

## READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

### HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE MEETING

8 JULY 2014

QUESTION NO. 1 in accordance with Standing Order No.10

Councillor K Edwards to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services:

#### Culture and Heritage

The Forbury Gardens and Abbey Quarter are enjoyed by residents from across Reading and visitors to the town. Can you please provide an update on the Abbey Quarter restoration, funding and next steps?

REPLY by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services):

Thank you Cllr Edwards and I'm delighted to respond with the positive news that in June 2014 the Council secured initial 'Round 1' funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) that will enable us to take the Abbey Quarter project forward in what is a two stage application process. The overall project prioritises the conservation of the Abbey Ruins and Abbey Gateway (both Grade I listed buildings and Scheduled Monuments), so they can be reopened and the public can once again access and experience this unique and very special part of Reading's heritage. The project includes a programme of community engagement activity and site-wide interpretation and signage. The initial funding will also allow us to employ technical specialists to develop the detailed specification of works and costs for the 'Round 2' submission for the full grant request of £1.7m. With an estimated future total scheme cost of £3m the Council is clearly demonstrating its commitment to the scheme by agreeing to provide £1.3m of match funding.

RBC has now received the official HLF's decision letter confirming approval of the Round 1 application and the next steps are:

- RBC officers will meet with the HLF officers at the end of the month to discuss a contractual agreement to enter the 'development stage' of the project. The total agreed development cost is £115,800. £61,400 (53% of this amount) is funded by HLF. The remaining amount is funded by RBC through S106 contributions.
- RBC will have up to two years during the development phase to submit a second round application to HLF for the full grant request of around £1.7 million. This will provide detailed plans for the conservation works of the Abbey Ruins and Gateway, the site-wide interpretation and the activity programme. However, as a lot of work has already been done, RBC hopes that this could be ready in less than 18 months. If the Council is successful at the second round of this competitive process, the delivery stage of the project will be able to start, and will take 18 months to two years to complete.

Thanks to cross-Council working and the joining-up of funding opportunities a lot of improvement works are currently taking place that contribute to realising the wider Abbey Quarter vision:

- **Town Hall Square refurbishment** is part of the wider Abbey Quarter's vision. The £450,000 funding was secured through the Local Sustainable Transport Fund. Work has included level access across the square, new seating and a deep clean of Queen Victoria's statue. These significant improvements add to the appeal of this key entrance to Reading's historic centre.
- **Conservation works to the Abbey Gate** form part of the Abbey Quarter project. As part of the development of the Council's application to the HLF a condition survey was conducted last year to assess the works needed to restore the Gateway. This was supported by a grant from English Heritage covering 80% of the survey cost. This work revealed that the most urgent issue was water damage caused by the leaking roof and blocked drainage pipes. Following the survey the Council has received permission to provide a temporary scaffolding roof that will stop further water penetration, allowing the structure to dry out while funding for further conservation work is secured. The temporary scaffolding work will begin in July.
- **St Laurence's churchyard wall** also forms part of the Abbey Quarter project and will finally be repaired after being propped up by scaffolding since the 1980s. The conservation work is funded by the Local Sustainable Transport Fund, as its repair will open up an important town centre pavement which is currently unusable. The tendering process for a contractor to conduct the repair work will begin in July, with an appointment made by the end of August. It is hoped that restoration work will begin on site by the end of October. St Laurence's church is a Grade I listed Norman building, therefore any work undertaken must take into consideration the archaeology of the site.
- **Queen Elizabeth I portrait** is back on long-term display at Reading Museum thanks to grant funding from the Earley Charity. The oil painting of about 1575 is one of the town's greatest treasures. Elizabeth regularly stayed in the Tudor royal apartments in the Abbot's House and had her own private pew at St Laurence's church. Development funding from HLF will look at further upgrades of Abbey Quarter related displays at the Museum.

In addition of course the Council continues to invest in ensuring the quality and attractiveness of Forbury Gardens is maintained as a key attraction for local people and visitors and a vital link in our longer term aspirations for the whole quarter.