

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 At its meeting on 27 November 2008, Cabinet considered a report on the Strategic Asset Review which set out options for the future of the authority's asset portfolio. Cabinet resolved to approve in principle the option for strategic consolidation of the Council's asset base and requested that this be subjected to public and staff consultation, with the results brought back to a future meeting. This report summarises the response to the consultation and seeks Cabinet's views on the way forward.

2.0 Background

2.1 At its meeting on 27 November 2008 Cabinet considered a report that recommended a way forward for managing the Council's property assets.

2.2 That report was the culmination of a strategic review process that started with the Cabinet decision in December 2006 to commission a strategic development plan for Wirral's Cultural Services and the appointment, in 2007, of Strategic Leisure to conduct that review. That work then fed into the wider Strategic Asset Review that was reported to Cabinet in July and October 2008.

2.3 The 27 November report was based on the consistent application of principles for asset use that had been previously endorsed by Cabinet. The review considered the whole of the borough using seven agreed geographical areas and concentrated in this initial stage on public facing assets.

2.4 The review produced a recommended approach for the strategic consolidation of the asset base, with a package of borough-wide proposals based on a vision of fewer but better assets and optimum value for money for local people. The recommended approach:

- Created a framework that could be used to maximise opportunities for partnership working
- Endorsed the principle of asset transfer to take place over an anticipated period of two years as an alternative to closure
- Proposed a programme for the development of multi-purpose complexes strategically located across the borough, and
- Proposed substantial rationalisation of the council's administrative accommodation underpinned by a drive to transform ways of working

2.5 The review group recognised that the part of the asset base supporting services for children and young people can play an important role in the overall delivery of corporate and community services. In addition service transformation in Adult Social Care will provide opportunities to further integrate asset use. Asset management is a continuous process and these major corporate service elements will be increasingly integrated into the review as it progresses.

2.6 The Cabinet resolution was as follows:

(1) Cabinet agrees the recommendation as set out below:

That the proposals set out in the report for the strategic consolidation of the Council's asset base across the borough be agreed in principle and then be subject to public and staff consultation as described, with the results of that consultation brought to a future meeting of Cabinet.

and asks that a special Area Forum Conference/Conferences be convened as soon as possible in order to allow a full debate on the proposals in the report.

(2) Cabinet also asks that this matter be referred to a joint Scrutiny Committee, comprising of Finance and Best Value, Corporate Services and Culture, Tourism and Leisure Overview Scrutiny Committees, with a Chair to be elected at the meeting. Democratic Services be asked to make the appropriate arrangements for this meeting to take place as soon as possible; and

(3) The proposals set out in this report for the strategic consolidation of the Council's asset base across the Borough, along with the provision of a mobile library/one stop shop, be agreed in principle and then subjected to public and staff consultation as described, with results of that consultation brought to a future meeting of the Cabinet.

2.7 This report brings the results of the consultation back to Cabinet to enable a final decision to be taken on the previously recommended approach to the strategic consolidation of the Council's asset base.

3.0 Consultation Mechanisms

3.1 The consultation period has been from 28 November 2008 to 14 January 2009. This allows Cabinet's final decision – which will have very substantial financial implications – to feed into the setting of the Council's budget.

3.2 During this initial phase of consultation the intention has been to focus on the strategic approach taken to the review; the proposed direction for consolidation and modernisation of the asset base; the context within which recommendations for individual assets have been made and the immediate recommendations for change. A substantial amount of feedback on the proposals has been obtained through different routes, and this is considered in more detail below.

3.3 Although consultation began following the Cabinet decision views were in fact received from a variety of interested parties as soon as the report became public. Some will undoubtedly continue to be received between Tuesday 13 January (when this report was finalised) and the Cabinet meeting on 15 January. If any new points are raised that are not generally covered in the feedback already received they will be summarised and circulated to Cabinet members at the meeting.

3.4 Following the Cabinet resolution of 27 November 2008, officers decided, in consultation with members of the Cabinet, to convene four Special Area Forum Conferences in locations spread across the Borough. These were designed to provide residents with a selection of venues and dates to give them a fair opportunity to attend, whilst at the same time keeping in mind the strategic, borough wide approach to the review. These Special Area Forum Conferences were held as follows:

- Monday 5 January - The Lauries Centre, Birkenhead
- Tuesday 6 January - Hulme Hall, Port Sunlight
- Wednesday 7 January - The Concourse, West Kirby
- Thursday 8 January - The Floral Pavilion, New Brighton

Anyone unable to attend the meeting within their local area could attend any of the other meetings.

3.5 Members of the Cabinet attended the Special Area Forum Conferences which were chaired by the Leader of the Council. At the start of each conference there was a presentation that outlined the rationale behind the review and emphasised the strategic approach proposed for modernisation. The presentations were followed by an open question and answer session. An information leaflet was made available to attendees, together with a comment card to ensure everyone present had an opportunity to express their views. Frank Field MP attended and spoke at the Birkenhead meeting; Stephen Hesford MP attended and spoke at the Port Sunlight and West Kirby meetings; and Angela Eagle MP attended and spoke at the New Brighton meeting. A letter from Ben Chapman MP was read out at the Port Sunlight Meeting as he was unable to attend.

3.6 Notwithstanding the recommendation of Cabinet that a joint Scrutiny Committee, comprising Finance and Best Value; Corporate Services and Culture; and Tourism and Leisure Overview Scrutiny Committees be convened, the respective Chairs considered it more appropriate to hold three separate meetings. These took place as follows:

- Culture, Tourism and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 10 December
- Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 17 December
- Finance Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 7 January 2009

The minutes of the three meetings are attached in Appendix 1. The Strategic Asset Review was also the subject of two Notices of Motion at Council on 15 December 2008, and copies of the Notices, an amendment and the relevant extract from the Council minutes are also included in Appendix 1.

3.7 In addition to the four Special Area Forum Conferences, further meetings that facilitated debate on the proposals have been arranged prior to the cabinet meeting. These include:

- Wirral Head Teachers' briefing on 14 January 2009
- Wirral Enabling Fulfilling Lives Group on 14 January; and
- Extraordinary Meeting of the Wirral Executive Youth Board on 14 January

Again, if any new points are raised that are not generally covered in the feedback already received, these will be summarised and circulated to Cabinet members at the meeting.

3.8 Staff directly affected by the proposals have been briefed by their managers, and meetings have been held with the relevant trades unions. Trades unions have also attended and spoken at the Special Area Forum Conferences.

3.9 Information regarding the Strategic Asset Review has also been published on the Council's website which will be kept updated as the review proceeds. Residents have been able as usual to comment to either the e mail address comments@wirral.gov.uk or to write directly to the Council.

4.0 Breakdown of Feedback Received

4.1 Feedback from the public has been received in the following ways:

- Correspondence
- Telephone comments
- e-mail comments
- views expressed in the open discussions at the Special Area Forum Conferences
- views expressed via comment cards at the Special Area Forum Conferences
- petitions received

4.2 In addition, there have been several unsolicited expressions of interest from individuals, groups and commercial interests in particular assets. It must be stressed that at this stage no such expressions of interest have been sought. Enquirers have been advised that their interest has been noted and that they will be contacted again once a final decision has been on the way forward with the review.

5.0 Collation of Responses

5.1 Public responses received up to 5pm on Tuesday 13 January are summarised in Appendix 2. Responses received by way of petitions, letters and emails have, where practical, been collated by reference to specific facilities. Responses given during the special area Forum Conferences have been collated by reference to type of facility.

- 5.2 The overwhelming majority of the views expressed throughout the consultation have been opposed to the overall Strategic Asset Review process and/or against the closure of individual facilities.
- 5.3 Members will note from Appendix 2 that a total of 34,830 responses were received, including 33,928 contained in petitions. Of these, 15,055 related to leisure centres; 16,535 related to libraries, 328 related to cultural facilities; 45 related to community centres; and 2,861 were general objections to the Strategic Asset Review.
- 5.4 In terms of specific sites, in addition to Woodchurch and Guinea Gap pools (petitions relating to leisure centres contain a total of 14910 signatories), high levels of opposition were recorded in petitions relating to Bromborough Civic Centre and Library (5096 signatories); Upton Library (2931); and Pensby Library (2243).
- 5.5 Key points that have emerged from the consultation include the following:
- The importance of leisure and cultural facilities in addressing a range of corporate priorities including tackling deprivation; health inequalities and supporting community cohesion;
 - Challenges that will be faced by local communities to access fewer but better facilities due to the limitations and cost of public transport; and
 - The importance of increasing the use of the full range of public sector assets – in particular the schools estate – to provide a wider range of access to sporting, leisure and cultural facilities for local communities.
- 5.6 In the light of the public consultation and responses received, a final decision is now required on the action to be taken for each of the assets covered by the review.

6.0 Financial implications

- 6.1 In the event that changes are made to the Strategic Asset Review consultation proposals there will be financial implications. If assets are deleted from those previously recommended for disposal or transfer, the Council will need to find both the relevant budget savings (for staffing and operating costs), and to fund the relevant maintenance backlog and future anticipated maintenance implications.
- 6.2 The total maintenance figures for all properties proposed for closure/transfer in the Review are £6.2M for arrears and a further £6.2M for 10 years' future maintenance (a total of £12.4M). This £12.4M, combined with the annual savings of £3.7M, means the 'No Change' option would, in ten years, cost over £45M more than the recommended strategic consolidation. If the £12.4M maintenance liability is spread over 10 years, this adds £1.2M to the revenue budget and the consequential budget pressure becomes £4.9M.

7.0 Staffing implications

7.1 Where services are ceasing in individual facilities managers will work with staff affected and their trades unions effect changes in the workforce using the Council's framework of workforce change policies.

8.0 Equal opportunities implications

8.1 None arising directly from this report. However, during the consultation process, concerns were expressed in respect of swimming facilities for those persons with disabilities in the event the Review proposals were implemented.

9.0 Community safety implications

9.1 None arising directly from this report. However, during the consultation process, concerns were expressed in respect of possible increases in anti-social behaviour in the event the Review proposals were implemented.

10.0 Local Agenda 21 implications

10.1 The Council's asset base is a major source of CO2 emissions. By operating more effectively from a reduced number of assets it should be possible to reduce emissions. Clarity on the future asset base to be retained will also allow a further programme of investment to target CO2 reduction.

11.0 Planning implications

11.1 None arising directly from this report.

12.0 Anti-poverty implications

12.1 None arising directly from this report. However, during the consultation process, concerns were expressed in respect of possible adverse impact on anti-poverty initiatives in the event the Review proposals were implemented.

13.0 Social inclusion implications

13.1 None arising directly from this report. However, during the consultation process, concerns were expressed in respect of possible adverse impact on social inclusion in the event the Review proposals were implemented.

14.0 Background Papers

14.1 Cabinet report 27 November 2008 – Transforming Wirral – Delivering the Strategic Asset Review

15 RECOMMENDATION

15.1 That Members consider the consultation responses received and determine the appropriate way forward with the Strategic Asset Review.

Stephen Maddox
Chief Executive