

REPORT TO: Executive Board Sub Committee
DATE: 24th January 2008
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director Environment
SUBJECT: Widnes Waterfront Development Zone Linear Park Railway Tracks
WARDS: Riverside

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To seek approval to waive Standing Orders and permit the disposal of the surplus rail tracks and level crossing gates at the proposed Widnes Waterfront Linear Park to the Llangollen Railway Society.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

- (1) approval be granted to waive part 7.9 of Standing Orders relating to Finance and Part 5 of the Procurement Standing Orders in relation to the disposal of the railway tracks, level crossing gates and ancillary equipment and materials at the proposed Widnes Waterfront Linear Park; and**
- (2) Approval is granted to Llangollen Railway Society to remove the railway tracks and level crossing gates for use at the Llangollen Railway and Museum.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Background

- 1.1 Widnes Waterfront Economic Development Zone (the "EDZ") is 200 acres of low quality former industrial land located on the banks of the River Mersey to the south of Widnes Town Centre. The site currently includes 44 hectares of vacant and derelict land, the legacy of the areas declining chemical industry sector.
- 1.2 The EU, Central Government, North West Regional Development Agency (NWDA) and Halton Borough Council have designated the EDZ as a regeneration site of high priority. Funding to bring this land back into full economic use is available until March 31st 2009 using

European Funding under Priority 3 of the North West England Objective 2 Programme, Northwest Development Agency Funds plus Halton Borough Council monies.

- 1.3 In order to address the area's problems the Widnes Waterfront Masterplan, which was approved by Executive Board on 22nd May 2003, set out the vision and objectives for the EDZ.
- 1.4 One of the projects within the Masterplan is the creation of a Linear Park on a disused rail siding which runs west to east across the EDZ from Earle Road to Tanhouse Lane. The Linear Park will be created as part of the wider landscaping scheme being implemented throughout the Widnes Waterfront and will include a combined footpath/cycleway. An application for planning permission has been submitted.
- 1.5 Negotiations have been on-going with Network Rail for four years regarding acquisition of the site by Halton Borough Council. This has finally been agreed and is now with solicitors.
- 1.6 £665,000 worth of funding for this project has been secured from the Northwest Development Agency (350K), ERDF (£204K) and Neighbourhood Renewal Funds (£111K). There are claw-back provisions in place from all of these funding bodies should there be any income generated from the site.
- 1.7 The Council will take possession of the site with a considerable amount of old rail in situ. Property Services have estimated that the scrap value of the rail tracks between £12,000 and £15,000 with the purchaser paying the Council's legal costs and their own removal costs. The gates are deemed to have no value.
- 1.8 Widnes Regeneration Ltd. have previously disposed of some redundant level crossing gates (from the former Blue Circle Cement plant fronting onto the east side of Tanhouse Lane) to the Llangollen

Railway Society, a charitable organisation which is restoring the former Llangollen Railway between Ruabon and Corwen in North Wales. They currently run services between Llangollen and Carrog and are extending the line to Corwen.

1.9 While the proposed Linear Park scheme incorporates a short length of track in recognition of the heritage of the site, the remainder of the rail is surplus to requirements. It is therefore proposed that rather than merely disposing of the rail for scrap, it be offered to the Llangollen Railway Society for re-use. They have inspected the rail and would welcome the opportunity to recover it at their cost for re-use. They have also indicated that they would appreciate the level crossing gates which are in place at the Tanhouse Lane end of the site, the matching pair to those which they have previously been gifted.

1.10 All the funding bodies for the scheme have agreed that if the rail tracks and level crossing gates are donated to the Llangollen Railway Society they will waive their rights to claw-back of the scrap value.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The Council adopted the Widnes Waterfront Masterplan in May 2003 (EXB 77).

4.2 The Widnes Waterfront Masterplan is included in the Council's Corporate Plan, the Halton Partnership and HBC Urban Renewal Strategy and Action Plan and supports the Council's Urban Renewal corporate priority.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The rail tracks need to be removed as quickly as possible after completion of the land acquisition from Network Rail to allow the landscaping works to start on site immediately and to be completed

within the ERDF funding timescale. The Llangollen Railway Society is fully aware of these requirements.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

None known.

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

Overall the EDZ will assist on providing job opportunities for local people and will go some way in addressing the level of unemployment in Halton.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

Walking and cycling can offer a safe and affordable means of accessing key services and thereby can overcome many of the transport barriers often faced by people who do not own or have access to cars.

6.4 A Safer Halton

The linear park project will provide much-needed environmental improvements to the area.

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

The linear project will create a high quality green space which will act as a catalyst to attract developers and new businesses to the Widnes Waterfront area by creating an attractive, well-accessed and serviced area which provides a safe and attractive environment for employees and visitors.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 Securing ownership of the former sidings was one of the key components in the delivery of the Widnes Waterfront Masterplan approved by the Council in May 2003 (EXB 77). This is expected to be completed by the end of January 2008 and was the subject of a report to Executive Board Sub on 18th October 2007. After four years of negotiations with agreement now having been reached with Network Rail and the Office of the Rail Regulator, it is highly unlikely that the deal will not go through.

7.2 If the Llangollen Railway Society is unable to remove the tracks in time for the landscaping works to take place, the rail could be disposed of in the usual way. They are fully aware of the council's deadlines, intend to use a company which is fully compliant with the relevant Health and Safety requirements when dealing with rail installations and are fully insured for all risks.

8.0 IMPLEMENTATION DATE

8.1 Immediately on completion of the acquisition of the site early in 2008.

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

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