

IMPROVEMENT SCHEMES FOR KINGSBURY AND MARKET SQUARE, AYLESBURY
Councillor Mrs Ward
Cabinet Member for Civic Amenities

1 Purpose

- 1.1 This report sets out the challenges facing Kingsbury and Market Square and outlines the plans to bring forward improvement schemes for both spaces and the associated costs.

2 Recommendations/for decision

Council is asked to:

- 2.1 Endorse in principle, the plans to bring forward improvement schemes for Kingsbury and Market Square
- 2.2 Approve in principle a package of funding, in support of the proposals, as set out below and make the necessary amendments to the capital programme:-
- (i) Use of Section 106 unallocated for Aylesbury Town Centre: £1m.
- (ii) An application for Heritage Funding Townscape grants: £2m (potential funding source).
- (iii) Use of New Homes Bonus: £1.5m (to be increased to meet any shortfall from the application for Heritage Lottery Funding).
- 2.3 Approve the immediate release of £100k to enable the procurement of a public realm architect to be appointed to develop concepts for both schemes in consultation with stakeholders.
- 2.4 Agree that the concepts and indicative costs of delivering both schemes are reported back to Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet, with Cabinet given approval to release the next phase of funding to enable the concepts to be developed to detailed planning application stage.
- 2.5 Authorise Cabinet to release the remaining funds of up to £4.4m to deliver the schemes once planning permission is granted.

3. Background

- 3.1 A report was submitted to the Finance and Services Scrutiny Committee on 9 July 2018 and Cabinet on 10 July 2018 setting out the challenges facing Kingsbury and Market Square. The report outlined the plans to bring forward improvement schemes for both spaces and the associated costs to address these issues.
- 3.2 Whilst both the Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet approved the recommendation that Council be asked to approve a package of funding of up to £4.5m to develop and deliver the schemes, since then further thought has been given as to how the funding could be released in phases. The report setting out the case for the schemes has also been enhanced to include some of the information presented to members at the recent seminar held on 'Supporting our town centres'. A copy of the report is attached to the agenda as Appendix 1

- 3.3 The Action Plan for Kingsbury is detailed at Appendix 2, with the Action Plan for Market Square detailed at Appendix 3. Both Action Plans form part of the Aylesbury Town Centre Improvement Plan.
- 3.4 Feedback from the scrutiny committee was reported to Cabinet who fully considered these in making their recommendation to Council.
- 4. Indicative costs of the improvements / Source of funding / Resource Implications**
- 4.1 These are set out in the recommendation to Council..

Contact Officer
Background Documents

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Aylesbury Town Centre Improvement Plan, Heritage Lottery
Funding: Townscape Grants Briefing

IMPROVEMENT SCHEMES FOR KINGSBURY AND MARKET SQUARE, AYLESBURY

1. Supporting information

Context

- 1.1 The Aylesbury Town Centre Plan (www.aylesburytowncentreplan) was published in 2014 and set out:
- The challenges facing the town
 - The regeneration achievements to date
 - A vision and unique selling point
 - Guiding principles for future regeneration of the town centre
 - A range of actions to improve the town centre generally as well as actions specific to the different area of the centre

The Town Centre Plan has now been reflected in the Draft Vale of Aylesbury Plan.

- 1.2 In respect of the challenges, the impact of internet shopping via multi-channels and the need to reduce the town's reliance on shops to retain and increase footfall was recognised and reflected in the Town Centre Vision described below:

Aylesbury will:

...be a high profile, sub-regional centre for entertainment and the arts, which has added a distinctive edge to its market town heritage.

...be a distinctive, 'best in class', modern market town, which is attractive, safe, sustainable and accessible.

--- provide a quality day and evening environment in terms of leisure, retail and food and drink, which attracts and brings together people of all ages and communities from within its enviable catchment area.

2. How town centres are changing

Retail

- 2.1 There is no definitive view on how much impact the internet is having or will ultimately have on traditional retail, but as explained at the recent Members' seminar on 'Supporting our town centres', it is abundantly clear that the demand for physical retail space is reducing with 16 shops a day closing in 2017. Almost weekly, the retail trade press is announcing that another operator is to review their portfolio. It is well known that this process is already

underway at Marks & Spencer's which has announced its intention to close 100 stores by 2020 (38 already known) and John Lewis Partnerships is undertaking the same process and already announced the closure of five Waitrose stores. 4.4 Nation wide, retailers are looking for ways to sustain their business and ensure that both their online and store offer work together. For example, big box operators such as B&Q/ Screwfix is capitalising on the growth of housing in town centres and in March 2018 opened a small high street store in London. After a successful pilot, B & Q is now looking to roll-out the concept to other towns.

Leisure

- 2.2 The increase in people looking to their town centre to combine a food and entertainment experience has also been phenomenal. Industry reports suggest that 40% of footfall will base their decision to visit a town based on the choice of dining options fuelling a significant national growth in both the number of restaurant and café openings and breadth of cuisine available. In the last twelve months, this rapid expansion has led to a softening of the dining out market with some rationalising by well known brands such as Jamie's, but new brands continue to enter the market and spend overall generally in this area continues to grow. Aylesbury is no exception to this trend and has seen a number of new cafes and restaurants open in recent years, with more opening as part of The Exchange development.

Living

- 2.3 The growth of town centre living is changing what a town needs to offer to sustain successful residential communities. In the last five years, 89,140 offices in the UK have been converted to living accommodation. In Aylesbury town centre, former offices such as Kingfisher House and Friars Square have been successfully converted to residential and proved extremely popular. The office building above QDs at the bottom of High Street has a permitted development for 110 apartments and the 47 apartments in The Exchange development are on sale.
- 2.4 The importance of creating a great environment is critical to the success of attracting people to a town whether to shop, socialise, live or work. It also impacts greatly on a town's ability to secure new retailers, restaurants etc as public space helps form first impressions of a potential investor and gives a sense of the character of a town and its wellbeing.
- 2.5 A theme throughout the Town Centre Plan, is the recognition that the general environment and specific areas of public space in Aylesbury needs improvement. Whilst it is difficult to quantify a direct financial return on investment from public space improvements, there is strong supporting evidence which shows that it can deliver the following intrinsic and non-economic benefits:
- Helps attract investment from the private sector as the town's reputation and profile rises. (AVDC can benefit from the business rate uplift this delivers).
 - Improves the wellbeing of existing residents and users of the town centre.

- Increases footfall as the town becomes the preferred choice of place to visit. This helps generate spend in the local economy and enables existing businesses to thrive. Some of these in Aylesbury are AVDC owned or where the council has a vested interest in eg Aylesbury Waterside Theatre. Increased footfall helps enhance this investment).
- Creates an environment where civic pride helps reduce anti-social behaviour.
- Can support job growth

2.6 In Aylesbury good progress has been made on delivering a range of public space improvements identified in the Plan. These include:

- Creatively using the former water scheme in Kingsbury for colourful planters
- Achieving a parking order for Kingsbury to enable enforcement of illegal parking on the central area
- Using different spaces for events eg Aylesbury on Sea (an Aylesbury Town Council event), WhizzFizz, Christmas light switch-on etc
- Developing the new Exchange public square alongside an improvement scheme for Long Lion
- Launch of the first waterside festival in September 2018 using the public space by the theatre and canal for the festivities
- New planters in the High Street (in part to help prevent unauthorised use by cars)
- An ever expanding street entertainment and events programme
- A fantastic Aylesbury in Bloom programme (led by Aylesbury Town Council)

2.7 However, whilst these small but incremental improvements are important, two of the town's largest public spaces – Kingsbury and Market Square, have operational and aesthetic challenges which require significant schemes to come forward to make a real difference.

3. Kingsbury - background and context

3.1 Kingsbury is a distinct area of the town and a gateway to the historic Old Town. The land known as Kingsbury was given to the people of Aylesbury by Charles I and was originally called "Kings Borough" ie the land of the King. It was the secondary square of Aylesbury and originally used as a base for carters who were employed to deliver goods purchased at the market to outlying villages. As Aylesbury has developed and grown, use of Kingsbury has changed and whilst it still retains many fine buildings, it has struggled in recent times to attract the footfall of its former years and to find its own identity.

- 3.2 In 2004, a Government funded scheme to improve the public space was delivered to help Kingsbury attract private investment in the commercial units and make it more integral to the retail circuit. Whilst these improvements were welcome, they have not brought about the transformation hoped for. Instead, the on-going decline in footfall has led to new challenges and an increase in anti-social behaviour ranging from parking on the central area to public drinking outside the agreed areas. Much effort has also been made by AVDC and its partners to address these issues, but the overall consensus is that more significant investment is needed to enable Kingsbury to thrive and become a greater asset to the town.

The Aylesbury Town Centre Action Plan and Kingsbury

- 3.3 The Action Plan for Kingsbury (taken from the Town Centre Plan is attached as Appendix 1). The mini vision for the area is to:

“Create a more attractive environment for residents, visitors and businesses and improve it as the gateway to the old town.”

- 3.4 A number of the actions listed have already been completed or are underway, but one of the key outstanding actions is to

“Form a stakeholder group to identify options for improving the physical environment, looking at seating, lighting, surfaces etc so that better use of the open space can be made all year round.”

- 3.5 Some preliminary work has already been undertaken by the Town Centre Manager to gauge interest by the business community in a scheme being brought forward. This engagement has been on the basis that whilst AVDC (working potentially with BCC who own the highway around the central area which is failing in parts), may be able to deliver enhancements to the public space, the land and buildings also need to be considered to achieve the best outcome for this relatively small area. This means that the investment and commitment from landlord and tenants will be needed as well.

- 3.6 There are some 40 landlords and tenants in Kingsbury – some remote and whose current primary objective is to simply ensure their unit is occupied regardless of whether the tenant or use of their property is in line with the greater vision we are seeking to achieve for the area. However, some landlords and tenants are local to Aylesbury and are enthusiastic about being part of the plans. The potential to transform Kingsbury through a joint approach is significant and any stakeholder engagement will also extend to other key partners such as the Aylesbury Town Council, Thames Valley Police and the Aylesbury Old Town Residents' Association.

- 3.7 Some initial thought has been given as to what the future look and feel of Kingsbury could be taking into account the need to reduce the areas reliance on shops and how Kingsbury could complement other areas of the town centre. To encourage footfall and capture people in particularly on route to the Old Town, Kingsbury needs an identity just as other areas of the town have. For example, the Market Square is known for its ancient cobbles and clock tower. Waterside south is defined by the canal and the theatre. Importantly, it needs to be an identity that stakeholders buy into. An initial concept based on bringing the Roald Dahl theme from the Museum in the adjacent area, to Kingsbury (both land and buildings) has been suggested and well received by

landlords and tenants. However, it is only an idea and as part of the development of the concept, significant more work would need to be undertaken with stakeholders to ensure that any concept is shared and jointly owned. Any early ideas will also need to be supported by Heritage and Planning Officers before they are developed up in detail to form a planning application.

4. Aylesbury Market Square – background and context

- 4.1 The Market Square with its landmark clock is Aylesbury's most established public space. Originally the Square was much bigger but over time has reduced as development has taken place on the periphery. Over the centuries, the Market Square has been a central space for people to meet, socialise, and trade. Around the historic cobbled square there are many fine old buildings including the original Grade II County Hall (built in 1725), the Crown Court and the Corn Exchange (built in 1864).
- 4.2 The Market Square is still a very popular space and today is home to four markets a week – the Vintage & Craft Bazaar, general, Foodie Friday, special markets, concerts, Christmas light switch-on, the Christmas carol concert, WhizzFizz and more.
- 4.3 However, despite its popularity, the Square has constraints. The key ones can be summarised as:
- Accessibility. The cobbles are an essential part of the Squares heritage, giving it a distinctive look and feel. However, they are also very uneven and deter many people, particularly if they have a disability, from using the Market Square and enjoying the activities on offer. A survey undertaken by the Markets Team identified that one of the reasons why people did not use the markets, was the concern about walking safely or easily across the cobbles. People who said this ranged from women wearing shoes with heels, older people, people with pushchairs and people with a disability.
 - Poor infrastructure. As the town's main event/activity space, The Square has limited on-site infrastructure such as electricity supply points for generators, lighting etc. This has become a constraint for regular events such as Foodie Friday which is growing in popularity, but stalls can only be located on the sections of the Square where there is pop-up electricity supply. In winter months, the lack of lighting becomes an additional challenge and is hard to address with health and safety regulations limiting how and where overhead cabling can be successfully rigged.

These two constraints collectively prevent all of the space from being used and for enabling a wider range of activities to be introduced.

The Aylesbury Town Centre Plan – Market Square

- 4.4 The Action Plan for Market Square (taken from the Town Centre Plan is attached as Appendix 2). The mini vision for the area is to:

“Make more of the area's presence as a key retail, catering and leisure hub”

- 4.5 As with Kingsbury, a number of the actions are already underway or completed. For example, significant investment has taken place to deliver the action to improve the markets. New stalls, and the development of the Vintage & Craft Bazaar, and the Foodie Friday markets, have all helped to revitalise the popularity of the town's historic market tradition. But one the key actions calls for a review of the public realm to

“Create a more attractive and usable environment for shopping, eating, drinking and leisure (including large scale events and socialising).

The Action Plan also states that the review should include:

- *Better links between areas*
- *Vehicle, pedestrian and events use*
- *Public space (including layout, surfaces, street furniture, signage, lighting and electricity supply)*

- 4.6 The brief will take into account these requirements and the specific challenges as set out in paragraph 4.20 which need to be overcome alongside the requirement to retain the Square's heritage look and feel.

5 Indicative costs of the improvements

- 5.1 Developing the concept to implementation of a scheme has a number of phases which will be applicable to both spaces. The key phases are:

- i) Inception, concept preparation and stakeholder engagement
- ii) Design development to planning
- iii) Tender and construction pack
- iv) Delivery and project management

- 5.2 Each phase carries costs which include the costs of securing specialist advice. Much of this advice will be needed for both spaces although with Kingsbury there will be an additional requirement to develop a Design Guide for the buildings.

- 5.3 Both spaces would be considered together. This will ensure a cohesive approach to the improvements and may also deliver some economies of scale in terms of commissioning the various elements of work.

- 5.4 The fee and capital costs of both schemes can only be indicative at this stage but for the purpose of this report, they have been identified as:

Collective fee costs for Kingsbury and Market Square: £180k

Capital costs of delivery – Kingsbury: £2m

Capital costs of delivery – Market Square: £2m

Contingency: £320k

Total: £4.5m

6. Sources of funding

- 6.1 Three funding sources have been identified:

- Existing Section 106 funding allocated to Aylesbury town centre but not to any specific scheme: £1m

- Heritage Lottery Funding Townscape Grants: £2m (potential funding source)
- New Homes Bonus: £1.5m

6.2 At this stage there can be no guarantee that the bid for Heritage Lottery Funding will be completely or partially successful. If there is any gap in funding from the Lottery, the proposal is that additional New Homes Bonus will be used.

7. Timescale

7.1 The timescales will not be known until the specialist advice has been procured but as an indication, phases i) to iii) are likely to take until at least spring 2019 to complete enabling procurement for the delivery in summer 2019 with construction starting later in 2019. Depending on the nature of the finally approved schemes, it is probable that work will be phased rather than carried out at the same time to minimise disruption.

8. Resource implications

8.1 The resource implications are set out in section 5. The overall programme will be managed by the Commercial Property & Regeneration Sector.

8.2 The council is currently holding in excess of £3.5m of unallocated New Homes Bonus from its allocation for 2018/19 and therefore there is sufficient funds available to fund this scheme if approved.

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Background Documents

Aylesbury Town Centre Improvement Plan
Heritage Lottery Funding: Townscape Grants Briefing
Note