

South of Romsey Town Centre Masterplan

Report of the Planning and Romsey Future Portfolio Holder

Recommended:

- 1. That the South of Romsey Town Centre Masterplan (as set out in Annex 1 to the report) be approved as a material planning consideration.**
- 2. That the South of Romsey Town Centre Masterplan be adopted to inform future development of land in the ownership of the Council;**
- 3. That the South of Romsey Town Centre Masterplan be used to inform policies for the emerging Local Plan.**

SUMMARY:

- The report outlines the process undertaken in the creation of the South of Romsey Town Centre Masterplan and seeks its approval as a material planning consideration and to use it to inform the emerging Local Plan and future development of land within the Council's ownership.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The way we use our town centres has changed considerably in the past decade. With the increased popularity and dominance of online shopping, changing habits of customers, and the unprecedented impact of COVID 19 have meant that our town centres face significant challenges and need to adapt to these circumstances.
- 1.2 Romsey Town Centre has not experienced the impact as much as other towns. This is partly because of its historic attraction and the function and type of its businesses. However to put the town in a stronger position Romsey Future, working jointly with the Council, commissioned consultants to bring forward a Masterplan for the area South of Romsey Town Centre. The aim of this is to ensure that the town centre continues to have a strong economic function, both now and in the future, and to meet the needs of our residents and visitors.
- 1.3 Following significant public engagement and technical work a Masterplan for South of Romsey Town Centre has been completed and is recommended to Council for approval as a material planning consideration.

2 Background

- 2.1 In November 2013, a number of organisations working in Romsey came together to create the Romsey Future partnership. Romsey Future includes key partners such as the Town Council, Romsey and District Society, voluntary organisations and the Borough Council. Following a wide scale public consultation involving over 2000 people a strategy document was published in early 2016. It sets out the long-term strategic vision for the town. The Council, along with other partners in the town, formally signed up to the document.
- 2.2 The vision of Romsey Future is that *“over the next 20 years, Romsey will become a place of choice for the residents of small towns and villages in Southern Test Valley to come together. Romsey will thrive and grow, new communities will emerge and more people will visit the town centre. The town will retain its character as a relatively compact historic market town closely related to the countryside around it”*.
- 2.3 Romsey Future (RF) has helped to deliver a number of social and environmental projects for the benefit of the community. One project is to see a healthy town centre that meets the needs of current residents and their expectations for the future. One of the ways to achieve this is to develop a strategic vision for the redevelopment of the south side of the town centre.
- 2.4 The South of Romsey Town Centre (SoRTC) area is a main southern gateway into the historic town centre, but is largely dominated by car parking and the area known as the bus station. Existing connections to the town centre through the site are confusing, especially to new visitors so the aim was to integrate the area properly into the historic centre. The Crosfield Hall, located on the southern boundary of the town next to the bypass, is a well-used community facility. However, it is relatively isolated from the centre and orientated in way that has it's a back towards the town. It is also surrounded by a public car park. The hall continues to provide a function but is limited as a multifunctional space for a growing population and demand.
- 2.5 This area has previously been identified in the adopted Local Plan (2016) for potential future retail opportunities (see para 6.63). Whilst not a specific allocation or policy the local plan recognises the limited opportunity for future growth in the other areas surrounding the centre and that south of the town centre would be a preferred location.
- 2.6 Whilst retail is still an attraction for people visiting town centres the National Planning Policy Framework (2019) recognises that for their long term vitality and viability there should be a mix of uses including residential. The NPPF advocates the production of a positive strategy for the future of the town centre. The National Planning Practice Guidance, which supplements the NPPF, reinforces the need for flexibility to reflect changes in habits and patterns; the role of evening and night time economy; and recognises the importance of bringing together stakeholders to create a positive vision for the area.

- 2.7 The chosen approach for moving forward with the aspiration was through the production of a Masterplan. A Masterplan is a comprehensive plan that acts as a blueprint for the area through setting out principles for the way in which it will develop on a comprehensive basis. By creating a Masterplan it helps to ensure that the development and enhancement of the town centre progresses in tandem with housing and employment growth elsewhere in and around the town and meets our communities needs now and in the future.
- 2.8 Following a competitive tender process Nexus Planning and Perkins & Wills Architects were appointed to produce the Masterplan. Additional specialist advice regarding heritage, commercial and highways has also been sought. The initial public consultation on the Masterplan was carried out over September and October 2018. Borough Councillors, officers and RF, supported by Nexus Planning and Perkins & Will Architects, was able to engage with stakeholders and the wider community to establish what the vision for the area could be; what were the key aspects and issues for the area; and what could realistically be achieved. It is estimated that more than 1,500 people took part in the process. This included attending events and meeting a wide cross section of community groups as well as engaging with primary and secondary age school children. A series of 'walk and talk' events were also arranged. This phase of consultation culminated in a "Planning for Real" type workshop with more than 60 key stakeholders in December 2018. More details of the consultation are contained within the stage 1 consultation report. The headline messages were:-
- The character of Romsey must be retained and complemented in any future development coming forward;
 - The waterway between Bradbeers and Dukes Mill is not currently utilised to its full potential;
 - It is important that car parking remains easily accessible and available within walking distance of the town centre;
 - Existing community facilities made available for public use are valued, including in the Crosfield Hall;
 - A better variety of shops within the town would be supported by residents;
 - Better pedestrian links throughout the whole of the area would improve the experience of anyone on foot;
 - More trees and greening would help to improve the appearance of the area;
- 2.9 In addition to this consultation process the Council wanted to explore how to engage with the wider community rather than those who would usually engage through traditional consultation methods. In 2019 the Council was awarded funding and support from MHCLG and DCMS 'Innovation in Democracy Programme'. This involved piloting a Citizens' Assembly approach aimed to enhance participatory and deliberative democracy alongside representative democracy. This was one of only three pilots in the country. The Citizens' Assembly brought together a diverse group of 42 people, from across the area, to discuss the future of SoRTC. These recommendations have helped shape not only the Masterplan but also the next local plan and the forthcoming refresh of the Romsey Future Vision document.

2.10 The Citizens' Assembly was asked: "*How do we improve the area around Crosfield Hall and the Bus Station to deliver the maximum benefit to Romsey?*" Over the course of two weekends, the Citizens' Assembly participants listened to a series of presentations from experts across a range of disciplines. The purpose of these presentations was to provide the participants with the knowledge required to make a series of recommendations. A group of facilitators then led them through a participative and deliberative process. The process was designed so that the group was able to receive and exchange information, to critically examine the issues at hand, and come to an agreement which would inform decision making. In response the assembly made a suite of recommendations of which the following have a specific connection to the SoRTC:-

- a) Make Romsey an **attractive, vibrant centre of excellence** including green spaces and wildlife corridors.
- b) **More green spaces** in the area to enhance, protect and increase our natural environment, which includes wild animals and plants.
- c) **Well planned, connected and accessible infrastructure** (including travel, access, public spaces, education, tech and business) with good flow for transport and pedestrians to encourage business and tourists.
- d) **Improved transport infrastructure to encourage a sense of community** – with viable options for moving around.
- e) **Community hub and green spaces** that bring people together (across generations).
- f) **Design an integrated transport & parking plan** that includes walking, cycling, public transport and cars and think about all the different kinds of people coming into the town (accessible parking, but still encourage bus use, especially by younger people).
- g) **Lots of things in town centre that are affordable and accessible for all** which everyone living in Romsey knows about and can take part in.

2.11 The stage 1 consultation and the Citizen Assembly process established the draft Masterplan proposals. These were consulted upon in February and March 2020 and continued the wide consultation and engagement process which have been a core running through the Masterplan process. More details of the consultation are contained within the stage 2 consultation document. The key messages were:-

- Retain the character of Romsey
- Retain the facilities provided by the bus station
- If Crosfield Hall is not retained, adequate community facilities need to be reprovided
- Ensure pedestrians and cyclists have priority
- Provide more greenery

2.12 As a result of this feedback the proposals were further refined especially with regards to the location and enhancement of the bus station. The proposed Masterplan is attached at Annex 1 along with three separate supporting documents; a baseline report (Annex 2) and a stage 1 (Annex 3) and stage 2 consultation report (Annex 4). The proposals within the Masterplan have been phased into short, medium and long term deliverables.

3 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 3.1 The Council's Corporate Plan 2019-2023 'Growing our Potential' highlights the once in a generation opportunity to respond to the changing face of the high street. Creating places where people live, shop, work and spend their leisure time in an attractive environment. To best achieve this requires working with external bodies through the Romsey Future partnership.
- 3.2 Romsey Future 2015 to 2035 identifies a number of ambitions for the town. Like many market towns its principal offer is to be a place where people come and meet. However, as the town develops and its population changes, it is necessary to look at what will be needed, not just now but in the future, both in terms of amenities and the future provision of services. This ambition is being progressed through the South of Town Centre project.

4 Consultations/Communications

- 4.1 Community engagement has been at the centre of the SoRTC project as evidenced by the supporting documents to the Masterplan. As the project has progressed the Masterplan has evolved in light of the comments received and further discussions with key partners such as Hampshire County Council. The final proposals have also received the support of both the County Council and bus operators. Discussions have also continued with key landowners including representatives of Aldi who are keen to remain a presence within the town and bring forward a store that better meets their future needs.

5 Options

- 5.1 The principal consideration for the Council at this stage is whether or not to adopt the Masterplan as a material planning consideration. To inform that decision the following section of the report appraised the key issues which have been considered. The supporting documents to the Masterplan summarises all the points raised.

6 Option Appraisal

- 6.1 The creation of a Masterplan is a standard planning tool to help secure redevelopment of an area. By creating a Masterplan it establishes a framework for future proposals coupled with articulating clearly an ambition for development. Producing a document that achieves this sits squarely with the aspirations contained within the Corporate Plan and the Romsey Future vision document. The approval of this Masterplan is seen as a way to attract investment into the area and act as a catalyst for its redevelopment.
- 6.2 In not having a Masterplan in place it would hinder the ability to secure a well-planned co-ordinated redevelopment. It would restrict the opportunities for seeking external funding because of the lack of a clear vision and delivery vehicle for the area. As part of this exercise officers have visited comparable towns who have Masterplans in place. Having an approved Masterplan helped those authorities secure investment from other Government agencies as well as making it clear to the commercial sector the requirements of any future development.

- 6.3 The connection between the Masterplan and the forthcoming local plan is key. By reflecting the principles within the local plan it provides greater weight as part of determining future planning applications; it provides a more robust position to deliver the aspirations of the Masterplan; and it reinforces the Council's commitment to bringing forward the scheme. The Council are in the process of drafting the next local plan and have consulted upon the refined Issues and Options document over the summer. This document recognises the role that the town centre Masterplan will play and that this will be complemented by specific policies within the local plan. The Masterplan also has wider strategic planning benefits in helping to meet the Borough's future residential and employment requirement which can be reflected in the local plan. The combination of both the local plan and Masterplan provide a strong basis to guide development through the planning process.
- 6.4 To provide further weight to the Masterplan it is proposed that in the near future the document will be made into a supplementary planning document. In order to do this it will require the need to follow a specific regulatory process. By doing so it will help co-ordinate policy and requirements of planning obligations as well as reinforce those design principles and key issues.
- 6.5 Given the time span which the Masterplan covers there may be other external factors which will need to be considered when moving forward with the redevelopment (e.g. quantity of public car parking). To future proof the Masterplan has meant that flexibility and resilience has needed to be built into the proposals. This allows for a degree of adaption to the Masterplan if justified.
- 6.6 To achieve the range of uses and benefits to meet the needs of a growing town at the right time will require careful planning and phasing. Inevitably in achieving the vision for the site it needs to be balanced with what uses can be best achieved as well as the viability of the scheme. In considering what uses could be delivered as part of the Masterplan RF and the Council has had the benefit of high level commercial advice. This has helped shape the proposed uses and reinforces that the Masterplan is both aspirational and deliverable.
- 6.7 The nature of the Masterplan is to provide the principles to guide future development in terms of locations, design and uses. There will still be the need for more evidence and technical studies to help inform the development as it comes through the planning application(s). Some of this is already underway such as the review of the Romsey Conservation Area and traffic modelling. The proposals have been created in a way that is mindful of adjoining land uses. However as this is a high level Masterplan it would be a matter for the planning application process to consider any material issues relating to neighbouring land uses.

- 6.8 Successful delivery of the Masterplan will be at risk from a number of factors some of which will be beyond the scope of the Council to control. The short and medium term proposals of redevelopment and environmental improvements all fall within the Council's ownership and therefore help reduce the risk to non-implementation. The later stages involve land under the ownership of Aldi Supermarket. Discussions with Aldi have been positive and they have expressed a keenness to remain within the town. It will be necessary to continue the discussion as the project moves into the delivery phase. The lease hold arrangements of the units above the existing Aldi store do add a level of complexity to potential delivery. Should it not prove possible to resolve and the Aldi supermarket is to retain in its current location the Masterplan includes an alternative option.
- 6.9 The implementation of the public realm and highway improvements outlined in the Masterplan will require the securing of funding from a variety of sources. This includes the use of Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 obligations. The Planning White Paper (August 2020) proposes an alternative to the current practice with the introduction of an 'Infrastructure Levy'. It is too premature to know whether this funding mechanism will be introduced, how it will be implemented and if this will have an impact on delivery. It will be necessary to keep this under review.
- 6.10 Officers will also seek external funding wherever possible (e.g. from the Local Enterprise Partnership) to help bring forward the public realm and environmental improvements. The early enhancements can act as a catalyst for attracting third party investment for the later elements of the proposal. The delivery of the proposals will be dependent on the Council working with the commercial sector and other third parties.
- 6.11 The RF vision document and local plan both recognise the future potential of the south of the town centre. As such the geographic scope of the Masterplan is limited to that area. However, both RF and the Council fully recognise that the area cannot be seen in isolation and should be seen in the context of existing adjoining land uses, any future aspirations of neighbouring land owners, as well as wider developments which have and will come forward in Romsey, particularly the new community at Whitenap.
- 6.12 The area of SoRTC is dominated by car parking and makes for an unattractive southern gateway to the town centre. The areas of car parking and highway make it difficult for pedestrians to orientate and navigate themselves towards the town centre. The proposals within the Masterplan identify those opportunities for the SoRTC area to create a better and easier connection with Bell Street, the Corn Market and The Hundred as a result of the enhanced pedestrian links, way finding and public realm improvements. This would complement the existing enhancements that have recently been put in place.

- 6.13 In learning from other towns a key to their successful regeneration was the creation and reinforcing of the connections and relationships between areas. To help illustrate this layouts and artists impressions of how the areas could look have been included. The redevelopment of the SoRTC should not be seen as competing with the existing historic core of Romsey but as complementing what is already on offer. The Masterplan envisages a range of uses and environmental enhancements that will encourage people to visit and stay in the town. In this way it will help support the whole of the town centre.
- 6.14 The Masterplan retains approximately the same number of public car parking spaces throughout the stages of redevelopment. This has been achieved through careful phasing. It is necessary at this stage to retain the same level of car parking in order to help support the economy of the town centre and to recognise the large rural catchment which Romsey serves and where public transport is not a feasible option. However, with the increased awareness of climate change, and the possible change in people's behaviour, it may result in a decreased requirement for spaces. There are too many variables to be able to forecast future demand for public car parking spaces with any accuracy. To account for this the Masterplan proposes a decked parking structure which allows for easy construction and dismantling depending on need.
- 6.15 The feedback received during the consultation and the recommendations from the Citizen Assembly highlighted the importance of having safe and convenient access to public transport. As a result of this feedback the proposed relocation of the bus stops have been amended from the initial proposal of being situated on Broadwater Road to a dedicated public transport hub adjoining the existing bus station. Having an enhanced facility retained in a central location will assist those members of the community who rely on public transport, may encourage more sustainable modes of travel and better serves the whole of the town centre. This amendment has been supported by Hampshire County Council, as highway authority, and the bus operators that serve the town.
- 6.16 In considering what uses could be delivered it is necessary to evaluate future demand and consider how this could best meet the needs of our residents. A key area for evaluation is that of the Crosfield Hall site and the function that it provides. The Crosfield Hall continues to provide a community facility for a range of public meetings and group activities. There have been comments wishing to see its retention especially given that it has been a venue for a long period of time. However, the Crosfield Hall is limited in the range and types of activities that it can host because of its size and internal layout. The buildings location within a public car park makes pedestrian access difficult and its orientation prevents greater connection with the town centre. In addition as the events at the venue attract such a wide catchment of people it raises the issue of whether a town centre location is required and if those driving to attend the hall result in an impact on the availability of public car parking spaces.

- 6.17 The Masterplan carefully outlines the phasing of the proposals and makes clear that any redevelopment of the Crosfield Hall site would only occur once alternative provision has been delivered. The Council is undertaking a review of all community groups and facilities within the town and surrounding area with a view of better understanding the availability and demand in the future. This will help inform the specification and location of any future facility, recognising that the Masterplan does identify the possibility of a smaller community facility within SoRTC to complement any future larger facility. Where that facility will be located would be a matter for the local plan process.
- 6.18 The approval of the content of the Masterplan represents an opportunity to clearly set out the aspiration for a mixed use scheme and deliver on the aspiration of Romsey residents following comprehensive public engagement.

7 Risk Management

- 7.1 An evaluation of the risks indicate that the existing controls in place mean that no significant risks have been identified in relation to the recommendations contained within this report. As the project moves towards the delivery of each phase there will be specific risks that the Council will need to consider and mitigate. At this time it is too premature to undertake this level of risk evaluation.

8 Resource Implications

- 8.1 The Council meeting of 26 June 2019 agreed a budget for both the Andover and Romsey Masterplans'. This was funded from the New Homes Bonus. The completion of this stage of the SoRTC project has been undertaken within budget. The recommendations within the report do not cause an additional resource pressure that cannot be absorbed through the existing budget or through the existing local plan budget. As the project progresses to delivery any resource implications, both staff and financial, will need to be considered at that time.

9 Legal Implications

- 9.1 The Masterplan is proposed to be a material planning consideration. It is not, at this stage, to be classed as a supplementary planning document as its production and consultation has not followed the necessary regulatory steps. This document still has material weight in the planning process and provides a springboard for work to commence on seeking funding to facilitate the proposed first phase of public realm improvements. It also helps support the drafting of the next local plan.

10 Equality Issues

- 10.1 The Masterplan has been produced having engaged with a wide range of the community and the proposals informed by the outcome of those conversations. The EQIA has not identified any potential for discrimination or adverse impact and all opportunities to promote equality have been taken.

11 Other Issues

11.1 Sustainability and Addressing a Changing Climate.

11.1.1 Running through the Masterplan are the principles of sustainable development and resilience to the future effects of climate change. These are outlined within specific section of the document (see section 5 of the Masterplan).

11.2 Property Issues.

11.2.1 The Council is the main landowner of the area within the Masterplan. The Crosfield Hall is within Council ownership and legal advice has confirmed that there are no restrictions requiring its retention. There are leasing arrangements with regards to the taxi office. These would not prevent the proposals within the Masterplan from coming forward.

11.3 Wards/Communities Affected.

11.3.1 The site is located within Abbey ward however the proposals would benefit all Romsey residents and those of surrounding areas who choose to visit the town.

12 Conclusion and reasons for recommendation

12.1 The proposals drafted were influenced by the views of our communities; technical evidence and specialist advice; and understanding best practice from other comparable town centres that have successfully undergone a process of change.

12.2 The approval of the South of Romsey Town Centre Masterplan would enable the Council to deliver on the aspirations of both the Corporate Plan and the vision of Romsey Future. The Masterplan puts in place the framework for bringing forward development and environmental improvements that help support the future of the town centre.

Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)

Romsey Future Vision document (2015)

Test Valley Revised Local Plan (2016)

Test Valley Refined Issues and Options (2020)

Confidentiality

It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.

No of Annexes:

4

File Ref:

N/A

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Report to:

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Date:

2 September 2020