

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL
EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S REPORT TO THE
CABINET

Date 10th . February 2016

1. Petition objecting to the proposed demolition of the former St Giles and St George's school, Barracks Road, Newcastle.

Submitted by: Executive Director (Regeneration and Development)

Portfolio: Planning and Assets

Ward(s) affected: Town

Purpose of the Report

To inform members that a petition has been received from local residents objecting to the proposed demolition of the former St Giles and St Georges school, for which planning consent was granted on 5 January 2016.

Receipt of the petition was reported to Council on 27 January 2016 where it was resolved that the matters raised should be referred to Cabinet for consideration.

Recommendations

- (a) That Members receive and note the petitioners concerns and objections.
- (b) That having reviewed and carefully considered the issues raised by the petitioners, Members reaffirm the decision to dispose of this property to Staffordshire County Council (by way of grant of long leasehold) in order for it to implement proposals for a new Public Sector Hub.

Reasons

The construction of a new Public Sector Hub will provide accommodation for the co-location of local / sub-regional government, and partner agencies into a multifunctional, 'one front door' public service centre. The need to promote the development of a new public sector hub has arisen because of the opportunity to facilitate a retail-led redevelopment of the site of the existing Civic Offices in Merrial Street (as part of a wider redevelopment which includes the former Sainsbury's site). The overall economic regeneration benefits of the two redevelopment schemes are considered to significantly outweigh any perceived harm caused by the loss of the former school building.

1. **Background**

- 1.1 Members will recall that the former school was closed in 2005 when the education function was transferred to a new site at Poolfields. The Borough Council acquired the building from the County in 2008.. At the time of acquisition the Borough Council's intervention had sought to retain the building and to find a viable use for it; the proposed use of the building was for a small scale enterprise centre, hosting managed workspace. The project was entitled Newcastle Design Studios and sought to attract funding from various sources, including the then Regional Development Agency (which had agreed to prioritise investment into Newcastle Town Centre as part of a sub-regional programme to stimulate economic growth). As feasibility work progressed and the likelihood of RDA funding began to diminish the project was re-framed to explore the scope for a Newcastle Heritage, Arts and Creative centre. In 2009 a business viability case and initial budget costs for the project was developed. Unfortunately by this time a shift in political and economic circumstances had a significant impact on public sector and external funding finances resulting in the project being aborted. In 2010 the Council marketed the property to-let by way of a long leasehold. A small number of expressions of interest were received however these were withdrawn owing to the costs of bringing the building back into use being considered too great.
- 1.2 Over the course of the last three years the Borough Council (NBC) and its partners, Staffordshire County Council (SCC) and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) have undertaken a comprehensive, in-depth review and re-assessment of their accommodation needs. This piece of work culminated in the partners taking the decision, supported by a detailed and robust business case exercise to construct a new Public Sector Hub on what was identified (from an original list of nine sites) as 'the preferred site' namely the former St Giles and St George's School in September 2015. Reuse of the existing twentieth century building was not considered to be viable, both financially or physically since it would not be possible to create sufficient, modern, fit for purpose accommodation either within it or by way of extension(s). It was further agreed that NBC would grant SCC a long leasehold interest of the preferred site, that SCC should take the 'lead developer role' for the Hub project and that once the development was completed, NBC and OPCC would be granted long term occupational leases of their respective agreed areas of accommodation.
- 1.3 In December 2015 SCC proceeded to submit a planning application for the demolition of the former school buildings and this petition has arisen in consequence of the LPA's decision to grant such permission on 5th January 2016. The petitioners are objecting to the proposed demolition of the building, stating that it should be preserved and restored as much as possible or that its façade be retained with a modern structure constructed to its rear.
- 1.4 At the time of granting permission the LPA Planning Committee took into account representations and responses received by the due deadline, following appropriate publication of notices and contact with statutory consultees. It duly considered all pertinent facts including, Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, which places a duty upon the LPA to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area. There was acknowledgement that the loss of the building would result in harm, both to the significance of the Conservation Area (albeit 'less than substantial harm') and directly as a result of the loss of a locally important building. However taking into account the significant public benefits arising from the redevelopment of the site with a Public Sector Hub, which in turn unlocks the retail led development of the Ryecroft site, it considered the harm to be outweighed by the benefits of the proposal, including securing optimum viable use. In summary the overall economic regeneration benefits, particularly for the town centre economy in terms of new and safeguarded jobs, as well as the capture of spending power from the employees, is considered to significantly outweigh any harm caused by the loss of the former school building.

- 1.5 Members will be aware that the planning application for the new Public Sector Hub has been submitted to the local planning authority. The new building would be constructed entirely within the curtilage of the former school but would seek to integrate much more effectively with the Queens Gardens through which the main pedestrian access will be gained.

2. **Issues**

In the above circumstances members need to consider whether to:

2.1 Rescind the decision to dispose of this asset, i.e. former St Giles and St George's school in the hope of finding a suitable use and the necessary funding to bring the building back into viable use.

2.2 Confirm the decision to dispose of this asset to SCC, thereby allowing it to implement the approved planning permission for demolition and to facilitate delivery of both the public sector hub development and the retail-led redevelopment of the Ryecroft site.

3. **Options Considered**

3.1 Rescinding the decision to dispose of the asset by way of grant of long leasehold to SCC would prevent it from implementing the approved planning permission for demolition. There is no known project for re-use of the building, neither is there any known funding.

3.2 Allow the disposal of this asset to proceed, thereby enabling SCC to implement the approved planning permission for demolition and the site's redevelopment of the public sector hub.

4. **Proposal and Reasons for Preferred Solution**

4.1 The second option (i.e. disposal) is recommended for the reasons set out in the report to Council dated 23rd September 2015.

5. **Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities**

- 5.1 The redevelopment of both this and the Ryecroft site is considered to contribute positively to the long term economic viability of the town centre, consistent with the aims of "Borough of Opportunity".

6. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

6.1 There are no legal or statutory implications arising directly from this report.

7. **Equality Impact Assessment**

7.1 There are no such issues arising directly from this report.

8. **Financial and Resource Implications**

8.1 Significant resource and expenditure have been committed to both this and the Ryecroft projects, all of which would be at risk should this disposal not proceed.

Potentially the partners suffering detriment could seek recovery of their losses from the Borough Council.

9. **Major Risks**

9.1 The creation of a new Public Sector Hub would, at the very least be delayed whilst an alternative site was identified. It is highly likely that more costs would be incurred and projected efficiency savings, lost or deferred.

9.2 The Ryecroft project would be delayed or even stopped altogether in its present form, as it would not be possible to give vacant possession of the site until a new Hub was built. Both developer confidence and tenant appetite would be put at risk.

10. **Key Decision Information**

10.1 The content of this report is not a key decision.

11. **Appendices**

None

12. **Background Papers**

12.1 Petition from Mr Ken Glover dated January 2016

12.2 Report to Council entitled 'Proposed Newcastle-under-Lyme Public Sector Hub
dated 23 September 2015

12.3 Report to LPA Committee entitled Former St Giles and St Georges Primary School
Barracks Road dated 05 January 2016