

Meeting date: 5th September 2022

Report to: Environment and Infrastructure CPH

Subject/report title: Solihull Town Centre Public Realm Improvement Scheme

Report from: Assistant Director for Growth and Development

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Wards affected:

- All Wards | Bickenhill | Blythe | Castle Bromwich | Chelmsley Wood |
 Dorridge/Hockley Heath | Elmdon | Kingshurst/Fordbridge | Knowle |
 Lyndon | Meriden | Olton | Shirley East | Shirley South |
 Shirley West | Silhill | Smith's Wood | St Alphege
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Public/private report: Public

Exempt by virtue of paragraph: (If 'Private', select relevant paragraph and delete the rest. If 'Public', delete all options)

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To seek approval to engage with the public on both the Solihull Town Centre Public Realm Strategy and possible options for phase one of the strategy: High Street to Malvern Park Design.

2. Decision(s) recommended

- 2.1 The Cabinet Member is asked to

- (a) Approve commencement of public engagement and dialogue on the Public Realm Strategy, as set out in paragraphs 3.6 - 3.11.
- (b) Approve commencement of public engagement and discussion about a possible option for phase one of the strategy: High Street to Malvern Park Design, as set out in paragraphs 3.12 - 3.14.
- (c) Delegate authority for the Director of Economy and Infrastructure to approve the engagement material, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Environment and Infrastructure.

3. Matters for Consideration

Introduction

- 3.1 The Solihull Town Centre Masterplan 2020 identified the public realm across the town centre as an area of weakness and an opportunity for improvement.
- 3.2 Well designed and high-quality public realm can deliver a host of benefits for town centres:
- (a) It can help create inclusive environments that everyone can enjoy.
 - (b) It can help people access and move around safely, easily, and intuitively.
 - (c) It can support wellbeing and cohesion by encouraging positive social interaction that builds a more cohesive society and provides opportunity for people to be physical active.
 - (d) It can help deliver a higher quality environment that is attractive and stimulating.
 - (e) It can improve the quality of our environment which enhances quality of life and contributes significantly to the experience of visitors and customers.
 - (f) Finally, it can deliver economic benefit by increasing footfall, increasing dwell time, and providing confidence for investment.
- 3.3 Whilst there have been localised improvements, much of the public realm in the heart of the town centre has remained unchanged for many years.
- 3.4 At a time when the role of town centres is changing, and the creation of positive and unique experiences for visitors is becoming more important, the role of good public realm has never been more relevant.
- 3.5 To meet the Council's ambitious aspirations post covid, for a revitalised town centre and a revival of the visitor economy, as stated in the Council Plan, we need a strong and cohesive strategy to guide the design and quality of its public realm.

Public Realm Strategy

- 3.6 A draft Public Realm Strategy (PRS) is attached in Appendix 1. It supports the Council's aim to create a town centre that will attract investment and that people will be happy and proud to use.
- 3.7 The PRS aligns and complements wider Council policies and strategies including:
- (a) The Solihull Walking and Cycling Strategy which seeks to achieve a modal shift towards active travel and steers the public realm towards a more people focussed environment, increasing priority for pedestrians and cyclists.

- (b) The Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan which identifies five priority cycle schemes that link directly into the town centre and are supported by the vision and principles set out in the PRS.
 - (c) Policies around climate change and environmental improvements, such as the Urban Forestry Strategy, Wildlife Corridors, and Planting for the Future, which can be supported by the urban greening promoted in the PRS.
- 3.8 The PRS is intended to support delivery of seamless, high quality public realm space throughout Solihull town centre by setting out design guidance to inform future development.
- 3.9 The PRS provides an overall framework of design principles for future projects to adhere to, ensuring a coordinated approach and continuity as developments come forward at different times.
- 3.10 The PRS includes concept designs which provide examples of how the vision and principles set out in the Strategy might be applied across the town centre. The concept designs are not fixed or final proposals but are illustrative of the types of improvements that could be achieved and are aimed at promoting discussion and debate with residents.
- 3.11 The vision of the PRS is to:
- (a) Design a public realm that, through simple uncluttered design, allows the local identities of vibrant destinations and character areas of the town centre to be better connected, expressed, and celebrated and integrate the adjacent countryside and parks with the town centre.
 - (b) Encourage the rediscovery and re-imagining of the town centre's heritage, its parks and local distinctiveness through pedestrian and cycle friendly streets and trails, along with the simplification of the public realm design to create a positive sense of place and thereby improving the appeal of the town centre.
 - (c) Using high-quality materials, sustainable technologies, and urban greening, the implementation of the PRS will support an accessible, safe, and healthy town centre which blends strong identity and character with aspirational new and refurbished buildings, greener streets and spaces, new landscape features and flexible social spaces for today and in the future.

High Street to Malvern Park Phase One Design

- 3.12 Alongside the PRS, a concept design has been developed for High Street to Malvern Park for public engagement and discussion. If there was sufficient support for this design, it could be further refined and ultimately delivered as a first phase scheme of the overall PRS.
- 3.13 This concept design covers the area shown in the phase one area and concept design drawings plan in Appendix 2. It can be broken down into 3 distinct sub sections: High Street, Church Square and New Road.
- 3.14 Plans showing the concept design for discussion and engagement on each of these

three elements are provided in Appendix 2. The key features of this concept design are:

High Street

- (a) Creation of a central green spine running the length of the pedestrianised High Street. Based along spine are 'rainwater gardens', ground level planting and semi-mature trees that provide greenery all year round. Street furniture, including bins and seating, are interspersed between the soft landscaping in the central spine and would be selected from a 'signature' palette as defined in the PRS. Space remains on either side of the central spine to accommodate pedestrians, pavement cafes, and service vehicles.
- (b) Three 'focal' areas provide natural breaks in the green spine and can accommodate art, events, celebrating heritage and culture, small bespoke markets, and street events. Rocks suitable for informal 'clambering' and routes through the green spine are also proposed, making the space interactive and introducing an element of informal play.
- (c) Surface materials are selected from the 'gold' palette as defined in the PRS and include hard sandstone and porphyry paving that reflects the importance and prominence of this important pedestrian environment.
- (d) Intelligent streetscape lighting is proposed which blends into the environment and includes electrical connections for markets and events to reduce clutter.

Church Square

- (e) The continuation of a pedestrian friendly environment beyond High Street past St Alphege Church and towards Malvern Park could create a new public square in the heart of this conservation area which could accommodate pavement cafes, events, and enable visitors to enjoy the heritage surrounding the new square.
- (f) Expansion of the pedestrianised area by altering the carriageway and moving the war memorial closer to the Church will provide the opportunity to create this new square, which could then accommodate the introduction of new soft landscaping.

New Road to Malvern Park

- (g) Alterations to the carriageway and improving crossings could provide an enhanced walking route that follows the natural desire lines and helps strengthen the pedestrian link between the town centre and Malvern Park.
- (h) A reduced carriageway could also provide the space to accommodate a new dedicated two-way cycle lane for the Knowle to Solihull Cycle route. This route is a primary cycle corridor defined in the adopted Council Cycling and Walking Strategy and Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan and is now being developed with funds secured as part of the Council's allocation from the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement.

- (i) The footpath along Park Road, linking New Road to Malvern Park, could be widened and lighting improved, to complete the connection between the heart of the town centre and the park.
- (j) It should be noted that these concepts are only indicative, and their purpose is to start discussion with residents as to their appetite for change. They are not fixed or final options and there are other options that could be explored which could deliver greater or lesser benefits. Resident engagement will identify these preferred options.

Public Consultation

- 3.15 Public engagement on town centre public realm was carried out in September 2021. The information obtained was used to inform the development of the PRS and the possible option for the phase one concept design.
- 3.16 The next steps are to carry out public consultation on the PRS and phase one concept designs, to gauge support and identify areas for improvement and concern which may require further consideration with different options or revisions to initial designs.
- 3.17 The engagement material will include consideration of the phase one concept designs. This will provide an example of how the vision and principles of the PRS can be delivered in practice and will be presented to the public in a way that will support high quality engagement.
- 3.18 The consultation material will be designed so that it presents a clear vision for the public realm across and describe the potential there is to change the look and feel of the space and the way people use it.
- 3.19 A concept design showing how the highway could be altered around Church Square to enable the achievement of that vision will be presented, along with alternative options that have been considered at a high level but could be explored in more detail.
- 3.20 In the engagement material and exhibitions, we will highlight where the phase one concept design responds to the overall PRS and encourage residents to respond to both.
- 3.21 It is proposed to carry out the engagement for a minimum period of 4 weeks from early September to early October 2022.
- 3.22 It is proposed that the following approach is adopted:
 - (a) Online – dedicated webpages and a website setting out the proposals using plans, narrative and images and providing a link to a survey where feedback can be given.
 - (b) Physical Display – a physical display established within the town centre for the public to view. Two public exhibitions will be held where members of the project team will be present with the display to talk about the proposals with members of the public.

- (c) Promotion of the consultation via bulletins, social media, local media, press releases and email circulation lists.

Next Steps

- 3.23 Following the public consultation, the feedback received will be collated and a consultation report will be produced. Recommendations for design changes or follow up actions will be made prior to work commencing on the development of an outline business case.
 - 3.24 The outline business case will be used to secure funding for further development and delivery of the phase one concept design. Potential funders and sources of funding will be identified through the development of the funding strategy as part of the financial case.
- 4. What options have been considered and what is the evidence telling us about them?**
- 4.1 At the outset of the project, a multi-disciplinary steering group was established to help set objectives for the scheme. The steering group helped identify the weaknesses and opportunities of the public realm in its current condition and considered what good future public realm looks like. This work included identifying the considerations that needed to be made for long term maintenance requirements.
 - 4.2 The project team has carried out public engagement, undertaken a 'Pedestrian Environmental Review' (PERs) assessment and a 'Healthy Streets' assessment to inform development of the PRS and phase one concept design. The use of these assessments represents nationally acknowledged best practice.
 - 4.3 Design guidance around street layouts and the use of tactile paving, level surfaces, coloured surfaces, road markings and at grade crossings has been carefully considered to ensure the phase one concept design balances the needs of users with different impairments and meets accessibility standards.
 - 4.4 Objectives for the PRS were set by the steering group and can be seen in Appendix 3.
 - 4.5 Several options for the phase one design of the PRS were developed and discussed with key stakeholders in a series of design workshops, ranging from low to high level interventions. Features considered include:
 - (a) A lower intervention design on High Street which retains several of the existing trees, and the chicane layout of the road. This option proposed some low-level planting connecting trees, but not as rainwater gardens, and the removal of some of the trees which are obstructing buildings.
 - (b) A lower intervention on New Road which retains a two-way carriageway and uses changes to surface material and street signage to try and create some sense of a pedestrian environment.

- (c) A higher-level intervention on New Road that sees the closure of New Road around St Alphege Church and enables the creation of a fully pedestrianised public square.

5. Reasons for recommending preferred option

5.1 The merits of each option for phase one of the PRS were assessed against the extent to which they delivered the vision and placemaking objectives set out in the PRS, as well as several other criteria, including:

- (a) Improving connectivity, permeability, and ease of movement.
- (b) Improving quality and identity of place.
- (c) Health and wellbeing.
- (d) Climate resilience and low carbon economy.
- (e) Costs and deliverability.

5.1.2 Options being presented for discussion are not being suggested as preferred options, but scored highest in the appraisal and could deliver transformational change.

6. Implications and Considerations

6.1 State how the proposals in this report contribute to the priorities in the [Council Plan](#):

Priority:	Contribution:
People and Communities: 1. Improving outcomes for children and young people in Solihull. 2. Good quality, responsive, and dignified care and support for Adults in Solihull when they need it. 3. Take action to improve life chances and health outcomes in our most disadvantaged communities. 4. Enable communities to thrive.	The PRS seeks to create a place that is safe, accessible, and somewhere that people and communities can meet and spend time. It seeks to create an open and inclusive place that encourages people to come together and spend time. A space that is flexible to accommodate uses that serve everyone.
Economy: 5. Develop and promote the borough's economy, with a focus on revitalising our town and local centres. 6. Maximising the opportunities of UK Central and HS2.	Well designed, attractive, and high-quality public realm can help increase visitor numbers, ensure the town centre remains competitive, that people dwell longer, spend more, and return more often, thus making Solihull an attractive place to invest.

Priority:	Contribution:
7. Increase the supply of affordable and social housing that is environmentally sustainable.	The PRS seeks to improve the public realm so that it helps to attract inward investment and increase the rateable value of property.
Environment: 8. Enhance our natural environment, improve air quality and reduce net carbon emissions.	The PRS promotes public realm which introduces more trees, planting, vertical greening, and sustainable urban drainage and promoting connections with surrounding neighbourhoods and greenspaces.
9. Promote employee wellbeing.	The PRS helps create a town centre which is an attractive place to sit, relax, dwell, meet and spend time – a significant asset for employees of the council and those of other local employers.

6.2 Consultation and Scrutiny:

6.2.1 A multi-disciplinary project steering group has been established with representation from departments across the council with an interest or influence on the public realm. The steering group has been engaged and consulted throughout the process of developing the PRS.

6.2.2 A public engagement exercise was held in September 2021 where members of the public were invited to speak to the design team about the current strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of the public realm, to inform the development of the PRS.

6.2.3 External stakeholders have also been engaged in the development of the PRS, including West Midlands Police, Solihull BID, Counter Terrorism, CCTV, and Historic England.

6.3 Financial implications:

6.3.1 There are no immediate financial implications arising from the engagement exercise, however the further development and delivery of the scheme will require additional resourcing which is yet to be secured.

6.3.2 The development of the PRS have been progressed using funding secured from the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) with up to £526,000 having been unlocked to support the development of an outline business case for the scheme.

6.3.3 Work is being undertaken to secure further funding to allow for the development of the PRS beyond the Outline Business Case stage; and to identify options for funding and financing elements of the delivery of the PRS. In the first instance this will include accessing a further £60,000 of funding from the WMCA which has been earmarked for this project within the affordable limit (sometimes referred to as the leader's allocation)

for the UKC investment Programme. Any financial implications arising from potential funding sources in future will be considered as required in due course.

6.4 Legal implications:

6.4.1 There are no legal implications as a direct result of this report.

6.5 Risk implications, including Risk Appetite:

6.5.1 The Corporate Risk Management approach has been applied to identify and assess the significant risks associated with the proposed town centre redevelopment.

A full project risk register has been produced and is monitored regularly. The main risks are as follows:

- Scope: Failure to deliver scheme benefits – mitigation includes effective stakeholder engagement and management.
- Funding: Failure to identify funding strategy for capital work – mitigation includes the production of robust business cases.
- Costs: Unforeseen costs in implementation – mitigation includes strong project management and procurement functions.

6.6 Equality implications:

6.6.1 Accessibility for all members of the public will be a key factor in appraising all design options. A Fair Treatment Assessment of the preferred option will be undertaken as the design progresses further.

6.7 Linkages to our work with the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), Local Enterprise Partnership or the Birmingham & Solihull Integrated Care System (ICS).

6.7.1 This project forms part of the UKC Infrastructure programme which has been funded by WMCA.

7. List of appendices referred to

7.1 Appendix 1 – Draft Public Realm Strategy.

7.2 Appendix 2 – Phase One Area and Concept Design Drawings.

7.3 Appendix 3 – Town Centre PRS Objectives.

8. Background papers used to compile this report

8.1 None.

9. List of other relevant documents

9.1 None.