensive refurbishment and enhancement of a retained building will create opportunities to improve the sustainability and environmental performance of the building and reduce CO2 emissions. These opportunities will be addressed in the design of the scheme.

## **11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 Costs are indicative at this stage and are based on condition surveys and further work undertaken Westminster House. More detailed estimates will be provided as part of a Scheme and Estimate report. Estimates at this stage include all fees, but exclude contingencies.
- 11.2 **Option 1 – Intensify the use of Westminster House**
- 11.2.1 A full refurbishment and upgrading scheme for Westminster House is estimated to cost £3.275m, which could be funded from a mixture of capital and revenue sources.
- 11.2.2 Vacation and closure of the North and South Annexes will save an estimated £210,000 per annum of revenue costs. There will be one-off costs to decommission and secure the buildings and to demolish them, estimated at £523,500.
- 11.2.3 Annual revenue costs in Appendix A were those included in the EC Harris business case. They are based on the full year 2008/2009.
- 11.2.4 Backlog maintenance costs are estimated to total £742,000 for the North and South Annexes. Life cycle (10 year) maintenance costs are

estimated at £658,000 for the North Annexe and £653,000 for the South Annexe. Vacation and closure of the buildings will therefore avoid a potential maintenance liability of £2.053m.

### **11.3 Option 2 – Refurbish the Annexes and dispose of Westminster House**

11.3.1 Full refurbishment and upgrading of both the North and South Annexes would cost a total of £2.911m to be funded from a mixture of capital and revenue sources.

11.3.2 Sale of Westminster House would realise a substantial capital receipt which would be available to reinvest elsewhere.

11.4 The scheme and estimate report will confirm funding sources for the preferred option. The Strategic Asset Review (SAR) proposed that necessary investment in buildings to improve efficiency could be made from the Efficiency Fund. Budgetary provision was also made following the SAR of £1.5m for four years for the cost of necessary IT infrastructure works to support office rationalisation. On 14 January 2010 Cabinet resolved to provide £750,000 for desktop IT to support agile working. Finally, the cost of the repair and maintenance works necessary within either option can be met from the Planned Maintenance Budget.

11.5 The business case showed that option 3 would deliver discounted average revenue savings to the Council in excess of £800,000 per annum over 25 years, on the modelling assumption of an overall reduction in staff of 10%. Additional and currently unquantified savings were also identified which, in the view of EC Harris should mean that the target annual saving of £1m per annum is achievable. That target will not, however, be achieved by 1 April 2011. When a way forward is agreed a revised timescale will be reported to Cabinet.

## **12. STAFFING IMPLICATIONS**

12.1 All administrative staff will potentially be affected by the rationalisation of the Council's administrative estate and the implementation of new ways of working.

12.2 The design of new and refurbished offices together with new working arrangements will improve the quality of the workplace for staff. Effective communication and staff engagement are key to successful large scale workplace change, and a comprehensive communication strategy will be developed for the project. Communication about the overall office rationalisation project will be dealt with in the wider context of the Change Programme through the Strategic Change Programme Board. For team and service office redesigns and relocations, a more detailed communications plan is being developed.

- 12.3 Full engagement will take place with trades unions, and discussions have already begun on revised policies to support agile working.

### **13. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1 An equality Impact Assessment has been completed for the overall rationalisation project. More detailed assessments will be undertaken as workplace changes are implemented. Refurbishment of existing accommodation and new build will allow the development of more accessible environments than exist in current accommodation.

### **14. COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1 None arising directly from this report.

### **15. LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS**

- 15.1 Refurbishment and improvement of existing accommodation will allow the creation of a more sustainable administrative estate with lower environmental impact. In particular, the opportunity will be addressed in any programme of work to improve building efficiency and reduce energy consumption and CO2 emissions wherever possible. Potential will also be considered in any scheme for micro-generation and wider sustainable benefits.
- 15.2 Other benefits will be realised through new working arrangements, for example a reduction in business mileage and CO2 emissions due to the consolidation of offices and an increase in agile working.

### **16. PLANNING IMPLICATIONS**

- 16.1 None arising directly from this report, although it should be noted that within the business case options Birkenhead Town Hall, Wallasey Town Hall and the Conway Centre are listed buildings.

### **17. ANTI POVERTY IMPLICATIONS**

- 17.1 None arising directly from this report.

### **18. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS**

- 18.1 None arising directly from this report.

### **19. SOCIAL INCLUSION IMPLICATIONS**

- 19.1 None arising directly from this report.

## **20. LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS**

20.1 This report will be of interest to all members.

## **21. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- Cabinet 9 July 2008 Strategic Asset Review
- Cabinet 16 October 2008 Transforming Wirral-Strategic Asset Review
- Cabinet 27 November 2008 Transforming Wirral-Strategic Asset Review
- Cabinet 15 January 2009 Transforming Wirral-Strategic Asset Review
- Council Excellence Overview & Scrutiny Committee 17 March 2010 – Office
- Rationalisation Project Update

## **22. RECOMMENDATION**

22.1 That the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management be authorised to discuss the potential sale of Westminster House with Wirral Partnership Homes and report to Cabinet at the earliest opportunity the outcome of those discussions, together with a recommended approach to office rationalisation.

**Bill Norman**

Director of Law, HR and Asset Management