

Regenerating Birkenhead Central

The commercial centre of Birkenhead needs to be regenerated. Compared to many towns of a similar size it is unattractive to both visitors and residents. The central commercial and housing areas are very basic. Many of the buildings are poor quality and the open spaces are scrappy. It has few good quality, modern leisure and cultural facilities. The pedestrian shopping area is depressingly short of shopping choice and environmental quality. There are few, if any, independent retailers, many shops pitch at the lower end of the market. Some businesses around the pedestrian centre find trading difficult.

Central Birkenhead is a hotchpotch of building types and ages. Few buildings built since 1950 are attractive. Few contribute positively to Birkenhead's local identity. They do little to promote civic pride. A visitor walking around could be forgiven for not being able to tell the difference between Birkenhead and countless other struggling town centres. The central part of Birkenhead lacks a sense of its own identity making it less able to attract Wirral residents and visitors.

It seems that central Birkenhead is passed over by many tourists and Wirral shoppers. Instead, these people probably spend their money in Liverpool, Chester and other destinations with a sense of place, quality environments, hotels, restaurants, entertainment and cultural activities. Birkenhead's poor shopping environment and little in the way of cultural and leisure facilities allows millions of pounds to leak away from Wirral and Birkenhead.

There are many possibilities for the regeneration of Birkenhead's central shopping area - referred to as Birkenhead Central from here.

Guiding principles are needed to achieve the best possible scheme for Birkenhead Central: a non-exhaustive and initial list is given below.

- Birkenhead needs a solid and imaginative vision that is inspiring to everyone with an interest in the future of Birkenhead Central. The residents of Birkenhead and the Wirral have to be the most important people shaping a shared Vision. The regeneration of Birkenhead cannot be led by developers acting to secure maximum financial returns. The problem with the precinct shopping area is more than a real estate problem. Developers are important partners who can help achieve a Vision. But the Vision has to come from local people working in partnership with others to identify new, positive futures to meet new circumstances. The involvement of local people is not just about collecting opinions. A new Birkenhead Central should reflect and match the aspirations and values of the people of Birkenhead and the Wirral in its form, development, use, activities and management.
- A new Birkenhead Central should be designed and developed to reflect the best neighbourhood and building planning and management and maintenance practice. This will ensure that new development minimises its environmental footprint over its whole lifetime. This will affect building form and massing, open spaces, energy sourcing and management, material specifications, resources used and waste management.

- The new Birkenhead Central should be developed with users and residents health and welfare at the heart of its planning, form and use. It should provide the spaces and resources for fulfilling lives to be lived in resilient communities with higher degrees of local self-sufficiency through local employment and energy security, for example.
- Birkenhead Central needs to be re-established as part of a thriving, busy town serving the whole of the Wirral (and beyond), attracting its share of spending tourists and visitors. It needs a stronger role in the Merseyside economy. The Vision for Birkenhead Central should be upbeat and upmarket. In time residents from the more affluent parts of Wirral, as well as Birkenhead's local residents, should choose to visit Birkenhead centre for shopping, leisure and cultural activities. The future and regeneration of Birkenhead needs to be based on the drawing together and use of Wirral's underused and potential resources to strengthen Birkenhead enabling it to regain its sub-regional and lead status as the main Wirral borough town.
- It is important to identify and use all the assets available to the Birkenhead community. Many unidentified and surprising assets exist in the community and the wider Wirral. These resources come from the social, physical, administrative, commercial, cultural, heritage and natural infrastructure. Regenerating Birkenhead using these resources will make Birkenhead more sustainable and richer socially, physically and culturally as well as in a narrower economic sense.
- The redevelopment of Birkenhead Central needs careful matching to realistic different scenarios for the Peel Holdings development. It needs to be resilient to the possibilities of the Peel scheme being phased and completed in full or part or even, improbably, its abandonment.
- Birkenhead's redevelopment needs to draw on lessons elsewhere - perhaps most relevantly from Liverpool and the remodelling of the city centre though there are other models such as Salford Quays. Some of the lessons learned include:
 - The value of an ambitious Vision - aiming high and being prepared to make bold decisions to achieve the Vision;
 - not being afraid to take on big developments with the associated disruption to city life (remember the Big Dig!);
 - making the most of the built and historic assets available (such as the link to the Albert Docks and the restoration of the old street pattern);
 - recognising the role of tourism and visitor numbers and spend;
 - recognising the enormous arts and culture potential of Liverpool and Merseyside to drive visitor numbers and investment in the city-region;
 - the importance of the development of a broadly-based package - a bigger offer to investors and tourists - the wider Liverpool city-region offer - Liverpool is much more than shopping in Liverpool One;
 - the importance of partnership and stakeholder development to the delivery of complex solutions to difficult problems; the need for appropriate delivery partners and developers able to work with and within communities - not just builders and marketeers.

A short, initial description of Birkenhead Central's regeneration using these principles is given below. There are three linked components in a single coherent approach.

1 The resources and features that make Wirral attractive to investors and settlers, tourists and visitors need to be identified. Much of this material is probably available now but it will need to be adapted and extended to suit a new purpose purpose. That is its integration with what Liverpool and Merseyside offer. This new portfolio covers all Wirral not just the immediate area of Birkenhead Central. It is important that Birkenhead becomes part of the Merseyside and Liverpool mix of attractive heritage, arts and culture led destinations for visitors and Merseyside residents. The aim is to make visiting Birkenhead a natural extension to visiting Liverpool because it offers heritage, arts and culture attractions in a quality urban setting that matches the best of Merseyside. It leads, also, to Wirral's other, important social, economic, cultural, sporting and natural heritage assets. These need to be linked to related Merseyside and Liverpool resources to show off to best effect what Wirral has to offer and make a powerful combined set of attractions. They provide the background against which the physical, social and cultural regeneration of Birkenhead Central will take place.

Wirral has a Viking and Celtic history with strong connections to Roman Chester and North Wales. Wirral is naturally well-endowed. It has a gentle climate, pleasant rural landscapes and seaside towns to the west and a powerful industrial, historical landscape associated with shipbuilding and maritime activity in an extensive dock area to the east. Cammell Lairds shipyards produced a long line of famous cruise and battleships including submarines for more than a century. On either side of the peninsula it has internationally recognised, globally important (Ramsar) sites in the Mersey and Dee estuaries. These are hugely important ecological systems with attractive migrant and resident communities of important and rare birds. Its urban pedigree is unique having produced, in Birkenhead, the world's first publically funded park. Wirral can claim to be the home of modern town planning. The first Viscount Leverhulme, founder of the Lever empire, developed Port Sunlight village for his workers. He endowed the Lever Chair of Town Planning and Civic Design in 1909 at Liverpool University establishing the world's first town planning school. Wirral's cultural history includes Wilfred Owen, Della Robbia pottery, Arthur H Lee and sons textiles and tapestries as well as many famous sports people, rock and pop stars.

2 Using key lessons from Liverpool's renaissance with imagination we might see Birkenhead's development building on Liverpool's success. That is, using a similar approach but with a distinctive and different "Birkenhead offer". Birkenhead's development should dovetail with that of Liverpool paying attention to heritage and authenticity to provide quality urban settings. Future visitors to Merseyside need to perceive Birkenhead as part of a combined Liverpool/ Birkenhead offer within the Merseyside context.

There is no reason why Birkenhead should not attract Liverpool's visitors initially attracted to the city's new and improved attractions including Liverpool One, Pier Head and the various National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside. It is a short trip on one of the most famous ferry crossings in the world between Liverpool and Birkenhead - this should become a "must-do" experience for tourists. New ways of crossing the river need to be exploited. (How about cycle and footpath access in the Queensway Tunnel maintenance tunnels - Tunnel Rickshaws?).

As in Liverpool, the centre of gravity of Birkenhead's commercial district needs to shift towards its historic core and waterfront. Sites at the Beatties' store end of the precinct and adjacent to Argyle Street could form a new shopping district replacing shops at the Pyramids end of the current precinct. New uses, possibly housing, may ultimately be needed for the Pyramids site. The smaller streets near Market Street offer the opportunity for higher quality independent retailers in artisan, specialist and arts and culture related

products with restaurants and hotels in the mix. These will be viable with sufficiently increased footfall associated with the wider scheme development linking the shopping centre to the Hamilton quarter. High quality public realm works are needed as part of these new developments linking the shopping centre to the Hamilton quarter.

3 The Hamilton quarter (the square is reported to be the largest group of Grade 1 listed buildings outside London) needs to be re-organised to make the most of its substantial assets. The ferry landing area is seriously underused as a gateway to Birkenhead and a focal point on the Wirral promenade which offers views of Liverpool's iconic, world class skyline. The bus terminal needs to be moved to a different, adjacent site to create a new civic space fitting for this high quality setting perhaps marking the start of the Wirral Coastal Park.

The development of high quality public realm landscape works appropriate to the architectural heritage of Hamilton Square is vitally important. Such treatment needs to be extended to create a new unity between Hamilton Square, the new Birkenhead Central and currently isolated resources such as the Pacific Road Arts Centre. This treatment can be used to draw people into the commercial centre.

The National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (NMGM) needs to be engaged as a key partner to develop a significant new cultural facility in or around Hamilton Square. Such an investment can be presented as a natural and consolidating extension of its museums and galleries in Liverpool scarcely a quarter of a kilometre distant. It can be argued that Wirral has a justified demand for an appropriate NMGM presence in central Birkenhead to help drive Birkenhead's regeneration.

One option would be to create the Natural History Museum in the North in the Hamilton Square area which would create huge new visitor numbers driving the regeneration of the new Birkenhead Central. The Town Hall may be suited to conversion to a new gallery or museum facility. One option would be to relocate the Williamson Gallery collection or to make use of some of the artefacts and materials held in storage in other NMGM galleries and Museums in Liverpool. Hamilton Square itself may have room for new hotels. The Pacific Road Arts Centre can be revitalised by these proposals and the visitor numbers they will bring.

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