

Meeting date: 5th September 2023

Report to: Cabinet Member for Environment and Infrastructure

Report title: Solihull Town Centre Public Realm Strategy and Improvement Scheme

Report from: Assistant Director - Growth and Development

Report author/lead contact officer: Catriona Gilbey, UKC Project Manager,
catriona.gilbey@solihull.gov.uk

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

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present the findings of public consultation on the Public Realm Strategy (PRS) and concept design for Solihull Town Centre and to seek approval of the PRS.
- 1.2 A PRS has been developed to support the delivery of seamless, high quality public realm space throughout Solihull town centre, by setting out design guidance to inform future development.
- 1.3 Alongside the PRS, a concept design demonstrating how design principles could be delivered has been developed for a first phase scheme covering High Street to Malvern Park.
- 1.4 Public consultation on the PRS and concept design was held between 9th June and 24th July 2023. The response to the consultation shows there is agreement for the need for a PRS and the design principles set out were well supported. The response to the concept design proposals was positive overall with good feedback received for each element of the design which can be considered and incorporated in future design development.

2. Decision(s) Recommended

- 2.1 That the Public Realm Strategy is approved.

- 2.2 That the concept design is approved as the basis for future design development.
- 2.3 That authority is delegated to the Director of Economy and Infrastructure to approve the submission of applications to secure funding for further scheme development and delivery.

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1. Matters for Consideration

Introduction

- 1.1 The Solihull Town Centre Masterplan 2020 identified the public realm across the town centre as an opportunity for improvement.
- 1.2 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 physically 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 investors.
- 1.3 Whilst there have been localised improvements, much of the public realm in the heart of Solihull town centre has remained unchanged for many years.
- 1.4 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.
- 1.5 To meet the Council's ambitious vision for a revitalised 'post-covid' town centre and visitor economy, as stated in the Council Plan, there is a need for a strong and cohesive strategy to guide the design and quality of the public realm.

Public Realm Strategy

- 1.6 A draft PRS was presented for public consultation and 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.
- 1.7 The PRS aligns and complements wider Council policies and strategies including:
- (a) 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.

- (b) The Solihull Economic Strategy, which recognises the importance of investing in Solihull Town Centre to improve its attractiveness and maintain its role as a leading regional centre.
 - (c) The Solihull Walking and Cycling Strategy, which seeks to achieve a shift towards active travel and steers the public realm towards a more people-focussed environment.
 - (d) 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.
- 1.8 The PRS is intended to support delivery of seamless, high quality public realm throughout Solihull town centre by setting out design guidance to inform future development.
- 1.9 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.
- 1.10 The PRS includes concept designs, which provide examples of how the vision and principles it sets out 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.
- 1.11 The vision of the PRS is to:
- (a) Design a public realm that, through simple uncluttered design, enhances the appearance, biodiversity, and utility of the town centre, promotes its local identity, heritage and individual character areas, and encourages more dwell time.
 - (b) Encourage the connection of the town centre with its adjacent parks and countryside through the establishment of pedestrian and cycle friendly streets and trails.

High Street to Malvern Park concept design

- 1.12 Alongside the PRS, a concept design has been developed for High Street to Malvern Park and was presented to the public for engagement and discussion.
- 1.13 This concept design illustrative masterplan is provided in Appendix 2. It can be broken down into three distinct sub sections: High Street, Church Square and New Road.
- 1.14 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 that includes 'rainwater gardens', ground level planting and semi-mature trees providing 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 street art, small bespoke markets and street events. Areas suitable for informal play and routes through the green spine are also proposed, making the space interactive and introducing an element of informal play.
- (c) Surface materials proposed in this area are 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 would complement the establishment of a new public square in the heart of the conservation area at the southeast end of High Street and could accommodate pavement cafes, events and enable visitors to enjoy the heritage surrounding the new square.
- (f) Expansion of the pedestrianised area, by realigning the carriageway and moving the war memorial closer to the end of High Street, will provide the opportunity to create this new square, which could accommodate the introduction of new soft landscaping.

New Road to Malvern Park

- (g) Realigning 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) 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.

Public Consultation

- 1.15 Public consultation on the PRS and concept design was held between 9th June and 24th July 2023.
- 1.16 Several methods were used to promote the consultation, including:
 - (a) Consultation material, including exhibition boards, explained the key features of the PRS and the concept design. 3D images were produced along with a 'fly through' video which helped people to visualise the scheme.

- (b) The consultation was promoted widely through several channels including social media, press releases, news bulletins, including Solihull Connected, and by direct mail to key stakeholders.
- (c) The exhibition boards were on display in The Core throughout the consultation period.
- (d) Face to face events were held on the High Street and in The Core during weekdays and at the weekend.
- (e) An online engagement website was created where consultation material could be viewed, and a survey was produced to gather feedback.

1.17 The level of response to the consultation was strong:

- (a) 3,100 visitors to the engagement website.
- (b) 1,500 visitors downloaded documents or images and videos.
- (c) 167 visitors completed the survey.
- (d) Approximately 150-200 people engaged at the face-to-face sessions. These sessions were 3 hours long each and four members of the project team were present. The public engaged well, and c75-100 people were talked to at each session.
- (e) Representations received from Transport for West Midlands (TfWM), Solihull Business Improvement District (BID), and the Royal British Legion.

1.18 Analysis of the survey results and discussions at the face-to-face events has been carried out and the following key themes have emerged: (The Consultation Summary Report can be found in Appendix 4)

1.18.1 The majority of those engaged agreed with the need for a PRS and supported the design principles set out in the strategy. An average of 80% of respondents supported each of the design principles. Several respondents commented on the appropriateness of investing money in public realm even when there is pressure on wider public finances. Officers also informed that external funding would be sought to contribute to the delivery of the scheme. Officers explained how investment in public realm could deliver positive benefits in terms of encouraging private investment in vacant units and ensuring the town centre remains prosperous.

1.18.2 In relation to the concept design, the overall response to the proposals for High Street was strongly positive, with an average of 75% of respondents supporting the key features of this section. Three common themes emerged which will be considered as the scheme develops as follows:

- (a) Concerns over people damaging the new public realm, dropping litter, loitering and general anti-social behaviour was the most common concern raised. Of the comments received, few identified features specific to the scheme but appeared to be a concern that could be applied to any investment in public realm.

- (b) The importance of ensuring that a plan is in place for ongoing maintenance, to ensure that the benefits of the new space are realised well into the future.
- (c) Ensuring that the central landscaped area and raingardens do not divide the High Street and make it difficult for pedestrians to cross from one side to the other or leave inadequate space for pedestrians to move around.

1.18.3 In relation to the proposals for Church Square, most respondents supported the key features of the design, but the average level of support, at 65%, was slightly lower than for the High Street proposals. Support for creating new pedestrian space that celebrates and helps people enjoy the history and heritage of this part of the town centre was highest, at 70%. The removal of road markings and use of paving to demarcate pedestrian priority received the lowest support at just over 60%. This is reflected in the common themes that emerged which were:

- (a) Concerns over the impact of the proposals on vehicle traffic. However, most comments in relation to this appeared to be due to an assumption that the proposal is to fully pedestrianise the space or make it one way for vehicles, which has been discounted.
- (b) Concern over the relocation of the war memorial. Specifically, concerns were around the appropriateness of relocating a war memorial and most people were unaware that it is not uncommon for them to be relocated, and that the proposal would place the memorial closer to its original position than its current location.
- (c) A general concern over the safety of shared spaces.

1.18.4 In relation to the proposals for New Road and Park Road, the majority of those engaged support the proposals of the concept design. On average, 75% of respondents supported the key features of this section, with the highest support for inclusion of tree planting on New Road and relocation of crossings to match desire lines for pedestrians and cyclists travelling between Malvern Park and the town centre. The key themes that emerged, which will be considered as the scheme develops, were:

- (a) The potential impact any changes to New Road would have on the ability for people to park temporarily when dropping and collecting children to and from St Alphege Infant school.
- (b) Concerns that the needs of pedestrians and cyclists are being prioritised over those of car drivers.
- (c) The potential impact of the proposals on traffic and congestion.

1.19 A formal response was submitted from TfWM , the key points being:

- (a) Overall, the PRS complements TfWM's Local Transport Plan (LTP5) and they would like this referenced in the strategies and policy context section of the PRS.

- (b) The PRS could include stronger demand management measures which are critical for reducing traffic.
- (c) TfWM's cycling and walking team support the strategy overall, but they feel there may be more opportunities to segregate cyclists from vehicles than is identified in the strategy and they would like to work with us to define where the cycle hubs and hire facilities could be best located.
- (d) Micro mobility options, including e-scooters aren't referenced in the PRS, and with likely legalisation, the PRS should consider how these options could be provided and designed for.

1.20 A formal response was submitted from Solihull BID, the key points being:

- (a) The need for ongoing maintenance and funding to be committed if the concept design is delivered.
- (b) Ensuring that access, seating, power points and bins are well considered in the design.

1.21 A formal response was received from the Royal British Legion confirming they do not have any objection to the principle of relocating the war memorial, and requesting they are involved in the future design stages on more detailed elements of this proposal.

2. What options have been considered and what is the evidence telling us about them?

2.1 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.

2.2 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 concept design. The use of these assessments represents nationally acknowledged best practice.

2.3 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 concept design balances the needs of users with different impairments and meets accessibility standards.

2.4 Objectives for the PRS were set by the steering group (see Appendix 3).

2.5 Several options for the concept design were developed and discussed with key stakeholders in design workshops, ranging from low to high level interventions. Features considered include:

- (a) A lower intervention design on High Street which retains several 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 existing trees which are obstructing buildings.

- (b) Two higher-level interventions on New Road that would include either the reduction to one way only traffic, or the full closure to enable the creation of a fully pedestrianised public square.

Options (a) and (b) above have been discounted.

3. Reasons for recommending preferred option

3.1 The merits of each option for concept design 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.

3.1.2 The option presented for public consultation scored highly in the appraisal and could deliver transformational change.

3.2 The feedback received from the public consultation on the concept design was generally positive, and where improvements were suggested, they can be incorporated in the subsequent scheme development.

3.3 The feedback received during the public consultation on the PRS was positive overall with consultees supportive of the need for a PRS and the design principles set out within it.

4. Implications and Considerations

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

Priority:	Contribution:
<p>People and Communities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">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.	<p>The PRS seeks to create a place that is safe, accessible, inclusive, attractive, flexible and in which people will wish to meet and spend time. The creation and use of such a high-quality space will help enable local communities to thrive.</p>

Priority:	Contribution:
4. Enable communities to thrive.	
<p>Economy:</p> <p>5. Develop and promote the borough's economy, with a focus on revitalising our town and local centres.</p> <p>6. Maximising the opportunities of UK Central and HS2.</p> <p>7. Increase the supply of affordable and social housing that is environmentally sustainable.</p>	<p>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 keeping Solihull an attractive place to invest. An enhanced town centre environment with new investment will be well placed to benefit from the arrival of passengers travelling via HS2.</p>
<p>Environment:</p> <p>8. Enhance our natural environment, improve air quality and reduce net carbon emissions.</p>	<p>The PRS promotes public realm that introduces more trees, planting, vertical greening, and sustainable urban drainage and promotes connections with surrounding neighbourhoods and greenspaces.</p>
9. Promote employee wellbeing	<p>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.</p>

4.2 Consultation and Scrutiny:

- 4.2.1 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.
- 4.2.2 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.
- 4.2.3 External stakeholders have also been engaged in the development of the PRS, including West Midlands Police, Solihull BID, Counter Terrorism, CCTV, and Historic England.
- 4.2.4 Public Consultation was held between 9th June 2023 and 24th July 2023.

4.3 Financial implications:

- 4.3.1 There are no immediate financial implications arising from approving the PRS and Phase 1 Concept Design, however the further development and delivery of the scheme will require additional resourcing which is yet to be secured.
- 4.3.2 The development of the PRS have been progressed using funding secured from the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) with up to £575,000 having been unlocked to support the development of an outline business case for the scheme.
- 4.3.3 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.

4.4 Legal implications:

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

4.5 Risk implications, including Risk Appetite:

- 4.5.1 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 of the design 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.

4.6 Equality implications:

- 4.6.1 Accessibility for all members of the public will be a key factor in appraising all detailed design options. A Fair Treatment Assessment of the preferred option will be undertaken as part of the development of the Outline Business Case.

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

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

5. List of appendices referred to

5.1 Appendix 1 –Public Realm Strategy

5.2 Appendix 2 – Concept Design Illustrative Masterplan

5.3 Appendix 3 – Scheme Objectives

5.4 Appendix 4 – Consultation Summary Report

6. Background papers used to compile this report

6.1 None

7. List of Other Relevant Documents

7.1 Solihull Town Centre Masterplan (2020)