

Property Acquisition: Land at North Walsham

- Summary: The report outlines a proposal to acquire land at a key gateway to North Walsham Town Centre to support the North Walsham Heritage Action Zone place making initiative.
- Options considered: The proposed option is to acquire the land to support the programme by improving the access to the town centre via the adjacent Loke. The alternative option, not to acquire the land, would miss the potential opportunity of further grant funding.
- Conclusions: The Council has the opportunity to acquire land adjacent to its existing landholding (Bank Loke Car Park) that would support the objectives of the North Walsham Heritage Action Zone place making project and offer scope for improvement that could further enhance the locality and services provided by the Council. The total budget required for the acquisition, associated legal costs and immediate costs involved in securing the site, once acquired are expected not to exceed £100,000.
- Recommendations: **It is recommended that Cabinet resolve to acquire the land, and instruct the Director for Resources to do so at his discretion, in consultation with the NWHSHAZ Working Party, subject to all reasonable due diligence and legal advice.**
- Reasons for Recommendations: To augment the High Street HAZ place making project in North Walsham.

Cabinet Member(s) Cllr Eric Seward Cllr Richard Kershaw	Ward(s) affected North Walsham
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Council was successful in 2020 in being awarded funding from Historic England to establish a High Streets Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) in North Walsham. Subsequently the Council gained funding from the Getting Building Fund (via New Anglia LEP) for the 'place making elements' of the HAZ scheme, which includes townscape improvements to the public realm in the Market Place and the connecting pedestrian routes and gateways.

- 1.2 The aim of the programme is to secure lasting improvements for the town's historic core, supporting its vitality and viability by improving the physical fabric of the town centre, restoring, repairing and improving key historic buildings and developing a cultural programme to celebrate the town's historic importance.
- 1.3 North Walsham has a disjointed network of pathways leading to its centre from its car parks and one, which is particularly unattractive is Black Swan Loke. This report relates to a proposal to acquire a vacant and derelict parcel of land adjacent to the route to the town centre from its main car park which would support the objectives of the programme.

2. Acquisition proposal

- 2.1 The parcel of land is located adjacent to the Council's Bank Loke Car Park and Black Swan Loke which provides a public access to the Market Place. The site has been for sale for some time but its potential for inclusion in the HAZ programme has only recently been considered; its early acquisition would therefore be very timely, in order that grant opportunities can be pursued.
- 2.2 A conditional offer for the land has recently been accepted for the freehold purchase of the land. The site would present an opportunity to augment the HAZ scheme and would likely bring significant improvements to the connection between the Car park and the Market place. In order to benefit from external funds towards the acquisition/ improvement, any transaction needs to be undertaken soon. Due to the short timescale for legal completion therefore, Eastlaw have been instructed to progress the purchase, with exchange and completion of contracts subject to acquisition approval being granted.
- 2.3 The purpose of this acquisition is to improve the amenity value of the land in question and to exploit its role in improving the connections between the Market Place and Bank Loke Car Park. The land may also have potential for future development, subject to survey/planning permission and consent from any funding organisations. A business case would need to be considered but such uses could potentially include:
 - Public conveniences
 - Car parking
 - Electric vehicle charging point
 - Concession pitch
- 2.4 The default position would be to merely improve the site as an attractive area of amenity space as part of the public realm.
- 2.5 If acquired and included within the 'place making' project of the HAZ programme, its design could be included within the contract for the design of the other town centre areas, which will be informed on the basis of widespread engagement with relevant stakeholders.

3. Corporate Plan

- 3.1 This proposal would potentially support the Corporate Objective of Quality of Life and links to the objective:
 - Delivery of the North Walsham Heritage Action Zone programme

- 3.2 The acquisition could also link to other objectives, depending on its future use.
- 3.3 The Council's Asset Management Plan which sits beneath the Corporate Plan, includes an Acquisition policy. This policy sets a framework for how the Council acquires land and property assets, including assets where it:
- Drives change within communities offering quick community benefits, but may have a longer term realisation of financial benefits
 - Has strategic, regeneration or redevelopment potential within the district
 - Improves economic development and community well-being
- 3.4 To an extent, this acquisition would potentially support all three criteria.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 An opportunity has become available to acquire a parcel of land to support the objectives of the Town Centre High Street Heritage Action Zone scheme for North Walsham in seeking to "re-stitch" and improve the connectivity and access through the town via lokes and gateways.
- 4.2 In addition to improving the pedestrian access route, the site could significantly improve the amenity of the area and may offer some further development potential, which could further support services provided by the Council in its vicinity.
- 4.3 Due to the opportunities this site presents to augment the HAZ programme and the funding opportunities that exist to help meet the likely costs of its improvement, it is recommended to Cabinet to approve the acquisition of the land from the NWHHAZ place making budget, using the grant from the Getting Building Fund and additional grant funding from Historic England, as appropriate, depending upon the timing of the completion of the acquisition.

5. Implications and Risks

- 5.1 As part of the acquisition process the Council will undertake all reasonable due diligence.
- 5.2 There is a risk that the acquisition does not complete in a timescale that secures additional external funding.
- 5.3 Whilst the primary focus of the acquisition is for the land to support the town centre place making objectives of the HAZ programme, there is a risk that the land does not deliver any further enhancements due to its constraints and viability. This would be determined through the development of a business case.

6. Financial Implications and Risks

- 6.1 An independent valuation advice report forms part of the acquisition process.
- 6.2 Historic England has confirmed its readiness to meet half of the cost of the site's acquisition (up to £50,000) provided the acquisition can be completed by 31st March 2021. The seller of the land is also seeking to complete the disposal within this time frame. Failing that, there is an opportunity to bid for funds to meet the costs of the improvement of the site (although not its acquisition) in the next financial year (it should be noted that the success of that cannot be guaranteed).

- 6.3 The funds for the purchase could be drawn from the Getting Building grant funding for the place making scheme or from an alternative Capital budget, which, if the timing is suitable may be matched (at 50%) by a grant from Historic England.
- 6.4 If the purchase does not complete, abortive costs will be incurred in the region of £2,000.
- 6.5 The revenue costs of the day to day maintenance and management of the site will depend upon its future use. Such costs, together with officer time, will be included in the business case for the future use/ development of the site.

7. Sustainability

- 7.1 The purchase of the land and improving the access to the town centre will enhance the attractiveness of the town and potentially retain more local customers, improving sustainability by reducing journeys further afield. The site is considered to be a derelict brownfield site with no existing beneficial uses.

8. Equality and Diversity

- 8.1 There are no direct equality and diversity issues arising from the recommendation.

9. Section 17 Crime and Disorder considerations

- 9.1 The land has been subject to fly tipping in the past and therefore with the purchase of this asset the Council can seek to address such issues.