

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting: 20th July 2017
Report of: Nick Fenwick
Title: Management of Conservation Areas

1.0 **Summary**

1.1 The March 2016 O&S Committee report into the Management of Conservation Areas made a number of recommendations. Following the progress report which was considered on the 22nd June, the Committee requested a further report which included a timeline for implementing the recommendations made in March 2016 and that this should be prepared for the next available meeting. This report sets out the delivery timeline and shows how the recommended projects fit in with the existing work programme of the Design and Conservation Team.

2.0 **Recommendations**

2.1 The committee is recommended to agree the timeline and approach set out in the report and Appendix 2.

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Report approved by: Nick Fenwick Deputy Managing Director

3.0 **Detailed proposal**

3.1 In March 2016 Cabinet agreed that the 11 recommendations made by the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group should be implemented. No time frames were specified in the minutes or the report for the implementation of the recommendations.

3.2 The report submitted to the Committee for consideration on 22nd June 2017 (Appendix 1) indicated progress to date and how the Design and Conservation team intends to build the projects into the work programme for the team going forwards. This is set out fully in Appendix 2 to this report as a Schedule for the review of all the existing documents and the projects emerging from the Overview and Scrutiny Review.

3.3 Once the Cabinet had agreed the recommendations made by the task group these were discussed within the policy team and the approach agreed was to try where possible to build the recommendations into projects on the existing work programme rather than create additional projects which would potentially slow down the delivery of the other projects already within the work plan. The work completed in 2016/17 included:

- two conservation area reviews (Grove Mill and The Square);
- working as a key member of the project team applying to Historic England for grant funding to undertake survey work to Little Cassiobury, then procuring consultants to do the work and managing the delivery of the reports and survey work;
- working with the applicant team for Frogmore House to reach a point where an application for the restoration of the Grade ii* star building and the development of the former gasholder site has been submitted;
- working with colleagues across the Council to reach agreement on repairs to the Pump House Theatre.

The work stream for 2017/18 includes:

- A full review of the Buildings at Risk Survey which will feed into the national list of Buildings at Risk which Historic England maintain.
- Review of the Conservation Area Appraisal for Macdonnell Gardens;
- Starting the review of the Conservation Area Management Plan.
- Starting to review the local list of buildings
- Reviewing the Shopfront Design Guide.

3.4 Project 1 – notifying residents and businesses that their building is in a conservation area will be reviewed with Revenues and Benefits team to see if we can include a conservation area awareness notification into the Council Tax mail out in spring 2018. This project cannot be built into existing work streams and would be an additional piece of work. This was delayed last year due to key staff within the department leaving and pressure to progress Local Plan 2.

- 3.5 Project 2 use of symbols on lampposts will be built into the review of the Conservation Area Management Plan which will start early in 2018.
- 3.6 Project 3 was affected by the reconfiguring of the Council's website. There is now clearer signposting to all the documents the Council has published relating to Conservation and Design – in particular the signposting for the Article 4 Directions has been improved and all the Directions can now be located on the website. Previously these documents were hard to find due to the rigid structure of the previous website. The policy team has started a project with the DM team to review how we can work more efficiently and this will include reviewing the guidance we have on the website for residents (part of project 3). This is a new work stream and progress was delayed until the new DM section head had started and his team fully resourced (there are currently vacant posts in that team as there are in the policy team which will affect the progress of this project. Once new staff are in post in August/September it will be possible to set up a workshop meeting to initiate this work stream (relevant to Project 9 as well).
- 3.7 Project 4 requires further discussion with members regarding what the purpose of the meetings etc should be; whether a descriptive account of heritage is required or more informative discussion on the language of the NPPF and what that means in relation to different types of heritage assets. The conservation management plan review could provide an opportunity to undertake a series of meetings which explain the significance of the areas, review the challenges and review what is needed to manage and enhance the areas for the next five years.
- 3.8 Project 5 is concerned with raising awareness and enhanced communications and could be launched alongside the review of the management plan. It will take some additional resource to provide the right messages and closer working with the Communications Team. Progress has been hindered by the high turnover of staff in the Communications team and the need to go over what we do each time a new person is assigned to the policy team. It is logical to include this work when the management plan review is launched as it gives a particular purpose to the social media campaign.
- 3.9 There are two projects related to Article 4 Directions (6 and 7). Article 4 Directions are an effective tool once they are up and running but they do take time to put together and require regular snapshot photographic reviews of all the properties covered by the Directions. The first step is a conversation with DM officers and the DM section head to review how the current ones are working; what additional development could sensibly be included and how we should manage the determination of applications ensuing from the application of any new Directions. This should take place before the review of the management plan starts and be built into that review as a proposal so that residents have an opportunity to discuss local restrictions to their development rights. A similar discussion took place when the conservation management plan was out for consultation and was generally found helpful.

- 3.10 Projects 9 and 10 concern the availability of resources to support the DM team and provide the relevant specialist knowledge to deal with the applications in conservation areas and to listed and locally listed buildings. The policy team will ensure that the resources required to support the DM are provided, however, in a period of competing needs and demands on resources we are looking at ways of working more efficiently so that the DM officers are equipped to deal with certain types of application by using an agreed set of guidelines and a verbal check where necessary as undertaken by other planning authorities. More complex applications and those for nationally listed buildings will continue to receive formal comments from the specialist officers as necessary.
- 3.11 Project 11 concerns member training. Officers have tried to get dates in the calendar, the first dates were postponed due to the run up to local elections, the next due to the snap general election and then due to more important member training. The most recent date of 6th July was postponed due the small number of members able to attend. The design and conservation team is also charged with training for members on developing a Watford Vernacular which is considered a priority by senior leadership team which took place on the 10th July. The postponed conservation training will be rescheduled for the Autumn. Further discussion is required regarding whether the conservation training should be compulsory for members sitting on DM committee.
- 3.12 In conclusion, officers believe that the recommendations are being met in the most resource efficient manner by making use of reviews of key documents and other projects within the work programme rather than creating an additional set of projects which could result in delays to the review of documents. As no time frame was set for the implementation of the recommendations officers believe that the approach taken is a pragmatic one.

4.0 **Implications**

The approach adopted by officers to implementing the recommendations is based on making the most efficient use of resources available to the team for such work. This approach is not expected to involve additional staff resources or additional budget.

4.1 **Financial**

- 4.1.1 The Head of Finance (shared services) comments that there are no significant additional resources required at this time which cannot be funded from existing budgets.

4.2 **Legal Issues (Monitoring Officer)**

- 4.2.1 The Head of Democracy and Governance comments that there are no legal implications in this report.

4.3 **Risks**

4.3.1 Risks to the delivery are limited and have low risk values.

Potential Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Overall score
Staff leave or have long absence due to sickness	2	2	4
Cost involved with some projects outweigh the potential benefit (e.g. information with annual Council Tax notices)	2	3	6

4.4 **Staffing**

4.4.1 No additional staffing resources are needed to deliver this in the way proposed. New staff members are joining the policy team in August to replace those who left earlier this year. This will ensure that the specialist staff working on this area can focus fully on delivering this work stream.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Report Submitted for 22nd June Committee

Appendix 2 Conservation and Design Team Project Timeline

Background Papers

March 2016 O&S Report

File Reference

P:\SP1.Corporate Democracy & External\SP1.2 Members\SP1.2.2 Meetings & Reports\SP1.2.2.4 Scrutiny Reports