

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET:

SUBJECT:	BIRKENHEAD TOWN CENTRE – MASTERPLAN KEY PRINCIPLES
WARD/S AFFECTED:	BIRKENHEAD AND TRANMERE WARD
REPORT OF:	STRATEGIC DIRECTOR REGENERATION & ENVIRONMENT
RESPONSIBLE PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	COUNCILLOR PAT HACKETT
KEY DECISION	YES

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report seeks Members approval of the key principles of the masterplan for Birkenhead Town Centre (Appendix 1 of this report) which has been prepared by Neptune Developments Limited which is a requirement of the lock-out agreement that Neptune have with the Council until 31 March 2015.
- 1.2 If these principles are supported which is the next key stage in the process, they will form the basis for:
- a) the undertaking of a test of lawfulness in relation to the masterplan principles
 - b) consultation with the public concerning the proposals
 - c) consultation with staff and Trade Unions about the potential relocation of Europa Pools.
- 1.3 At this stage the Council is seeking to consult and test Neptune Development's proposals and will bring back a report to Cabinet, for decision, once the outcome of the lawfulness test and consultations are known.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The 2010 Integrated Regeneration Strategy for Birkenhead and Wirral Waters stated that the retail offer of the town centre needs to be strengthened to provide a sustainable blend of multiples and independent retailing, including an improved market and retail anchor, either through improving the existing floor space or through redevelopment activity. The Council's Corporate Plan 2013/16 includes a commitment to develop a masterplan for Birkenhead Town Centre and seek its implementation with the private sector.
- 2.2 To help achieve this objective the Council entered into a Stage 1 Lock-Out Agreement with Neptune Developments Limited on 10 October 2013 for an initial period of twelve months to allow them the time frame to work up a masterplan for the Town Centre and this was extended until March 2015 to allow further time for the masterplan to be developed.

3.0 MASTERPLAN PROPOSAL BY NEPTUNE DEVELOPMENTS LIMITED

- 3.1 Neptune Developments has been working with WMBC to develop proposals for the regeneration of Birkenhead Town Centre through a lock-out agreement.
- 3.2 The subject area of this work has included areas of the Town's central retail core, together with vacant sites on Europa Boulevard and the site of the existing Europa Pool.
- 3.3 Neptune has identified that there is an opportunity to develop both the central and retail core and the leisure and retail offer in Birkenhead Town Centre to increase the use of Birkenhead by all Wirral residents and in doing so significantly improve the prospects of the Town for future investment across a range of uses.
- 3.4 Birkenhead Town Centre was historically a busy retail and leisure destination but in recent years has seen significant competition from other adjacent retail and leisure centres which has had a significant impact on its trading performance.
- 3.5 Developments such as Liverpool One, the Bromborough Retail Park and Cheshire Oaks have all provided higher quality alternatives to the use of the traditional Town Centre retail and leisure offer and the Wirral's excellent transport links with these locations has diverted much of the retail spend away from Birkenhead's central core.
- 3.6 Other factors such as the quality of the environment and car parking, together with perceptions of safety and security have also had a negative impact.
- 3.7 Whilst these factors present a significant challenge to the Town the latent demand from the relatively large catchment of the Town Centre does provide an opportunity to represent Birkenhead as a viable destination and recapture lost retail and leisure spend.
- 3.8 The existing shopping centres of the Grange and the Pyramids have strong footfall but it is understood from retail assessments that a high percentage of Wirral's population do not shop in Birkenhead.
- 3.9 All Town Centres have faced challenges in recent years due to the recession and the impact that this has had on both shoppers and retailers. Many Town Centres suffer similar challenges to that of Birkenhead and few have been totally successful in achieving a comprehensive regeneration due generally to an oversupply of retail space and a lack of scope to undertake significant regeneration and environmental improvement works.
- 3.10 A feature of those areas that have been most successful has been the provision of a strong leisure offer combined with retail which significantly improves the overall visitor experience. In analysing Birkenhead's competition, it is clear that this combination of leisure and retail is a key feature.
- 3.11 The leisure sector has emerged from the recession in a far stronger position than the equivalent retail business and demand from leisure operators is generally stronger than that of retailers. In addition, leisure operators are realising the benefits of Town Centre locations for their outlets particularly where these have anchor uses which drive strong footfall.

- 3.12 Birkenhead is relatively unusual in that it has a modern Town Centre cinema but this is not supported by the car parking and restaurant uses which are essential for a successful operation.
- 3.13 It is understood that the existing Vue Cinema in Birkenhead does not perform in line with expectations due primarily to the fact that its car parking and complimentary leisure offer is extremely limited.
- 3.14 There is a synergy between cinemas and restaurants which are mutually dependent and this has been illustrated well by the success of the New Brighton development which has brought together a relatively unknown cinema operator with national restaurant operators and is one of the best performing leisure developments of its type in the UK.
- 3.15 The development of a new cinema in an alternative location would be extremely difficult to deliver due to the intrinsic value of the existing building, together with the significant cost of constructing and fitting out a new facility.
- 3.16 There is, however, an opportunity to utilise the value and investment in the existing cinema and to transform its offer by the development of a series of restaurant uses adjacent to it, together with a significant improvement in the current car parking arrangements.
- 3.17 Having undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the options available for the development of the area, it has been identified by Neptune Developments that the only practical solution to the issue is to relocate the existing Europa Pool facility to an alternative site and subsequent to this, develop the existing pool site for restaurant use.
- 3.18 Whilst this proposal may seem radical the developer believes that it provides a sensible and cost effective solution which will be a very significant first phase of the regeneration of Birkenhead Town Centre as a whole.
- 3.19 In order to capture the benefit of the footfall generated by a new pool and reinforce the area's position as an overall leisure destination, it is proposed that the new pool is located on the Europa Boulevard site which lies adjacent to the Conway Park Railway Station and Price Street.
- 3.20 The existing Europa Pool will continue to operate throughout the period of construction of the new facility with no interruption in service with the existing pool only being demolished when the new facility is fully operational.
- 3.21 Subsequent to the clearance of the existing pool, the construction of the commercial leisure development will commence and this will consist of a series of family restaurants adjacent to the cinema and discussions are already taking place with a number of national restaurant operators.
- 3.22 The proposed development of a new leisure quarter centred around Conway Street and Conway Park forms the first phase of a more comprehensive regeneration of Birkenhead and Neptune has undertaken a masterplanning framework which will form the future phases of the development of the Town Centre which will build upon the leisure footfall and seek to improve the quality of the retail offer in the Town Centre to

re-establish Birkenhead as a viable alternative to both Liverpool and the out of town retail parks.

3.23 Discussions are currently ongoing with existing land owners and other key stakeholders with a view to finalising proposals for the larger project in the near future.

3.24 The current proposals for the phase 1 development (set out in this report and in the document at Appendix 1) are deliverable within a short timeframe and subsequent to the confirmation of Council approval of the key principles a planning application will be developed and consultations with stakeholders undertaken.

4.0 STRATEGIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS

4.1 Birkenhead Town Centre requires redevelopment to create a modern, vibrant town centre to meet the retail needs of Wirral residents. The Framework document provides key principles to achieve this.

4.2 The "leisure area" (the pool, cinema and food court) proposes an approach that has been successfully implemented in a number of out of centre and in centre locations and will bring a focus for these activities which does not currently exist in the town centre.

4.3 The proposals for the market and surrounding areas will create a destination point and a modern centre for Birkenhead. Initial commercial in confidence discussions have revealed that there is significant interest in creating this opportunity in Birkenhead.

4.4 Neptune Developments have a proven track record of delivering mixed use schemes as New Brighton and Queen's Square in Liverpool demonstrate.

5.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

5.1 An assessment of the Neptune proposals confirms that if delivered the scheme will have the potential to revitalise an important part of Birkenhead Town Centre delivering a far greater regeneration impact than if the sites identified in this report were developed out separately. No other options have therefore been considered as NDL has already secured an interest in the balance of the land that is needed to deliver the re-provided market.

6.0 CONSULTATION

6.1 Public consultation on the scheme will be undertaken by the developer and statutory consultation will take place in relation to the planning application(s) required for these developments.

6.2 Consultation concerning the proposals of potentially relocating the pool will also take place directly with staff and Trade Unions and be undertaken by the Strategic Director for Families and Well-Being.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS.

7.1 Consultation with these groups will take place as part of the consultation process.

8.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS, FINANCIAL, IT, STAFFING AND ASSETS

- 8.1 All financial matters relating to Neptune Development's proposals along with the outcome of the test of lawfulness and consultation will be reported to Cabinet in due course prior to any decisions being taken.
- 8.2 The key principles of the masterplan envisage the sale of the Council owned land on Europa Boulevard, including potentially the Europa Pools site and this will generate a capital receipt. Subject to the project progressing the actual sum will be determined following completion of the independent valuation of the sites.
- 8.3 The final return to the Council will be calculated and reported when the proposed scheme has been fully developed. This would be prior to the Council entering into an Implementation Agreement with Neptune and will be predicated on the scheme and its delivery mechanism passing the test of lawfulness in terms of procurement and implementation.
- 8.4 Consultation on the potential relocation of the pool will take place with staff and Trade Unions.

9.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 If Members approve the key principles of the masterplan then a number of matters including a test of lawfulness, procurement and land matters will be considered and reported back to Members in due course.

10.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The proposed redevelopment scheme that is the subject of this report will be available to all residents of Wirral, irrespective of their religion, creed, sexual orientation or race.
- 10.2 An Equality Impact Assessment will be prepared to inform any public consultation undertaken.

11.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The re-provision of the pool and the construction of new retail units will reduce carbon omissions.

12.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 Any future application for the redevelopment of the sites named in this report will need to be assessed against the Council's Unitary Development Plan the emerging Core Strategy Local Development Framework and the National Planning Policy Framework.
- 12.2 This masterplan seeks to bring new development and community activity to Birkenhead Town Centre and is expected to improve community safety in this area.

13.0 **RECOMMENDATION**

- 13.1 That the key principles of the masterplan proposed by Neptune Developments Limited set out in Appendix 1 be agreed and be used as the basis for the test of lawfulness and for consultation with the public, staff and Trade Unions as set out in this report and that a further detailed report on the outcomes is brought back to Cabinet for a future decision.
- 13.2 That the Strategic Director of Families and Well-Being be authorised to undertake consultation with staff and Trade Unions concerning the potential re-location of Europa Pools.

14.0 **REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION**

- 14.1 To progress the development of, and consultation on, a comprehensive redevelopment scheme for Birkenhead Town Centre which is a Corporate Plan Priority.

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