

Classification: Public

Key Decision: No

Gravesham Borough Council

Report to: Report to Leader of the Executive
Date: 23 October 2014
Reporting officer: Director (Housing and Regeneration)
Subject: Former Parrock Street WCs

Purpose and summary of report:

To consider the future of these disused facilities in the light of there being no reasonably viable commercial scheme coming forward from the current owners to ensure improvements to the benefit of the surrounding area.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

1. the former WCs be re-purchased by the Council for a sum of £35,000 (subject to contract and planning permission) and that they be filled in and surfaced to a standard to enable adoption by KCC as public highway.
2. the Director (Communities) and Assistant Director (Governance and Law), be authorised to conclude negotiations and enter into all necessary contracts to re-acquire the property (subject to a satisfactory planning permission being secured) and that the Director (Housing and Regeneration) be authorised to progress the scheme for the demolition / infill of the structure and onward adoption by the Kent County Council as highway land.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The former WCs at the northern end of Parrock Street were closed many years ago due to poor access and cost of maintenance.
- 1.2 In response to requests from the adjacent church, efforts were made to secure demolition of the facility and construction of a layby to allow for bus stopping facilities and a drop off for weddings and funerals. An application for Conservation Area Consent was therefore submitted under ref. no 20050499 for the demolition of the underground public toilets, planters and walls in connection with the installation of a bus stopping facility, which was approved under delegated powers. However, the costs associated with this were greater than KCC, as highways authority, were prepared to commit, no alternative funding was identified and the permission never implemented.

- 1.3 In view of the on-going deterioration of the property, and in the light of the successful sale and alternative re-use of other former public WCs, the decision was taken that they were surplus to requirements and should be sold with a view to suitable alternative use(s) being identified. To that end, the property was placed into auction on 11 April 2008, achieving a sale price of £60,000.
- 1.4 Since that time the property has remained vacant and is a blight on the surrounding area - the site lies within the conservation area and impacts on the setting of a number of Listed buildings, notably the RC Church of St John. Two applications have been submitted but, in the light of adverse feedback from officers, withdrawn before determination

2. Issues

- 2.1 The site is fronted by Parrock Street immediately to the West and to the East of the public open space adjacent to St John's Church, which wraps around the site to the North and South. The footprint of the former public conveniences is long and slender, running adjacent to and backing directly onto Parrock Street, starting almost at the corner of Milton Road. The length of the site is comparable to the side elevation of St John's Church, facing onto Parrock Street or equivalent to 4 typical shop fronts in Milton Road. Due to the low height of the railings around the perimeter of the former public toilets, being less than 1.5 metres in height, it is not recognisable as a building, rather boundary railings to an enclosed space.
- 2.2 The challenge for the site is to minimise the above-ground footprint of any proposed building or structure, in order to reduce the visual impact on the setting of adjacent listed buildings and the conservation area as a whole. This needs to be considered whilst creating space for a viable use which is likely to be subterranean and accessed by lift as well as stairs for DDA compliance. Any elevation above the 1.5m height of the existing railings is likely to have a detrimental impact on the setting of the conservation area and Listed buildings due to the prominent location of the site.
- 2.3 As stated above, efforts have been made by the current owners to secure a viable planning permission, the most recent being in 2013 under ref. no. 20130329, seeking demolition of the existing toilets and erection of a single storey building to provide A1 retail accommodation with staff and storage area below ground.
- 2.4 The proposals within that application attempted to address the solidity of the mass by proposing frameless glass elevations attached to an internal steel frame, adopting a flat roof covered in sedum. The design reference for the proposal was taken from large modern pavilions that can create the allusion of invisibility or transparency. Such an allusion can only be achieved with minimal internal furniture, which was unlikely to be a practical solution for a retail unit requiring wall space for shelving, display material, advertising behind the shop front, etc. As this practical issue was not addressed in the proposals, and it was difficult to see how internal arrangements would not impact on the external visual appearance of the unit, it could not be supported by officers.
- 2.5 In light of the blighting effect of the property and the apparent difficulty in identifying appropriate and alternative uses for the existing structure or redevelopment proposal, officers have investigated the possibility of resurrecting a variant of the earlier proposals to demolish the structure, infill and pave, providing

a blank canvas for future possible improvements in the area. It should be noted that demolition of this structure has previously received consent and discussions on the principal of the proposed approach are supported by the Council's conservation advisor.

2.6 Informal discussions have established that the current owners would be prepared to dispose of the site for a sum of £35,000. KCC highways officers have worked with our own officers to develop an adoptable scheme that demolishes and infills the current structure, replacing it with paving. This, in turn, has been estimated to cost in the region of £40-45,000, giving an overall estimate of cost in the region of £80,000. Within the Council's retained reserves is an unallocated sum of £89,169.10 that could legitimately be used for works of this type (Y350 - Public Realm Enhancements). As this work isn't actually in the approved capital budget, its use would need to be approved by the Leader / Cabinet.

2.7 As regards the price quoted above for purchase, whilst we originally sold them for £60,000 and this could be regarded as a net profit, advice on value has been sought from colleagues within the property team, which is as follows:

“ . . . there is no commercial value in the old toilets but it is possible that, if they were put into auction, someone would buy them on a speculative basis as indeed the current owners did. Having said that, I would surmise in the current market that the auctioneers would only accept on the basis of no reserve and the guide price for the purposes of the catalogue would probably be around £2-5,000.”

However this does not take into account any 'non income related' benefits to the area such as removal of an eyesore and improvement of the street scene of this Conservation Area location. The cost for demolishing / infilling would have been required under the original proposals for the site.

3. Recommendations

3.1 It is recommended that the Director (Communities) and Assistant Director (Governance and Law), be authorised to conclude negotiations and enter into all necessary contracts to re-acquire the property (subject to a satisfactory planning permission being secured) and that the Director (Housing and Regeneration) be authorised to progress the scheme for the demolition / infill of the structure and onward adoption by the Kent County Council as highway land.

4. Background Papers

4.1 There are no background papers pertaining to this report.

IMPLICATIONS**APPENDIX 1**

Legal	There are no legal implications.
Finance and Value for Money	<p>Within the Council's retained reserves is an unallocated sum of £89,169.10 that could legitimately be used for works of this type (Y350 - Public Realm Enhancements).</p> <p>Colleagues within the property team have provided further input, which is as follows:</p> <p>“ . . . there is no commercial value in the old toilets but it is possible that, if they were put into auction, someone would buy them on a speculative basis as indeed the current owners did. Having said that, I would surmise in the current market that the auctioneers would only accept on the basis of no reserve and the guide price for the purposes of the catalogue would probably be around £2-5,000.”</p> <p>However this does not take into account any ‘non income related’ benefits to the area such as removal of an eyesore and improvement of the street scene of this Conservation Area location.</p>
Risk Assessment	<p>Failure to address this problem in a rational manner, given that no reasonably viable commercial scheme is coming forward from the current owners to ensure improvements to the benefit of the surrounding area will result in this eyesore remaining and deteriorating further to the detriment of adjacent Listed buildings, the conservation area and the street scene generally.</p> <p>There remains a risk that the KCC would not adopt the completed project as ‘highway’ but discussions indicate that adoption will be possible subject to due process, construction to the required standard and payment of fees.</p>

Equality Impact Assessment	Screening for Equality Impacts		
	Question	Answer	Explanation
	a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community?	No	
	b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality?	No	
	c. What steps are you taking to mitigate, reduce, avoid or minimise the impacts identified above?		N/A
	<i>In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above</i>		
Corporate Business Plan	2. A clean and green environment		
Crime and Disorder	Whilst there is no direct link to crime and disorder, run-down areas often attract anti-social behaviours.		