

HIGH WYCOMBE TOWN CENTRE IMPROVEMENTS

Cabinet Member: Councillor David Johncock

Wards Affected: Abbey, Disraeli, Terriers and Amersham Hill, Ryemead

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PROPOSED DECISION

That £200k of CIL from the High Wycombe Town Centre Masterplan allocation in the major projects capital programme be released for spend on a staff resource to progress future improvements which will be partly or wholly funded by CIL.

Reason for Decision

High Wycombe is the principal town in the District, and the success of the town centre is central to the economic success of the District, and the well-being of residents. The Council requires a staff resource to progress the projects.

Corporate Implications

1. An overall budget of £18.5M has been set aside in the capital programme for improvements to High Wycombe Town Centre for the next 5 years, building on investment to date.
2. In accordance with the Planning Act 2008 and the Community Infrastructure Regulations 2010, money raised through the Community Infrastructure Levy ("CIL") can be used to fund a) the provision, improvement, replacement, operation or maintenance of infrastructure; or (b) anything else that is concerned with addressing the demands that development places on an area. CIL has been used for previous town centre improvements.
3. CIL is funding that is provided to the Council from developments that take place in the District. Regulation 123 of the Community Infrastructure Regulations 2010 (as amended) restricts the use of planning obligations (s.106 agreements) for infrastructure that will be funded in whole or in part by the Community Infrastructure Levy.
4. CIL can be used in accordance with the Council's CIL Reg 123 list. The Council's CIL Reg 123 list identifies specific projects in relation to High Wycombe Town Centre Masterplan which would be eligible for CIL funding, as distinct from funding via s.106. This list is included elsewhere in this report. CIL can also be used to fund projects not listed on the Reg 123 list.
5. Staff resource to undertake or commission feasibility and subsequent detailed design work that meets the above tests can be funded from CIL. This will need to be reviewed as work progresses to ensure the work remains within the scope of the CIL regulations, and the Council's CIL Reg 123 list in relation to schemes funded from CIL and those from s.106, or from other sources.
6. There is no ongoing revenue budget to fund this post. If as the project progresses the work no longer qualifies for CIL funding, alternative funding will need to be found from revenue budgets.

7. It should also be noted that depending on the term of any proposed employment contract and the terms and conditions of such contract, there is a risk that whilst the project is for a finite duration, the employee may accrue employment rights, including but not limited to redundancy rights.

Executive Summary

8. In the Council budget there is an allocation of £18.5M of Capital and CIL for investing in improvements to High Wycombe Town Centre. High Wycombe is the principal town in the District, and the success of the town centre is central to the economic success of the District, and the well-being of residents. The way people use town centres has changed radically over the past 10 years with more people shopping on-line, eating out less and then using town centres for broader leisure pastimes rather than utilitarian purposes.
9. Over the last 5 years the alternative route around High Wycombe town centre has been constructed, and the final piece, (through the Gas Works), is due to open in summer 2019. It is therefore time to start making plans to reap the benefits of the reduced traffic that will need to use Abbey Way and the Oxford Road. In addition, further investment is needed in the public realm of the 'old town', building on the successful scheme at Paul's Row. There are a number of projects which could be beneficial, depending on actual costs once detailed designs have been prepared.
10. However, it is important that any improvement projects fit into an overarching vision for the town centre over the long term. This needs to bring together the work that has been undertaken on the masterplan to date, review those elements envisaged but not yet funded, and look at the opportunities over the short, medium and long term. The work of the new post will contribute towards the preparation of this vision – but the vision needs to go beyond projects that have the potential to be funded by CIL. It needs to embrace issues of transport, land use and regeneration, as well as the quality of the public realm.
11. A further report will be brought to Cabinet in due course setting out the scope of the vision work, and the timetable for its preparation.
12. This report is seeking funding to employ a full time officer in Planning and Sustainability's Infrastructure and Projects team, to contribute to the vision for the improvement of the town centre, and to commission designs for a number of projects. This will be funded through CIL. This report is not seeking funding for any project funding at this stage; a further report will be brought back to Cabinet in due course.
13. An additional staff resource is required to over-see the £18.5m programme. Existing staff resources cannot be put onto the programme without significantly altering current priorities.

Sustainable Community Strategy/Council Priorities - Implications

14. This proposal contributes to Place, Prosperity and People strands of the corporate plan.
15. As is set out above, High Wycombe is the principal town in the District. The budget sought in this report will allow for an officer to work up further improvements of the town centre, which will improve its sense of place. This will in turn help to maintain its prosperity, because people will be attracted to continue to come into the town centre for a variety of reasons.

Background and Issues

16. As part of the preparation of the Core Strategy (which was adopted in 2008), a Masterplan was conceived for the town centre. The vision for the town centre, and the policies and plan for delivering it, were set out in the Delivery and Site Allocation Plan (2013). At its heart was the creation of an 'alternative route' around the town, to allow less traffic to use the current route through the town centre via the Abbey Way flyover, creating opportunities for regeneration and environmental improvement.
17. In 2014, the LEP was successful in winning £8.5m for the implementation of the masterplan, with £5.5m local funding principally from CIL taking the total to around £14m. There was also a WDC capital sum of about £1m to pump prime the programme.
18. This funding has been used to design and construct the different phases of the alternative route, including the extension of Westbourne Street to link Oxford Road to Desborough Road, improvements along Desborough Road and Lily's Walk, a new road (under construction) through the former Gas Works, improvements to Queen Alexandra Road, and changing Queen Victoria Road and Easton Street to two way working (under construction).
19. This work has been undertaken in partnership with the County Council, which, as highway authority, has responsibility for the public realm of the town centre.
20. In constructing the alternative route, attention has been paid to the quality of the environment that is created. It is important that the new road does not itself become an unpleasant place, and a new barrier between the town centre and the surrounding residential areas. To this end it has been implemented using a 'low clutter' approach that reduces road signs and white lines to a minimum, and encourages slower traffic speeds, making it a more pleasant environment for the all road users. It has also been designed without traffic signals – with a few exceptions – to allow a better flow of traffic. The alternative route is not a shared space – it still has clear pavements for pedestrians and distinct running lanes for vehicles.
21. Other improvements have also been made in the town centre, guided by a Public Realm Strategy (2012). Paul's Row has been transformed into a café quarter with a widened subway connecting to Buckinghamshire New University; parking has been introduced in Frogmoor; and a new surface crossing has been made across the A40 to the Rye.
22. Not all stages that were envisaged as part of the Masterplan have been able to be implemented with the funding to date. The proposals included improvements to allow the greenspace within the 'magic roundabout' at the gyratory at the bottom of Marlow Hill to be more easily accessed, and used as a 'pocket park'. They also included further improvements to the Oxford Road outside Sainsbury's and M&S, allowing for the possibility of remaking a stretch of the river Wye – this has been the subject of a Task and Finish Group which is reporting its findings to the Improvement and Review Commission in September.
23. There are other projects that are also on the 'long list' of schemes that could be funded from the £18.5m allocation. The east end of the High Street is cluttered and car dominated and White Hart Street's attractiveness could be greatly

enhanced with a better public realm. Frogmoor also remains an area of concern.

24. The Council's CIL Reg 123 list identifies the following projects under High Wycombe Town Centre Masterplan:
 - Construction of Gas Works link road phase of alternative town centre route
 - Treatment of alternative route (Queen Alexandra Road; Desborough Road, Bridge Street, Bellfield Road) to help achieve slow and steady traffic flow
 - Improvements to Swan Forecourt
 - Reconfiguration of highway to provide new link road between Bellfield Road and Archway, and associated highway changes.
 - Reduction of Abbey Way flyover to single carriageway and related environmental improvements of the flyover
 - Eastern town centre traffic management changes
 - Environmental improvements at Archway
 - Re-location of existing uses at Swan Frontage (HWTC10), including High Wycombe Fire Station
 - Highway works to reconfigure Abbey Way Gyratory
25. By listing these projects on the s.123 list, the Council is clarifying that it will not be seeking s.106 contributions from developments for these projects. This is to avoid the potential of 'double counting' CIL and s.106 in relation to the contributions from any individual development.
26. However, this list is not exclusive. The Council can fund matters not on the s.123 list from CIL – so long as s.106 contributions have not already been collected for that purpose, and recognising that by funding a project via CIL, future s.106 contributions cannot be sought.
27. The Reg 123 list was last reviewed in June 2016. It is reviewed on a periodic basis. Any review is subject to public consultation.
28. On-going maintenance of the High Street and the rest of the town centre from a highway perspective is managed through a separate process with the County Council, with CIL funding being provided each year, to 'top up' core maintenance funding and minimise 'patch' repairs. This appears elsewhere on the CIL Reg 123 list so is not included in the list provided above.
29. Transport is clearly going to be a key component of any future proposals for the town centre. WDC and BCC are jointly undertaking a piece of work that will underpin a new transport strategy for the High Wycombe urban area. This will fit in well with the preparation of a vision for the town centre.
30. This work will also inform thinking about the proposals needed to be included in the next Local Plan in relation to the town centre, in the light of current retail trends to on-line shopping.

Consultation

31. The masterplan was developed as part of the Core Strategy and the subsequent Delivery and Site Allocations plan, which were both subject to public consultation.
32. There has been no specific consultation on the proposals in this paper – but all proposals will be subject to consultation before funding is sought from Cabinet for implementation.

Options

33. There are three options.
 - Option 1: release funding as set out in the recommendation and resolution (recommended);
 - Option 2: release a different amount of funding;
 - Option 3: do not release any funding. This option would mean that there were no staff resources available to progress work in relation to the allocation made by Council of £18.5M to further improve High Wycombe Town Centre.

Conclusions

34. The CIL funding sought to be released in this report, from funds already allocated by Council, will allow proposals to continue to improve High Wycombe town centre to be brought forward, building on the improvements that have already been completed or are under way

Next Steps

35. The next step is the recruitment of a member of staff.

Background Papers

36. Budget Papers, Cabinet, June 2018