



Report For:	Cabinet
Date of Meeting:	Cabinet 21 October 2019
Part:	Part 1 - Open

<b>SUMMARY</b>	
<b>Title of Report:</b>	<b>CABINET RESPONSE TO THE RIVER WYE TASK AND FINISH GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS</b>
Cabinet Member: Officer Contact: Direct Dial: Email:	Councillors David Johncock, Steve Broadbent Penelope Tollitt, Peter Wright 01494 4211519 penelope.tollitt@wycombe.gov.uk
Ward affected:	Abbey
Reason for the Decision:	To respond to the recommendations of the Improvement and Review Commission.
<b>Proposed Decision:</b>	That:  (i) the response to the recommendations of the Improvement and Review Commission 28 November 2018 concerning the River Wye is noted; and that in any future plans, strategies, schemes or bids which Buckinghamshire Council may pursue for the town, that they take the report and response into account;  (ii) the work to develop a strategy and action plan for the Future High Streets Fund takes the IRC report and the Cabinet responses into account; and  (iii) the new Buckinghamshire Council is encouraged to adopt a clear strategy and action plan in its first year for the improvement and regeneration of the town centre which includes making a feature of the hidden asset of the River Wye.
Sustainable Community Strategy/Council Priorities – Implications  (risk, equalities, h&s)	Strategy: Creating opportunities to enjoy the River Wye is part of the vision for High Wycombe Town Centre, and in policies, in the adopted Delivery and Site Allocations Plan (July 2013).  A draft Regeneration Strategy is being developed. It is a high level document, and identifies the strategic value of blue (water) and green (spaces) infrastructure and the specific potential value of making a feature of the hidden asset of the River Wye.

	<p>A Transport Strategy for High Wycombe is also in preparation, jointly between Wycombe District Council and Buckinghamshire County Council. This will provide a framework within which future decisions on transport issues in the town centre can be taken.</p> <p>In the Natural Environment Partnership's Biodiversity Action Plan the River Wye is identified as a Biodiversity Opportunity Area as part of the Central Chilterns Chalk Rivers.</p> <p>Risk: This report is responding to the recommendations of the IRC report. There are therefore no risks as such.</p> <p>Equalities: This report is responding to the recommendations of the IRC report. There are therefore no equalities impacts as such</p> <p>Health &amp; Safety: This report is responding to the recommendations of the IRC report. There are therefore no health and safety issues as such</p>
Monitoring Officer/ S.151 Officer Comments	<p><b>Monitoring Officer:</b> The responses do not commit the council to any specific legally binding commitments.</p> <p><b>S.151 Officer:</b> The financial implications have been set out in the report. The responses do not commit the council to any specific items of expenditure.</p>
Consultees:	Some external consultation was carried out as part of the work by the Task and Finish Group which informed the IRC. High Wycombe Town Committee were consulted and supported the proposals. The position of some stakeholders has been clarified since.
Options:	<p>Cabinet has the option to make a different response to each of the IRC recommendations, from those that are included in the report. Overall other options include either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to accept the recommendations in full</li> <li>• to not accept the recommendations in full</li> <li>• to accept or not accept different recommendations to those set out in the report.</li> </ul>
Next Steps:	N/A
Background Papers:	<p>Task and Finish Group notes held in Democratic services</p> <p>Reports by Eunomia Research &amp; Consulting Ltd</p> <p>IRC referral report and appendices to Cabinet 17 December 2018</p>

	Reports by Eunomia Research & Consulting Ltd Pedestrian footfall surveys (Jacobs 2011)
Abbreviations:	IRC Improvement and Review Commission EA Environment Agency

There are no appendices to this report. The appendices referred to are those that accompanied the IRC referral report to Cabinet 17 December 2018.

## Introduction

1. On 28 November 2018 Improvement and Review Commission considered the recommendations of the River Wye Task and Finish Group and made eight recommendations to Cabinet.
2. These were reported Cabinet on 17 December. Cabinet resolved to respond to these recommendations.
3. An information sheet was issued on 1 March 2019 setting out work that was put in hand to inform Cabinet's response to the recommendations. Reference is made to this work in the Cabinet response to the IRC recommendations below.
4. In parallel, the Council has been developing a Regeneration Strategy (to complement the existing district wide Economic Development Strategy).
5. Wycombe District Council and Buckinghamshire County Council are also jointly developing a Transport Strategy for High Wycombe. Engagement on the vision was held over the summer through workshops with stakeholders and local groups, and further engagement on the strategy is planned for later this autumn. The final strategy – following public consultation – is likely to be adopted by the new Buckinghamshire Council.
6. This summer Wycombe District Council learned it had been successful in the second award of Future High Streets Fund. A programme is now in development.

## Response to Improvement and Review Commission Recommendations

7. This section takes each of the IRC recommendations (included in a box for clarity), followed by the Cabinet response.

### **Recommendation 1 - That Cabinet be recommended:**

8. To recognise that the technical feasibility of remaking the river has been established.

### **The reason for this recommendation:**

9. On the basis of all the evidence the TFG has considered since its first meeting in September 2017, it is now known that the river can be opened between Westbourne Street & Archway Roundabout, (see the indicative plan in appendix 1), this takes into account issues relating to hydrology, flooding, underground utilities, levels and other considerations.

## Response - Accepted.

10. The technical work that has been done is recognised and welcomed. At the start it was not clear that remaking the river as a surface river was a practical proposition. The evidence gathered showed that there were no reasons – such as flooding – that meant the project were not practically possible. The word done was to a level of a preliminary design.
11. Further technical work would be necessary if the project were implemented, and would also be required to obtain planning permission, a licence from the EA, and other necessary permissions.

### **Recommendation 2 - That Cabinet be recommended:**

12. To recognise the extent of support for remaking the river.

#### **The reason for this recommendation:**

13. The economic assessment found that 8/9 stakeholders interviewed were very positive about the idea of remaking the river. Buckinghamshire County Council's Head of Highway Infrastructure Projects has voiced support to bringing the river back at the same time as carrying out highway works. The High Wycombe Society have shown their support. Other public and press support is also evident (see appendix 2\*).

## Response - Accepted

14. The work to inform the IRC recommendations was necessarily targeted towards a small number of stakeholders; it would be necessary to undertake wider public consultation before proceeding with any scheme.
15. Concerns were expressed that the positive impact on Eden were at risk of being exaggerated as the river is outside of the shopping centre, hence the economic argument needs to be based on the positive impact it might have for the rest of the town. There is also concern, about the disruption that could occur from road works if this were to make it more difficult for shoppers to get into/out of Eden.
16. Since IRC concluded its recommendations, the EA has confirmed its position in relation to this issue, valuing the Councils sustained role in improving the River Wye and offering 'strong' support to this scheme in recognition of the benefits to the river environment and which 'if landscaped appropriately ...would serve to partly naturalise the town centre into a living, greener, healthier and more vibrant space. (Information Sheet item 5)
17. It is understood that the Chairman of the Task and Finish Group has received a number of unsolicited emails from residents supporting the scheme. Cabinet Members have also received a number of similar e-mails from individuals supporting the reopening of the river.

Whilst not all voices are in favour of the proposal, Cabinet recognises there is support for remaking the river.

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\* This refers to the Appendices to the report from IRC to Cabinet in December 2018.

**Recommendation 3 - That Cabinet be recommended:**

18. To recognise that the wider economic, social and environmental benefits justify the remaking of the river.

**The reason for this recommendation:**

19. From research undertaken into benefits and experience in other case study towns where watercourses have been remade, the effects are transformative and this could be replicated in High Wycombe. The remaking of the river work would bring substantial benefits to the town, improving its environmental, health & wellbeing, air quality, social and economic outlook, thus enhancing the sense of place and transforming it to a more desirable destination (see appendix 3\*).

**Response – Partially Accepted**

20. Cabinet recognises that the proposal would bring some social benefits and considerable environmental benefits, as well as some economic benefits, but not that these justify the remaking of the river at this stage.
21. It is recognised that other places have benefited from remaking watercourses. Some of these were focused on the watercourse, some had wider regeneration opportunities.
22. The social and environmental benefits of the IRC's work are accepted. The indicative scheme would re-introduce an important natural asset that would be more attractive than the current traffic and highways dominated environment along Oxford Road, enabling opportunities to enjoy the river and its wildlife, bringing quality of life benefits.
23. It may be possible in principle to achieve some of these benefits with a lower cost scheme (without the river) that delivered the highway elements (ie reduced highway width and reduced traffic) and which included grass verges and tree planting.
24. A key question in assessing the social benefits is knowing how many people walk along Oxford Road at present (Information Sheet Item 2). Footfall data from 2011 counts the number of people passing certain points. The data shows (annual flows):
- 450,000 – 500,000 people cross the Oxford Road each way at the pedestrian crossing to the west of the Oxford Road roundabout
  - 400,000 are walking into town when they cross Archway at the pedestrian crossing to the north of the Oxford Road roundabout, and about 600,000 cross the other way
  - 300,000 – 350,000 people walk in each direction up and down the Oxford round between the roundabout and the bus station
  - 100,000 – 150,000 people cross the Oxford Road each way near the bus station.
- Aggregating the data is not straight forward, because it is highly likely that the same people have been counted a number of times as they make their journey. However, making some conservative assumptions, some aggregations are helpful to show the order of magnitude of the pedestrian use in the area
- Counts of people crossing the Oxford Road were made by the bus station, mid-way along the street, and at the Oxford Road roundabout. People are unlikely to cross the street in all three locations. The total of these crossing movements is 1.8

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\* This refers to the Appendices to the report from IRC to Cabinet in December 2018.

million. Some of these people will be crossing, and then crossing back – but it suggests in the order of 1million people cross the road each year.

- Counts of people walking along the street are at much greater risk of being ‘double counted’. 500,000 people are recorded as walking in both directions on Oxford Road where the new junction with Westbourne Street has been created. A similar number are walking along the street at the Bellfield junction, and 1 million people are recorded as crossing Archway at the other end of the street. Some of these will be the same people, but it suggests that 1 – 1.5million people walk along the street over the course of a year.
25. In terms of the economic benefits, these are not fully proven on this particular scheme, and consideration also needs to be given to any opportunity costs – funding is limited, and the Council would need to consider whether other, wider, benefits might be gained by investing the funds in other town centre projects.
  26. The IRC work was necessarily constrained, and the economic benefits were therefore assessed ‘in their own terms’. A review of the baseline data on estimate property vacancies and the financial benefits (Information Sheet items 3 and 4) to the Council shows that any such work is heavily dependent on the assumptions made.
  27. The emerging Regeneration Strategy identifies how there is a need to have a broader strategy for the town, recommending that:

“A people-centric approach will be taken to transform the public realm into thriving spaces of exceptional standard. The rerouting or gradual removal of traffic from selected streets and making a feature of hidden assets such as the River Wye as part of wider regeneration work, greening spaces and positively encouraging cultural activities out of buildings into newly activated streets will deliver a safer, more cohesive and social town centre,” (page 14).
  28. The Council has also been successful in getting funding in the second round of the Future High Streets Fund, and that will also provide a wider context to promote the economy of the town with a dynamic and changing town centre.
  29. In considering any future proposals as part of a wider strategy, the ‘halo’ effect will be an important consideration – where a more attractive environment in one part of the town centre positively affects perceptions and attitudes – which are hard to quantify or predict – but which lead to indirect and wider spin off benefits as a result of enhanced status, reputation, and footfall, which have an economic benefit. There is no agreed ‘standard methodology’ to assess these impacts, and there are risks that if too rigid approach is taken – which arguably was the case here – insufficient weight may be given to benefits simply because they are hard to quantify. It is notable that other nearby towns with town centre waterways, including Maidenhead, Aylesbury and Hemel Hempstead, have taken the opportunity to make more of these,
  30. It must be recognised that the Eden centre, and other town centre businesses, would not welcome traffic disruption that would occur during construction as it would deter visitors at a time when the challenges to town centres are obvious. Opening the alternative route to traffic by the end of October may provide an opportunity to mitigate the traffic impacts during construction. Clearly the impacts, the timing and the practical aspects of any such works need to be carefully considered, and minimised, or avoided if possible.
  31. The particular scheme proposed by IRC includes changes to the Oxford Road Roundabout. The impacts on traffic in and out of Eden would be substantially reduced if this part of the scheme were omitted. (Information Sheet item 6).

**Recommendation 4 - That Cabinet be recommended:**

32. To recognise that the financial returns which will accrue directly to Wycombe District Council resulting as a direct consequence of remaking the river will exceed the costs in most scenarios.

**The reason for this recommendation:**

33. Wycombe District Council has employed consultants to undertake an Economic Assessment of remaking the river. This focussed particular attention on the financial impact on the Council. The assessment has shown that the remaking of the river will impact rents, rates and redevelopment values all of which will improve income for the council. High, central and low impact scenarios were modelled for 30 and 60 year time frames, only the low impact scenario over 30 years, resulted in the remade river returning less than its full cost to the council (see appendix 4).

**Response – Partially Accepted**

34. The consultants demonstrated that there are opportunities for direct financial returns to the Council, but that it would be many years, even in the most optimistic scenarios, before the costs of the project would be recouped. Taking this approach may be appropriate for capital investment, but it is arguable whether this is the correct approach to CIL funded projects, given that the money is raised for infrastructure purposes, that do not typically have a direct financial return. See also the response to recommendation 3 above. Any future scheme needs to be considered in a wider regeneration and financial context.

**Recommendation 5 - That Cabinet be recommended:**

35. To agree that highway works within Phase 7 (Oxford Road) should not be progressed if they prejudice remaking up the river and that it would be most cost effective and publicly acceptable to undertake both the road and the river together.

**The reason for this recommendation:**

36. Given that highway and river works within Phase 7 (Oxford Road) are so closely related, a phased delivery approach would not only substantially increase the costs and disruption but also be seen unfavourably by the public when compared to undertaking the works together in a coordinated fashion.

**Response – Partially Accepted**

37. On the basis of the scheme drawn up by IRC, it is accepted that it would be counter-productive to carry out works that prejudice remaking the river between Westbourne St and the Oxford Road roundabout.
38. However, to say that no improvements could be made without the River is not accepted. There may be other improvements to Oxford Road which would be more cost effective in the short term, without causing the potential negative impacts identified by IRC.

**Recommendation 6 - That Cabinet be recommended:**

39. That it has been established that the remaking of the river between Westbourne Street & Archway Roundabout will cost approximately £3 million more than highway works alone.

**The reason for this recommendation:**

40. The preliminary design work for Phase 7 (Oxford Road) has been costed with the benefit of a detailed understanding of the river culverts, underground utilities, levels, and other survey information, as well as expert engineering knowledge and experience gained from delivery of the rest of the Town Centre Master Plan

**Response – partially accepted**

41. The cost figures have been reviewed (Information Sheet item 1). The review indicated that the figures presented to IRC included a cost of river diversion works together with an allowance for costs and fees estimated at £3.5m. However this cost does not fully account for project management costs risk and optimism bias. It should be noted that the level of risk and optimism bias was at a higher level than the rest of the Masterplan, which has been delivered on budget. However, because of the inclusion of the River – which is a more unusual and therefore higher risk project – higher levels of risk and optimism bias may be prudent. Additionally the costs from the work of the TFG are now almost 2 years old.
42. Further work on estimating the costs of the outstanding stages of the masterplan has been carried out over the summer. This has not separated out the costs of the river from the wider public realm improvements, but the costs for the whole scheme are likely to be higher .
43. The costs prepared in the work undertaken by the TFG are accepted as being a fair assessment, with the level of information available at the time, of the likely magnitude of construction costs, fees and utility diversion stats, however they underestimate the full costs that would be incurred. Firmer and more reliable cost estimates could only be prepared with a more detailed design, which would enable greater cost certainty and thus provide a more reliable figure but, as with any large scale project at this stage, this would require significant revenue investment. This more detailed work has not been undertaken or commissioned.

**Recommendation 7 - That Cabinet be recommended:**

44. To recommend funding the works from its CIL & capital programme.

**The reason for this recommendation:**

45. A wide range of external opportunities have been investigated but due to their scale and focus they are unsuitable for anything other than minor augmentation of Council funding sources (see appendix 5).

**Response – Partially Accepted**

46. The Regeneration Strategy, Transport Strategy and Future High Streets Fund, are setting a broader context to consider improvements to the town centre. In addition, the opening of Suffield Hill through the former gas works, which will complete the alternative route, will allow for the assessment of opportunities with potentially less traffic making use of Abbey Way Flyover and the Oxford Road.



47. A broader programme is required, rather than committing to fund one specific project at this time.
48. Cabinet also accepts that it is unlikely that there would be any external funding sources that would bring any substantial funds to remaking the river, and that this would be a legitimate project for the receipt of CIL funding.
49. Any future funding decision will fall to the new Buckinghamshire Council. Not all parts of the new Council area will have access to CIL, and the correct approach to funding improvements to the different town centres will need to be equitable across the whole of the Council area.

**Recommendation 8 - That Cabinet be recommended:**

50. That funding be made available to commission the detailed design, costing and consultation of public realm work including the river for the phase 7 area.

**The reason for this recommendation:**

51. Detailed design and technical work is required before phase 7 (Oxford Road) and the river can be brought forward. Funds that have been allocated in the 2018-19 capital program for High Wycombe town Centre public realm enhancements should be made available to support this, subject to the development and approval of suitable project documentation.

**Response – Not accepted**

52. As has been stated above, the specific proposals need to be considered in the round with other opportunities in the town centre. It would be premature to commit to the detailed design of a specific project until the broader strategy has been prepared.