

## **NORTH WALSHAM MARKET PLACE IMPROVEMENT SCHEME**

**Summary:** The North Walsham High Street Heritage Action Zone (NWHSHAZ) includes measures to enhance the public realm and improve accessibility within North Walsham town centre. This scheme was based on concepts developed in 2018/19 and budget estimates submitted for funding to two separate external funds in 2020. This report seeks additional finance to complete the implementation of the scheme to the standard anticipated.

The scheme is part of a programme of measures that will make very significant improvements to the attractiveness and accessibility of North Walsham town centre and its historic assets, thereby improving town centre vitality and the viability of local businesses. Phase one, the creation of a new amenity garden at the gateway to St Nicholas's Church, is virtually complete and the Market Place/King's Arms St. improvement works are continuing apace, with the programme projecting completion in March 2023. In addition, a new bus interchange has been developed at New Road, which enabled through traffic in the Market Place to be reduced and for congestion and pollution caused by idling busses to be resolved.

The fixed budget for the project (with substantial external funding), in the face of inflationary pressures since the scheme was conceived in 2020, has meant that the scheme has had to be tailored to fit. Further funding is therefore required in order to complete the improvements to the satisfaction of the Council and local stakeholders – in effect achieving more than the current budget allows.

### **Options considered:**

Alternative options would be:

- to complete a reduced scheme within the existing budget – this would not capitalise fully on the opportunity that exists to transform the town centre;
- to implement the project within the existing budget and to bid for further external funds (at a later date) to implement additional works - as above but also, the likely delay and uncertainty would inevitably incur additional costs of remobilising and further inflation.

**Conclusions:** The jointly funded (Government and Local Authority) place-making scheme will be enormously beneficial and the opportunity exists to capitalise on the effort but that will require additional budget. Due to cost

increases, the scope of the scheme has been amended but with additional budget, greater outcomes can be achieved. It is therefore proposed that additional financial resources are made available from the Business Rates Retention Reserve (which currently holds circa £600,000 within the overall balance. This was the share of the distributed surplus from the pooling arrangement in 2019/20 and which was agreed should be set aside for regeneration projects such as this) in order to complete the proposed Market Place scheme and to undertake improvements to ancillary areas.

**Recommendations:** **To recommend to Full Council that £400,000 be allocated from the Business Rates Retention Reserve for the completion of the NWHSHAZ place-making scheme.**

**Reasons for Recommendations:** This recommendation is made in order to deliver the additional town centre improvements as part of the HSHAZ place-making scheme.

**LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS AS REQUIRED BY LAW**

*(Papers relied on to write the report, which do not contain exempt information and which are not published elsewhere)*

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**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 A central element of the North Walsham High Street Heritage Action Zone (NWHSHAZ) is the ‘place-making’ scheme. This includes improvements to key areas of public realm and to the accessibility and circulation within the town centre.
- 1.2 Council, at its meeting in September 2020, gave the go-ahead for the scheme to proceed following confirmation of the funding package. Cabinet, at its meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2021, delegated “the determination of the final place making designs to the Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Growth.”
- 1.3 The programme of interventions under the HSHAZ has followed the Council’s project management and governance procedures and has most recently been overseen by the Council’s HSHAZ Board, with periodic reports to the Cabinet Major Projects Working Party.

- 1.4 The second phase of the place-making scheme involves the improvement to the appearance, accessibility and amenity of the Market Place area of North Walsham. The Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) for the scheme was approved on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2022 and consequently the works commenced in September 2022. The improvements to the Market Place are expected to take 23 weeks to complete. Council officers have been working with the appointed design and funding advisors, together with Norfolk County Council and the contractor, to ensure that the scheme can be implemented in a way that makes most effective use of the available funding, optimises the achievement of the HSHAZ objectives and minimises temporary disturbance and short-term adverse impact on town centre interests, including businesses, customers, market traders and other town centre users.
- 1.5 This report sets out the scope of the place making scheme, and identifies the budgetary challenges it faces, identifying the additional funds sought in order for the scheme to achieve its potential and meet the North Walsham High Street Heritage Action Zone Objectives.

## **2. The scope and impacts of the scheme**

- 2.1 The scheme is part of a programme of measures that will make very significant improvements to the attractiveness and accessibility of North Walsham town centre and its historic assets, thereby improving town centre vitality and the viability of local businesses. This includes significant townscape improvements within the Market Place and traffic management changes, aimed at alleviating the impacts on pedestrians and businesses of through-traffic, which included buses and heavy goods vehicles passing through the main shopping street. The aim is also to create spaces where customers and visitors can dwell in the town centre and where markets and events can take place year-round.

### **Church Approach**

- 2.2 The first phase of the town centre public realm improvement programme (place-making), was the creation of an attractive landscaped amenity area at the eastern end of Market Street (Church Approach) enhancing the setting of St Nicholas Church with public seating and spaces used by neighbouring businesses. This phase is expected to be completed shortly, once the improvements to the wall to the building flanking the space to the north are finished and the remaining 'snagging' issues have been rectified. This element of the scheme commenced early on in order to meet the requirements of external funding constraints and to demonstrate the opportunities that the HSHAZ scheme will bring to the town. This element has been fully funded, although some of the costs are shared with the second phase of the place-making scheme (for example set up costs and the site compound etc.). The scheme did take longer than initially anticipated due to delays encountered in the implementation of the works (namely, ground conditions, underground services and availability of materials). As a result, the cost of phase one was higher than anticipated due to the programme extending and the rapidly rising costs of construction.

### **Transport Hub**

- 2.3 A complementary (but separately funded) part of the programme was the establishment of a transport hub on the site of New Road Car Park, where the creation of three new bus bays and ancillary facilities (seating, shelters etc.) has enabled the removal of buses from the main Market Place and from

nearby roads, where congestion and pollution detracted from the environmental quality and safety of town centre streets. This has improved accessibility to the town centre by public transport and has improved passenger comfort. In doing so, it has enabled a redesign of the Market Place to materialise. This scheme was jointly funded by Norfolk County Council, North Norfolk District Council (through land, lost income and staff resources) and North Walsham Town Council (contributing to the bus shelters). It was not funded from the HSHAZ budget, although there were economies of scale achieved through its delivery alongside the place making works. The site has been fully operational for some three months.

### **Market Place**

- 2.4 The most significant part of the scheme is the redesign of Market Place. This will make it a more accessible and attractive area for shoppers and visitors to enjoy by the widening of pavements, the removal of through traffic, the introduction of landscape and amenity features, and infrastructure to better facilitate markets and events. This phase commenced in early September and good progress is being made, with the scheme generally proceeding in accordance with the programme and due for completion in March 2023. This phase of the scheme has been 'de-scoped' to fit within the available budget, however, an additional budget is necessary in order to ensure the scheme is able to incorporate the overall streetscape, amenities, street furniture etc. that were originally intended.

### **The Lokes**

- 2.5 The enhancement of the routes into the Market Place from the town centre car park at Bank Loke is a highly desirable supplementary element of the place making project. Currently, this car park is connected to the main commercial centre via two paths (Bank Loke and Black Swan Loke), which, for many people arriving by car will be the gateway to the town, but neither are attractive or well-lit at night. Bank Loke Car Park accommodates ten of the one-hour free parking spaces that replace those removed from Market Place and it is within minutes by foot from the centre. Proposals to improve the Lokes are outlined as follows.

#### *Black Swan Loke*

- 2.6 Early on in the HSHAZ scheme's gestation, the Council acquired an area of unused and derelict land (considered an unsightly 'gap site') adjacent to the Black Swan pub and to the rear of the grade II\* Listed no. 7 Market Place. The funding for this came from the HSHAZ budget, supplemented by a further grant from Historic England (approximately fifty percent of the purchase price). This site will enable a direct link to be made between the car park and Black Swan Loke, and Planning Permission has been obtained to facilitate this through the partial demolition of the boundary wall and the creation of a ramped access. The balance of the site is proposed to be transformed into a town centre amenity space or community garden. The owners of No 7. Market Street have cooperated with the Council in improving its rear façade by relocating unsightly paraphernalia and painting the rear wall, leaving a south facing and potentially attractive walled site. The design work has been undertaken, and a revised method of implementation has been agreed for this project, however there is insufficient budget for its implementation. Further funds would enable the access between Bank Loke car park and Black Swan Loke to be created, and improvements to the overall amenity and appearance of the site to be made; additional funds will be sought, perhaps in

collaboration with local organisations, to establish a community/wellbeing garden within the site, if that is the chosen option.

#### *Bank Loke*

- 2.7 Bank Loke is the principal route joining Bank Loke Car Park with Market Place. The Council has been working with the owners of properties that adjoin the route to remove clutter (bins, parking etc.) and improve accessibility. It would however be desirable for the streetscape and lighting to be improved and a draft scheme had been designed to achieve this. In the light of budgetary constraints, it has been suggested that these works be further revised and it is anticipated that, in addition to the 'de-cluttering,' significant improvements to the appearance and accessibility of the Loke could be achieved with lighting and signage.

### **3 Budget**

- 3.2 The original bid for funding to deliver the HSHAZ programme was submitted to Historic England in 2019 and the final approval was announced in June 2020. Subsequently, additional Government funds were successfully gained in late 2020 to develop and deliver the place making scheme.
- 3.3 The North Walsham High Street Heritage Action Zone place making total budget is set at £2,224,008. This includes a grant given at the tail end of the last financial year, when Historic England offered additional funds (from underspends from other HSHAZ schemes) over and above the original grant, but the available window for spending it was extremely short – a matter of weeks. The only realistic way of spending this additional money was by purchasing materials up-front for the impending Market Place works, not only enabling the Council to secure the funds but also to avoid further materials cost increases which were expected. The Council was consequently awarded an additional grant of £257,920.44, which helped to further subsidise the scheme and to avoid inevitable inflation cost increases.
- 3.4 The breakdown of the place-making budget is currently as follows.  
Historic England: £669,008  
Getting Building Fund: £1,170,000  
NNDC: £385,000
- 3.5 As the budget for the scheme was fixed prior to the detailed design work being undertaken and before the work was tendered, the scheme has had to be tailored to fit within the budget. The additional plot of land at Black Swan Loke (not included in the original bid) was acquired with funds allocated to the place making scheme after the programme had been developed, which increased the scope of the scheme and further reduced the available funding. There was a need to spend a significant proportion of the funding by the end of the last financial year, and so phase one of the work (Church Approach) commenced before the cost of the main scheme (Market Place) or the ancillary works (the Lokes) was known.
- 3.6 Due to the inflation experienced in the construction industry, the cost of the place-making scheme is significantly above what had originally been anticipated. Now that the target cost for the Market Place is known and the cost of the works on the Lokes can be reasonably estimated, it is possible to accurately anticipate the total cost of the scheme. As stated above, there are currently insufficient funds to implement the level of improvements at Market

Place that were originally planned, and no budget is in place to fund the anticipated improvements to the Lokes.

- 3.7 An additional budget of £400,000 is needed to complete the place-making scheme satisfactorily. It is recommended that this sum be taken from the Business Rates Retention Reserve, which currently holds circa £600,000 within the overall balance. This was the share of the distributed surplus from the pooling arrangement in 2019/20 and which was agreed should be set aside for regeneration projects such as this place-making scheme.

#### **4 Programme**

- 4.2 The implementation of the place making work is being managed on behalf of the Council by Norfolk County Council's Highway Design team and undertaken by Tarmac under the County's framework contract. The work is programmed to be completed by the end of March - the date by which the external funds have to be defrayed - and it is hoped that any additional work to the lokes can be incorporated within that programme timeframe. Progress on the implementation of the scheme will be reported to the HSHAZ Board and periodic updates will continue to be provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

#### **5 Corporate Plan Objectives**

- 5.2 The matters addressed in this report relate to the following Corporate Plan objectives and delivery themes:

**Boosting business sustainability and growth:** "facilitating the transition of our town centres to be places which are attractive and accessible for living, working and for leisure"

**Quality of life:** "delivery of the North Walsham Heritage Action Zone programme"

**Financial sustainability and growth:** "investing in environmental and economic initiatives which deliver positive outcomes and a financial return for the authority."

#### **6 Medium Term Financial Strategy**

There are not considered to be any material impacts upon the MTFS as a result of the recommendations in this report as the recommended capital sum would come from the Business Rates Retention Reserve. This would leave circa £200,000 funding available for other regeneration schemes in the future.

#### **7 Financial and Resource Implications**

Additional funds of £400,000 are recommended to be allocated from the Business Rates Retention Reserve in order to meet the costs outlined in this report. After this there would still be £200,000 available to fund other such schemes.

#### **8 Legal Implications**

There are no legal implications thought to arise from matters outlined in this report or recommended course of action.

#### **9 Risks**

As with all construction projects at this point in time, inflation has been a major risk factor. The additional budget recommended in this report is considered to be an accurate reflection of the anticipated costs based on the advice of the appointed external consultant quantity surveyor, following his review of the contractor's progress and the contract sums.

**10 Sustainability**

There are not considered to be any impacts upon sustainability as a result of the recommendations in this report.

**11 Climate / Carbon impact**

The matters referred to in this report relate to reinforcing the vitality and viability of North Walsham town centre. If the town remains as a thriving service centre, it should reduce the number and length of car journeys made by residents of the town and its catchment. The impact on carbon emissions cannot realistically be calculated but it is hoped that the proposals will help to facilitate no net increase.

**12 Equality and Diversity**

There are not considered to be any impacts upon equality and diversity as a result of the recommendations in this report.

**13 Section 17 Crime and Disorder considerations**

There are not considered to be any impacts upon crime and disorder as a result of the recommendations in this report.

**14 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The jointly funded (Government and Local Authority) place-making scheme will be enormously beneficial and the opportunity exists to capitalise on the effort but that will require additional budget. Due to cost increases, the scope of the scheme has been amended but with additional budget, greater outcomes can be achieved. It is therefore proposed that additional financial resources (£400,000) are made available from the Business Rates Retention Reserve (which was intended for investment in regeneration activities such as this) in order to deliver the additional town centre improvements as part of the HSHAZ place making scheme.