

WIRRAL COUNCIL

PROPERTY DEMOLITIONS IN BELMONT, BIRKENHEAD

12TH APRIL 2012

SUBJECT:	UPDATE ON AREA APPRAISAL AND STRATEGIC ACQUISITIONS – BELMONT, BIRKENHEAD
WARD/S AFFECTED:	BIRKENHEAD AND TRANMERE
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION HOUSING AND PLANNING
RESPONSIBLE PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY
KEY DECISION	NO

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek authorisation to proceed with the demolition of 10 buildings in Belmont, Birkenhead acquired by the Council and update Members on the overall progress of the Belmont area appraisal.
- 1.2 This action supports ongoing work to seek the longer term comprehensive regeneration of the Belmont area, in line with the Council's Corporate Priorities.
- 1.3 Demolition will reduce both the Council's liability of ongoing security and maintenance and exposure to risk through anti-social behaviour, vandalism and theft.
- 1.4 Demolition is not a statutory duty.

2.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

- 2.1 Belmont is a street of nineteen pre-1919 terraced properties located off a major road into Birkenhead Town Centre and at the gateway to Oxton (see Appendix A). The residential properties are in a very poor external and internal condition and are all vacant. The street is flanked by two privately owned and previously cleared sites, a public car park, a small terrace of three vacant commercial premises and a public house.
- 2.2 On 15 October 2009, the Council's Cabinet approved commencement of a preliminary area appraisal of the Belmont site to determine ownership and regeneration prospects. This included delegation of authority for the

Director of Law, HR & Asset Management to agree terms and complete the strategic acquisition of land and properties within the area, subject to owner and resident consultation.

- 2.3 The area provides an opportunity for the Council to assemble a site, which could facilitate a comprehensive housing redevelopment to the benefit of the local neighbourhood. The *Town and Country Planning Act 1990*, as amended by the *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004* enables action to be taken to improve the economic, social and environmental well being of the area.

3.0 PROGRESS UPDATE

- 3.1 At the outset of the appraisal all Belmont property owners have been consulted regarding their views and aspirations for their property and the area. All agreed that the area was in decline and in need of intervention. There was a unilateral expression of disappointment and a lack of trust in the private sector due to a succession of previous development plans on the neighbouring land, which have failed to be delivered. However, one owner felt that this was partly the Council's responsibility due to the imposition of stringent planning requirement procedures. All property owners expressed an interest in receiving a valuation offer from the Council.
- 3.2 Agreements were subsequently reached to acquire 15 of the 19 houses and to date, 14 are in Council ownership and 1 is in the process of being conveyed to the Council. Numbers 4, 7 19 and the Mews remain in private ownership and discussions are ongoing about the possible acquisition of these houses. (see Appendix A)
- 3.3 Senior Council officers have met with the owners of the cleared sites on the corner of Oxton Road/Balls Road East and side on to Oxton Road who were co-operatively working on scheme proposals to develop their own sites in isolation to the rest of the area which is currently residential. Discussions with these owners highlighted that such partial site development was problematic for scheme implementation and unsatisfactory in terms of area regeneration. Further to these discussions, the owners have indicated that they would be interested in working with the Council to facilitate comprehensive site development. The long terms aspirations from the Council are for a comprehensive redevelopment of the whole site to be undertaken. This will complement the work which has been undertaken in the Balls Road/Oxton Road gateway which includes improvements to the local Church and shops and also road improvements. Discussions therefore remain ongoing regarding the potential proposals which could be achieved through the redevelopment of the whole site.
- 3.4 The Council already owns land to the east of numbers 19 and 22 Belmont, which is partially landscaped and used as a car park. This facility appears to be well used and parking provisions for local

businesses on Oxton Rd will be considered as part of the comprehensive redevelopment of the site.

- 3.5 A fire at 22 Belmont resulted in emergency demolition work to protect public safety. The site has now been fenced off to prevent access to the exposed gable wall of number 20. This is currently stable but may deteriorate over the winter months. Fencing has had to be reinstated several times and rubbish in the general vicinity is cleared on a regular basis. With site management costs accruing, consent to block vehicular access to the rear of the evens terrace was sought from affected owners, in order to deter persistent fly tipping.
- 3.6 As the Council has acquired houses the security and site maintenance liability has increased. To date, significant resources, both in officer time and financial costs, have been utilised to ensure the housing units are kept safe and secure. Ongoing vandalism and anti-social behaviour puts pressure on the limited resources available. Over time property conditions have and will continue to deteriorate.
- 3.7 To summarise, a particular difficulty for previous developers has been the fractional nature of property ownership but the Council has made significant headway in resolving this issue. The Council has bought or agreed to buy 15 of the 19 properties, and negotiations to acquire the remaining 4 are ongoing. Despite the success in acquiring the majority of the housing units, the properties are deteriorating due to ongoing vandalism and anti-social behaviour. Only limited resources are available to respond to these ongoing problems.

4.0 PROPOSED ACTION

- 4.1 In accordance with Cabinet's previous minute resolution (Item 169) the feasibility of demolishing the existing buildings has been assessed. As the Council now owns the majority of properties in this street, ongoing security and site management costs are accruing. This could be reduced by undertaking further limited demolition work to remove liabilities for vacant, derelict property and improve community safety. With 22 Belmont already demolished, it would be possible to continue demolition up to number 6, as all of these properties are in the Council's ownership. Number 6 is also Council owned but its retention would be required to protect the structural integrity of number 4, which is presently privately owned. On the opposite terrace there is an opportunity to demolish numbers 11, 13 and 15 leaving numbers 9 and 17 to support the remaining privately owned houses, numbers 7 and 19, respectively (see Appendix B)
- 4.2 At this stage, it is suggested that negotiations continue with the remaining individual property and land owners regarding both possible acquisition and a comprehensive regeneration solution for the area as a whole. Should it not be possible to reach satisfactory agreements with

the remaining owners, then a further report to Members will be submitted with details about potential issue resolution.

5.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 5.1 There is a risk that a member of the public could be injured should they gain unauthorised access to any of the vacant properties. The Council's exposure to this risk has increased in line with property acquisitions over time and this is evidenced by ongoing vandalism, illegal entry, arson and anti social behaviour both in and around the housing units owned by the Council, despite appropriate remedial measures being taken in an attempt to reduce these risks. Demolishing the majority of the houses owned by the Council, as detailed previously, will reduce this risk to a more manageable level.

6.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 6.1 The alternative to demolition is to continue the existing efforts to maintain property security. To date, this has proved to be resource intensive in terms of staffing and finance. With no firm regeneration proposal for the area at this stage, it is difficult to project how long the existing arrangements would need to be continued.

7.0 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The Council has been in contact with all property owners in Belmont regarding both negotiations and the future of the area. Should limited demolition be agreed all remaining property owners will be notified of such a decision.

8.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

- 8.1 There are no implications for voluntary, community and faith groups.

9.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: FINANCIAL; IT; STAFFING; AND ASSETS

- 9.1 Acquisitions and site security/maintenance costs are being funded from the existing Housing Capital Programme for 2011/12. It is estimated that the acquisition of the remaining housing units on Belmont will cost in the region of £200,000 with the suggested demolitions in this report costing in the region of £30,000. An allowance has been made for the remaining acquisitions, ongoing security costs and demolition from capital resources previously secured for clearance work.

- 9.2 There are no IT or staffing implications.

9.3 The Council will retain the ownership of the land following demolition work.

10.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Demolishing the housing units detailed in this report will reduce the Council's exposure to risk and potential liability claims.

11.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

11.1 Has the potential impact of your proposal(s) been reviewed with regard to equality?

No because there is no relevance to equality.

12.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

12.1 Demolition often results in a degree of material salvage and recycling by the demolition contractor. In the longer term the brown field land will be subject to a more comprehensive regeneration solution for the area as a whole which will incorporate carbon reduction measures.

13.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

13.1 The site is located within a Primarily Residential Area in the Council's Unitary Development Plan. It is also within a regeneration priority area where new housing development is acceptable in principle under the terms of the Council's Interim Planning Policy 'New Housing Development'.

13.2 Future redevelopment for new housing or self contained flats would be subject to UDP Policy HS4 and Supplementary Document SPD2 'Designing for Self Contained Flats Development & Conversions'. Development incorporating retail use would need to be considered against UDP Policy SH4 and the tests in National Planning Policy PPS6 or any forthcoming replacement. The setting of Oxtou Congregational Church, a Grade II listed building, will also need to be taken into account in the design of future proposals.

13.3 It is anticipated that the demolition of the properties detailed in this report will greatly reduce the incidents of anti social behaviour and vandalism in the area

14.0 RECOMMENDATION/S

14.1 Members approve the demolition of numbers 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18 and 20 Belmont, Birkenhead

14.2 Members authorise officers to consider additional demolition to the remaining 9 units should any further agreements to acquire houses be reached.

14.3 Members note the progress with the area appraisal, pending a further report detailing a more comprehensive regeneration proposal for the Belmont area as a whole.

15.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

15.1 Ongoing incidents of vandalism, theft and anti social behaviour in and around properties owned by the Council in Belmont Birkenhead are likely to continue into the future, having implications for the limited resources available to respond to these incidents. This exposes the Council to the risk of a member of the public being injured.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Area Appraisal, Belmont, Birkenhead

Appendix B – Plan showing property ownership and proposed demolition

REFERENCE MATERIAL

(Include background information referred to or relied upon when drafting this report, together with details of where the information can be found. There is no need to refer to publicly available material: e.g. Acts of Parliament or Government guidance.)

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Cabinet Report: Area Appraisal and Strategic Acquisitions – Belmont, Birkenhead	15 th October 2009