

NORTH WALSHAM TOWN CENTRE PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS

Summary: The Council has been successful in its bid for funding from the Getting Building Fund to support a programme of townscape improvements for North Walsham Town Centre. This will augment the proposals made under the North Walsham Town Centre Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) programme, for which the Council has been successful in winning a grant from Historic England.

This funding provides a significant amount of match funding that will allow a critical element of the project to proceed – North Walsham town centre public realm improvements – with greater haste and more certainty than would otherwise have been the case. This will allow for work to progress on engaging stakeholders and designing a suitable scheme to remodel public spaces within North Walsham town centre. This will be referred to as town centre ‘place-making.’

This should clearly set in sufficient detail all feasible alternatives. This will go in the minutes.

Options considered:

The HAZ programme requires significant levels of match funding in order to achieve its objectives. The funding approved previously by the Council would not have been sufficient to deliver all of the improvements that are hoped to be made to the townscape. This funding will allow that specific project element to proceed, and indeed bring it forward in the overall HAZ programme. There is currently no identified alternative source of funding to deliver this element of the scheme and realistically the only other option is to review the programme in the hope of gaining sufficient funding from elsewhere to deliver it at a later date. This is not considered a sensible option as it would increase the uncertainty over the delivery of this scheme which, given the current economic circumstances, is considered to be optimal timing. The only other alternative is to not deliver this part of the HAZ programme, which itself might jeopardise the whole initiative.

Conclusions:

The proposals contained in this report aim to capitalise on external funding opportunities to deliver a key aspect of the revitalisation of North Walsham town centre.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

- 1. Cabinet Recommend to Full Council that the success of bid by this Council be noted and that the sum of £1,170,000 (from a grant received**

from the Getting Building Fund) be allocated in the budget towards the town centre place-making elements of North Walsham High Street Heritage Action Zone.

2. Authority be delegated to Cabinet, in consultation with the North Walsham Town Centre Heritage Action Zone Working Party, to determine the terms of the implementation of the scheme, including the involvement of interested parties, scheme design and implementation.

Reasons for Recommendations: To capitalise on the external funding opportunity in order to deliver improvements to North Walsham town centre in a timely fashion.

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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Cabinet Member(s) Cllr Richard Kershaw	Ward(s) affected North Walsham Market Cross Ward
Contact Officer, telephone number and email: Robert Young; 01263 516162; robert.young@north-norfolk.gov.uk	

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Getting Building Fund was established as part of the Government's response to the economic impacts of Covid-19. It aims (inter alia) to deliver infrastructure in areas facing the biggest economic challenges as a result of the pandemic. It is supporting projects agreed with Local Enterprise Partnerships to boost economic growth and fuel local recovery and jobs. The Council has secured a grant of £1,170,000, via New Anglia LEP. The stated aims of the project are to make the town centre more accessible and to increase its attractiveness to a range of commercial and service uses, reinforced by a marketing campaign.
- 1.2 The High Streets Heritage Action Zones (HSHAZ) programme is a place-based scheme designed to secure lasting improvements to our historic high streets and the communities who use them. The Council's bid for £975,000 was formally approved on 27th March this year (although news of the award was subject to an embargo). The Council had previously approved a budget of £975,000 of match-funding to support the broad delivery of the programme. The fund is administered by Historic England and the North Walsham programme will be managed by the Council in collaboration with key stakeholders and through close involvement with the local community in North Walsham.
- 1.3 The Programme has as its goal, making the high street (by which for North Walsham is meant Market place and the surrounding town centre commercial

areas, including the various lokes, passages pavements and routes to/from the car parks) a more attractive, engaging and vibrant place. HSHAZs set out to achieve this through physical works to buildings, including repair and conversion to new uses, and strong community engagement, HSHAZs also seek to improve shared spaces, creating cultural opportunities through learning about the history of the high street and its importance to local communities.

2. Background

- 2.1 At its meeting on 7th October 2019 Cabinet received a report outlining the purposes on the North Walsham HSHAZ bid. Cabinet welcomed and supported the opportunity that this programme provides to regenerate North Walsham town centre and recommended that the Council match fund the programme delivery. Subsequently Full Council at its meeting on 20th November 2019 resolved that that up to £975,000 be allocated from capital receipts to match fund the programme delivery.
- 2.2 Cabinet resolved to delegate the formulation of the detailed programme to the Head of Economic & Community Development in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Economic& Career Development and the Portfolio Holder for Culture & Wellbeing, following a process that includes Historic England and local stakeholders. It also resolved to establish a Cabinet Working Party to support the project development and delivery. Subsequently the programme for the successful application was developed and the Working Party has met regularly to advise on the development and delivery of the programme. A project manager (Jenni Jordan) has been appointed to the Economic Growth team.

3. Proposals

- 3.1 The town centre place-making scheme will comprise physical improvements to the public realm within North Walsham town centre with the aim of making it a more attractive and accessible place for customers of town centre businesses, thus improving the economic prospects for businesses offering goods and services within the town. Norfolk County Council undertook a 'place-making study', which it published in December 2018. It was on the basis of tentative options within that study that the appropriate elements of the HAZ bid were developed. On the basis of cost estimates, the Getting Building fund proposals were developed.
- 3.2 The starting point for any re-design of the Market Place and surrounding areas will be engaging town centre businesses, shoppers, specific user groups and other interested parties in order to establish the objectives from their various perspectives. With those outcomes in mind a series of potential options would be developed, modelled and tested in order to understand their likely impact and acceptability. Draft designs would likely then be formulated for further consultation. This process is intended to produce an appropriate design as a result of dialogue with those whom the scheme will ultimately benefit (or affect). It should be noted that this element should not be viewed in isolation but as part of an integrated and holistic package of improvements to North Walsham town centre under the HAZ programme.
- 3.3 If the proposal set out in this report is supported then the North Walsham town centre place-making proposals, comprising the Market place and the other linked access and circulation points within the town centre, will have budget made up as follows. It is hoped that additional funding and in-kind

support will be forthcoming from Norfolk County Council in support of their market towns network improvement strategy or related initiatives:

- Historic England: £335,000 (part of the NWHSZAZ programme funding)
- North Norfolk District Council: £385,000 (part of the NWHSZAZ programme match funding)
- New Anglia LEP (MHCLG): £1,170,000 (Getting Building Fund)
- Total: £1,890,000

- 3.4 The Getting Building Fund must be spent by March 2022. This presents a challenging timescale but one that is achievable as a result of the development work that has already gone into the HSHAZ programme. Officers are reviewing the programme and the HAZ funding profile in order to bring forward the place-making project and ensure its timely implementation.

4. Corporate Plan Objectives

- 4.1 This proposal supports the 'Boosting Business Growth' objective of "facilitating the transition of our town centres to be places which are attractive and accessible for living, working and for leisure."
- 4.2 The approach advocated would also support the Corporate Plan priorities of 'Financial Sustainability and Growth' and 'Quality of Life.'

5. Medium Term Financial Strategy

- 5.1 If the funding outlined in this report is approved, it should be added to the overall NWHSZAZ project fund outlined in the MTFS.

6. Financial and Resource Implications

- 6.1 The funding that this proposal brings, together with that from other sources, is believed to be sufficient to deliver the scheme; however the works will need to be tendered. The scheme will be managed by staff in the Economic Growth team but specific design and project management resources will be need to be provided by consultants.

7. Legal implications

- 7.1 The matters addressed in this report have no specific legal implications.

8. Risks

- 8.1 The HAZ funding has grant conditions and the Getting Building Fund will similarly include strict criteria that the Council will need to adhere to. The principle issue identified to date relates to the delivery timescale. In order to mitigate any risk of the project slipping, sufficient staff resources will need to be dedicated to the place-making project. A HSHAZ project manager was recruited in July and once the funding package for place-making scheme is agreed the project plan will begin to be implemented. The earliest activity will need to be community involvement and stakeholder engagement, in order that work can commence as soon as possible on the formulation of draft design options to meet the identified common aims and objectives of the scheme.

9. Impact on Climate Change

- 9.1 There are no identified adverse sustainability implications directly resulting from the recommendation or options considered in this report. If the proposals are approved, the resultant scheme will reinforce the role of the town centre as a local service centre and hopefully thus reduce the journey time of its customers and visitors. Improving the public realm will help engender greater the civic pride and provide opportunities to improve the wellbeing of the local population.

10. Equality and Diversity

10.1 There are no identified equality and diversity implications directly resulting from the recommendations or options considered in this report.

11. Section 17 Crime and Disorder considerations

11.1 There are no identified Crime and Disorder implications directly resulting from the recommendations or options considered in this report.

12. Conclusion

12.1 North Walsham is the District's largest town and plays an important role as a service centre to a substantial hinterland. Its significance is likely to increase through planned future expansion. Like many other towns nationally, its town centre has struggled to remain vibrant in the face of changes to the retail sector. This year it has been uniquely challenged also by the huge disruption to town centre accessibility and consequential impacts on town centre businesses caused by the relaying of the gas main, which then collided with the economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

12.2 The funding package presents a very substantial opportunity to make improvements to the town centre that will improve trading conditions and consequently the vitality and viability of North Walsham town centre through the place-making proposals.

12.3 It is recommended that:

- Cabinet Recommend to Full Council that the success of bid by this Council be noted and that the sum of £1,170,000 (from a grant received from the Getting Building Fund) be allocated in the budget towards the town centre place-making elements of North Walsham High Street Heritage Action Zone.
- Authority be delegated to Cabinet, in consultation with the North Walsham Town Centre Heritage Action Zone Working Party, to determine the terms of the implementation of the scheme, including the involvement of interested parties, scheme design and implementation.