



POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 6th November 2024

REPORT TITLE:	WALLASEY AND BIRKENHEAD TOWN HALL - NEXT STEPS
REPORT OF:	INTERIM DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION AND PLACE

REPORT SUMMARY

On 17 July 2024 this Committee agreed (amongst other matters) to convene a Member workshop to inform future options for Wallasey and Birkenhead Town Halls, to review work to date and understand the implications of next steps. A workshop took place in September and this report sets out recommendations having regard to the outcome of that workshop.

It is proposed that Wallasey Town Hall continues to deliver the democratic functions of the Council. In addition to this, the report outlines proposals to move into Wallasey Town Hall front facing and partner services and explore opportunities to accommodate other services that are not suitable for the Council's Mallory Building. This would be done on a case-by-case basis. In addition to this, the report sets out proposals for other opportunities to be explored relating to delivering other services and activities from Wallasey Town Hall, for example activating the use of the main hall.

In order to comply with the Council's commitment to net zero, officers will also explore opportunities to decarbonise Wallasey Town Hall. The Council will also have to invest in the building in terms of fabric and a robust plan to invest in the asset will be developed and incorporated into the Council's long term financial planning. Similar work will not be progressed on Birkenhead Town Hall until a decision regarding its future is made.

Officers will undertake a soft market testing exercise for Birkenhead Town Hall and in addition to this will seek to understand what options there are for Council services in Birkenhead Town Hall. Following this work a further report will be brought to the committee on the future of this asset. It is envisaged that this work will be concluded within six months.

The recommendations align with the following themes within the Council's Plan 2023-2027:

Theme 1: Working together to create a more efficient, effective and accessible council.

Theme 4: Working together to deliver people focused regeneration;

Theme 5: Working together to protect our environment.

Theme 6: Working together to create safe, resilient and engaged communities.

This is a key decision. This has relevance to Birkenhead and Tranmere, and Seacombe wards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Policy and Resources Committee is recommended to:

- (1) agree to the continued occupation of Wallasey Town Hall for licensing services and for civic and democratic functions, including Council, Committee Meetings and the Mayor, including support functions.
- (2) endorse the utilisation of Wallasey Town Hall for front facing and other appropriate Council and partner services on a case-by-case basis.
- (3) note that further work is to be undertaken by the Interim Director of Regeneration and Place regarding options for Birkenhead Town Hall, including surveys, soft market testing and future options to inform a future decision of this Committee.
- (4) support the relocation of Registrars to Wallasey Town Hall, in light of deterioration of its current accommodation in BTH and the opportunity to generate potential savings by suspending day to day activity in the Building.
- (5) That work will be undertaken to consider options for a Birkenhead offer for the Registrar Service and this will be included in the report referred to in recommendation six.
- (6) To note that a further report will be brought back to this committee to consider the future of Birkenhead Town Hall.
- (7) To note the required capital works (£12m) associated with the condition of the building and the revenue costs (£1.2m) for Wallasey Town Hall. This will be subject to more detailed assessment for future capital bids.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 Until the Mallory building came into operation, Wallasey Town Hall was the principal office of the Council since its formation in 1974. This report, if agreed, will enable progress to be made on utilising this well-known building in a way that is aligned to the Council's plan.
- 1.2 The Council has chosen to focus its main back-office accommodation in the Mallory Building, Birkenhead, in order to deliver associated regeneration benefits to the Town Centre. Mallory Building is currently not configured to deliver any public facing services nor civic and democratic functions of the Council, principally Committee and Council meetings and the exercise of the Mayoral office.
- 1.3 Birkenhead Town Hall is not configured to deliver Council meetings at the scale needed to operate Wirral Council. Whilst there are issues such as public, Member and officer accessibility and security, it does however benefit from better quality public transport connections.
- 1.4 Wallasey Town Hall contains purpose-built spaces at the right scale and layout for democratic functions including the main council chamber and viewing gallery. By focusing the Council's accommodation on two primary buildings it will be able to further rationalise its accommodation releasing underused assets to their future use, allowing the Council to plan over the long term to invest in its remaining assets.
- 1.5 The Council's operating model has changed, and it has less need for accommodation whilst also being challenged financially to be more efficient. It is not value for money to retain assets that the Council no longer needs.
- 1.6 Given the listed status of Birkenhead Town Hall, it is appropriate that the Council carefully considers this asset. In addition, the Council also needs to carefully consider the Registrar's service which is customer facing and operates out of this building.
- 1.7 The future use of Wallasey Town Hall provides the opportunity to align the Council's accommodation strategy with the customer experience strategy and work currently under way to transform customer services.
- 1.8 Wallasey Town Hall has significant potential to deliver more services to the public which are outside the statutory services provided by the Council, for example spaces that the Council may not choose to deliver services in, or the sprung dance floor. This includes commercialisation of the building for events such as weddings.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The Committee could delay making a decision. However, if Members are supportive of the democratic function remaining in Wallasey Town Hall and, given this does not consume the whole of the building, it is reasonable for Members to seek the balance of the building to be populated. This option would simply delay this work progressing and generate uncertainty about the future of both Town Halls.
- 2.2 The Committee could choose to dispose of Birkenhead Town Hall now, subject to any consultation or other work required to make the asset vacant. However, completion of work that is referred to in the recommendations would give Members a

better understanding of the potential of Birkenhead Town Hall prior to considering its future. Choosing this option would mean Members would take a decision, lacking some of the information they would need to understand the implications of the decision.

- 2.3 Members have previously considered retention (as Town Halls) or release of both town halls and discounted this. As these have been previously considered and discounted, they are not considered in detail in this report.
- 2.4 Members could consider not supporting the principle of relocating Registrars to Wallasey Town Hall and or not support the suspension of day to day operation of Birkenhead Town Hall until a report on its future is presented to committee. There is an opportunity to commercialise elements of Wallasey Town Hall and the Registrar Service plays a significant part in this. The Registrar Service have had to work round several building fabric issues in Birkenhead Town Hall, which is not ideal for a resident facing service. In addition to this the Council would lose the opportunity to explore savings from the suspension of services from the building. Options for a satellite service in Birkenhead could be considered.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Civic and Democratic Functions

- 3.1 The Council need spaces where the public can witness elected officials taking decisions. These activities include Committee and full Council meetings, which, by statute, are in person meetings. There is a need for the mayor to be able to exercise the delivery of their role within the Borough as its first Citizen. A specific group of officers support Council and Committee meetings, the Mayor and also the election process. Wallasey Town Hall offers the best solution to deliver this wide range of activity, in an environment which is efficient, safe and with the appropriate gravitas.

Licensing

- 3.2 The Licensing team has relocated to Wallasey Town Hall and their previous accommodation has now been successfully re-used for education purposes. The team is now settled and working well in the Town Hall. In July 2024, this Committee endorsed the temporary relocation of the service, which was enabled for practical operational reasons. Based on the recommendations in the report this move would become permanent.

Carbon Neutrality

- 3.3 The Council's commitment to carbon neutrality by 2030 means that if Wallasey Town Hall is retained, work will be needed to decarbonise it. This will include changing the heating system and works to the fabric of the building to improve insulation, which are likely to be disruptive and may have decorative impacts to the building. Given these factors, future applications for decarbonisation grant funding will explore Wallasey Town Hall as an option. This may have Capital and Revenue cost implications for the Council, but this would be explored at the point of any application for funding and a decision taken at that point in time.

Travel

- 3.4 The stated intent of the Local Plan, the Birkenhead 2040 Framework, the Places for People Strategy, and Cool Wirral is to enable sustainable transport, reduce car

dependency and make progress to see “a complete shift to fossil fuel free local travel by around 2030” and reduce impact of car use. The draft Wallasey Town Hall Quarter Masterplan (WTHQM) is to be considered by Economy Regeneration and Housing Committee in December 2024. It was subject to public consultation between 12 October 2023 and 7 December 2023. It sets out a “Healthy Streets approach” to reduce the barrier of Brighton Street with proposals for improved public realm, seating and improved lighting to support increased walking, cycling and public transport as well as supporting proposals for a Mass Transit system. Currently there is no funding attached to WTHQM so timescales for delivery are not known at this stage. WTHQM identifies a number of existing parking sites as potential for redevelopment, recommending that alternative parking solutions must be introduced and that establishing a robust parking strategy for the area is essential. It is anticipated that support enabling sustainable travel options, such as EV charging, cycle parking, changing facilities, would be considered as occupation of Wallasey Town Hall evolves.

Costs

- 3.5 It has been previously reported that Wallasey Town Hall needs £5.99m over a 15-year period, at today’s prices with some exclusions such as inflation and preliminaries. At the end of the 15-year period, particularly as the asset is listed and addressing only the building condition issues the Council is likely to have spent £12m. It is anticipated that this would be addressed by a series of bids for inclusion in the Medium-Term Financial Plan over the 15-year period. This work would also consider the lifespan for each component. This work does not include costs for improvement of the asset or ICT equipment.
- 3.6 The cost of decarbonising the building is likely to be £3.85m based on the findings of the heat decarbonisation plan. This would include replacement of the heating system, LED lighting secondary glazing and upgrading the incoming electrical supply to accommodate the proposed works. It is anticipated that this will be funded by a central government grant or other funding, but the Council, as applicant, may have to provide an element of match funding (circa 12%) and any grant application is not guaranteed. The amount of any match funding will be dependent on the terms of the grant funding round. Therefore, with these figures combined it is likely that a sum greater than £16m would be spent on the Town Hall over the period to enable and secure its future use.
- 3.7 Relocation of services will also have as yet unquantified cost, in addition to the sum set out. This will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. It is anticipated any business case will consider revenue savings and capital receipts that may be generated by any proposition in order to fund it. In certain instances, there may be reasons why additional funding would be sought to relocate specific services. Improvements to ICT will be required but this element is currently not costed, although there is a cost of over £60,000 for life expired network devices. It is therefore possible that the overall cost of works to the building on completion of a 15-year period could be over £20m inclusive of condition work, decarbonisation works and relocation of services.
- 3.8 The condition survey work indicated that less preliminaries the cost of works in year one for Birkenhead was £567,000 and Wallasey £149,000. Additional costs associated with IT systems would need to be investigated to enable improved connectivity to the building. Elements of the IT system in Wallasey are known to need renewal.

Future use of Wallasey Town Hall

- 3.9 Should members continue to endorse the use of Wallasey Town Hall for democratic purposes, it is appropriate to consider the balance of the building and what potential it has to co-locate services for the benefit of residents and the efficient operation of the Council. Due to the type and scale of accommodation available, the building has the potential to deliver front line and other services, for example it is currently delivering the licensing function and a number of front facing services operated from the building in the past. Consideration of front line service relocation to Wallasey Town Hall would be on a case-by-case basis, using a robust business case process. This could also include services provided by partner organisations, including other public services, for example the NHS and other partners that are aligned to achieving the Council's aims and objectives.
- 3.10 The vista and other aspects of the Town Hall also lends itself for uses other than the delivery of Council and partner services. Although not yet fully explored, it would be appropriate to remain open to these opportunities. These could be shared use, for example letting parts of the building to a third party, or delivery of events, for example concerts in the main hall. These would also be considered through a business case process, following the appropriate governance.
- 3.11 Wallasey Town Hall also has the potential to interact with the Council's emerging Customer Experience Strategy. Although this work is emerging, the Town Hall offers opportunities for residents to engage face to face with the Council at this location.
- 3.12 Any proposals for Wallasey Town Hall will need to have regard to the emerging WTHQM. During the development of the masterplan transport for the area was considered and it has proposals for active travel and public transport.

Potential future uses of Birkenhead Town Hall

- 3.13 The next appropriate step is to undertake a soft market testing exercise relating to Birkenhead Town Hall. This should help the Committee understand the scope of potential uses that the building could be put to and inform a future decision on the building. This work would include a wide range of options including other potential Council and partner uses of the building. It is planned that once this work has been completed, a further report will be provided to the committee outlining the findings and proposing a way forward with the asset. During the development of the master plan transport for the area was considered and proposals for active travel and public transportation was considered.

Workshop

- 3.14 During a workshop in September 2024 Members were interested having a clear way forward for the future of the Town Halls, which took into account the cultural significance of both buildings, maximising the opportunity to take into account the buildings' listed status. Members were in particular interested in understanding a range of issues:
- Provision of suitable accommodation to deliver the democratic and civic functions of the Council. Such accommodation to be safe and accessible for all and have the appropriate spaces to deliver these functions. It also needs to provide a cultural 'home' for the Council.

- Consideration of opportunities for maximising the use of the Grade II* listed asset, generating income for example, using Wallasey Town Hall as a venue for hire, with opportunities centred around events such as weddings and the sprung dance floor.
- The opportunity to generate improved services to residents, aligned to the emerging customer experience strategy.
- The need to consider a wide range of options for Birkenhead Town Hall,
- The cost of rationalising the estate and of delivery of proposals.

3.15 In order to support this work, members are asked to note that officers anticipate a budget of circa £400k will be required.

Registrars

- 3.16 Further work needs to be undertaken regarding the detail of relocating the service. This includes exploring elements of the service remaining in Birkenhead Town Centre. This work would also include any statutory notice periods, existing booking commitments, and special requirements the service has including fit out of future accommodation. There is an opportunity to commercialise elements of Wallasey Town Hall and provision of weddings is an element of that approach.
- 3.17 The Registrar Service have had to work round several building fabric issues in Birkenhead Town Hall, which is not ideal for a resident facing service. Recent issues include water ingress on two separate occasions in the Registrars accommodation resulting in collapsed ceilings. This type of issue would continue until the condition of the building is addressed. Therefore, the approach taken in this report is to recommend to the committee to agree to the principle of relocation. It is proposed that relocation of the service would be delivered in a planned way over a period of time.
- 3.18 Whilst further work is being prepared relating to Birkenhead Town Hall, there may be an opportunity to generate a saving related to its operation over a short period of time, by scaling back its use. This would mean suspending day to day operations in the building, which could be an option once registrars relocate. This will be explored as a business as usual exercise, and if feasible put forward as a budget saving option in due course. The Act of Remembrance for 2024 would not be affected by this and there is no plan to change the location of the Act of Remembrance in the future.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 It is estimated that Wallasey Town Hall needs £12m over a 15-year period, of which £149k would be required in the first year. This is based upon the need for construction work, in a listed building, preliminaries (including surveys, design fees and other such fees) as well as construction cost inflation over the period of 15 years. This would involve capital works across a range of differing components (such as walls, roof and mechanical and electrical elements of the building) which have different asset lifespans, with an average lifespan estimated at 20 years. With interest rates at an assumed 5%, this means the cost of borrowing for £12m over 20 years would require a revenue budget of £1.2m per year. It is not likely that this sum

would be drawn down at one time but would be drawn down over a number of years as the funding was required. This is not currently available and so would increase the budget gap for the council when the capital spend is required. This figure excludes any costs associated with changing the heating system or relocating workforce into the building. In total over £16m, inclusive of any grants, for example for decarbonisation of the asset, is likely to be spent on the asset.

- 4.2 Birkenhead Town Hall needs an estimated £7.5m over a period of 15 years, of which £567k is needed in the first year. With an average lifespan of 20 years, the cost of borrowing would require revenue growth of £0.75m to fund this. This is not currently available and so would increase the budget gap for the council when the capital spend is required. This figure excludes any costs associated with changing the heating system or any development should the Council wish to re-use the building for its own purposes. Including work to modernise the heating system, the total cost is likely to be over £9.5m, excluding costs to fit the asset out for any future uses.
- 4.3 Varying the programme of works set out in the condition survey could also flex the sum required each year of the programme. Therefore, a further piece of work would be required to bid for capital funding and understand the profile of costs.
- 4.4 There are revenue costs associated with the remobilisation of Wallasey Town Hall. These are not budgeted. It is currently estimated that these will not exceed £100k. In addition, savings identified with the mothballing of Wallasey will be impacted and valued at £400k per annum will now not be achieved, although this may be offset by changes to the status of Birkenhead Town Hall if the Committee chooses to do this in the future. This gap has been included in the Council's financial plans for 2024-5 and beyond.
- 4.5 A considerable sum has been identified in year one of the condition work for Birkenhead. Should the Council look to release the asset the Council would not incur that cost.
- 4.6 Any spend prior to March 2025 will be in accordance with the Council's additional in year rules around spending.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Section 132 of the Local Government Act 1972 enables the Council to acquire or provide and furnish halls, offices and other buildings, for use for public meetings and assemblies. The status of Wallasey Town Hall and Birkenhead Town Hall as Grade II* listed places a responsibility of the Council to maintain them in accordance with the listed status.
- 5.2 Any contract award for surveys and building work would be made on either a lowest bidder, most economically advantageous tender basis or through an approved Framework route. The Council's Contract Procedure rules set out how contracts are to be awarded by the Council in accordance with its Procurement Strategy requirements.

- 5.3 The Council may need to undertake a consultation with the public or members of staff should it wish to relocate services to a different building. This should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 The proposal set out in this report may see elements of the Council's workforce relocating and this may have implications for the assets and ICT delivery of the Council.
- 6.2 There is a requirement to review fibre and radio connection to support services in the Town Hall and costs associated with this have yet to be determined. Should high bandwidth services be relocated into the building connections will need to be improved and dependant on configuration of any future use reconfiguration of the wired infrastructure may need to be undertaken. All network devices in the building are end of life or out of support. To fully re-open the building, around 60 devices need to be replaced, with a minimum cost of £60,000 and undertaking this work would be disruptive whilst the equipment is replaced. Any relocation would need to be carefully planned through the IT Service desk as there are limited resources available to enable relocations of IT equipment.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

Condition and costs

- 7.1 Both buildings require further investment. The cost of this work is currently not budgeted for and would provide a pressure for the Council.
- 7.2 Although a good piece of work has been done to determine condition, unforeseen additional work may arise out of work already identified. Construction cost inflation and other factors, such as changing regulations may also affect costs known at this time. This has been mitigated by the approach taken around costings and would be further mitigated with careful programming of any work in the future and appointment of the appropriate professionals.

Civic Artefacts and other issues

- 7.3 The Committee is not taking a decision about the future of Birkenhead Town Hall at this meeting. However, a factor to consider in the future would be the sensitive and careful consideration of how these assets would be treated. The act of remembrance, which is not affected by this decision, takes place in front of Birkenhead Town Hall. Careful arrangements around management of this and other issues would be needed in the future if members choose to change the operational status of Birkenhead Town Hall.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 If services relocate to Wallasey Town Hall, then other consultation exercises may need to be undertaken, but this would be addressed as each decision regarding relocation of services was undertaken on a case-by-case basis.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Both Town Halls are Grade II* listed buildings and of historic importance to the Residents of the Borough, and Council. Therefore, seeing them in economic use is important as this will ultimately protect the assets in the long term. This is also important from an environmental standpoint as reusing the buildings ensures that the carbon embedded in their construction is not released or carbon invested in new buildings where existing buildings can be used for the same purpose.
- 10.2 The WTHQM has proposals for improved public realm, seating and improved lighting to support increased walking, cycling and public transport as well as supporting proposals for a Mass Transit system.
- 10.3 This decision, giving clarity on the future of Wallasey Town Hall, sets the condition for future grant funding applications to enable future decarbonisation of the building.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Taking this decision means the Council will place services and the seat of democratic function outside Birkenhead, where the Council's investment is taking place. This will help give certainty for the Wallasey Town Hall master plan area, but also allow the Council to directly invest into the building and immediate area. This would also include potential delivery of services directly to the local community and the wider borough. This will also generate opportunity for other activity within the Town Hall, which offers increased community benefits, although the scope of these need to be fully developed in due course.
- 11.2 This report also sets the conditions to achieve a long-term solution for both Town Halls. It addresses a long-standing issue for the Borough and should ultimately see both assets being brought back into economic use to the benefit of the borough.
- 11.3 Investment in these assets also generates economic opportunities during any construction phase which has the potential to provide opportunities for individuals and businesses in the area.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

The proposed Wallasey Town Hall Quarter Master Plan
Initial review of transport times
Floor areas of Birkenhead Town Hall and Wallasey Town Hall

Condition Survey Wallasey Town Hall
 Condition Survey Birkenhead Town Hall
 Building level heat and decarbonisation and energy efficiency report – Wallasey Town Hall
 Building level heat and decarbonisation and energy efficiency report – Birkenhead Town Hall
 Reimagining Birkenhead and Wallasey Town Halls
 Wallasey Town Hall Quarter Masterplan.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by this Committee in accordance with sections a, b and f of its Terms of Reference.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
P&R Committee Workshop	09 September 2024
P&R Committee	17 July 2024
P&R Committee	13 December 2023
ER&H	18 September 2023
P&R Committee	15 February 2023
Council	11 July 2022
P&R Committee	16 March 2022
Council	06 December 2021
P&R Committee	07 October 2021