

BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of Mark Kiddle-Morris, the Executive Member for Assets & Strategic Development

To: Cabinet: 18 June 2013

(Author: Kevin Ward - Growth Programme Manager)

Subject: Thetford Town Centre Masterplan

Purpose: The purpose of this report is for Members to consider the outcome of the Thetford Town Centre Masterplanning process and agree that the Thetford Town Centre Masterplan is adopted as a Council document to coordinate investment and regeneration activity in Thetford town centre.

Recommendation(s):

It is recommended that Cabinet endorse option 1 of this report and agree that the Thetford Town Centre Masterplan is adopted by Council.

1. BACKGROUND

The adopted Thetford Area Action Plan (2012) sets out the policy framework for the growth and regeneration of Thetford. This includes a policy which positively and proactively seeks to facilitate investment in the town centre, particularly in the short to medium term, to ensure that the town centre is a position to serve the town's current population as well as attracting the growing population as the location of choice for shopping, leisure and culture. The town centre policy in the Area Action Plan identifies that a masterplan will be prepared to coordinate investment and regeneration activity. The masterplan process is part of implementing and delivering the Council's planned vision for Thetford.

- 1.1 The Thetford Town Centre Masterplan work follows a number of studies and plans commissioned and prepared in the last decade which have sought to promote redevelopments within the town centre. These studies were prepared at a time when the market was buoyant and made strong assumptions that the market would be capable of delivery. This previous work was perhaps more aspirational rather than grounded in the realities of delivery. It has been important that this latest town centre masterplan work is based on a robust and sound understanding of development viability and identifies proposals that the market can deliver and where public sector funding and assets can assist delivery.
- 1.2 Breckland Council is the lead authority that has commissioned the work and is a key landowner in the town centre. The work has been funded from efficiency savings and is supported by a significant contribution from Norfolk County Council. Thetford Town Council has not contributed any funding but has participated in the steering group that has overseen its preparation. Ultimately, the Thetford Town Centre Masterplan will be a Breckland Council document.
- 1.3 Like many town centres, Thetford is experiencing pressure from changes in shopping habits and competition from other towns and on-line and out-of-town retailing. However, the timing of the masterplan works well with the current A11 improvements, ongoing measures to promote and make the most of the

attractive environment in and around the town and available developer contributions for town centre improvements.

2. MASTERPLAN PREPARATION

- 2.1 In July 2012, following a robust and transparent procurement process Allies and Morrison – Urban Practitioners (AM-UP) were appointed as consultants for the Thetford Town Centre Masterplan and delivery framework. This followed an interview process which included Thetford Town Council, Breckland Council and Norfolk County Council (joint funders of the Masterplan).
- 2.2 The brief for the masterplan included a requirement to produce a baseline report, a masterplan and a delivery framework. Early in the process a key stakeholder consultation event was held on 25th September 2012 in the Guildhall in Thetford. This event was attended by representatives from Breckland Council, Norfolk County Council, Thetford Town Council, Thetford Society, town centre retailers, Thetford businesses and local groups such as SORT-IT. This session identified issues and opportunities for the town centre which are captured and presented in the Baseline report. The masterplan responds to the issues identified but importantly it represents the first comprehensive assessment of delivery, recognising the need to identify schemes and solutions that will work for investors. In this regard the masterplan is a demanding delivery document rather than a softer ambition or vision document.

3. THE MASTERPLAN

- 3.1 The town centre masterplan identifies a strategy for the town centre and then focuses on short term, deliverable projects to improve the public realm and increase activity and footfall in the town centre. The masterplan then identifies a range of medium to longer term schemes which are dependent on changing market conditions and wider site assembly. Part of the benefit of having a masterplan is that these longer term sites and opportunities are not frustrated by poorly conceived short term schemes.
- 3.2 In the short term the catalysts for change will be the forthcoming relocation of the bus interchange to Minstergate, Town Council activity to improve the Guildhall complex and the riverside redevelopment area on the former Anchor site. The masterplan work reaffirms that the riverside area remains the key short term deliverable site in the town centre and that a leisure/hotel based scheme is an appropriate response to economic conditions and market interest.
- 3.3 The strategy in the short term for Thetford town centre will involve a blend of public investment (bus interchange), small scale improvements and recognising that the extent of the town centre will need to contract and re-focus around a new hub at the river corridor. Small scale improvements will involve shop front enhancements, better signage, improved street furniture and encouraging 'pop-up' developments (seasonal markets, pop-up cinema, pop-up retail units, themed events, festivals). A compact town centre will probably see commercial properties at the periphery on Guildhall Street and Magdalen Street changing to residential but enhanced focus of retail and commerce on King Street, the riverside and Minstergate.
- 3.4 The town centre framework also includes 7 key development sites. These are primarily long-term objectives. The two short term deliverables are the bus interchange on Minstergate, the Guildhall complex and the former Anchor site. The independent advice through the masterplan is that these sites are

deliverable from a market perspective. Longer term the masterplan identifies significant development opportunities at Minstergate (the Council owned retail units and car park), the 1960s riverside retail units, the former Cottage Hospital and various parcels of land and vacant areas at the Thetford Retail Park off Lime Kiln Lane. The masterplan illustrates how these sites could be redeveloped, taking into account the viability of these sites and attractiveness to the market.

- 3.5 The masterplan also considers how movement in and around the town centre could be enhanced. Proposals include re-fashioning the bridge to riverside and Butten Island, improving cycle connections around the town centre and especially to the railway station and controversially reintroducing car traffic into parts of the town centre which are currently pedestrianised. Car park provision has also been assessed and it is recommended that Tanner Street car park is decked to accommodate long-term demand as the town expands. A number of these measures are short term and reasonably affordable (cycle improvements, signage, small scale public realm improvements). There are also a number of proposals which could be delivered in the short term although they would require significant funding (externally sourced through bids). A good example would be a new bridge over the river, which similar to local examples in Norwich, could stimulate further interest and visitors to the town, especially if it was an innovative and cutting edge construction.
- 3.6 It is important to note that the masterplan contains a number of recommendations and measures such as reintroducing car traffic back into parts of Tanner Street and King Street, which are currently pedestrianised, could be contentious. Neither Breckland Council nor Norfolk County Council is required to deliver what is the masterplan but it is independent, objective advice from experience and evidence gathered from market town elsewhere. Importantly, unlike previous masterplans, this document has been prepared equally by architects/designers and surveyors/property consultants to provide a balance between the visionary and the deliverable.

4. THE DELIVERY PLAN

- 4.1 Financial viability and delivery is a critical part of the document. This element of the work has been undertaken by recognised property consultants G L Hearn and has been led by a surveyor who was responsible for the Dereham Town Centre redevelopment scheme (Dencora) and who has an intimate and considerable knowledge of local property markets and retail and leisure demand in market towns in the current economic climate. Thetford is not a prime market location and consequently conditions are challenging. The growth in the population through the planned urban extension is the key factor which attracts the market and will lever in investment. This is a long term activity and in the short term, town centre development will be reliant on public sector assistance whether that is in the form of assets or subsidy. In this regard it is important to note that the partners behind the masterplan (the three Councils) have approached the masterplan work on the basis of understanding the collective public land ownership in Thetford town centre to enable delivery.
- 4.2 The delivery element of the plan recognises that large scale, big impact redevelopment schemes are currently not happening in small to medium sized market towns. Thetford does have the advantage of the riverside site which is now in preparation and has the benefit of planning consent. The viability work confirms that this site represents the focus for short term activity and development in the town centre. Elsewhere, other key development sites will be dependent on market conditions improving. However, the cumulative

impact of smaller, more focussed public realm improvements and meanwhile uses cannot be underestimated.

5. MASTERPLAN STATUS

- 5.1 The Thetford Town Centre Masterplan is intended to be a document of the Council and as such will have that status. It is not a supplementary planning document by virtue of not having been subjected to the scale of public consultation and assessment required. However, as an adopted document of the Council it will be a material consideration in planning, alongside the Area Action Plan, although its weight in the decision making process needs to reflect this. More importantly as an adopted document of the Council it will be an important framework for informing Council activity in respect of its land-holdings. It will also be a positive document for those making investment decisions in Thetford whether it is private landlords, the highway authority or other public bodies.
- 5.2 Some early opportunities are already coming to fruition, such as the redevelopment of the former Magistrate's Court. More importantly, there is a range of activity and commitment already in Thetford which is doing much to support the town centre and to celebrate local heritage and connections. The masterplan does not seek to over-shadow or replicate this existing local activity but it should be embraced and supported as a tangible commitment to support ongoing delivery in the town centre.
- 5.3 The masterplan is a document to be used in negotiations on public and private investment decisions and planning applications.

6. OPTIONS

- 6.1 There are two options available to Members:
 - (1) Members consider the Thetford Town Centre Masterplan and agree that it is recommended to be adopted as a document of the Council to coordinate investment and regeneration in Thetford Town Centre.
 - (2) Members consider the Thetford Town Centre Masterplan and agree that it is not adopted as a document of the Council.

7. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1 It is recommended that Members endorse option 1 which will allow for the Masterplan to take effect in coordinating investment and regeneration activity in Thetford town centre. It is timely that the Council has a masterplan in place as it considers future options for its asset base. In the short term, despite challenging market conditions, there is funding available for Thetford Town Centre, and a Masterplan will enable those monies to be spent in an effective and synchronized way. The Masterplan will also be a consideration in the determination of planning applications when formally adopted.
- 7.2 Endorsing option 2 above would have the impact of creating uncertainty for investment and facilitating piecemeal and adhoc developments that may cause harm and long term damage to the town centre whilst simultaneously preventing coordinated and comprehensive regeneration which will benefit the town over the longer term.

8. EXPECTED BENEFITS

- 8.1 The expected benefits of adopting the Masterplan is that it will ensure investment and activity in the town centre is coordinated in a way which works

in harmony towards securing the vision and the long term objectives. The ultimate benefit is that the town centre develops as an environment to visit and invest in and attracts existing and future residents as the destination of choice for retail, leisure and culture.

9. IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Legal

There are no direct legal risks resulting from this report.

9.2 Risks

There are no risks associated with this report.

9.3 Financial

This report has no financial risks. The Masterplan work has been funded by Breckland Council and Norfolk County Council from identified savings in 2012/13.

9.4 Timescales

The programme is to adopt the Masterplan as a document of the Council at the meeting of Council on 4th July 2013.

9.5 Equality and Diversity

None

9.6 Stakeholders / Consultation

Breckland Members, Norfolk County Members, Town Council Members and Elizabeth Truss M.P have been consulted on the document. The masterplan also included a wider consultation event with local businesses, transport operators, retailers and heritage advisors.

9.7 Contracts

None

9.8 Section 17, Crime & Disorder Act 1998

None

10 WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED

Thetford Abbey; Thetford Castle; Thetford Guildhall; Thetford Saxon

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Key Decision – No

Appendices attached to this report: Thetford Town Centre Masterplan