

WEST MIDLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

25 NOVEMBER 2013

1. BUILDINGS ASSET STRATEGY

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

RECOMMENDED

- 1.1 THAT the Authority note the development of an assessment tool which provides the ability to prioritise those Fire Stations most critical to service delivery.
- 1.2 THAT the Authority note the position regarding £2m Capital Grant Funding (highlighted in paragraph 6.2).
- 1.3 THAT the Authority note the identification of a number of Fire Stations that would benefit from re-build or minor relocation (subject to appropriate land sites being available).
- 1.4 THAT the Authority approve the Academy site is disposed of or rented on commercial terms.
- 1.5 THAT the Authority gives authorisation to the CFO for the approval of the option to dispose of the following vacant residential/non-operational properties:
 - 1.5.1 Perry Barr – sell 6 of the 8 houses which are void properties;
 - 1.5.2 Erdington – sell 7 of the 14 flats which are void properties;
 - 1.5.3 Kings Norton – sell the apartment block containing 6 flats; and
 - 1.5.4 Bloxwich – sell the ‘Old Bank Building’.

2. **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 2.1 This report is submitted to inform Members of the development of an assessment tool which can be applied to Fire Stations and also highlights a number of Fire Stations that would benefit from re-build or minor relocations (subject to appropriate land sites being available).
- 2.2 The report proposes the disposal or renting of the Academy site.
- 2.3 The report also proposes the sale of a number of the Authority's residential/non-operational properties.

3. **BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 A review of Fire Stations has been undertaken to ensure that future expenditure is targeted as efficiently as possible across the Fire Authority's building estate.
- 3.2 A part of the review, the development of an assessment tool has been undertaken which provides the ability to prioritise those Fire Stations most critical to service delivery. It is anticipated that the outcome from the assessment tool will provide similar results to the existing degradation plan which identifies those Stations most critical in the delivery of operational response if there are staffing and/or resource shortages for any reason. Given the ongoing austerity measures the Fire Authority is expected to face over the coming years, the assessment tool could also be used to; review Fire Station numbers, reassess the need for a pump rescue ladder to be based at every Station, or to identify potential sites for conversion to alternative duty systems other than wholetime.
- 3.2 In connection with alternative duty systems, on 19 December 2012, the Director for Fire, Resilience and Emergencies at the Department for Communities and Local Government announced that capital grant of £38m would be allocated to 15 Fire and Rescue Authorities in 2013/14 and 2014/15. This Authority was allocated £7.6m (£3.8m in both 2013/14 and 2014/15). One of the successful bids was £2m to provide building alterations for Low Risk Flexible Crewing. At this stage there is no Authority approval to proceed with this scheme.

Station Essential for Response, but would Benefit from a Change of Location

- 3.3 Aston Fire Station fits the above description, as it serves an important role in responding to the city centre and the north side of Birmingham, but its current location could be improved upon. Aston is the oldest station operated by the Brigade having been constructed in 1924 and has not been the subject of a major refurbishment. Research by Operational Intelligence has indicated that a site for Aston closer to the city and in proximity to an arterial route would improve response performance of the fleet in this area.
- 3.4 The existing Aston site includes a three-storey office building currently standing empty after its closure as a Fire Safety Centre. The market value of the Aston site is likely to be impacted by the Station's designation as a listed building.
- 3.5 The Aston site should be considered for disposal and the station replaced on a one-for-one basis at a location identified as optimum for emergency response.
- 3.6 Kings Norton Fire Station is one of the Authority's most historic buildings having been constructed in 1930; it incorporates a number of houses at the rear of the yard and flats to the side, formerly allocated to firefighting personnel from the site. Some of these houses and flats are let.
- 3.7 Whilst the building is well constructed and is basically sound, it is questionable whether the site provides accommodation fit for purpose for the modern Fire and Rescue Service, despite occupying a good location with respect to emergency response.
- 3.8 The Kings Norton site should be considered for disposal, being replaced by a new, modern station in the local vicinity, on an optimum site for emergency response.

Identification of Stations Suitable for Rebuild

- 3.9 Coventry and Bickenhill provide an essential function for emergency response but the current building is in need of reconstruction and refurbishment.

- 3.10 Coventry Fire Station has been confirmed as a good location for response, being located at the junction of Radford Road with the main city ring road and the site also accommodates a range of training facilities including a hot firehouse and a liquefied petroleum gases (LPG) simulator unit. The building was originally constructed in 1976 as the headquarters of Coventry area ('B' Division) and used to include its own vehicle workshops and later, the recruit training centre, together with a Fire Safety Centre. As a result, the building is a very extensive one, being oversized for its current function and incurring heavy running costs both in terms of energy usage and building maintenance.
- 3.11 The existing Coventry station and office buildings should be considered for demolition and rebuild on the same site to provide appropriate accommodation for firefighting personnel in a smaller, modern building.
- 3.12 Whilst the Technical Rescue Unit is a new purpose-built facility in 2008, the original fire station in which the staff are accommodated, dates from 1977 and is now in need of considerable capital spending to carry out repairs and modernisation to the tune of approximately £420k up to 2018. Bickenhill Fire Station is also inefficient with regard to energy consumption with combined gas and electricity usage almost twice that of other stations comparable in size.
- 3.13 Bickenhill Station should be considered for demolition and rebuild on the same site to provide appropriate accommodation for the firefighting/Technical Rescue personnel and appliance(s).

The Academy Site

- 3.14 A report was presented and approved at the Executive Committee meeting on 30 April 2013 which highlighted that whilst the Academy would not form part of the internal Asset Strategy of the Authority, consideration would be given to exploring commercial partnership opportunities and, in accordance with the direction set out in 'The Plan', explore the opportunities for shared services with other public sector providers.

- 3.15 Extensive discussions have taken place with commercial organisations, most notably Babcock and Capita, but no partnership arrangements have emerged as a result. Discussions are currently ongoing with an external educational organisation potentially interested in renting the site. No public sector providers have expressed an interest in sharing the site.
- 3.16 In the meantime, work is progressing to develop a multi-centre distribution approach to key training facilities to support operational training delivery. Given that the Academy no longer forms part of the internal asset strategy, it is proposed to relocate staff to alternative Fire Authority sites and dispose or rent the Academy site.

Residential Property Review

- 3.17 A review of all West Midlands Fire Service residential properties has been carried out as part of the review to assess:-
- the condition of property and costs associated with modernisation; and
 - the feasibility of income generation from further rental or disposal.
- 3.18 There are nine properties occupied by secure tenants across the Brigade. Secure tenancies puts great onus on the landlord; namely to provide secure housing for the secure tenant for their lifetime. If the Authority should choose to dispose of a property with a secure tenant in residence, the Authority has responsibility to find a suitable alternative form of housing/accommodation that meets the need of the tenant and provides the same security.
- 3.19 A secure tenant can normally live in the property for the rest of their life as long as they do not break the conditions of the tenancy. The tenancy can only be ended if:-
- the tenant gives 4 weeks' notice in writing;
 - the Authority evicts the tenant; or
 - the Authority needs to move the tenant, for example to redevelop the property, in which case it should offer the tenant a new property and a new tenancy with no less security.

3.20 A summary of the Authority's residential properties is provided in Appendix A.

4. **EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

In preparing this report an initial Equality Impact Assessment is not required and has not been carried out.

5. **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

The course of action recommended in this report does not raise issues which should be drawn to the attention of the Authority's Monitoring Officer.

6. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 It is estimated that capital expenditure of £600k would be required to bring the twenty vacant residential/non-operational properties proposed for sale up to a standard suitable to maximise capital receipts, estimated at approximately £1,870k. This expenditure would need to be reflected in the Authority's Capital Programme. Any sales proceeds would be treated as a capital receipt.

6.2 The Capital Grant Allocation of £2m referred to in paragraph 3.4 was awarded specifically to support building alteration work to facilitate Low Risk Flexible Crewing arrangements to be introduced. If this work does not proceed, CLG would need to be notified.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Asset Strategy Review – Organisational Intelligence
Executive Committee Report 30th April 2013, 'Asset Strategy (Academy)'.

PHIL LOACH
CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

WMFS Residential Properties Summary

<u>Station</u>	<u>House/Flat/ Office</u>	<u>Sell</u>	<u>Retain</u>	<u>Additional Information</u>
Perry Barr	8 x Houses	6	0	The properties require freehold alteration and access alterations including road access (subject to planning) before bringing to market
		0	2	Occupied by secure tenants making the properties unsuitable for immediate disposal
Erdington	14 x Flats	7	0	The properties require freehold alteration. Existing tenants may need to relocate on the site to consolidate unit ownership and access alterations (subject to planning) before bringing to market
		0	7	Occupied by a secure tenant, National Association of Retired Firefighters (NARF) and use by Station make the properties unsuitable for immediate disposal
Kings Norton	7 x Houses	0	7	Restricted access, secure tenants x 4 unsuitable for immediate disposal
	6 x Flats	6	0	Potential freehold investment subject to planning approval for change of access. Apartments sold with no access or parking on site
Harborne	2 x Houses	0	2	Occupied by secure tenants making the properties unsuitable for immediate disposal
Bloxwich	2 x Flats	0	2	Restricted access, unsuitable for disposal
	1 x Ex Bank Building	1	0	Potential freehold investment subject to planning approval for alteration of pedestrian access and the property sold with access/parking restrictions to our site
Total	40	20	20	

WMFS Residential Properties

Perry Barr – 8 x 3 bedroom houses

- 2 x occupied by secure tenants.
- Secure tenant status makes the disposal of the 8 properties as a freehold investment impractical.
- 6 x void properties require investment to modernise before sale to maximise return.
- sale of the 6 properties may be possible upon:
 - alteration to freehold.
 - alteration of vehicle access (subject to Local Authority approval).

Proposed:

- Pursue the feasibility of selling 6 of the 8 properties after investigating the possibility of altering freeholds and the road access (subject to planning and building regulations).
- The remaining two properties would stay in the ownership of the Authority with secure tenants for the foreseeable future.
- Investment needed to include alteration of road access (subject to Local Authority approval).

Erdington – 14 x 3 bedroom flats

- 1 x flat occupied with secure tenant.
- 1 x flat rented to National Association of Retired Firefighters.
- 5 x used by the Station.
- 7 x void properties require investment to modernise before sale to maximise return.
- Sale of the properties would be subject to:
 - altering pedestrian access (subject to planning approval).
 - investment to modernise the flats to current legislation and building regulations.
 - alteration to the freehold.

Proposed:

- To pursue the possibility of selling 7 flats after investigating the feasibility of altering the freeholds and pedestrian access (subject to planning and building regulations).
- Investigate the possibility of moving the tenants of flats to remain under WMFS control to one floor for ease of access and ease of disposal of remaining flats.

- The 7 remaining properties would stay in Authority ownership for the foreseeable future.

Kings Norton – 7 x 3 bedroom houses,

- 4 x houses occupied with secure tenants.
- 3 x void properties.

Proposed:

Selling the 7 houses is not considered viable due to access issues and secure tenancy agreements and therefore they will remain under Authority ownership for the foreseeable future with their 4 secure tenants.

Kings Norton – 4 x 3 bedroom flats and 2 converted flats to offices (Commercial)

- 6 x flats located in a self contained apartment block, 4 x void require modernisation before sale to maximise return.
- 2 x flats have been converted to offices (Commercial) and are in good condition.
- Sale of the properties would be subject to:
 - modernisation
 - alteration to the freehold
 - alteration to building subject to planning for a separate pedestrian access (no parking) into the block off the High Street.

Proposed:

- To pursue the possibility of selling the 6 apartment block.
- Investigate the feasibility of alteration to the pedestrian access (subject to planning and building regulations) and freehold.
- Investment needed (apartment block only) including to alter access (the flats would be sold with no parking or access to the WMFS site).

Harborne – 2 x 3 bedroom houses, grade II listed buildings

- Both houses are occupied by secure tenants.
- Selling the properties would prove problematic due to the secure tenant status.

Proposed:

Selling the two houses is not considered appropriate due to secure tenancy issues.

Bloxwich – 2 x 3 bedroom first floor apartments

- Both properties are void.

Proposed:

Selling the apartments is not considered viable due to access issues; the apartments are located above the garage block located at the rear of the station and have no alternative access.

Bloxwich – The 'Old Bank Building'

This building is located to the front of Bloxwich Fire Station within WMFS boundary and known as the Old Bank. It is a commercial property sited within a conservation area.

- Refurbishment of the bank to a decent standard would be required before marketing the property for sale.
- There maybe potential to use the building for cold training once refurbished.
- Demolition subject to approval by the conservation group may provide the opportunity to build a new station on the plot and sell the existing station plot complete with garages and two apartments.
- To sell the building, the freehold would need to be altered and boundary fences erected to provide separation from the operational Fire Station.

Proposed:

- To pursue the possibility of selling the Old Bank, investigate the feasibility of alteration to the freehold, pedestrian access and separating the building from the Station (subject to planning and building regulations).
- Investment needed to alter and separate pedestrian/vehicle access.