

NORTH WALSHAM HIGH STREET HERITAGE ACTION ZONE WORKING PARTY

Minutes of the meeting of the North Walsham High Street Heritage Action Zone Working Party held on Thursday, 20th August 2020 remotely via Zoom at 2.00 pm

Committee Members Present: Ms V Gay Mr R Kershaw
Mr E Seward

Also Present: Mrs S Butikofer (Leader)

Officers in Attendance: Estates and Asset Strategy Manager, the Economic Growth Manager, the Head of Economic and Community Development, the Project Enabler, the Project Manager, the Communications & PR Manager and the Democratic Services Manager

The Chairman began by welcoming the new Project Manager, Jenni Jordan. She introduced herself to the Working Party and outlined her background.

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr V Gay had sent her apologies.

2 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 9th July 2020 were agreed and signed by the Chairman.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

4 GENERAL / HISTORIC ENGLAND UPDATE

The Economic Growth Manager began by informing Members that the latest budget submission had been provided to Historic England (HE). A condition survey and feasibility study had been commissioned on the Cedars and there were a number of key documents that had been prepared and that would be discussed during the meeting. He said that HE had been relatively passive during the pandemic regarding monitoring of the project, but that they have requested that the Council implemented a system to capture and monitor town centre footfall as an early priority. HE had also advised the Council that North Walsham was the main focus town in the East of England for their research team. A Historic Area Appraisal would be one of the outcomes from their focus on the town.

Cllr E Seward asked when HE would publicly announce the projects that had been successful in receiving funding. The Project Manager replied that they had indicated early September as a likely date.

Building Improvement Scheme

The Project Manager explained that she had reviewed the programme and said that

this particular strand would not necessarily be developed this year. The scheme would be undertaken in partnership with building owners and she would work with them to generate interest and engagement. The Chairman agreed, saying that it was a large scheme and it was important that there was evidence to show that work was being undertaken to gain public support and confidence.

The Economic & Community Growth Manager said that communication was key. Once timescales were agreed on specific projects then they could be shared to generate interest – as part of an integrated package of projects. Phrasing would be a vital part of the communication strategy.

The Leader, Cllr S Butikofer, said that she wanted to remind everyone that they needed to be mindful of costs. There were a number of projects coming forward in North Walsham and the Council could not plough everything into the town. A realistic approach needed to be taken. The Chairman queried whether this was in issue for the HAZ project as funding had already been allocated. The Leader replied that because additional funding had recently been received from the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) then the money that the Council had assigned should not be considered in its entirety. The Head of Economic & Community Growth clarified that the funding for the LEP had not yet been received but it would be allocated for the townscape aspect of the Heritage Action Zone project – not the wider scheme. He acknowledged that the Council had allocated £975k towards the project and that this was match funding for the HAZ bid. The Leader said that everyone needed to be aware that the Council should not be putting a significant amount of funding into just one town. She said that it was her understanding that the bid for the LEP had been intended to replace some of the Council funding. The Head of Economic & Community Growth replied that he did not have the same view. He said that a report had been taken to Cabinet in May regarding funding for the project, following funding pressures caused by the pandemic. By agreeing to remove some of the elements that would require private investment, the Council funding could come down to around £750k. The place-making proposal and the part of the scheme focussed on the lokes and walkways could be scaled back, reducing costs further. However, the case that had been made to the LEP had been based on Council funding being available. He reiterated that the LEP funding was not general money for the town or for the Heritage Action Zone, it was specific funding for an element of the Heritage Action Zone project and was to augment an element of the programme.

Cllr E Seward said that he was still in the process of gaining an understanding of the extent of the LEP bid and what it would cover. He added that Cabinet would need to have a discussion about the points raised by the Leader.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their comments and suggested that the discussion moved on.

The Cedars

The Chairman said that it would be helpful to clarify JD Wetherspoons' position once and for all. He referred to another potential site in Diss and their public statement that it was being put on hold. Cllr Seward agreed, and said that it would be helpful to know if the company had purchased the site in Diss as this would give an indication of their overall approach. He then asked about the condition survey and sought clarification on why it was being undertaken and what the intended outcome was. The Estates and Asset Strategy Manager replied that she had not heard from Wetherspoons for some time. She said that a Land Registry search could be undertaken on the Diss property to ascertain its status. Regarding the Cedars site,

she explained that the portakabins had been removed and that a condition survey was being done to provide an updated position on the property and to establish the cost of any work that was needed. A feasibility study was also being undertaken to look at options regarding refurbishment or reconfiguration. It would take approximately two months to complete. Cllr Seward sought clarification on whether it would provide information on the cost of renovating the building and future potential use. The Estates and Asset Strategy Manager confirmed this and said that it would also look at the accessibility of the building. The Head of Economic & Community Growth queried the timeline for the Cedars. The Project Enabler replied that a decision as to the sustainable future use of the building with a costed schedule of works by the time of the second grant payment.

Potential options for the future of the site were discussed, including possible use for community facilities, commercial uses and/ or residential development. The Estates and Asset Strategy Manager agreed to evaluate all options in the light of the condition survey and any known opportunities.

The Head of Economic & Community Growth said that valuations had been sought regarding the site if it was put on the open market. He said that the OPE project was relevant as it would be a further project in the town. It was unlikely to be beneficial from a financial point of view but would have positive community outcomes. It could potentially be re-packaged with the Cedars site being used for part of the project. The starting point was to consider the OPE proposals and decide whether to proceed with them. If they were not viable then alternative uses for the Cedars site could be explored.

The Estates and Asset Strategy Manager added that the site had been assessed and there was potential for 7/9 units and a decision had been taken at the time not to take it forward.

Cllr Seward commented that Cabinet would need to have a preliminary look at the OPE proposal. All of the options in North Walsham needed to be assessed and then the best way forward could be considered.

Heritage Research and Skills Workshops

The Project Manager began by saying that this was an exciting element of the project. The Project Manager at Historic England had been in touch recently and indicated that they were very keen for North Walsham to be a key part of their research. It was proposed that a photographer would engage with students at Paston College and run a photography workshop aimed at capturing images of the town. In addition, there would be broader areas of research which could then feed into other developments. A heritage assessment would be undertaken which would result in a report which would feed into a variety of heritage-based activities.

Interpretation and Signage

The Project Manager said that the findings from the research, activities and cultural programmes would feed into the signage and interpretation part of the project. For this reason, the interpretation boards would probably be erected towards the end of the overall scheme. The Project Enabler added that this part of the project would also include way-finding which would link with the town centre place-making part of the scheme. The Economic Growth Manager said that the town centre was not well connected and this work would complement this and improve it. The Project Enabler

agreed, saying that there were at least 12 entrances to the town centre and market place and footfall cameras were being used to establish which ones were well used.

Community consultation and engagement

The Chairman said that this was a fundamental part of the project. Recent challenges around social distancing and the gas works in the town had generated feedback, including a petition, from local business owners. It was imperative that they were kept informed and engaged regarding any developments such as the footfall cameras to ensure that they were kept on board. Cllr Seward commented on the Stakeholder Forum and asked whether there were terms of reference in place yet. The Project Enabler replied that there had been a local stakeholder group during the programme design phase which had terms of reference. This group was very small and it needed to be reconstituted now that the project was entering the delivery phase and consideration would need to be given as to who needed to be part of the new, larger group but it would definitely include representatives from the business community. Consequently, the terms of reference would be reviewed and revised.

The Head of Economic & Community Growth said that it was proposed that a stakeholder engagement strategy was produced. This would require going through the whole project and identifying who should be involved in which parts of the project and in what way. He said it was important to include those people that were willing to come forward as well as representatives from 'hard to reach' groups. The Project Manager would be picking up this piece of work. The Project Enabler added that Historic England had asked that a community engagement plan was produced within the first 3 months of the project. This had been started and would begin with a community engagement workshop to engage a wider audience – including external stakeholders. The Project Manager said that this was about ensuring that local people could get their voices heard and ensure that they were involved in the project. If there was a common agreement at the outset then this would form the framework for community engagement. The Economic Growth Manager agreed, saying that the high level outcomes would demonstrate that there was a commonality between the aims of the community – including business owners.

Market Place public realm improvements and town centre re-stitching

The Project Enabler said that this part of the project had gone through a lot of iterations and it was felt that it would be simpler to bring the two strands together under the umbrella of 'town centre place-making'. This was a key bit of messaging and would make communication much easier. The Head of Economic & Community Growth added that budget-wise there had previously been a distinction between the two as the market place public realm improvements was always going to be dependent on significant external match funding. He acknowledged that this may need to be pared back in light of the earlier discussion but this was a decision for Cabinet to take. He said that it was crucial to get some 'early wins' with this work and spend the MHCLG money in a timely way (by March 2022). In conclusion, he said that budget-wise it might be helpful to maintain the distinction between the two strands but for communication and engagement purposes it was helpful to bring them together.

Cllr Seward said that in terms of linkage and public realm, an early start could be made and this would show people what the project was about and gain buy-in. Any communication strategy would need to bear this in mind as residents would only begin to accept the project and feel affiliated to it when they saw it happening. He

said that it was important to identify 2/3 sites that could be delivered quickly, adding that there was some work that could be done to the entrances to the town. The Project Enabler said that the Council had submitted a revised year 1 budget to Historic England at the start of August and they had requested a revised budget for the whole 4 years in September. She added that Church Approach would be a quick win. She reiterated that the majority of the LEP funding had to be spent by 2022 so careful thought would need to be given to this and work to the gateways and entrances would need to be prioritised to maximise the impact. The Estates & Assets Strategy Manager said that other landowners would need to be contacted ahead of any works to Church Approach as the Council owned a proportion of the land but not all of it. The Head of Economic & Community Growth added that community engagement was still key. Residents may have different views and it was important to demonstrate that the Council was not going ahead with work without engaging with the wider community first.

5 PROJECT BUDGET

The Chairman asked the Project Enabler to provide an update on the phasing of the budget for the project. The Project Enabler said that it was a working budget and several adjustments had been made. Historic England had requested a split of 10:40:40:10 for their contribution over the four years and any amendments needed to reflect this. She outlined the current budget and explained the phasing over the four-year lifetime of the scheme, highlighting specific projects. In response to a query regarding the Council's funding contribution, the Leader confirmed that Cabinet would review all of the projects for North Walsham and make a decision.

Cllr Seward said that it was important to establish if there were any planning implications regarding proposed work on Church Approach, and if so, these should be 'bottomed out' quickly.

7 ISSUES AND RISK LOG

The Project Manager said that there was an officer-led workshop scheduled to analyse the risks relating to the project. The outcome of this would be reported back to a future meeting of the Working Party.

8 COMMUNICATIONS

The Communications and PR Manager informed Members that he had attended a meeting with Historic England and the Project Manager and there was a consensus that some of the challenges already outlined during earlier discussion would also impact on communications about the project. He said that he would advise that communication was kept relatively low key until it was clear what would be delivered – particularly during the first 6 months. North Walsham residents wanted to know what the project would tangibly deliver. He reiterated that it was important to agree how and when key elements would be delivered and this would form the basis of the communications strategy for the project. A timetable with key dates would be particularly beneficial.

Regarding branding, he said that consideration may need to be given to make the scheme sound more 'user friendly'. It was intended to bring together the principal stakeholders in the project to establish key elements such as branding and a timetable of key events. The LEP timetable was more accelerated than the Historic England one and this presented some challenges.

The Communications and PR Manager said that it would be worthwhile looking at the role of civic pride when engaging with residents as this could generate buy-in to the project and encourage a positive approach.

He concluded by saying that a communications plan would be produced in conjunction with Historic England and to help with this, it was important to identify who would be the key NNDC spokespeople for upcoming projects, together with a timetable of events for the next calendar year. Any imaging relating to the project would be really helpful as it would help people visualise the outcomes of the scheme. It was likely that next key message would be in September when Historic England would announce the successful bids for funding. North Walsham was considered to be one of their flagship schemes so was likely to feature prominently in any promotional campaigns.

9 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Project Enabler spoke about the cultural programme which ran alongside the overall scheme. The pilot grant scheme was open now but the Cultural Consortium had indicated that they would not apply for the first round but would apply for the second round when it was widened out.

The meeting ended at 15.47pm

Chairman