



POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

13 DECEMBER 2023

Report Title:	WALLASEY AND BIRKENHEAD TOWN HALL UPDATE AND PROPOSED NEXT STEPS
Report of:	DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION AND PLACE

REPORT SUMMARY

This report details the status of both Wallasey and Birkenhead Town Hall including the current changes in the service provided from the buildings. Condition reports, which were issued in 2019 show significant amounts of capital investment required for maintenance purposes. There has been building work undertaken to meet urgent building condition needs as well as modification to ventilation systems. However, there is a need to update these reports in order to get a clear view and assurance of the Capital required, with current condition and cost being important factors.

Demolition of the two Annex buildings which sit either side of Wallasey Town Hall is underway, and this report provides an update on the progress of these works.

Regeneration Plans have progressed at pace across the Borough and the location of Birkenhead and Wallasey Town Halls fall within these areas of Master Planning and Regeneration plans. The report requests funding to procure a targeted feasibility study of the two Town Halls in relation to future uses by a specialist company experienced in heritage stock, linking to the Master Planning. The scope will also include commercial and economic viability of any options brought forward.

The report proposal directly supports the Wirral Plan (2021-26) through the following key theme:

- Safe, vibrant communities where people want to live and raise their families.

This decision affects Seacombe and Birkenhead & Central Wards and is not a Key Decision.

RECOMMENDATION

The Policy & Resources Committee is recommended to agree:

1. That the Director of Regeneration and Director for Neighbourhoods progress the required feasibility work and Condition Survey refresh on both sites.

2. That the Director of Regeneration and Place be requested to submit a report to a future meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee detailing the findings of feasibility studies and presenting options and business cases in respect to the future use of both Town Halls and alternative recommendations for the Committees consideration.
3. That Wallasey Town Hall remains stood down until the completion of works outlined in this report and until receipt of the report to Policy and Resources detailing the findings of the feasibility report and condition surveys.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The Council has a large portfolio of assets including the two Grade II * listed Birkenhead and Wallasey Town Halls. The Council's Asset Management Strategy identifies the need for sound strategic decisions to be taken to ensure the optimal use of the Council's assets including financial, service needs and supporting the newly agreed Council Plan. Up to date information is significant to ensure the correct decisions are taken.
- 1.2 The Council must comply with its duties to its employees, members, and visitors when operating Council buildings and sites. Since the previous condition reports were undertaken, the Council must be able to ensure compliance with ventilation standards which were introduced during the Covid pandemic. The Climate Emergency agenda also places more emphasis on the efficiency of Council buildings which in turn require careful consideration when investing in mechanical and electrical systems, as well as heating and insulation. It is anticipated given the age of the assets that the building fabric will also require capital investment.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 Utilising existing reports and feasibility studies is an option but carries several risks namely, existing condition reports do not take into account changes in ventilation requirements arising from the Covid pandemic and contain cost estimates which are not consistent to today's prices. Without a clear direction of the future use of these Town Halls, any Capital investment would only be targeted on current use, for example Wallasey Town Hall could provide use for Civic and Committee functions but limited administration function due to the opening of the new offices in Birkenhead. Any work progressed without integration to with current Master Plan and Regeneration Programmes could lead to unnecessary expenditure and limited value to the outcomes of the Wirral Plan.
- 2.2 To retain both Town Halls as functioning Civic and general municipal use is a model that the Council has operated for many years. This option comes at a cost for both revenue and Capital expenditure particularly considering stock condition reports of both assets which indicate high levels of expenditure required to deal with outstanding maintenance and compliance needs. These costs will continue to rise as building and other project related expenditures rise. Both Town Halls are inefficient in their energy use and have other significant running costs, including those associated with their listed building status. Climate emergency considerations must also be factored into this option utilising data within recently commissioned decarbonisation reports. To continue without a clear strategy for future use is not an option that is affordable.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Current Use of Wallasey and Birkenhead Town Halls

- 3.1 Council approved the "stand-down" of Wallasey Town Hall as part of the 2023/24 Budget Options. However, the building has had to remain partly operational to facilitate the Local Plan Consultation process due to the number and size of rooms

required. The Local Plan consultation ended in August 2023 and the Town Hall has now moved to a “stand down” position for facilities management but maintaining essential archive and contractor access as required. As part of the “stand down”, approval has been sought to provide additional security to the building. New CCTV cameras have been fitted and Perspex window protection is to be installed to all ground floor windows in December 2023 and if necessary, this will be extended to upper floors.

- 3.2 The adjacent North and South Annexes to Wallasey Town Hall, built in 1964 are scheduled for demolition in early 2024. This comes after many months of decommissioning the sites from asbestos and utilities and planning the main demolition. The amount of work necessary to prepare the Annexes before demolition work is undertaken, should not be underestimated. The close confine with residential accommodation means that extra care needs to be taken. Whilst there will be no directly associated works to the Wallasey Town Hall building, the area around the perimeter will be restricted due to scaffolding, hoarding, road changes and the demolition process will pose risks associated with noise, dust and general access around the area. The demolition of the annexes is scheduled to be completed within 20 weeks of the commencement of works, this timeframe will coincide with other internal work to the Town Hall which is also due to be completed by June 2024.
- 3.3 At the start of the 23/24 municipal year Birkenhead Town Hall has been the nominated site for Civic and Council activities with all Committee meetings taking place at this site, as well as Mayoral functions. Weddings take place regularly and all Registrar functions continue to operate from Birkenhead. Political party meeting rooms and offices have also been successfully located within Birkenhead Town Hall, although it is recognised that the physical quality of the Council Chamber arrangements is compromised.

Building Condition

- 3.4 Construction of Wallasey Town Hall commenced in 1914 and it opened in 1920, its architecture is described as Free Neo-Grecian in a Beaux Arts tradition. It has served as a temporary military hospital and whilst it was badly damaged in August 1940 it has retained many of its original features. The most recent survey of Wallasey Town Hall in 2019 identified that whilst the building has conformed to relevant legislation, there is a backlog of maintenance to building fabric, mechanical and electrical services which needs to be addressed in the short to medium term to maintain the building in a satisfactory state of repair. The estimated summary of costs identified in 2019 was £8m for building, electrical and mechanical works, over a ten-year period.
- 3.5 Some priority building works including asbestos removal and ventilation improvements have been undertaken but there is an acknowledgement that the survey does need to be refreshed to take account of the works already completed, additional requirements placed on the Council, the impact of the building having been closed for prolonged periods of time during the Covid pandemic and changing construction costs since the original work has been completed.
- 3.6 The building is one of the Council’s most inefficient and costly buildings to heat. It has one heating system which cannot currently be zoned. Decarbonisation reports have been undertaken and discussions will take place to determine the route of funding applications. The current energy certificate is D which is poor however, recommendations are provided and will be considered along with the decarbonisation report as part of the overall feasibility study.

- 3.7 Officer approval has been given to undertake essential maintenance following the completion of the Local Plan meetings in August 2023. Due to the intrusive nature of the works these are best completed whilst the building is vacant. Critical to the safety of the proposed works it is advisable that these are aligned with the demolition of North and South Annex to ensure that Construction, Design and Management Regulations are met. Works within Wallasey Town Hall are scheduled to commence early 2024, it is estimated these will take approximately 4-6 months to complete due to some of the works requiring listed building consent which extends the lead-in time. The timeframe will coincide with the wider construction activity in the vicinity of the Town Hall. Works will be procured through competitive tender, works are estimated to cost in the region of £300,000 and will be met from existing Capital funding sources.
- 3.8 The building improvement areas fall within the following categories:
- External gutter and rainwater pipe renewal;
 - Repairs to suspended concrete slabs in lightwells;
 - Refurbishment of asphalt ledges due to vegetation growth;
 - Asphalt roof coverings in isolated areas;
 - External lighting (minor works); and
 - Security of windows, application of Perspex
- 3.9 Birkenhead Town Hall was built in 1887 and is located in a prominent position within the Conservation area of Hamilton Square. The building suffered a major fire in 1901 and the upper part of the tower had to be rebuilt. The building continued to be used as council offices until the early 1990s, when work was undertaken to restore the external stonework and many interior decorations and features, including the former council chamber. Between 2001 and 2010, the Wirral Museum occupied a significant portion of the building. In 2009 the sale of the building was explored.
- 3.10 As with Wallasey Town Hall, Birkenhead also has significant backlog maintenance and the estimated summary of costs in the 2019 condition report identified £5.5m investment was needed over a ten-year period. Some urgent works such as electrical and roofing works have already been completed and general maintenance undertaken as part of the move of functions from Wallasey Town Hall, including ventilation to the Council Chamber. A refresh of the condition survey would consider the works already completed and provide further insight of the Capital investment required to bring the building up to the required standard. The current energy certificate rating is C which is better than Wallasey Town Hall however, recommendations are provided and will be considered along with the decarbonisation report as part of the overall feasibility study.

Heritage Reports

- 3.11 Independent Heritage reports have been commissioned for both Town Halls. The report for Wallasey Town Hall was completed in March 2023 and it outlined the constraints of the building and reviewed at a high level several options such as residential, educational, wedding and function venue etc.
- 3.12 Birkenhead Town Hall Heritage Report was completed in January 2021 and highlighted the constraints of the building, opportunities particularly within the Town Centre Masterplan for Birkenhead. Alternative use options such as museum, live music venue and art have been ruled out due to past ventures or a duplication of other facilities nearby.

3.13 The commissioned Heritage reports were undertaken as a specific exercise and there is now a requirement to procure a more targeted feasibility study by a specialist company experienced in heritage stock. The company would be procured following a detailed brief from officers in the Regeneration and Place Directorate and would link to existing and emerging Master Plans for both Birkenhead and the Town Hall Quarter in Wallasey. The study would also review current uses and the condition of the Town Halls but widening the scope to include commercial and economic viability of any options brought forward.

Occupancy Strategy

3.14 The occupancy of Council assets was undertaken as part of the Asset Consolidation Staff Relocation exercise in 2019 which identified a number of Council assets for disposal ahead of the consolidation into one centrally located office in Birkenhead (Mallory Building). Since this exercise was completed, Covid has led the Council to embrace a hybrid working model which has resulted in fewer buildings being required for general administrative use. Civic and Committee assets are still required and must be considered within any options around future use of the two Town Halls and would be subject to further reports.

3.15 A proposed feasibility will look at the efficiency of current use of our Town Halls ensuring that all Capital investment meets the aims of the Council's Asset Strategy. The focus would include the longevity of the future uses of the Town Halls, its current purpose and that of future generations. Any approved Capital investment would require detailed programming information to ensure the continuity of services and expectations and that outcomes of the investment were clearly visible and quantifiable.

Demolition Progress of North and South Annexes

3.16 North and South Annexes were built in the 1960s. The buildings are not listed, and they have no historic or cultural significance and do not make a townscape contribution to Brighton Street.

The offices had been identified as being surplus as part of the Asset Consolidation Staff Relocation and the Annexes have remained empty since 2019. Both buildings having significant structural weakness, poor mechanical and electrical systems and significant amounts of asbestos within the fabric of the building.

3.17 Key Milestones for the Demolition and associated works are as follows:

Buildings mothballed	2019
Asbestos strip completed	October 2023
Disconnections completed (BT and utilities)	November 2023
Contract Documentation and Award	November 2023
Pre-site meeting	December 2023
Site setup (hoarding, pavement closures, scaffold)	January 2024
Demolition Start	February 2024
Completion (20 week contract)	June 2024 (anticipated completion)

3.18 The above timescales are indicative based upon outcome of pre-site meeting and contractors programme and schedules. At end of the demolition, the site will have top-soil applied and seeded, with post and rail fencing erected to the perimeter of the building outline.

- 3.19 The One Public Estate Programme (OPE) has involved a partnership between the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Office of Government Property (within the Cabinet Office) and the Local Government Association . The OPE is charged with delivering the Brownfield Land Release Fund. This is a programme which enables Councils to bring forward surplus land for new homes. The Council was successful and the awarded £2.325m will fund all costs associated with the demolition of the two Annex buildings. Conditions of the bid are clearly defined and directly support the work which is being undertaken on the Master Plan for the area surrounding the Wallasey Town Hall.
- 3.20 The range of activity within the Seacombe Masterplan area will need careful consideration, a summary of key activities and dates are shown in the table below.

Activity	Dates
Remedial works within Wallasey Town Hall	December 2023 – April 2024
Demolition of North and South Annexes	February 2024 – June 2024
Riverside Primary (i) temporary accommodation set up (ii) new school construction	Late 2024/Early 2025 (To be confirmed) Early/Mid 2025 (12-month contract, to be confirmed)
Seacombe Masterplan and related One Public Estate (i) Masterplan Consultation (ii) Contract let for brownfield land release fund (iii) Land released for housing	November 2023 March 2024 March 2027

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Condition reports prepared for both Town Halls in 2019 estimated that outstanding maintenance works would cost between £13.0 m, this needs to be caveated due to the large increase in material and labour costs for building work and no account was taken for change of use.
- 4.2 The Condition Surveys will require a refresh. It is recommended that an appropriate company will be appointed following procurement rules to undertake this work. Costs associated with the survey works could be met from the Corporate Health and Safety Condition budget and are estimated at approximately £25k.
- 4.3 In order to commission detailed strategic feasibility studies estimated costs have been determined and revenue monies identified for this exercise as a growth item in both 23/24 and 24/25 financial years.
- 4.4 The revenue budgets for each Town Hall are as follows.

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Wallasey Town Hall	£561,879	£161,879	£606,879	£631,879
Birkenhead	£338,230	£338,230	£460,230	£475,230

Town Hall				
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- 4.5 2023/24 column shows the reduced amount based on “standing down” Wallasey Town Hall being a budget saving for 2023/24. Additional staffing and general facilities management costs associated with the shift of Civic and Committee services to Birkenhead Town Hall are anticipated to be in the region of £90,000.
- 4.6 The demand for assets to meet external examination requirements as well as maintaining Civic demands has placed a strain on facilities and staff. The use of Birkenhead Town Hall has saved alternative hire costs at a large multi-roomed venue.
- 4.7 The savings associated with standing down Wallasey Town Hall have been estimated at £400,000 however, the continued use of the Town Hall for the Local Plan and Leverhulme Planning Appeals through the Summer of 2023 has affected this target saving and an estimated £200,000 budget pressure has been identified. Monthly monitoring of revenue expenditure is routinely undertaken by Asset Management and Finance Business Partners.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 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 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 Any awards will be underpinned by a formal contract which will be drawn up by the Council’s legal team.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 There are no direct staffing and ICT implications arising from this report.
- 6.2 Consideration on travel time by staff between Wallasey and Birkenhead will need to be taken into consideration as part of the feasibility study in addition to costs associated with travel.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 The Council has a number of duties in respect of any asset it holds, firstly to ensure a safe workplace under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and associated regulations. Risks such as personal injury, fines and reputational damage could arise as a result of health and safety legislation not being followed.
- 7.2 Not undertaking appropriate feasibility studies will seriously restrict discussions, consultation and decisions on the best use of the Town Halls for Civic, Commercial, or other identified uses.

- 7.3 Lack of current condition surveys could omit new building requirements such as ventilation and unable to provide investment certainty due to increases in building work costs.
- 7.4 The standing down of Wallasey Town Hall gives rise to security and reputational risks in terms of potential damage to the external and internal building fabric and contents. Arrangements have been put in place to minimise these.
- 7.5 Financial risk to the Council is significant due to the savings associated with the standing down of Wallasey Town Hall of £400,000 in 2023/24. The current anticipated budget pressure is £200,000 in 2023/24 but with all efforts being made to keep this figure as low as possible.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 As part of the proposed feasibility studies a range of consultation and engagement activities will be undertaken.
- 8.2 Full consideration of past and proposed reports and recommendations will be considered by Officers when bringing forward future options to Members.

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.
- 9.2 There are no direct equality impacts from this report.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no Environment and Climate Implications arising directly out of this report, any Capital investment proposals will thoroughly detail implications.
- 10.2 Changes in use of the Town Halls could have an impact on staff and member travel due to the location and available public transport, this factor will be reviewed as part of the feasibility study.
- 10.3 Recommendations within decarbonisation reports will be considered as part of the feasibility study.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 There are currently no community wealth building considerations.

REPORT AUTHOR: **Name** **Jeannette Royle**
 telephone: 07775827104
 email: jeannetteroyle@wirral.gov.uk

APPENDICES

1. Asset Strategy 2022-2027

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Heritage Report (2023) Wallasey Town Hall
Heritage Report (2021) Birkenhead Town Hall
Condition Survey – Wallasey Town Hall
Condition Survey – Birkenhead Town Hall
Asset Consolidation Staff Relocation Report (2021)
Decarbonisation reports (2023)

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Policy & Resources Committee	16/03/22