

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	15 th DECEMBER 2020		
TITLE:	HIGH STREET HERITAGE ACTION ZONE PROGRAMME 2020 - 2024 UPDATE REPORT		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLORS PAGE / ROWLAND	PORTFOLIO:	DEPUTY LEADER AND STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT / CULTURE, HERITAGE AND RECREATION
SERVICE:	PLANNING AND CULTURE	WARDS:	ALL
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Reading is one of 68 areas of England to receive a share of a £95 million government fund having secured High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) status for three conservation areas in the centre of the town. As a result, Reading will receive up to £806,500 from Historic England. The Council will match-fund £808,500 to deliver a £1.6 million implementation programme over the next 3.5 years. The Council has entered into a contract with Historic England to run the programme from 1 April 2020.
- 1.2 The High Street Heritage Action Zones (HSHAZ) scheme is a regeneration initiative lead by Historic England, working with local councils and the community to create economic growth and improve the appearance and quality of life in historic high streets.
- 1.3 The context in which the Council is delivering this programme is very different from when the bid was made a year ago. The impact of the coronavirus is far reaching and has already had major effects on high streets, including local businesses and their communities. Furthermore, the recent lockdowns and safety restriction measures are also impacting on the delivery of the programme. However, the HSHAZ programme can play an important role in the recovery of our high streets. The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with more details of the programme and the current situation.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 The committee is invited to note the HSHAZ programme aims and objectives, the plans to deliver the HSHAZ programme over the next four years and to update on the main activities and key milestones over the next 6 months.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Reading's High Street Heritage Action Zone programme's approach contributes directly to the long-term Reading 2050 Vision, which aims to establish Reading as an internationally recognised and economically successful city region. It envisages a place where low carbon living is the norm, and where the built environment, technology and innovation have all combined to create a smart, dynamic and sustainable city, providing a high quality of life and equal opportunity for all.
- 3.2 The Borough's new Local Plan also supports these aspirations for Reading as a dynamic, inclusive community of the 21st Century and 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. THE PROPOSAL

Current Position

- 4.1 The Reading's HSHAZ programme with a total budget of £1.6 million programme has clear objectives:
- 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 their town.
 - 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 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.

4.2 The Reading's HSHAZ programme, focusing on three Conservation Areas (Castle Hill/Russell Street/Oxford Road, St Mary's Butts/Castle Street, Market Place/London Street) will deliver across three complementary strands:

- **Physical interventions:** 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:** activities and events celebrating the history of the high street and its importance to local communities

4.3 The Programme update

Since the Policy committee report submitted on the 20 July 2020, a range of actions set out below have taken place.

4.4 Programme governance

Two project officers have been recruited:

- A Conservation Officer, who will focus on developing the conservation projects and activities within the conservation strands
- A Community Engagement and Cultural Officer, who will focus on implementing the community engagement strand and the cultural programme

A programme steering group was established with key officers and partners. The group virtually met for the first time on the 10 November 2020 and terms of reference for the group have been drafted.

4.5 Communication and Branding

The national HSHAZ scheme was formally launched by Historic England (HE) and DCMS on the 19th September 2020. The Reading team created a new designated webpage on the Council website: www.reading.gov.uk/hshaz. The page will be updated as the programme progresses with separate pages for the different project strands. The team is currently developing a logo and a clear branding for the programme to comply with HE's branding guidance.

4.6 Strands update

In advance of the wider cultural programme, Historic England offered several Pilot Grants to initiate and test projects to engage communities. In September 2020, Reading was successful in achieving a grant of £9,231 to run a pilot project for the HSHAZ. This pilot project focus is on the Oxford Road conservation area, specifically the east end between Howard Street to Russell Street.

4.7 The newly appointed Conservation Officer is refining the priority list of the buildings and shop fronts which have been identified as needing improvement, when confirmed and costed this list will be subject to consultation.

4.8 The initial community engagement work is helping with the development of a community mapping and engagement framework that will help the programme team to communicate and engage with the various communities within the three conservation areas that form the HSHAZ.

- 4.9 The newly appointed Community Engagement and Cultural officer has established contact and already made strong connections with community groups with a focus on the Oxford Road area.
- 4.10 Wider Cultural Programme: Historic England, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Art Council England are providing local cultural grants for the HSHAZ programmes through their Cultural Consortium. Each scheme can apply for up to £100K, to develop a programme of activities and events to celebrate their local character and heritage, making our high streets a key place to experience and participate in culture. Reading's Programme through its established cultural consortium is developing a cultural proposal around the three conservation areas.

5.0 Next Steps and Milestones over the next 6 months:

- 5.1 Conservation and public realm projects: To review and refine the conservation plans and to submit them for consultation. To engage with key internal and external partners to ensure a holistic approach to the implementation of conservation plans within the town centre. To comment on planning applications submitted within the HSHAZ areas.
- 5.2 Community engagement: To develop and produce a community engagement plan, which will give a framework for meaningful engagement with community groups and key stakeholders within the three conservation areas. Giving a voice to the grassroots organisations and hard to reach communities within the HSHAZ.
- 5.3 Cultural pilot: To deliver the activities of the cultural pilot project from October 2020 to the end of February 2021, including an evaluation report.
- 5.4 Cultural programme: The initial community engagement for the cultural pilot grant project will inform and be the basis of our wider cultural programme bid for the three conservation areas, to deliver Covid-19 secure activities and events that build lasting community trust, engagement and participation. To submit the application by the 11th December 2020.
- 5.5 Programme monitoring evaluation: To ensure regular communication and reporting to Historic England, including quarterly update reports and grant claims.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 6.1 The HSHAZ programme supports 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.
- 6.2 The programme also complements 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.

7. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

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

7.2 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.

8. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

8.1 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".

8.2 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 Programme 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.

9. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

9.1 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.

9.2 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.

9.3 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is not relevant to deliver the Reading's HSHAZ Programme.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 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.

10.2 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).

11.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 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.

11.2 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.

11.3 The HSHAZ programme was successful in receiving a small cultural pilot grant of £9,231. This grant is not part of the main budget and will be added as a separate table below.

11.4 The table below shows a breakdown of the revenue and capital costs as well as the funding:

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

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

Cultural Pilot grant	From October 2020 to March 2021
HE grant award	£9,231

12.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1 *High Street Heritage Action Zone, Policy Committee report, 20 July 2020*