

1. RYE FEASIBILITY STUDY

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Wards affected: Abbey and Ryemead

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATION

To note the conclusion of feasibility work funded by High Wycombe Town Committee and consider whether any additional work is required.

Reason for Decision

The Town Committee funded feasibility work into the provision of a second set of public toilets at the Rye to serve users of the two play areas. The operation of the toilets needed to be cross-financed by an income generating service.

Corporate Implications

This report contains no recommendations that would lead to further expenditure. However the Committee's discussion may generate additional work that may require funding.

Executive Summary

The Town Committee funded a feasibility study to explore options to develop self-financing public toilets on the Rye, which is a General Fund asset. One option appears to be financially sustainable – a leased visitor centre with a café and toilets on the London Road edge. However this may prove difficult to implement and there are a range of alternative improvements to the Rye that can be made instead that may be more welcomed by the Park's many visitors.

Sustainable Community Strategy / Council Priorities - Implications

The work supports the People and Place priorities in the Corporate Plan as it looks to improve one of the town's most attractive assets and provide a better visitor experience for residents and visitors.

Background and Issues

A petition three years ago campaigned for public toilets at the town end of the Rye between the two play areas on the grounds that it was too far for small children to go to the existing toilets by the car park. The car park is an eminently sensible location for the toilets, being central to the Rye, the main point of arrival for many visitors and close to the sporting facilities. Most parks do not have toilets. Across the District WDC only provides toilets at the Rye, Higginson Park and Kingsmead (a historical anomaly).

The Town Committee funded feasibility work up to a cost of £25,000. Following

procurement Atomik Architecture Ltd. were appointed as consultants to carry out a feasibility study. They have developed and costed a range of options and the points below summarise the findings.

- Toilets are only financially sustainable as part of a café/visitor offer (otherwise they will require additional annual revenue funding of £2,300k per toilet)
- To provide public toilets the café/visitor facility must be open all year round
- To be sustainable on a daily basis throughout the year the café offer needs to be prominent and run by a commercial operator
- Only the London Road front of the Rye provides this prominence
- There is an option to develop within the Pann Mill boundary, but this would require agreement with the High Wycombe Society as this area is leased separately
- A further option would be to locate the café and toilets on the Rye side behind Pann Mill, but this is in the flood zone and would be less prominent and reduce potential income from passing trade
- The boathouse does not have a sewage connection and is in a poor location that would not allow it to become financially sustainable all year round. It also has very limited opening times.

Planning Comments

Early input from Planning indicates that the front edge of London Road will be a difficult location to site any development. This frontage of the Rye has never been developed. Development on the south side of the London Road 'stopped' at the location where City Garage now is, and 'began again' at Pann Mill – with Pann Mill, in effect, marking the start of the centre of High Wycombe. The mill itself was of course demolished, in part to allow for road widening, but the historic role of the site remains. Introducing a building – albeit a small one – 'in front' of Pann Mill, would undermine this historic relationship.

Findings

The consultation results showed that, people liked the facilities that were in situ, and wanted modest improvements but no substantial changes. The dilapidated condition of the boathouse was commented on. An excerpt from the Feasibility Report is attached at Appendix A.

Options

In terms of resources £400k of s106 monies have been allocated for improvements

at the Rye. This allocation can fund a significant number of modest improvements or one major one.

The only 'major' improvement option in the form of a new café with toilets, that could generate income sufficient to operate on a sustainable commercial basis is the prominently located, visitor centre on the London Road side.

The available funding could, for example, support the delivery of:

- A modular visitor centre with toilets and a coffee shop on the London Road side of the Rye.

Or some or all of the following

- Cost effective replacement of the boathouse with two conjoined containers, with a sewage connection for staff toilets (a legal requirement if the structure is replaced)
- New table tennis tables for outdoors use
- Outdoor gym equipment in clusters towards the rear of the Dyke
- Surfaced footpath from Bassetsbury Lane to join the existing footpath network
- Widening of London Road side footpath to accommodate cycles as well.
- Replacement of any felled trees
- Improved signage/wayfinding

Note also that Pann Mill Trust/High Wycombe Society are interested in developing a small visitor facility and staff only toilet at Pann Mill (likely to be open on a limited basis).

Conclusions

The feasibility study indicates that the only financially sustainable location for public toilets, integrated as part of an income generating visitor centre, is the London Road edge close to the pedestrian crossing by Pann Mill. However, in planning policy terms, this would be a complex location in which to develop such a facility. If this option cannot easily be delivered it may be better for the available funding to be allocated to a range of improvement projects from the list above.

Next Steps

These are dependent on the Committee's discussion. The Committee may commission additional work or accept the study's findings.

Background Papers - Rye Feasibility Study – files held in Community Services