

CABINET – 9 September 2015

THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 14 September 2015

CASSON BLOCK, ST GEORGE'S STREET, FORECOURT/FRONTAGE
ENHANCEMENT SCHEME

REPORT OF HEAD OF ECONOMY AND ARTS

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RECENT REFERENCES:

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Casson Block on St George's Street, Winchester, is home to a number of businesses, Winchester District Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and an NHS office. For many years, there has been a growing desire to improve the look and feel of the frontage and forecourt of the building, making it more inviting for customers, and improving the overall appearance for the benefit of all.

Progressing this project had previously been dependent on the Winchester Town Access Plan and the wider considerations regarding the one-way system and St George's Street in particular. However, the local business community has reiterated the need to move this work forward independently of these wider plans. Preliminary designs are being drawn up to improve the appearance of the forecourt and frontage, and these will form the basis of a consultation exercise in the Autumn.

It is envisaged that the consultation and the designs will be complete ready for work to commence during 2016.

This report explains the background to this work, and seeks agreement to allocate capital funding to enable this work to proceed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To Cabinet:

- 1 That, in accordance with Financial Procedure Rule 7.2, approval is given to vire £150,000 of capital budget in 2016/17 from the Winchester Town Access Plan to the Casson Block project, subject to the matter not being called in by The Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and
- 2 That, in accordance with Financial Procedure Rule 7.4, approval is given for the revenue budget virement of £5,000 of existing Local Economy budget and £5,000 of existing Estates budget in 2015/16, for the design phase of the works.

To The Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- 3 To consider whether to call-in the proposed capital budget virement of £150,000 for review, or make any comments to the Portfolio Holder or Cabinet.

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DETAIL:

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Casson Block on St George's Street was built in 1962/3 based on a design by Sir Hugh Casson, a highly regarded figure of the twentieth century, being not only an architect but also an outstanding writer, broadcaster, speaker and artist. The building is currently home to a number of businesses including eateries and a hearing-aid specialist, and the upper floors house an NHS service. It is also home to Winchester District CAB.
- 1.2 For many years now, there has been a growing appetite to improve the appearance of the Casson Block and its frontage onto St George's Street. Representation was made to Winchester Town Forum in November 2013, although ideas dating back to 2004 are in existence. In 2008 a mural was commissioned in the alleyway between The Winchester News and Parchment Street, along with a deep clean of this section and improved lighting as part of plans to make the area more welcoming. The popular Kite Flyer archway at the entrance to Parchment Street was installed in 2009 to draw shoppers and visitors to the area. However an Independent Retailing Health Check for the city centre commissioned in 2013 – which was very positive about retail performance in general - reported that "not enough is being done visibly to channel consumers to the independent clusters, which can be hidden from view": The Casson Block is one such area.
- 1.3 Further improvements have not been taken forward to date due to an expectation that a wider review of the one-way system by Hampshire County Council as part of the Winchester Town Access Plan together with the impending Silver Hill development would provide opportunities for larger scale changes to the city centre, which would have implications for St George's Street.
- 1.4 The desire to make changes to the Casson Block has, however, been raised again, reinvigorated by continuing discussions about developments across the rest of the city centre. The resident businesses feel they have waited for a long time for improvements to take place, and some say they are seriously considering their future as tenants of the area. The improvements requested are outlined in 1.5 below, and generally consist of enhancements to the appearance intended to encourage a more welcoming atmosphere, greater appeal to customers, and effect general enhancements to the cityscape.

- 1.5 At a meeting on 29th July 2015, four business representatives from the Casson Block met with Cllr James Byrnes, the Portfolio Holder for Local Economy, and representatives of the Estates, Economy & Arts and Policy & Projects teams in order to agree on a way forward. The key issues highlighted by the businesses at that meeting were:
- a) The use of the cobbled frontage to the building – the cobbles have been raised in places due to tree roots, and are frequently and inappropriately used as a parking area for delivery vans. This causes an eyesore and further deteriorates the environment for customers seated in the outside area of the eateries in the Casson Block.
 - b) The general design of the forecourt and the lack of usable space for tables and outside dining together with the overall appearance and drab materials and lighting.
 - c) The appearance of the air quality measurement unit – this is considered detrimental to the appearance of the area, and could be disguised with careful ‘dressing’ such as planting, painting or other form of visual cover.
 - d) The cleanliness and general look and feel of the area – the ceiling of the walkway in front of the shops, walls and ground has a grey, dirty appearance that could easily be addressed through deep cleaning, decoration or improved lighting.
 - e) Reports of anti-social behaviour have been noted in the vicinity of the building – this can partly be addressed by changing the appearance of the building. In addition Winchester City Council has a designated Neighbourhood Services Officer who patrols the city centre and has contact with businesses and some of the clients frequenting the area. This provides a mechanism for monitoring complaints and putting in place remedial action as appropriate.
- 1.6 It is anticipated that the cost of the design element of the work, to draw up initial designs on which a consultation exercise will be based, will be in the region of £10,000. Consultation will be led by Winchester City Council with assistance from Winchester Business Improvement District, as set out in 4.2 below.
- 1.7 The cost of this design work will be met by the Local Economy and Estates budgets in the current financial year. This could enable the use of £150,000 capital programme budget in 2016/17 to carry out the work and the final scheme design.
- 1.8 It is recognised that this work will mean changing the appearance of this prominent building and forecourt. Officers are undertaking this work in response to requests from the business community over a number of years. The potential benefits to the local economy and wider cityscape are significant

compared with any negative effects of making changes to the architectural work of the building.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

2 COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND PORTFOLIO PLANS (RELEVANCE TO):

- 2.1 These proposals support the Local Economy Portfolio Plan 2015-16 and the Prosperous Economy outcome of the Community Strategy, especially the objectives of 'supporting the local economy' and 'promote tourism and the cultural assets of the District'. They also support the High Quality Environment outcome, specifically to "Ensure that the quality of place we enjoy is maintained and enhanced."

3 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 3.1 A total budget of £160,000 is being requested for this project, of which up to £20,000 will be utilised for the investigatory work, feasibility, design, and site supervision costs and the remainder (c.£140,000) on works.

- 3.2 The budget will be comprised of virements as follows:

<u>Virement from:</u>	<u>2015/16</u>	<u>2016/17</u>
Winchester Town Access Plan (Capital budget)		(150,000)
Local Economy	(5,000)	
Estates	(5,000)	
<u>Virement to:</u>		
Casson Block – preliminary costs	10,000	10,000
Casson Block – forecourt/frontage enhancement scheme		140,000
<u>Financed by:</u>		
Local Economy & Estates revenue budgets	10,000	
Property Reserve		150,000

- 3.3 In accordance with Financial Procedure Rule 7.2, approval from Cabinet is sought to reallocate the £150,000 in the capital programme in 2016/17

allocated to the Winchester Town Access Plan to enable the Casson Block works to proceed. The budget for the Winchester Town Access Plan was put into the capital programme around 3 years ago in order to support work being undertaken by Hampshire County Council on potential changes to the one-way system which would in turn enable environmental enhancements to be made to St George's Street. This work has not progressed to a stage whereby such work can be undertaken in the foreseeable future and hence it is requested to reallocate the funding to the Casson Block enhancements scheme and to reconsider future funding to support wider St George's Street works at a later stage if and when the one-way system review progresses. This budget will be financed by the Property Reserve.

- 3.4 Of this £150,000, up to £10,000 would be used towards design and site supervision costs in addition to the Local Economy and Estates budget allocations in 2015/16.
- 3.5 The inclusion of a scheme in the capital programme does not constitute authority to incur expenditure until a full project report has been submitted and for schemes costing in excess of £100,000 a full financial appraisal is also required under Financial Procedure Rule 6.4.
- 3.6 Implementation of the works will be managed to minimise the impact on the tenants' ability to operate their businesses during this time.
- 3.7 We have considered the impact on prudential indicators and confirmed that there is none. The incremental impact on Council Tax is the difference between the revenue budget requirement of the current approved budget and the new budget; as this paper seeks reallocation of existing budgets there is no change. There is no increase to the Capital Financing Requirement (and therefore the Operational Boundary/Authorised Limit) as the project is financed from existing resources.

4 RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

- 4.1 There is a risk if these enhancements are not undertaken that existing tenants may decide to relocate their businesses, resulting in a loss of that business/facility to the City together with the associated loss of rental income to Winchester City Council. The work of the business-facing teams of Winchester City Council, along with organisations such as Winchester BID, goes a long way to making Winchester an excellent place to do business. However, the quality of the built environment is critical to this success.
- 4.2 Deciding on a design, even with a robust consultation plan in place, risks upsetting those who disagree with the final scheme. In any consultation exercise, it is accepted that all consultation responses are considered; however, it is impossible to act on all of these, especially where they contradict one another. In order to address this, residents of the Casson Block and the nearest neighbours will form the focus of the consultation exercise; however, this will also be open to wider public comment. Winchester City Council will manage consultees' expectations by setting out

the intention to consider all responses and incorporate all those feasible into the final design.

- 4.3 Should this work take place, the impact should be considered on trees, the highway, CCTV coverage and ecology. Any designs also need to concord with Conservation Area policies and to be assimilated into the character of the area. Close liaison will also be required with Hampshire County Council as parts of the frontage/ forecourt are public highway/ footway. All the necessary approvals will be sought in order for these works to proceed.
- 4.4 The VAT and Balance Sheet implications of the proposed scheme have yet to be considered and will be included in the financial appraisal when approval for further spending is requested in accordance with Financial Procedure Rule 6.4.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

The Independent Retailing Health Check can be downloaded from <http://www.winchester.gov.uk/business/economic-development/>

APPENDICES:

None