

NORTH WALSHAM HIGH STREET HERITAGE ACTION SCHEME PROJECT REPORT TO OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 14 JULY 2021

1. Background

- 1.1 North Walsham is presently embarking on an exciting scheme to renew its historic town centre. In Spring 2020, North Norfolk District Council submitted a successful application to Historic England to develop and deliver a town centre revitalisation scheme, securing initial funding through the national High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) Programme. The overall aim of the Historic England programme is to make the high street a 'more attractive, engaging and vibrant place for people to live, work and spend time'.
- 1.2 The initial funding application to Historic England secured £975,000 which was match funded by NNDC, resulting in a budget of £1.95 million. To capitalise on this, a further funding application was made to the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (NALEP), securing an additional MHCLG *Build Back Better* grant award of £1.17 million towards the town centre placemaking project strand of the scheme. Recognising that there were further opportunities, an additional £80,000 has been recently secured from Historic England. This will provide £50,000 towards the purchase of land west of Black Swan Loke and £30,000 towards additional public realm design costs. This brings the total HSHAZ scheme budget to £3.2 million.
- 1.3 In addition, an independent Cultural Consortium has been established by a group of volunteers in North Walsham. They have successfully applied for £90,000 in funding from Historic England to develop and deliver a Cultural Programme to complement and sit alongside the HSHAZ scheme.
- 1.4 The North Walsham HSHAZ will be delivered over the period of 2020-2024. However, the NALEP (MHCLG) element of investment has to be committed and spent by March 2022.

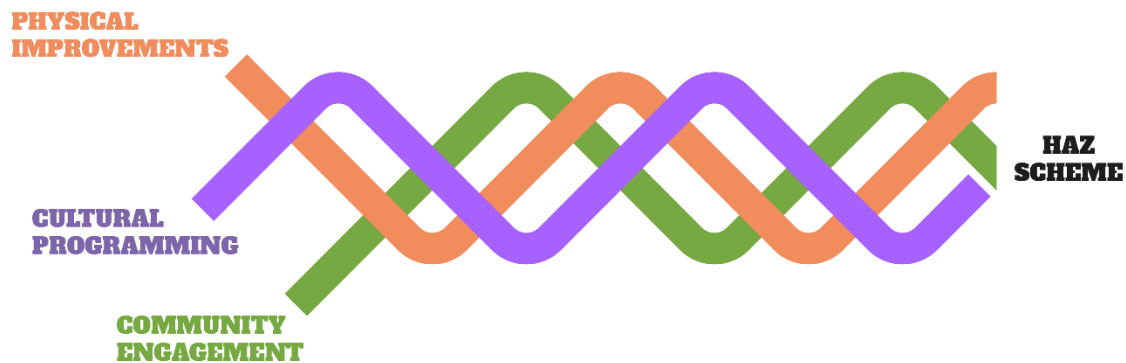
2. Area of Delivery

- 2.1 The North Walsham High Street Heritage Action Zone covers the centre of the town within the North Walsham Conservation Area, focused on the Market Place and immediate surroundings.



3. Programme Scope

- 3.1 There are three core elements to the HSHAZ programme, which are designed to deliver a holistic approach to revitalising the town centre:



- 3.2 The programme is composed of a number of separate project strands. Collectively their delivery is intended to create a lasting change and serve as a catalyst for future investment into the town; through attracting investment in the form of regeneration of land and buildings in private ownership and through providing a locally 'tested' steer for further town centre development that may possibly not be delivered within the scope of the present funding.
- 3.3 The key deliverable of the project include:
- Town centre place-making improvements – streetscaping, including the Market Place and surrounding streets and reconnecting the lokes and gateways to facilitate better movement around the town centre;
 - The Cedars Grade II Listed building - repairs and restoration and returning the main building to occupiable use;
 - A Building Improvement Grants scheme – to support the restoration and repair of buildings within the town, including shop front improvements and supporting projects that will help to fill vacant units and presently unoccupied floorspace;
 - Heritage research and training;
 - Cultural Programme and community activities.
- 3.4 Community Engagement is a vital and key element of the programme. The involvement of local people in local decision-making will play a strong role in determining its success and they will play an integral part in shaping the final outputs and ensuring the legacy of the project. A community stakeholder group has also been established, involving representatives from a number of local groups and organisations, including North Walsham Town Council, Regenerate North Walsham, Paston College, North Walsham Cultural Consortium, Phoenix Group youth CIC and local Members. The stakeholder group meets regularly to develop opportunities to involve local people, groups and businesses in the development and delivery of the HAZ scheme.

4. Progress Update

4.1 Town centre Place-making

4.1.1 A competitive tendering procurement process was undertaken in January 2021 and a multidisciplinary team of landscape architects, placemaking consultants, highways engineers, heritage architects and quantity surveyors were appointed, including Influence Environmental, HETA architects, BSP, Gleeds and Rees Bolter Architects.

4.1.2 There are three key project stages involved in the town centre place-making project:

- **Stage 1** - Masterplan, design and community and stakeholder consultation;
- **Stage 2** - Implementation Plan - detailed design, construction and liaison including early contractor engagement;
- **Stage 3** - Delivery – Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) and framework contractors implementing the public realm and highways detailed designs

The first project stage is shortly to reach completion in July 2021. However, in reality a number of tasks are purposely overlapped within the project delivery plan, particularly around early contractor engagement and identifying where TROs will be required.

4.1.3 To date the following activities have been delivered:

Site and Context: Research and Analysis – March-April 2021

- Analysis of the town centre's physical context
- Review of existing community engagement and research
- Broader context research into what's happening within high streets and town centres

Concept Design - May-June 2021

- Development of a distinct town story and shared identity
- Consultation on options for improving and stitching together the public realm
- Consultation on improving the quality of the public realm and pedestrian safety of the Marketplace and Market Street
- Preliminary proposals for the selection of the materials to be used to create a coherent streetscape
- Identify the phasing and prioritisation of the works

Developed Design - July-August 2021

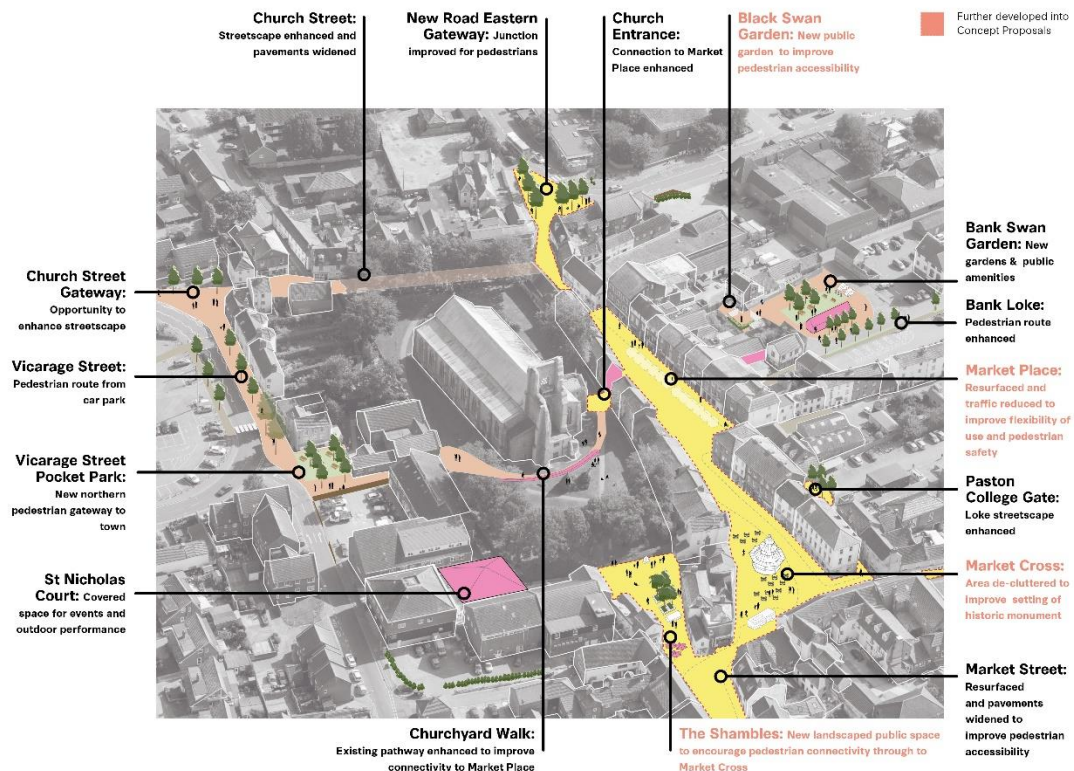
Development of the design of preferred options identified through consultation in the previous phase.

The place-making and public realm masterplan has been developed to deliver specifically:

- a safe and inclusive environment;
- a healthy environment that supports wellbeing;
- a high quality environment;
- economic benefit;
- a flexible and sustainable townscape.

4.1.4 Collectively, these measures will help to support the sustainable use of the town and meet the long-term needs of the community. In particular, an overarching aim of the project is to strengthen the sense of civic pride within the town.

4.1.5 The below diagram illustrates some of the high-level options presently being considered to regenerate the town centre and as was used to initiate conversations and to inspire thoughts and ideas during the consultation process with local stakeholders and the community.



4.1.5 The consultation programme has been designed to ascertain views around the following three key areas.

- i. Masterplan - the Masterplan identifies an overall vision for the town centre and is presented as a suite of projects that can be delivered within the present funding and then as further funding is identified and secured;
- ii. Public Realm Concepts - initial concept illustrations were drawn up for certain key areas identified within the masterplan. These served to inspire peoples thoughts as to how they would like to see these areas reimagined; and
- iii. Town Identity - proposal of four potential story themes around which to build a *shared identity* – inspired by North Walsham’s history and the people who live, work and visit there.

4.1.6 To support this, a number of community and stakeholder engagement activities have been undertaken:

- Ongoing online community engagement through a dedicated interactive community engagement platform (visit bit.ly/HiNorthWalsham)
- Online public engagement at the North Walsham Big Bash community event April 2021
- Public exhibition held in North Walsham town centre on 16, 17 and 23 June 2021

- Public engagement and display at North Walsham FunDay 27 June 2021
- Paston College exhibition 28 June - 2 July 2021
- Stakeholder meetings, both before and during the project's implementation

4.2 The Cedars

- 4.2.1 Owned by NNDC and standing at a key gateway and juncture to the town centre, Market Place and New Road, The Cedars is a prominent Grade II listed historic building and heritage site.
- 4.2.2 In September 2020, the Council tendered for a detailed Condition Survey to be undertaken on the site, to which conservation architects Kings and Dunne were appointed. In addition to this, several specialist investigations have now been completed, including an electrical test and inspection, a disabled access audit report, an ecological survey, an asbestos survey and a drainage survey.
- 4.2.3 Despite being unused for some time, it has been established that the property is generally in a serviceable condition and the main property appears to be generally in sound structural condition. Some parts of the building require essential repair, mainly on areas of water ingress where rainwater goods and flashings are failing and there are some isolated cracks on the walls. Contractors appointed by NNDC are already addressing essential repairs.
- 4.2.4 The appointed architects were also commissioned to undertake a scoping study to identify the possible types of use for the building and the wider site. The report established that a predominantly office use would be the most straight forward and suitable option for the main building and this would require a simple conversion with minimal alterations required, giving flexibility to a range of potential future users. There is presently limited accessibility to the upper floors which would mean that these may be better suited to commercial office use and a range of options could then be considered for the lower floor spaces, including a number of potential community uses.
- 4.2.5 A specification and cost plan has been produced to determine the cost of refurbishing the building and the wider site, including the Grade II listed barns. From this report it was identified that the projected costs for a 'comprehensive' scheme exceeded the funding available within the HAZ budget. A value engineering exercise was therefore undertaken, which highlighted opportunities to make a number of cost savings that would still deliver a habitable building with all the essential repairs undertaken and bring the property back into use. The revised specification for the main Cedars House building has subsequently been agreed with Historic England. This is presently being developed to a detailed design stage and is due to be completed in July 2021. Procurement will then take place to appoint contractors to carry out the repairs and restoration work required to bring the Cedars back into use during the autumn of 2021.
- 4.2.6 In addition to letting out the main building, the Council is presently exploring the opportunities for the adjoining land, including potential disposal for development by a third party.
- 4.2.7 The Council had previously been in talks, dating back to the summer of 2014, with national pub and restaurant chain JD Wetherspoon, who had indicated an interest in acquiring The Cedars site. However, despite protracted conversations, JD Wetherspoon have been unable to formally commit to purchasing the site. The

Council's Cabinet therefore took the decision (5 July 2021) to press ahead with proposals to restore and refurbish the building itself and invite other businesses or community groups to express their interest in renting space within the premises.

4.2.8 The following next steps for the Cedars project are to:

- To repair and restore the building;
- Invite interested parties to come forward with proposals;
- Consider types of use and feasibility including financial viability;
- Explore and identify the preferred uses for the building, barns and wider site.

4.3 Building Improvement Grants Scheme

4.3.1 There are a wealth of historic buildings within and surrounding the Market Place in North Walsham, including 103 that are Listed. The Building Improvement Grant scheme will offer grants to support the restoration and reinstatement of traditional shopfronts and architectural features, the repair and restoration of heritage buildings, and help bring unused floor space back into use.

4.3.2 Detailed Guidance on the grant scheme criteria has been produced in conjunction with Historic England and the scheme will be open for formal application in July 2021. A number of informal conversations and expressions of interest have already been received for the grant scheme.

4.3.3 Conservation architects are shortly to be appointed to act as lead professionals, providing expert advice to potential applicants and to work with the HAZ Team to identify eligible projects to progress to formal applications. An NNDC panel, working with the lead professional, will determine the application approvals. Projects involving Listed buildings and those with a value of over £20,000 will be referred to Historic England. The council's Conservation and Design Manager will also be consulted on projects to ensure that they comply with Conservation Area requirements.

4.4 Heritage Research and Training

4.4.1 Historic England have identified North Walsham as the focus for an in-depth research study, which will be the largest research project within the East of England region. Given the shortage of existing detailed studies of North Walsham's buildings and the significance of the town, HE concluded that a Historic Area Assessment (HAA) will help to improve the understanding of the town centre and provide a good evidence base for future planning and improvement decisions.

4.4.2 The Historic England research team are working closely with the Project Manager along with North Walsham Heritage Group and North Walsham & District Community Archive to engage with local businesses and property owners. The Historic Area Assessment research will be conducted throughout HSHAZ project delivery period and will involve both in-depth desk research and fieldwork, archaeological investigation, geospatial surveys, photography and other methodologies. Quarterly meetings are being held for the duration of the HAZ project.

4.4.3 In January 2021, NNDC/HE announced the launch of the Historic England research and invited property owners and occupiers to allow access to investigate their buildings. The team have visited a number of buildings in the town centre, which has

been extremely insightful and informative. This research is being separately funded by Historic England and will make a valuable contribution to the North Walsham HSHAZ project.

- 4.4.4 The in-depth architectural research, conducted by a team of Historic England investigators to produce the Historic Area Assessment, is expected to generate further ongoing research as information about the history of the town centre buildings emerges. This additional research will be carried out by local groups and volunteers and material generated by the HAA and local historic research will be used for events such as talks, heritage trails, publications and leaflets. Research findings will also feed into the interpretation and signage elements of the town centre place making. It is envisaged that the research will help to increase the awareness and appreciation of the history of North Walsham.
- 4.4.5 The HSHAZ project also presents the opportunity to support the development of skills, both within the heritage elements of the project and the wider regeneration of the town centre. This will likely take the form of a range of training and skills workshops and will seek to develop a variety of both hard and soft skills. For example, training for community volunteers is currently being explored in relation to the research and proposed digitisation of the photographic archive of the town and workshops.

4.5 Cultural Programme and Community Activities

- 4.5.1 Alongside the physical improvements that will be delivered within the programme, NNDC and North Walsham's Cultural Consortium have successfully bid and secured a £90,000 grant from Historic England to create and deliver community-led cultural activities within the town over the next three years. Led by a consortium of local groups and arts organisations, this funding will help celebrate the town's heritage and culture and make the town centre a more attractive, engaging and vibrant place.
- 4.5.2 A programme of activities is presently in development.

5. Governance

- 5.1 A Working Party was established by Cabinet to oversee delivery of the North Walsham High Street HAZ. Following the establishment of the Corporate Delivery Unit, the governance structure for the HAZ scheme has been revised in line with the new guidance.
- 5.2 The Project Team meets weekly to oversee the operational delivery of the scheme. A Project Board is shortly to convene to continue to monitor and support the project delivery. This will be chaired by the Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth and will be comprised of the Project Manager, the Economic Growth Manager, other officers involved in delivery of specific projects being delivered through the scheme, the relevant Portfolio Holders and representatives of Historic England and the Community Stakeholder Group.

6. Communications

- 6.1 Communication Delivery meetings are held on a weekly basis with the relevant Officers. An overarching Communication and Engagement Strategy, which outlines a range of key activities and intervention points and identifies the methodology and vehicles required to support them, underpins these meetings. Within this, individual Communication Plans have been developed for each of the project strands.

- 6.2 To date, a number of media releases, radio interviews and other communications actions have been carried out since the HAZ scheme was launched. However, given the growing and pressing need to maintain strong communication and engagement throughout the project, it has been identified that additional resources will be required. To support this, funding has been identified within the HAZ budget to provide for a part time Communications and Engagement Assistant which will shortly be advertised.
- 6.3 A specific communications and engagement platform has been established for this project in order to ensure that communication can be inclusive, innovative, relevant, responsive and up-to-date. The link to the site is here: <https://northnorfolkdistrictcouncil.mysocialpinpoint.co.uk/north-walsham-haz/home/> (or type in to the web browser: bit.ly/HiNorthWalsham). The use of this site has been encouraging, with 569 'page views', 103 'unique users', and an average visit time of approximately four minutes, in the week commencing 28th June.
- 6.4 As mentioned above, a wide variety of methods have been used to engage relevant local interested parties in this initiative, including virtual workshops, public exhibitions, walking tours, appearing at town events, exhibition at Paston College, meeting property owners and a planned stall at the market (once-a-month).

7. Monitoring and Budget

- 7.1 A robust project monitoring tool sits behind the delivery of the programme and is reviewed on an ongoing basis. This suite of reports tracks the progress of the deliverables within each project strand, contains the risk log and a comprehensive budget forecast and expenditure monitor.
- 7.2 In addition to the Project Team and Project Board meetings, quarterly reports are submitted to the funders Historic England and the LEP.
- 7.3 As a complex, multi-faceted programme, the budget report is dynamic and is routinely monitored as costs become better known. Expenditures are documented and all purchases and services are conducted within the Council's own procurement procedures.