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**Governing neighbourhoods:
*Wirral Waters - a catalyst for
change?***

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Abstract

In September 2006, Peel Holdings announced new radical plans for the proposed redevelopment of the Birkenhead docklands on the eastern side of the Wirral peninsula in northwest England. Despite Peel's announcement seeming like a tremendous regeneration prospect for a part of the region dealing with the legacy of acute housing market failure, some immediate concerns were raised about the success of the venture in a climate of economic uncertainty and increasing difficulties in accessing affordable housing for local people.

The proposal from private developer and landowner Peel Holdings is to create a £4.5 billion scheme envisaged to provide approximately 15,000 new homes upon 260 hectares of quayside. Perhaps also more ambitious is the projected estimate of Wirral Waters becoming home to between 20,000 to 25,000 new residents over a 40 year period. This is to take place in an area which is currently ranked in one the most deprived urban areas of the UK.

This paper will consider the argument for locating a development of this magnitude in Birkenhead and examine the existing framework which governs planning policy in the Liverpool City Region, whilst questioning the role that any new housing will play in transforming the existing area. The paper will also consider the possible impact of the existing economic downturn on the proposal and the implications of Wirral and Liverpool's recognition as national growth-point. This status categorises Wirral Waters as a key catalyst for regional economic growth, perhaps an early, yet surprisingly crucial demonstration of central government support for a private sector scheme.

Alongside this, the City Region Housing Strategy (2007) suggests that the growth of the population in the wider sub-region will lead to an additional 75,000 dwellings being required to support the 38,100 new jobs forecast in the baseline strategy (2005). These projected demands fall in a highly dense urban region where brownfield space is at a premium, adds further weight to the proposals for derelict docklands redevelopment where possible.

This paper is derived from a piece of postgraduate research undertaken as part of a research dissertation in fulfilment of the regulations of Master of Arts in Contemporary Urban Renaissance at the University of Liverpool (January 2009) by the author.

Introduction

Focusing upon the ambitious plans of Peel Holdings to develop a vast housing, leisure, retail and office development in the heart of some of the most deprived communities in the UK, this research aims to explore the existing reasons for such blight, the current policy and strategic improvement plans, the opinions of the local public and ultimately conclude by examining the evidence available to suggest what potential exists for not only the Wirral Waters development – but also that for the local community, the borough of Wirral and the wider sub-region.

Based on the north eastern coast of Wirral, a peninsula of 311,200¹ residents in the northwest of England in the UK, Birkenhead docklands area currently demonstrates the bleak effects that a decline in post-war port activity has had not only on the physical landscape, but also on a modest community which for years has been riddled with poverty, crime, poor quality terraced housing and worklessness. The proposal for Wirral Waters however, offers a lifeline to the area and is likely to create a physical presence that will dominate the skyline of eastern Wirral by 2030, if a number of hurdles are overcome. The potential also exists for more than this, such as the great promise and hope that the wider ripple effects of an economy boosted by visitors, businesses and new residents may ultimately have upon greater regeneration in the wider area. Peel Holdings themselves argue that the docks should not cease to operate, but for the docks to evolve, consolidation of the dock system must take place so that it can operate efficiently and regenerate with new uses. Done successfully a new breath of life can be brought to Birkenhead and the docks can once again be a wonderful and thriving environment. (Peel, 2008).

A new development such as Wirral Waters may appear debateable at present, but thought needs to be given to its potential impact within the existing layout of Birkenhead. Will it integrate within the existing infrastructure of Birkenhead life or if it will change community life altogether with revolutionary modernistic architecture and living concepts? Whether or not residents themselves will embrace this change or be able to adapt to such modernism is a current area of contention, however the potential exists for the concept of neighbourhood to be reinvented sympathetically by gradually drawing upon local history, networks and tradition. There is also a need to support the local area by influencing and attracting a visitor economy to help neighbourhoods within eastern Wirral compete, retain population and maximise the physical change.

The Offer from Peel Holdings

Wirral Waters is a £4.5 billion scheme envisaged to provide approximately 15,000 new homes, 27,000 new direct full time jobs and over 750,000 sq.m of retail and commercial development. The proposal from existing landowners Peel Holdings is to transform the dilapidated docklands for which a vision has been created to construct a major mixed-use development over the 260 hectares of quayside, predominantly containing offices and residential high rise developments within the East Float area of the Docks, centered on Vittoria Wharf with development cascading down in height to the north and south of East Float. In addition, it is proposed to locate a major high quality development at the former Bidston Dock to create a new retail and leisure

¹ Source: Office for National Statistics, 2007.

destination. Finally, the Twelve Quays and West Float areas of the Docks will be retained for port use.

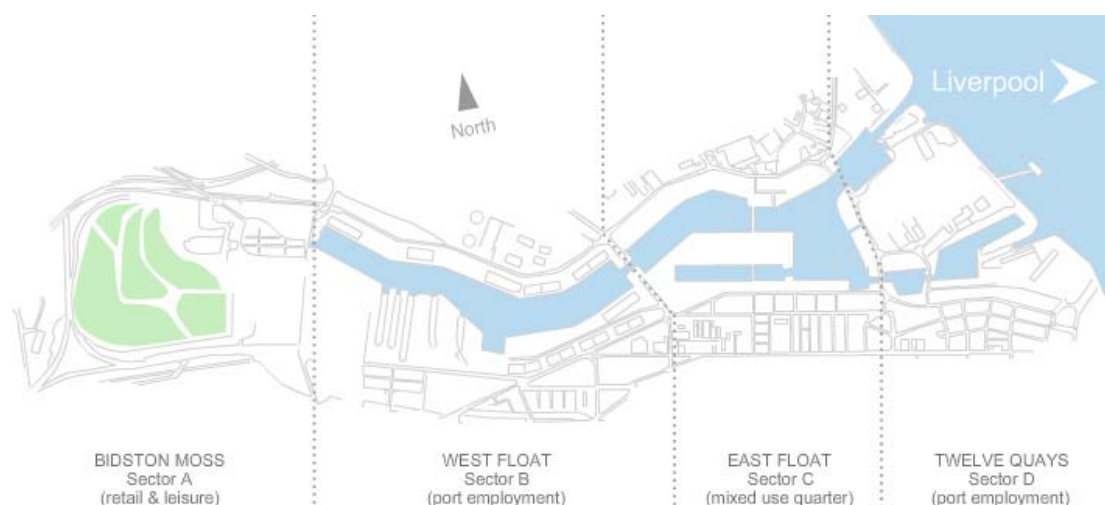


Fig 1: Sector plan for the redevelopment of the Birkenhead docklands (Source: Peel Holdings, 2008)

A presentation by Peel Holdings in February 2007 outlined the plans for this redevelopment and it was apparent that despite new business units having been developed after the traditional port industry declined in the mid 1980s, the neighbourhoods of North Birkenhead and Seacombe were still widely considered as barren and underperforming as local regeneration funding was specifically targeting these areas of Wirral. Norfolk Line ferries started a passenger and vehicle service in 2003 to Belfast and Dublin from the Twelve Quays, however travellers are forced to stay in Liverpool or seek accommodation elsewhere on the Wirral before catching their early morning ferry due to the lack of local facilities – taking potential business away from the local area. The docklands therefore presented a major development opportunity for Peel, who now have ownership of the docklands following a buy-out of the Mersey Docks & Harbour Company to enable Peel to exploit the potential in this area.

Despite these early plans, scepticism towards this project emerged from debate in local media. Having witnessed first hand the troubles that befell the planned redevelopment of nearby New Brighton – could the local resident population believe that the largest development ever proposed for Wirral would get public backing? Could the public sector match the ambition being shown by the private sector? At a local public meeting in June 2007, a unanimous vote from ‘local’ people – not private developers, not investors, not financiers, but existing local residents, many of whom were from Birkenhead, Seacombe and Tranmere, ended up vehemently calling for Wirral’s Council leader to not let this opportunity fall away under the weight of planning legislation, lack of public funding and a failure to share the ambition of Peel Holdings.

The local residents in attendance voiced their belief that Peel holdings would deliver on this project based on their stunning track record of creating popular developments such as Manchester’s Trafford Centre, Liverpool John Lennon Airport and Media City, home for the BBC at Salford Quays. They believed that despite the development having huge spin-offs for commercial gain, the project would encompass

the wider area and have a beneficial effect for the residents and communities of north eastern Wirral.

The Challenge Ahead

Since the plans were made public in 2006, much has changed in local government. Not only has public investment been limited further by the existing economic climate, examples of which have seen Wirral Councillors clash with the public over proposed closures of local libraries and leisure centres, but there has also been the emergence of new city-region planning policy and the awarding of ‘Growth-Point’ status to Wirral and Liverpool which incorporates Wirral Waters into the main Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) of the Liverpool City-Region – a strong demonstration of central government support.



Fig 2: Virtual drawing of Wirral Waters facing inland away from the River Mersey (Source: Peel Holdings, 2008)

However, although this project has not yet witnessed anything within this country to rival its magnitude, the idea of regenerating docklands and making use of waterside living has been a consistent debate for planners, private developers and Local Authorities since the early 1980s, when a catalyst was required to appeal to inward investment. This was apparent especially in Liverpool, Cardiff, Bristol and other major towns and cities with rivers and port access, which had witnessed a decline in port activity, new business start-ups and population.

However, what is interesting is that each of these cities has witnessed a heritage led revival based on the legacy of its past, and currently each are undergoing what is being classified as ‘re-regeneration’. The ODPM website *Renewal.net* stated in a 2005 paper that the preservation of heritage not only contributes to the state of health of the built environment, but also crucially to cultural and community identity and helps to define ‘the character of a place’. (*renewal.net*, 2005). Thus, the revival of Birkenhead’s docklands is hoped to achieve the same, if not a greater level of success witnessed by the regeneration of Liverpool’s Albert Dock in the 1980’s. This too was

an area of under-used former storage space for merchant ships, and like Birkenhead, it witnessed trade decline, before alternative uses were sought to revive the area.

The novelty of heritage led regeneration however perhaps passed off following the realisation that this was becoming a common trend in many established towns and cities. Birkenhead docks had tried a small landuse revival in early 1990 when a historic warship and submarine exhibition were located on the east float, however a decade later, it failed to attract the level of tourism required to maintain the exhibits and the project was relocated – although the focal German U-boat is due to be relocated to Woodside further along the dock system. Indeed, Middleton (1990) argued that even by the late 1980's, there was an excess supply of industrial heritage, whereas in the late 1970's, the demand for heritage tourism outstripped supply. This perhaps signals early saturation for heritage tourism by the 1980's, although the revival of Liverpool's Albert Dock was based upon this.

In their paper on Heritage Tourism, Light & Speake (2000) question further the future demand for heritage tourism and agree that there is very likely to come a time when tourists tire of heritage attractions – particularly because there are so many of them in the UK. In addition, it is also suggested that Liverpool's Albert Dock, a success of the 1980's, now requires re-regenerating through either new investment or new ideas, as tourists who have visited several times may have lacked interest in revisiting due to the lack of change that has been evident on each subsequent visit. Probably most interesting is in conclusion, where it is suggested that the New Labour Government emphasises 'looking forward' (in stark contrast to the backwards-looking heritage culture which boomed in the years of the previous Conservative administration). (Light & Speake 2000). This forward looking approach is one success of the re-regeneration of the Albert Dock area of Liverpool. Despite its city-centre location, the fulcrum of the latest regeneration has been the private investment in both the Liverpool One shopping centre and the arena and exhibition centre at the King's Dock, adjacent to the Albert Dock which in turn has been rejuvenated through increased visitor footfall.

Housing & Docklands

The emerging argument that is being raised through local internet forums are that Peel Holdings are only interested in generating further wealth and should really look at the current high levels of vacant living space on the Liverpool waterfront before creating new apartments which, it is presumed based upon household income figures in Birkenhead, will be beyond the affordability of local households. However, the opportunity exists for Peel to develop mixed use housing on the site (although this would be in the form of high-rise accommodation). Sairinen (2006) suggests that the main tool in waterfront redevelopment for decreasing the tension between private and public interests has been the balance between social and private housing, something that Peel have outlined as part of their Masterplan, although debate will continue as to the suitability of high-density social housing for families situated in an area of deep water and little existing open space.

However, Sairinen (2006) also suggests that by creating new areas of accessibility in the centre of existing communities, it will appeal to locals and lead to an increased community presence in the docklands area. Ports and docklands have long occupied

the urban waterfront which has in turn made them strictly guarded and inaccessible to the public, but with waterfront regeneration making these areas accessible to local people, areas of physical and psychological barriers are hence removed by creating attractive walkways and utilising the attraction of the water in any development design.

Of critical importance is the age structure of the population, with an increasingly ageing population and a trend of young people leaving the area to find work elsewhere. It is intended that the Wirral Waters proposals will provide an environment in which innovation can thrive and young people be encouraged to stay. Alongside the age structure imbalance is an issue of low skills within the adjoining communities. Low skills and low aspirations combine to exacerbate health and worklessness issues, which are at their most critical in the deprived communities around north Birkenhead and Seacombe to the north of the docklands.

Existing Governance & Planning Frameworks

Despite research having shown a reduction in population loss for the borough, the NewHeartlands migration report (2006) recognises that housing markets have suffered as Birkenhead has experienced high levels of population loss, housing abandonment, worklessness and poverty since the loss of port activity in the last twenty years. High levels of social housing in the area are a characteristic of low-income areas and a poor tenure mix has been viewed as unsustainable for the future of communities in the area (NewHeartlands, 2006).

However, despite such population loss, Birkenhead continues to be the principal retail, leisure and commercial centre in the Borough of Wirral. It is characterised by its linear nature from the town centre through to North Birkenhead, running parallel with the inland docks. The residential area is tightly constrained between the industrial areas along Price Street to the north, by Birkenhead Park to the south and by the town centre to the east. Further residential development is located along the western side of Birkenhead Park adjacent to the retail core of the town centre. Over recent years Birkenhead, in particular the northern area has seen significant socio-economic decline and severe housing market failure. The area has some of the highest worklessness rates in the country with some areas having a rate of almost 57% and an overall rate for the Housing Market Renewal Area Development Framework (ADF) area of almost 48%. In addition, four census Super Output Areas (SOAs) in north Birkenhead rank in the 100 most deprived SOA's nationally in terms of Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

The City Region Housing Strategy (2006) provided a regional analysis that continued to show that the areas exhibiting the greatest housing market stress are those within the NewHeartlands Pathfinder Area contained within the strategy's Northern Housing Market Area. This strategy and continued monitoring reports (2007 & 2008) continue to highlight the need for the HMR programme as the most appropriate response to these issues, and recognises that it will be at the core of delivering a significant proportion of the additional 75,000 dwellings needed to support the 38,100 new jobs forecast in the baseline strategy (2005).

The Housing and Regeneration Bill (2008) established the new Homes and Communities Agency, which will focus on delivering more new and affordable homes

across all tenures and will drive and invest in regeneration activities through support for regeneration and providing decent places as well as decent homes. The Bill implements the changes proposed in the Housing Green Paper, to give councils more freedom and incentives to build new homes.

For the Wirral Waters Project, Peel is pursuing a Strategic Regeneration Framework (SRF) approach, because the timescale of the development goes beyond the Local Development Framework (LDF) and the current Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). The current RSS was issued as RPG13 but a revised RSS will be issued by Government in July 2008, to cover the period 2003-2021. Peel's timescale envisages development over a 30-50 year period. (Wirral MBC, 2008).

The SRF is a model promoted by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE – the Government's advisor on architecture, urban design and open space) in their document 'Creating Successful Masterplans – A Guide for Clients'. Peel have carried out consultation on the initial stages of the SRF with national and regional stakeholders such as Government Office North West (GONW), English Partnerships (EP), Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), the North West Regional Development Agency (NWDA), The Mersey Partnership (TMP) and organisations such as the Environment Agency and United Utilities.

Moving forward however, the release of the Regional Spatial Strategy (2008-2021) in September 2008 highlighted the opportunity that both Wirral Waters and Liverpool Waters posed to housing and economic growth in the region, with deep consideration for the restructuring of communities via relaxed planning guidance in both the inner Wirral and docklands area of Liverpool (also known as the Mersey Heartlands Growth Point).

In the strategy, the housing development priorities for the Liverpool City Region were outlined as a central driver to support continued major regeneration activity, with developments such as Wirral Waters and Liverpool Waters being central. This would entail maintaining and enhancing the roles of both Birkenhead and Bootle to provide community facilities, service and employment whilst supporting the development of the Mersey Ports and the maritime economy (which is a key part of the Wirral Waters initial masterplan to continue port activity).

However what should be noted from these key priorities in the RSS is that an emphasis has been placed upon the need for providing a range of good quality housing in the inner areas of both Liverpool and Wirral. Quality must be reflected in the size, type, tenure and affordability with a high quality environment and accessible local facilities and employment opportunities. Whilst it may be that Wirral Waters will offer considerable employment opportunities, a concern remains amongst those interviewed as part of the research for this paper and in the local media that the planned apartments won't cater for local needs and the facilities on offer will not be either affordable or accessible for the local communities of Birkenhead, Seacombe or Wallasey.

The Research Method

As this was an individual piece of research, rather than targeting local addresses via a mailshot or household survey, an online web questionnaire was developed that would enable local residents and workers – with an internet connection – to share their views either anonymously or in public. This survey, although not allowing those without internet access the chance to share their opinion – would then compare results with the official Peel Holdings baseline survey.

The survey was comprised of four sections: ‘awareness’, ‘potential effects - businesses’, ‘potential effects – community’, ‘future alternative developments’. In addition, respondents could also request further information or leave their details to be contacted. Four of these respondents were later invited to a mini-focus group which proved successful in obtaining further views from both the local business community and residents.

In total 82 questionnaires were submitted online by respondents, of which 4 respondents opted to share their views in a small focus group that would enable a ‘deeper-dive’ into the conflicting views of both local residents and two local businessmen. In recognition that this represented just 0.05% of the total population of Wirral, the survey findings need to be considered alongside other secondary factors such as media reports, message board reviews and the public consultation undertaken by Peel Holdings to date.

The results of the primary research for this paper highlighted two distinct findings.

- a.) *Those who answered as local residents feel that the development will largely have a positive impact upon the area and,*
- b.) *If the development does not go ahead, they would wish that the docklands are still considered for further development opportunities to increase both leisure facilities and public access.*

Summary Outcomes from the Survey

In studying the outcomes of this consultation, the web-survey results overall highlighted great support for the proposals and complimented the general feeling of the focus group. Overwhelmingly, 99% felt that the development would ultimately be positive for the area, with just 18% then answering that they felt it would take more than physical regeneration to resolve some of the deprivation issues in the locality. This signals that of those surveyed, the belief strongly exists that Wirral Waters can be a catalyst for change and that the potential economic benefits for the wider area and Wirral will be great. It was interesting to note the mixed views for future use of the docklands should Peel decide to invest elsewhere. Surprisingly, 15% of those who vote thought that the area should remain as it currently is with port traffic only, whereas 37% thought that the area could be used for leisure purposes along with another 37% who viewed the area as having potential community development space – perhaps with the ultimate aim of drawing together the two communities of North Birkenhead and Seacombe – something that Peel aim to do by creating thoroughfares between both communities.

The development and plans were accepted as having the potential to reinvigorate the area and bring potential additional benefits for the community through the creation of new employment opportunity and environmental improvements. This in turn was viewed as having the potential to act as a catalyst for renewed hope in the area, as increased prosperity would restore lost pride – something which the group agreed was desperately lacking in the local community, as high levels of anti-social behaviour and vacant property had let many residents desperate to leave the area.

Moving Forward - The Housing Challenges

As the Northwest Regional Spatial Strategy suggested in 2008, Wirral Waters should focus residential development in the Inner Areas of Wirral in order to secure a significant increase in population and to support major regeneration activity. It is forecast that this will entail maintaining and enhancing the role of Birkenhead to provide community facilities, services and employment alongside the continued development of the NewHeartlands Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder to revitalise housing in Wirral through comprehensive area based regeneration schemes. (North West RSS, 2008, p41).

It is this statement that should drive forward the housing element of Wirral Waters. Scepticism so far has related to the assumption that all new accommodation will be in the form of high-rise apartment towers similar to those in abundance in Liverpool, however early scale models have failed to show the likely developments on the periphery of the docks, such as on vacant land in and around Poulton, Seacombe and North Birkenhead.

It is also vital that Peel continue to work closely with NewHeartlands in driving forward the good work already done by Wirral and become central to any revised North Birkenhead housing and environmental improvement masterplanning that may take place to meet the forecasted affordable housing need within eastern Wirral.

By looking at the quality of newbuild housing in many of the Housing Market Renewal areas throughout the UK and examples on the continent, there is a strong argument made by Clare Goff writing in *New Start* magazine that many opportunities still exist for local authorities and private developers to create high-density multi-purpose newbuild housing in a variety of styles that integrate into existing neighbourhoods with the design approval of CABI - the government's advisor on architecture. (Goff, C 2008). Such designs as those at Salford Quays in Manchester, Adelaide Wharf in Hackney and City Point in Brighton demonstrate high quality architecture and provide a range of high density housing for single tenants, families and owners. It is also a vital consideration for Peel to consider the local environment and placement of any new accommodation development. The proximity to the quayside may boost values for buyers who seek apartments as an investment from plan, however if, as the RSS states, new housing is created to suit a variety of needs – then consideration in relation to the proximity of shops, transport and recreation space must be given. Within most new communities, space has typically been created to act as social meeting points for residents such as community gardens or street furniture that encourages such – depending upon where the pedestrianised space will be amongst the development.

Above all however, it should be remembered that for planning permission to be approved, Wirral Council would utilise the new *Building for Life* assessor to monitor new developments and ensure that Peel follow guidance from CABE. In essence, CABE encourage local authorities and private developers building inner-city accommodation to create a strong character with a series of enclosed courtyard spaces offering sanctuary from the surrounding public space. (Goff, C 2008).

Looking at the concept of docklands living, Wood (1999) argues that the presence of water does exert a measurable positive effect upon property values, and there is a discernible ‘stepping’, or escalation, of this influence from office to leisure to residential property. (Wood, R 1999). This argument from Wood may do little to quell the debate regarding the need for taller quayside apartment blocks, however as has been shown with the recent mill conversion on the East Float in Birkenhead – apartments with waterside views have to date attracted investment, although many remain available for private rent. In addition, Housing Market Renewal in eastern Wirral has highlighted the need for more suitable family housing and this really should be the priority accommodation which is built, however whilst acknowledging that apartment blocks may be more suited to quayside living – it should also still be remembered that brownfield sites are available in and around the docklands, where despite lack of prominent space (aside from the land at the former Rivers estate – earmarked for a park and ride site), with previous examples such as newbuild at Old Chester Road and on the former Fiveways estate in nearby Rock Ferry having proven that quality, high density affordable housing can be built within confined spaces that appeals to a variety of tenures.

Restructuring the Local Housing Market – continuing the good work?

It is clear that despite local Housing Market Renewal works, the Wirral Waters scheme is clearly required to provide an additional catalyst for the local housing market. Wirral Council clearly acknowledge that despite localised effort, the area is still suffering from acute housing market stress and continues to be characterised by the severe decline of the retail parade along King Street and Brighton Street in Seacombe and the poor provision of neighbourhood services, particularly financial services. Despite the development of high street supermarkets such as ASDA and leisure facilities in nearby Liscard, this has seemingly attracted local residents, taking away business from the traditional Brighton Street corridor through Seacombe.

This decline, not just in Seacombe but also similarly in north Birkenhead along Laird Street has acted as a catalyst in neighbourhood decline, with retail jobs lost, local investment diminished and a sense of overall pride in the physical state of the area abandoned. Today, as the housing markets of each area are subject to market renewal interventions to bring vacant housing back into use and to improve houses in poor condition through working with private landlords through accreditation schemes, both communities either side of the docklands are witnessing visible signs of real intervention.

Despite this good work to date, experts still acknowledge that the housing market renewal programme has reached a critical phase in its development and that it will either have to evolve and innovate in a radically different climate, or after 2011 it will become a forgotten episode in the history of British urban and regeneration policy due

to the current pressures taking over public spending. Brendan Nevin writes that new opportunities (such as Wirral Waters) will continue to deliver positive change in distressed areas, although a renewed confidence in private investment must first be discovered as the construction industry weakens. For regeneration schemes such as housing market renewal, a critical point in its future success has been reached during a time of public expenditure crisis. Nevin concludes that the last time this happened, in 1976, the government responded by decimating public expenditure. If the same were to happen 30 years later today, neither housing market renewal nor regeneration policy more generally will retain credibility as the century enters its second decade. (Nevin, B 2008).

However, despite the categorisation of Seacombe as an area subject to renewal works, the area still has easy access to the Mersey promenade and retains high value housing and residential homes in prime locations next to the river. It is on the west of Brighton Street, however, around Union Street, Woodhall & Royston Avenue that has witnessed the greatest housing market decline, where tightly packed terraced housing, generally built before the First World War has become undesirable for use today.

To date (October 2008) the Seacombe area has received £9 million of investment through activities relating to the HMRI programme within Inner Wirral. Yet prior to this, it was in the 1990s that this area of Wirral was granted renewal area status and benefited from early private sector renewal investment. Today, Wirral Council anticipate that investment in Seacombe will be significantly increased with the intent of Peel Holdings in the Wirral Waters Masterplan to radically transform the Seacombe Waterfront and adjoining areas and will complement planned HMRI and RGP investment beyond 2011. Much of the investment in the area has largely been by housing associations which is then often dispersed through the neighbourhood. (Wirral MBC, 2008)

A series of Neighbourhood Renewal Assessments has been completed in Seacombe and Egremont that have resulted in 3 clearance areas being declared. In total this has resulted in 136 units being acquired since 2003 and 114 being demolished. (Wirral MBC, 2008). Alongside HMRI, £1.31million has been utilised from English Partnerships to fund acquisition and clearance in the Seacombe area and proportionally the greatest leverage of other public sector funds to match HMRI funding has been achieved in Seacombe. Parallel to this intervention in predominantly private sector markets, Wirral Partnership Homes has continued to rationalise its stock in the area and are currently exploring medium-long term options for a number of less popular estates in the area. A significant proportion of the housing stock within Seacombe is in the social rented sector, in 2008 the figure was 24% compared to a borough wide average of 14.5%. (Wirral MBC Area Mapping Project, 2008).

	Total Stock	No Social Housing Units	% Social Housing	Wirral Average Social Housing per Ward
SEACOMBE WARD	7218	1731	24.0	1008
ROCK FERRY WARD	6904	2219	32.1	1008
BIRKENHEAD AND TRANMERE WARD	7858	2574	32.8	1008
BIDSTON AND ST JAMES WARD	7395	3637	49.2	1008

Table 4: Social housing figures for the four eastern Wirral renewal wards, September 2008 (Source: Wirral Area Mapping Project 2008)

In March 2007, following baseline work by ECOTEC consultants, GVA Grimley produced the Liverpool City Region Housing Strategy, which is supported by Merseyside Authorities (including Wirral). It includes the identification of sub-regional housing markets. Despite lack of movement between inner Wirral and Liverpool (evidenced by ECOTEC and later Mott MacDonald, 2008), both were identified as being within the same housing market area – the Northern Housing Market Area (NHMA) – which incorporates Wirral, Liverpool and Sefton, together with parts of West Lancashire, Knowsley, St Helens and Halton. The NHMA is therefore a large area, with the study undertaken at a higher spatial level than the ECOTEC work. Evidence from this highlighted little movement within Merseyside and high levels of outward migration from Wirral. It would therefore be expected that by developing an attractive, affordable housing offering within Wirral, that this haemorrhage of population may slow down significantly – especially if the wider offer of jobs and prospects is strengthened.

Owner occupation is also significantly below the district average in both Seacombe and Birkenhead, with high levels of private and Registered Social Landlord (RSL) renting. A comparison of the tenure position in 2003 at the HMRI level, to that of Wirral as a whole (using data taken from Census 2001) clearly shows these differences within the district. It is evident that, at present, large parts of Inner Wirral are not achieving the Government's aspirations for mixed communities. There is a need for a wider range of improved housing quality, alongside greater economic strength. Some improvements are occurring through HMR activity in improving terraced stock, clearing the worst problem areas and allowing new build in HMRI areas. Alongside dockland developments, it is also recognised that there is a need for a greater number of quality "aspirational" family housing in Inner Wirral and that this will need to be explored with Peel's partners. Wirral Waters offers the opportunity to create the quality of environment in which high value family housing can be delivered both to an extent within the docks, and also through acting as a catalyst, to areas surrounding the docks, for example at the interfaces with HMRI areas such as north Birkenhead and Seacombe.

Another important factor for Wirral Waters is that the HMRI area housing market is more fragile than wider more prosperous markets, principally due to lower demand but also due to comparatively high vacancy levels. Introducing significant additional amounts of new housing at the lower end of the market in Inner Wirral could result in further imbalance by attracting existing residents of HMR areas to new housing, resulting in more empty stock and continual decline for those areas. It is therefore important that any future housing development at Wirral Waters positions itself, in terms of quality/market offer, location and type, in such a way that HMR activity and local housing needs are positively assisted rather than undermined.

Conclusions

The challenges outlined in the introduction require careful consideration. Creating such a monumental development in the centre of a fragile community carries a high amount of associated risk. This is much more than a development - it is the creation of not only a new neighbourhood, but the potential to design the actual concept of a totally new neighbourhood. Peel hope to create strong pedestrian linkages between both Seacombe to the north and Birkenhead to the south of the docklands, but for

Wirral Waters to achieve these stronger links, both groups of residents need to be closely involved with all aspects of the development to inherit a real sense of belonging to this new place, so that the linkages can evolve socially.

The most striking aspects of Wirral Waters are its boldness and visionary approach, which look towards the introduction of major new development in markets as yet unproven in this area of Wirral. As outlined, the long term vision of Peel Holdings is to deliver an Ocean Gateway to the northwest of England, which it has to be remembered, includes key projects at not only Wirral Waters but directly opposite within the existing Liverpool docklands north of the city centre - Liverpool Waters. Combined with a multi-modal approach to creating a Superport, Wirral Waters capitalises upon the company's ownership and control of both the Port of Liverpool and Liverpool John Lennon Airport, therefore the strategic elements behind the positioning of Wirral Waters must be considered. Peel are a private company and will firstly be planning to create Wirral Waters to enhance their global status and company growth. It must be remembered that the regeneration of Birkenhead is therefore only a secondary measure and that any perceived lack of support may lead to abandonment by Peel.

Initial research into this project highlighted the current plight of the local communities within eastern Wirral and the subsequent need for major regeneration. The subsequent analysis of survey results supplemented this by suggesting that despite the poor state of Birkenhead, those who lived there still retained greater aspirations for change and were willing to embrace the Wirral Waters proposals. The research revealed that public confidence remains high in believing that the local area will benefit in the long-term from Wirral Waters, however it was clear that many fears were still abundant regarding the short term plans and immediate solutions Peel would decide upon. It is therefore vital that public consultation exercises are continually undertaken and that research findings are monitored so that the impact of Wirral Waters upon the economic performance, migration patterns and deprivation standing within both Wirral and the wider city-region are responded to accordingly. This monitoring is likely to be via sub-regional planning officers groups, however academic research should focus upon the relationship of economic trends between Merseyside and other European cities undergoing similar regeneration – or which have been subject to similar regeneration schemes, although it appears none on the same magnitude. In addition, it will also be informative to monitor the progress of the initial proposals from Peel against developments at intervals during the 30-year development life, creating a greater evidence base for projecting the construction and legalities of such future developments.

This study also researched the historical change of Wirral Waters by creating a pictorial history of the docklands. This created an important insight into the development of the quayside industries over the last 30 years. Despite reporting earlier that much of the docklands is classified brownfield space, many warehousing units and small factory businesses have existed, but not sustained due to poor accessibility for customers and bleak surroundings.

The survey of homemovers carried out by Ecotec (2004) highlighted Birkenhead as the least favoured place within the sub-region that people aspired to live in. It has been found that Birkenhead's reputation has contributed to the sustained loss of

population over the last 30 years, which amounts to around 40% of the total proportion of Birkenhead since the early 1970s and has seriously threatened the overall sustainability of the entire neighbourhood. These results are likely to change radically should an influx of affordable, modern housing evolve in Birkenhead – however it should also be recognised that building new housing goes far beyond construction. In order to successfully regenerate local housing markets and continue the housing market renewal initiative that is already ongoing, Peel and Wirral Council need to ensure that developers not only design attractive and affordable housing, but that the wider social offer of a safe, interactive neighbourhood is created, something that will attract not only families and new residents, but further continued investment to sustain such an area.

It is also of vital importance that Wirral Waters builds upon the strengths of excellent transport links and the huge potential of economic generation within the Birkenhead Docklands whilst improving the connectivity to wider areas of economic growth in Liverpool and the wider sub-region. There is a commitment from Wirral Council in the current housing strategy (2007) to recreate attractive and vital neighbourhoods with high quality, affordable homes that have good access to the town centre, the regenerated Birkenhead Park and proposed new employment and recreational area around Birkenhead docks. Although the vision is in place, the challenge now for Peel and Wirral Council to succeed is for the area to be successfully re-branded in order to diminish the legacy of high crime rates and poor quality living areas.

It also appears apparent that Wirral Waters will rely heavily upon innovative architecture as its key attraction, whereas the example of the rejuvenation of Liverpool's Albert Dock was centred upon the opening of the Kings Dock arena and the associated increase in visitor numbers who might not have previously chosen to visit. It therefore could be suggested that Wirral Waters may need a greater offer to compete, as the availability of late night restaurants and arcades may not have the long-term appeal to sustain a night time economy in Birkenhead.

Finally, and most critically of all is the vitally important ownership role Peel will need to play in ensuring their own masterplan succeeds. Despite the financial offer and idealistic masterplan, the success is simply dependant upon a robust working in partnership approach, with the need to work with key stakeholders to deliver an integrated approach that will secure regeneration benefits for local communities. This should in turn ensure that such private investment, allied to close monitoring and a strong partnership approach aimed at increasing public confidence, will ensure that Wirral Waters becomes an exemplar 21st century regeneration initiative which ultimately diversifies and helps align the housing markets of eastern Wirral.

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