

OFFICE RATIONALISATION

BIRKENHEAD TOWN HALL

At its meeting on 22 July 2010 Cabinet considered a report on the outcome of a disposal exercise for the former town hall and a proposition from The Hamilton Partnership. Cabinet decided not to proceed with the proposal from the Hamilton Partnership at that time but asked that further work be undertaken to identify potential alternative uses.

The former town hall is an impressive Grade II* listed building within the Hamilton Square conservation area. It is physically run down and needs substantial investment to address disrepair. It is also difficult to alter to a significant extent internally because of its listed status, which limits the prospects for alternative uses. Those difficulties are compounded by the current economic situation which severely restricts the prospects of alternative commercial uses.

There are concerns about the economic vitality of the square and the decline in activity. Bringing the former town hall back into use would help bring life and activity back to the square and contribute to its regeneration.

Since the closure of the Wirral Museum the only occupier has been the Registrar's Service, with occasional uses for civic events and meetings. There is however evidence of potential demand for room hire, both to provide meeting space for Council and partners' activities and from external enquiries. If the building is to be used for these purposes on a regular basis investment in building systems and repairs must be made. Without that investment the building should be mothballed.

A group of Council officers met following the Cabinet resolution to consider options for the future use of the building. That group came to the conclusion that, in all the circumstances and in the absence of a viable commercial use, the Council's retention and management of the building offered the most appropriate basis to bring it back into use on a 'mixed' basis that would incorporate Council accommodation, function and meeting space for internal and external hire and arts and cultural activities with the involvement of the voluntary and community sector.

It is therefore proposed that the building is repaired and upgraded on a phased basis, with the Registrars Service remaining on the ground floor, the first floor brought into use as Council offices and the second floor remaining in use as high quality meeting and activity space available for civic use, Council use and to hire. Depending on room layouts the first floor could accommodate between 70 and 100 workstations.

The office space created would form part of the total accommodation available to facilitate the vacation of other Council buildings. Whilst the offices would not offer modern open plan space they would be no less suitable than those in Hamilton Building, Conway Centre or Wallasey Town Hall.

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Such an approach gives priority to the continued use of the former town hall over other buildings based on its significance and potential contribution to the health of the wider conservation area. Re-use of the building on this basis would not prevent consideration of alternative uses in future.

Given the continued occupation of part of the building by the Registrar's Service work is already in hand to carry out necessary repairs and renew the fire alarm. The cost of this work will be met from existing maintenance budgets.

The estimated 'one-off' costs of bringing the first floor into use as offices are as follows:

Lighting/Electrical	£90,000
IT Infrastructure	£20,000
Structural & Decoration	£50,000
Lift Refurbishment	£40,000
Mechanical	£150,000

The Council would retain the responsibility to address the backlog and life cycle repairs to the building. These figures need to be confirmed. A conservation management plan prepared when the building was marketed estimated costs of disrepair in the region of £1.7m. Some repairs have since been carried out.

A constraint on the re-use of this building is the lack of car parking associated with it. If the Council accommodation is to be occupied by staff who are desk based this will not be a problem. If however the building users are mobile or agile staff some provision will be required. To address that situation it is recommended that the Elgin Way long stay pay and display car park (at the rear of the Treasury Building) is brought into use for staff based in the former town hall on a similar basis to current use of the car park at Hamilton Building. This would allow continued use for pay and display parking but with priority staff use in office hours. This car park is currently poorly used, producing annual net income of £7,000.

It would be intended to generate income from the hiring of rooms in the town hall for functions and events, although at present there is no estimate of the likely amount of income achievable.