

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE POLICING INFRASTRUCTURE IN CARLISLE AND NORTH CUMBRIA

A Report by the Chief Constable

SUMMARY

This report sets out the current position and options for progress in relation to two of the identified reconstruction workstreams, custody facilities and the long term policing provision. A separate paper will be provided in relation to the ownership and insurance claims workstreams.

The report summarises the current position at Carlisle and details events since the last formal report to the Authority. Options for developing adequate custody facilities are explored and recommendations made.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

SCHEDULE OF RECOMMENDATIONS
Recommendation 1
Members agree that the current emergency custody arrangements are unsustainable and alternative provision needs to be made as soon as possible.
Recommendation 2
The Police Authority should appeal the refusal to grant planning permission for the Houghton site forthwith.
Recommendation 3
The Constabulary should be required to swiftly and expeditiously explore the viability and costs of developing a short term (four or five year) interim custody facility in the rear yard at Rickergate. Whilst exploring the viability, it should submit a temporary planning application in order to avoid subsequent time delays.
Recommendation 4
The Constabulary should be required to swiftly and expeditiously explore the viability and costs of locating the modular custody unit design within the Headquarters site and providing transport links to and from Carlisle.

Recommendation 5

The Authority and Chief Constable should work to form a joint view as to the long term policing needs of North Cumbria, and in particular the City of Carlisle. This work should be informed by an options paper presented to the Accommodation Working Group, by the Carlisle Redevelopment Project Team at the working group meeting in February 2006.

DETAIL

Overview

In the storms of January 2005, the Cumbria Constabulary area headquarters at Rickergate, Carlisle was severely damaged by floodwater. The Police Authority, in accordance with Constabulary advice, subsequently determined that the site was no longer suitable for police occupation as an area headquarters.

An urgent action plan needed to be developed to provide continuity of policing services. Put simplistically, a police station comprises three elements: the operational front end, core back office functions and custody services. With an enormous effort from the Constabulary and support from partner agencies, premises were secured at the Citadel and Portland Square in Carlisle, which provided a five-year temporary solution for the operational front end and back office functions. Emergency custody provision was negotiated using a combination of the Crown Court cells in Carlisle and Hunter Lane police cells in Penrith. The Crown Court cells are occupied through the grace of Her Majesty's Courts Service and this could be withdrawn at short notice, although there is no indication that this is likely at this time. This was an emergency concession on their behalf which has endured for approaching a year.

The way forward

The key questions before the Authority are –

1. Is it agreed that the current emergency custody arrangements are unsustainable and alternative provision needs to be made as soon as possible?
2. Should it appeal the planning decision at Houghton?
3. What alternatives are there to the Houghton site? How swiftly can the different alternatives be delivered and at what cost? Which is the best alternative?
4. How can the long-term policing infrastructure for the North Cumbria BCU best be determined?

The adequacy of current custody provision

As has been reported to the Authority on several previous occasions, there are real health and safety issues for staff and prisoners with these emergency arrangements, plus monetary and staff time costs associated with transporting, interviewing and processing prisoners in Penrith.

The health and safety risk in Carlisle is graded as high and is only being managed by significant extra staffing and a fund of staff goodwill and enterprise that is now severely overdrawn. There is a permanently open line of communication with staff associations in relation to this matter. Reassurance has been given that both the Authority and Chief Constable are aware of their legal and moral obligations in relation to the health and safety of staff and are working expeditiously to find an answer.

Recommendation 1

Members agree that the current emergency custody arrangements are unsustainable and alternative provision needs to be made as soon as possible.

Appealing the planning decision at Houghton

Local residents fiercely contested the planning application for cells at Houghton, on the grounds that they felt the police facility would increase the level of crime. The principal concern was that released prisoners en route home would commit opportunistic crime and several opponents voiced the fear that women and children would no longer be free to walk in the village for fear of personal attack. A strong case was presented by the Constabulary to counter these fears. Additionally, a relatively inexpensive transport plan was proposed under which the Constabulary would provide transport, for detainees, back to Carlisle city centre.

The application was supported by the planning officers of Carlisle City Council, but rejected by the committee on a six to five vote. It is the view of the project team and professional advisors who attended the meeting that a powerful case was presented and that the appeal process would operate in the Constabulary's favour with a strong chance of success. A timely appeal process may still mean the Houghton Site is viable as custody facility. However, setting aside the value of the land as a custody facility, as a large piece of land within an area of the city where property attracts a premium, the NTU is a potentially valuable asset. The current planning decision effectively sterilises the site for further police development and there may well be value in challenging the planning decision on that basis. Secondly, as a large site in a good location, NTU Houghton may in due course be valuable as a potential land swap for a site closer to the city centre, as part of the strategy for the longer term policing future. As such, if any planning anomalies were able to be cleared away, its intrinsic value may be enhanced.

Recommendation 2

The Police Authority should appeal the refusal to grant planning permission for the Houghton site forthwith.

Evaluating alternative urgent action options for custody

Provision of a custody facility at Houghton was identified as the strongest option, but in the absence of a decision, alternative options need to be developed.

The Carlisle Redevelopment Project Board has identified and partially evaluated an option to flood-protect and redevelop the carcass of the former recreation club in the rear yard of Rickergate, attaching to it a 10-14 cell modular complex, built on a raised platform. The submission of a planning application is complicated by the requirement for liaison with the planning authority and the Environment Agency to determine the extent of flood risk work to be undertaken, but is currently being prepared. The estimated project completion date for this option would be November 2006, although this timeframe could be compressed by six to eight weeks if an exceptional tendering process was authorised.

Recommendation 3

The Constabulary should be required to swiftly and expeditiously explore the viability and costs of developing a short term (four or five-year) interim custody facility in the rear yard at Rickergate. Whilst exploring the viability, it should submit a temporary planning application in order to avoid subsequent time delays.

A second alternative option would be to build the current modular design, which has already been the subject of tender, on a different police-owned site. Areas within the Carleton Hall site are large enough to accommodate the building. It has been suggested that transport links to Carlisle could be planned with prison buses being used to reduce the problems associated with the distance from Carlisle. This option avoids the need for expensive land acquisition and associated time delays. The downside is the distance from Carlisle and careful evaluation is needed.

Recommendation 4

The Constabulary should be required to swiftly and expeditiously explore the viability and costs of locating the modular custody unit design within the Headquarters site and providing transport links to and from Carlisle.

Potential alternative sites

Earlier this year, the Chair, Clerk and ACC Rhodes met with Carlisle City Council senior officers and reviewed the land map for the entire Carlisle area. Potential sites, both in private and public ownership, were visited and assessed for suitability in terms of either a custody facility, or custody facility and potential BCU headquarters. Since then, the Estates Manager has held a watching brief, assessing any new land on the market, or where, through his extensive network of contacts with property professionals, land was likely to become available.

All potential sites have been assessed (indeed the discounting process was a part of the recent planning application at Houghton) and new sites continue to be assessed – two further offers having been received in the past three weeks. Of all the sites assessed, the most promising piece of land remains that already in police ownership, NTU Houghton. It is well positioned and large enough for either purpose. It is the Constabulary's intention to continue the proactive search for alternative sites.

Determining the long term policing infrastructure for North Cumbria BCU

Members will be aware from earlier papers that the Constabulary and the Authority are actively engaged in developing the 'Carlisle Renaissance' plans that include substantial redevelopment of the Rickergate area.

If an urgent action plan can be agreed, in as short a time frame as possible, that will deliver an interim custody facility to provide, as the Citadel and Portland Square premises have done, a solution for the next five years, this will create a sensible time period within which the long-term policing provision for Carlisle and North Cumbria can be negotiated.

It is proposed that at the February meeting of the Accommodation Working Group, the Carlisle Redevelopment Project Team could present an options paper to inform discussion. The paper could assess the feasibility and likelihood of a combined justice centre being an integral part of Renaissance proposals, advise on the most appropriate location for the headquarters of the North Cumbria BCU and update progress in relation to the interim solution.

Recommendation 7

The Authority and Chief Constable should work to form a joint view as to the long term policing needs of North Cumbria, and in particular the City of Carlisle. This work should be informed by an options paper presented to the Accommodation Working Group, by the Carlisle Redevelopment Project Team, at the working group meeting in February 2006.

Michael Baxter
Chief Constable