

Cabinet – 20 March 2024

Approval of the design brief for the Walsall Connected Gateway Project

Portfolio: Councillor Andrew – Deputy Leader and Regeneration

Related portfolios: Councillor Bird – Leader of the Council

Service: Regeneration & Economy

Wards: St Matthew's

Key decision: No

Forward plan: Yes

1. Aim

1.1 The Council was successful in securing £11.44million of government funding through Future High Street Fund (FHSF) in 2021 to deliver the Walsall Connected Gateway project, which aims to improve connectivity between the town centres rail and bus stations, whilst modernising the Saddlers Centre, and delivering public realm enhancements in Walsall Town Centre.

2. Summary

2.1 The Walsall Connected Gateway project involves the redevelopment of the Saddlers Centre to create an enhanced rail gateway entrance, a modernised/repurposed Saddlers Centre and associated public realm works between the St Pauls bus station and Park Street. The project is currently in the early design stages (end of RIBA Stage 2).

2.2 This report seeks to provide an update on the project, following a recent RIBA Stage 3 brief review period. It should be noted by the Cabinet that the Town Deal and Future High Street Fund Cabinet Report, dated 20 March 2024, contains a recommendation regarding delegations to progress to subsequent design stages and all other activities associated with the implementation of this project.

2.3 This report is supported by **Appendix A** – Walsall Connected Gateway RIBA Stage 3 Brief Report) and contains detailed information setting out the latest design, cost and programme changes, which will be considered in private session, due to the provision of commercially sensitive information. **Appendix B** is a public version of the report, which omits any commercially sensitive information but contains updated proposed visuals and further design information.

- 2.4 The successful implementation of the FHSF project will have a positive impact and contribute towards the borough's ambitions set out in Our Council Plan (2022–2025), including priorities related to economic growth, health and wellbeing of our residents, and empowering our communities.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet approve the RIBA Stage 3 brief design for the Connected Gateway project and allow the project to commence RIBA Stage 3 works.

4. Report detail – know

Context

- 4.1 Walsall Connected Gateway is an estimated **£39.94million** project, with **£11.44million** funding from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and will transform the heart of Walsall Town Centre, around the Saddlers Centre and Park Street. It will improve connectivity between St Pauls bus station and Walsall Rail Station, by creating a new public square on Park Street, also improving passenger access to and from the station.
- 4.2 The project will also transform the Saddlers Centre, by improving Bradford Mall and realigning Park Mall, to create a more direct access through to Walsall Rail Station, reconfigure the retail floorspace and diversify these units for alternative end uses such as food & beverage, convenience retail, and other services related uses.
- 4.3 In Autumn 2023, the Connected Gateway project team commissioned the delivery of structural intrusive survey works to the Saddlers Centre. This was done to remove any previous assumptions and give greater certainty on future design decisions and avoid unforeseen delays. These surveys are now complete and helped to inform a 5-week Stage 3 brief review in December 2023. The outcomes of this review period are contained in **Appendix A** (Walsall Connected Gateway - RIBA Stage 3 Brief Review Report).
- 4.4 In summary, the report resulted in changes to Saddlers Centre entrance at Park Mall, re-configuration of the Park Mall; changes to the entrance/egress onto Station Street; and the public realm components of the project, which have also been informed by the recently completed Walsall Public Realm Manual. The project will still necessitate the removal of buildings on Park Street and Butlers Precinct in order to install the transformative public scheme. The work in progress visuals illustrating these potential changes is contained with **Appendix B**.
- 4.5 It is also important to note that the Adult Learning Centre, to be funded separately through Town Deal, is proposed to be located in the majority of the former M&S unit. This results in a key interface between the two projects and

the brief report has helped to define the red line boundary of the respective projects.

- 4.6 The report also provides an updated cost position indicating a total project cost of **£39.94million**. This revised cost is currently within the approved budget of **£41.16million**. The project's cost consultants will continue to review costs as the project progresses through the final design stages and construction phases of the project.
- 4.7 In addition, work to progress the refurbishment of Bradford Mall is now accelerating through RIBA Stage 3 and will be delivered earlier to ensure FHSF grant can be spent within the deadlines as set out by DLUHC (March 2025). A separate 2 stage tender process will commence for Bradford Mall in Spring 2024 with construction estimated to commence in Autumn 2024.
- 4.8 The outcomes of the RIBA Stage 3 Brief Review report were also recently shared with the Council's Asset Strategy Group on 29 January 2024 with support given to its recommendations.
- 4.8 Furthermore, the Council will now deliver a wider public engagement exercise in February/March 2024 to provide more detailed updates on the project to town centres businesses, the wider public and other stakeholders. This will be an opportunity to raise awareness of the project and will also give opportunity to invite feedback on the current work-in-progress visuals. This process will also inform the formulation of the planning application, which is currently forecast for submission in Spring 2024.

Council Plan priorities

- 4.9 The Connected Gateway project will make positive contributions towards the 2022 – 2025 Our Council Plan's areas of focus, including contributing towards the following outcomes:
 - 1. Economic:
 - a. Supporting a dynamic, resilient and diverse economy where businesses invest and everyone has the right jobs and right housing in the right place
 - b. Education, training and skills enable people to contribute to their community and our economy.
 - 2. Communities:
 - a. Our communities will be more resilient and supportive of each other.
 - b. The people of Walsall feel safe in a cleaner, greener Borough.

Risk management

- 4.10 The project has a risks and issues register for the project, which is reviewed at regular Working Group meetings. Any items requiring escalation are raised at Project Board and be taken on to Regeneration Board or Strategic Investment Board

- 4.11 In respect to decisions in this report, risks are set out on page 52 in **Appendix A**.

Financial implications

- 4.12 At its meeting on 10 February 2021 the Council's cabinet approved a report on the Corporate Budget Plan 2021 – 2024, making provision for the **£11.44million** external funding through Future High Street Fund and **£25.23million** as Council match funding, through the Capital Programme and Pipeline investment Fund, resulting in a total project budget of **£36.67million**. Following a cost review of the project at the end of RIBA Stage 2 in 2022, the total project cost had increased to **£41.16million**, due to scope increase and inflationary pressures impacting the construction industry at the time. Subsequently an additional **£4.49million** of Council funding was approved by the Cabinet through the Capital Programme on 8 February 2023. In addition, the budget plan was approved by Council on the 23 February 2023.
- 4.13 Through the appended RIBA Stage 3 Brief Review report a further cost review was undertaken and this provided an updated estimated project cost of **£39.94million**, which is currently within the agreed project budget of **£41.16million**. Project costs will continue to be monitored through the lifetime of the project.
- 4.14 Furthermore, to comply with the spend deadlines as set out by DLUHC on the external FHSF grant, the project will need to be contractually committed on the works to deliver Bradford Mall by the end of September 2024 and to then spend contractually committed funds by March 2025. The current programme indicates the project will be in contract for Bradford Mall by August 2024 and to have spent this funding by February 2025.

Legal implications

- 4.15 Through the existing internal governance arrangements for the Connected Gateway Project, recommendations and /or options are developed and proposed for the detailed scheme works. The delegated authority sought in this report will enable such works to be approved and signed-off by officers prior to contracting.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.16 The project team have been working with the council's procurement team to select the most appropriate building contractors with specific experience to deliver the necessary phases of works within the overall Connected Gateway project. This includes utilising compliant framework agreements to allow Walsall Council to buy from which have been tendered by another contracting authority and allow the council to benefit from reduced administration, agreed terms and conditions and economies of scale. These frameworks also comply with the council's contract rules section 5.

- 4.17 Where possible contractors will be sourced with a local presence and will be evaluated on their commitment to utilise local supply chains, supporting employment and apprentice opportunities to maximise social value within Walsall and for our residents.

Property implications

- 4.18 As previously set out in the approved business case and previous cabinet reports, the Connected Gateway was required to acquire a number of properties on Park Street to enable the successful delivery of the project. These acquisitions were completed in 2022 and the council is now managing these properties through its existing arrangement with Avison Young, who are also the council's appointed agents to manage the Saddlers Centre. A number of these properties are to be demolished to implement the public realm element of the project, which will be subject to planning permission.
- 4.19 The council previously acquired the Saddlers Centre in 2017 and the project will introduce a number of enhancements to this asset. Corporate Landlord and Avison Young maintain a regular dialogue with the existing tenants within the Saddlers Centre and Park Street properties and this will help to ensure vacant possession can be secured prior to the commencement of construction.

Health and wellbeing implications

- 4.20 There are no implications at the time of drafting this report.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.21 There are no direct equalities impact as a result of decision recommend in this report. An EqIA has been developed for the Connected Gateway project and equality considerations will be applied through the public engagement exercise to ensure that all groups who wish to engage in the project have the ability to do so.

Staffing implications

- 4.22 There are no staffing implications arising from this report. Officers and the project's appointed consultants will continue to lead, support and resource the implementation and management of this project and ensure delivery of the project against

Climate Impact

- 4.23 There are no direct impact arising from this report. However, climate impacts arising from the project have been considered in the early design stages to date and will continue to be as part of the forthcoming design stages.

Consultation

- 4.24 The Connected Gateway project is supported by a robust internal governance structure, consisting of a Working Group, Project Board and Regeneration Performance Board, which provide appropriate consultation and checks through the various implementation stages of the projects.
- 4.25 The project team have held regular dialogue with the Local Planning Authority (LPA) and the future planning application will be subject to the relevant consultation procedures led by the LPA. As set out earlier in the report the project will deliver a public engagement exercise to a wide variety of stakeholders in February and March 2024, to raise awareness of the project and to give opportunity for feedback on the current proposals.

5. Decide

- 5.1 The decision to approve the RIBA Stage 3 brief report would allow this brief to form the basis of the RIBA Stage 3 process. Furthermore, at this stage, the design brief will enable the formulation of the planning application to be submitted to the LPA in Spring 2024 (as mentioned in para 4.8).

6. Respond

- 6.1 If the recommendation is approved by Cabinet, the Connected Gateway project will continue to be developed and implemented with approvals and signoffs sought at the appropriate stages and key milestones via the delegated authority that has been secured. A copy of the project gantt chart, which provides an outline programme is included on page 54 in **Appendix A**.

7. Review

- 7.1 The Connected Gateway project is subject to continual review through the Connected Gateway Working Group, Project Board, and Regeneration Performance Board, with regular updates to the Portfolio Holder. The project is also subject to a 6 monthly monitoring and evaluation processes of the DLUHC, which provides the external FHSF grant to the project.

Appendices

Appendix A – Walsall Connected Gateway Stage 3 Brief report (private)

Appendix B – Walsall Connected Gateway Stage 3 Brief report (public)

Background papers

- Corporate Budget Plan 2021 – 2024, Cabinet Report, dated 10 February 2021
- Walsall Future High Street Fund Scheme, Cabinet Report, dated 21 April 2021
- Contractor Procurement Strategy for Connected Gateway Project, Cabinet Report, dated 9 February 2022
- Walsall Town Centre Masterplan, 2019
- Town Deal and Future High Street Fund Updates, Cabinet Report, dated 20 March 2024

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8 March 2024



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8 March 2024