

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	20 JULY 2020		
TITLE:	HIGH STREET HERITAGE ACTION ZONE PROGRAMME 2020 - 2024		
LEAD COUNCILLORS:	COUNCILLORS PAGE / ROWLAND	PORTFOLIOS:	DEPUTY LEADER AND STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT / CULTURE, HERITAGE AND RECREATION
SERVICE:	PLANNING	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Reading Borough Council submitted an Expression of Interest for the High Streets Heritage Action Zones (HSHAZ) Programme, a nationwide initiative designed to secure lasting improvements to the town's historic high streets and for the communities who use them, to Historic England (HE) in July 2019. In September 2019 it was announced that Reading Borough Council's bid was one of the 69 schemes from across the country that had been accepted to continue to the next stage in the application process. The Council was therefore invited to submit a comprehensive Programme Design application by 6 February 2020. The bid documentation was developed with considerable support from various community groups, internal and external partners and culture and heritage organisations. See Appendix A for a map of the area covered.
- 1.2 The Council's bid was accepted and the Council has entered into a contract with Historic England to run the programme for four years (commencing from 1 April 2020). The purpose of this report is therefore to provide the Committee with more details of the programme and to seek agreement to add the High Streets Heritage Action Zones (HSHAZ) Project to the Capital Programme.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That Policy Committee approve the £1,340k addition of the High Street Heritage Action Zone to the 2020/21 - 2024/25 Capital programme that would be funded from Historic England grant and central area S106 and CIL.
- 2.2 That Policy Committee allocate funding as set out at Section 10 of the report and delegate the receipt of grant money and the spending funds to support the

programme to the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport and the Lead Councillor for Culture & Heritage.

- 2.2 That Policy Committee notes that future years' funding allocations would be sought from CIL 15% (Central Area) local funds and Section 106 funds.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 The Borough's new Local Plan has an expanded section on heritage, including new policies on both enhancement of conservation areas (EN3) and new development in a historic context (EN6). In the pre-amble at para 4.2.2 it is stated:

'Protecting Reading's heritage assets contributes to a sense of place, and doing so can contribute to other important planning goals. Investment in heritage and culture, in turn, generates more spending in the local economy. For example, previous investment in publicly owned heritage assets within the Abbey Quarter, like the Forbury Gardens and Simeon Monument, has created an attractive environment for high-quality commercial investment including Forbury Square and Forbury Hotel. A vibrant historic environment also contributes to town centre vitality, sustainable transport, residential development, good design and the natural environment. Heritage assets can be a positive force for regeneration. New development can be beneficial to heritage assets through providing or encouraging new uses or better revealing their significance'.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 HSHAZ is a government-sponsored programme to transform high streets into thriving town centres through the power of heritage. The programme is administered by Historic England on behalf of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.
- 4.2 Under this programme Councils can apply for a grant of between £250,000 and £2m, to set up a four-year partnership beginning April 2020 to run a HSHAZ 'scheme' to deliver physical improvements and cultural and community activities to regenerate historic high streets or town centres. It is essential that councils work closely with other high street stakeholders, including the local community. Historic England, National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council England are designing a complementary Cultural Programme for HSHAZ which it is envisaged will be delivered by local arts and culture groups, with the support of successful HSHAZ partners.
- 4.3 Officers identified the retail part of three conservation areas; Castle Hill/Russell Street, St Mary's Butts/Castle Street, and Market Place/London Street that lie around the town centre (Appendix A) as eligible for the programme. The Conservation Area Advisory Committee (CAAC), Reading Civic Society and Baker Street Area Neighbourhood Association (BSANA) were involved in the development of the Expression of Interest bid setting out a detailed case for the Oxford Road Conservation Area. These groups and further culture and heritage organisations, internal and external partners helped to develop the council's final programme submission to Historic England.
- 4.4 The Programme has as its goal making the high street a more attractive, engaging and vibrant place for people to live, work and spend time so is clearly complementary to the overarching policy objective of protecting heritage for its own merit and for the support of the future economic success of the town. The streets

that will be the focus of the HSHAZ suffer from having vacant units or units in need of investment and where the public realm needs improvement commensurate with these streets lying in conservation areas.

4.5 The HSHAZ programme combines three complementary strands:

- **Physical interventions:** undertaking physical works to buildings, including repair, reinstating lost features, supporting the conversion of historic buildings for new uses and improvement of shared spaces, drawing on the lessons learnt in Streets for All
- **Community engagement:** giving local communities a key role in deciding what works they want to see happening on their high street and what sort of place they want it to be
- **Cultural programme:** cultural activities and events celebrating the history of the high street and its importance to local communities over the generations.

4.6 The deadline for submitting an initial Expression of Interest was mid July 2019. Reading's Expression of Interest bid to run a programme supporting the three conservation areas was accepted by Historic England in early September 2019. The next stage in the process was to prepare a comprehensive programme design application which was submitted to Historic England in February 2020. It was confirmed on 2nd April 2020 that the programme had been accepted and as part of the award the Council has been offered a grant of up to £806,500. The Council was invited to enter into a contract to manage the programme which was completed and signed by delegated officer on 29th May 2020. In light of the focus on responding to the Covid19 emergency, HE postponed any formal publicity on the award and has only recently published the decision to enter into a project with Reading Borough Council.

4.7 The four-year programme requires the Council to work closely with key internal and external partners, local businesses, cultural and heritage organisations and community groups to deliver the following objectives within the Reading HSHAZ project:

- To enhance the understanding of Reading's heritage by revealing its hidden histories and to give the community a sense of pride and ownership in developing the town's future.
- To improve the physical condition and viability of the high streets within the three conservation areas by identifying those properties most at risk and engaging with property owners to help them to restore the buildings, to show them how to maintain the buildings and to share best practice. We want to see premises viably and fully occupied and footfall and customer satisfaction increasing.
- To develop a comprehensive strategy to improve the public realm across the high streets that make up our HSHAZ. The outcome will be a better experience and sense of place for those living or working in or visiting the town centre.
- To support local businesses, the economy and local community and cultural initiatives by creating a positive sense of place through contributing to the heritage of their high street.

4.8 From recent discussions HE is keen to help the Council to respond to the current coronavirus restrictions on some of the planned activities in our programme. It is clear that programmes, plans and proposals might need to change to respond to the more pressing crisis for our high streets during and following the pandemic.

4.9 The context in which the Council will be delivering the programme will be very different from that when the bid was first made almost 12 months ago and even from

the programme submission in early February. The impact of the coronavirus is likely to be far reaching and although the Council and its partners do not yet understand the full implications for the high street, it is clear that there is already a major impact on high street occupiers including retailers, cafes and other local businesses. The Council, working with its partners, will need to quickly review our High Streets HAZ programme to ensure that it can play an important role in the ultimate recovery of our high streets.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 The HSHAZ Programme is in line with the overall direction of the Council by meeting the Corporate Plan priorities 4, 5 & 6 by supporting the town's high streets and the businesses working there and encouraging more to visit them:

1. Safeguarding and protecting those that are most vulnerable;
2. Providing the best start in life through education, early help and healthy living;
3. Providing homes for those in most need;
4. Keeping the town clean, safe, green and active;
5. Providing infrastructure to support the economy; and
6. Remaining financially sustainable to deliver these service priorities.

5.2 The Programme will also complement the Council's approach to the recovery from the Covid Pandemic (as reported to Policy Committee 22 June 2020) and in particular supports the third objective to secure the economic future of Reading.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).

6.2 The HSHAZ programme has at its heart the principal of making better use of the heritage assets of the town to help the town to prosper economically and socially. By making better and full use of our older buildings, many of which have unused empty space above ground floor, the programme can be seen as complementary to the Council's ability to respond to the Climate Emergency and achieve a carbon neutral Reading by 2030, taking into account the Council's Climate Change Strategy and its associated action plan and the Local Transport Plan along with any other relevant policies and statements.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

7.1 Section 138 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 places a duty on local authorities to involve local representatives when carrying out "any of its functions" by providing information, consulting or "involving in another way".

7.2 The aims and objectives of the HSHAZ programme are to meaningfully inform and engage with communities and stakeholders with a strong focus on local communities in the most deprived areas. The Council will need to produce a Community Engagement Plan and the key objectives will include:

- To inform and actively engage with a wide range of local communities and stakeholders on the Reading's HSHAZ programme proposals and to ensure, as far as possible, they have every opportunity to express their views to the project team at the design stage and before decisions are finalised;

- To ensure that the views and the needs of the local community are embedded within Reading's HSHAZ programme;
- To actively involve the communities and key interest parties in the enhancement of their local heritage to renew their sense of pride, identity, and ownership in developing the town's future;
- By taking an active and collaborative role with the programme and training opportunities, the community and local businesses are learning new skills, good practice and are becoming more resilient, creating a more prosperous and better maintained neighbourhood.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

8.2 The HSHAZ programme does not have a differential impact on: racial groups, gender, people with disabilities, people of a particular sexual orientation, people due to their age, or people due to their religious belief. The programme will promote equality of services/opportunity to all sectors of the community. The project will regularly engage, consult stakeholders and community and evaluate the various strands of the project. Activities will provide opportunities for enjoyment and learning for all regardless of ethnic origin, social background or financial means.

8.3 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) was not relevant to the decision to submit a Design Programme application to Historic England and the acceptance of the grant and the decision to enter in to a legal agreement with Historic England to deliver the programme.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Reading Borough Council has entered in to a legal agreement with Historic England on 29th May 2020. In accordance with Council's constitution, the Council's s151 Officer and Executive Director of Resources has authority to enter into grant agreements specifically section (3)(3) which reads "accept capital and revenue funding from external sources, and associated terms and conditions of grants within the context of the Council's approved budget framework". The project will follow Reading Borough Council and HE's standing orders and procurement rules.

9.2 The Council's Financial Regulations state that a capital programme is prepared on an annual basis for consideration by the Policy Committee. However, schemes may be added to, or removed from, the capital programme outside of the annual budget setting process with the approval of the Policy Committee, where the scheme is financed by external funding and/ or subject to financing from Section 106 contributions (see Financial Regulation 4.3.5).

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The total projected budget over the four years of the project; (April 2020 to 31 March 2024) is £1.615 million, £1.185m of capital expenditure and £0.430m of revenue expenditure.
- 10.2 The project has grant funding of £0.807m from Historic England, £0.430m will be used for revenue expenditure to ensure the project does not put an additional budget pressure on the revenue budget. This leaves £0.377m of the grant available towards the capital expenditure. The remaining capital expenditure of £0.808m will be funded by S106 and the allocation of an element of the 15% Central CIL funding.
- 10.3. The Central CIL funding is agreed annually, spending on the project will not be incurred unless this has been agreed.
- 10.3 The table below shows a breakdown of the revenue and capital costs as well as the funding:

Revenue	From 2020 to 2024 £m
Employee costs	0.180
Running costs	0.250
Total	0.430
Historic England Grant	(0.430)
Net Revenue Cost to the Council	-

Capital	From 2020 to 2024 £m
Capital costs	1.185
Historic England Grant	(0.377)
CIL (local 15%) and S106	(0.808)
Net Capital Cost to the Council Total	-

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1

High Streets Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) Guidance Notes. March 2020
 High Streets Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) Supplementary Guidance Notes. May 2020
 All produced by Historic England

Appendix A

Plan showing the three conservation areas subject to HSHAZ; Castle Hill/Russell Street, St Mary's Butts/Castle Street, and Market Place/London Street

