

£1m Capital Investment Programme – Regeneration of Macclesfield Town Centre

OPTIONS APPRAISAL

With a £1M capital budget allocated for works to support the regeneration of Macclesfield Town Centre, it is necessary to consider the alternative ways that money may be spent to try and ensure the best option is being pursued to meet the stated objective of town centre regeneration.

Option 1

Acquisition of ‘problem’ sites and vacant properties for redevelopment

Stakeholders have suggested the Council should consider purchasing ‘problem’ sites/buildings to repurpose to facilitate town centre regeneration. Typical sites referenced are Craven House, Sutton Castings and vacant premises on Mill Street.

Although on this option has the potential to enhance the town centre landscape through utilising currently underused buildings, many of the sites referenced are available for sale but have not been attractive to private developers at the price sought from the current owners. It is unlikely therefore that the Council could purchase these sites and redevelop as a viable proposition. Some are simply far too costly for the budget available, Craven House, for example, has been advertised for sale for in excess of £2M. To pursue a purchase of smaller sites via CPO would add significant legal costs and substantial time delays and would have only localised benefits.

For these reasons it is recommended this option is not pursued.

Option 2

Public Realm Investment

The benefits of this option would be highly visible and high impact investment. Although funding limitations may restrict the quantum of high quality improvements, the benefits of this would be for all town centre users rather than specific groups as with some other options. Many stakeholders have indicated improvements to the public realm in the core of the town centre would be welcomed.

A quality environment could help to boost footfall and encourage complementary investment from local businesses and organisations. Research shows the value of identifying the particular distinctive features of town centres and investment in the public realm can help to highlight and build on local distinctiveness.

Focusing enhancements on public art and creative visible enhancements would help reinforce Macclesfield’s identity as a creative town reinforcing a distinct sense of place and making the town a more attractive proposition for inward investment.

Focusing enhancements on the core of the town centre and the linkages between the proposed cinema development and the core offers the potential to create a real sense of momentum in town centre regeneration.

It is recognised that events can be extremely effective in enhancing town centre vitality and viability and that there could be scope to use capital funds to support events through for example providing power points in a public space as part of public realm enhancements.

It is therefore recommended this option is pursued.

Option 3

Invest in CEC owned building assets

Council own assets such as the Butter Market and Old Police Station attached to Macclesfield Town Hall lie underutilised and in the case of the later, are in a poor state of repair. £1M could be used to refurbish and bring such property back into a use which could generate footfall in the town centre, adding to town centre vitality and viability.

There is a risk that investing the money in this way, before first tackling some of the most visible deficiencies in the public realm, could provoke criticism from local stakeholders.

It is therefore recommended that this option is not pursued with the £1M budget identified but that a business case is explored in the future, liaising with HLF to see if a case could be made to bring in grant funding to enable this option to be pursued at a future stage.

Option 4

Invest in Car Park Improvements

Stakeholders frequently point out the deficiencies with town centre car parks in Macclesfield and suggest investment is overdue.

Enhancements to car parks largely benefit those who use cars and not the whole community and hence it is considered preferable that such improvements should be funded through reinvestment of income from car parking charges rather than from this allocation. There may, however, be benefits to investing in highly visible enhancements geared at changing the image and perception of place rather than practical enhancements for car park users.

It is recommended that aesthetic enhancements undertaken as part of a wider public realm scheme should be considered for central car parks.

Option 5

Roll out Shop Improvement Grants

The Council has already plans in place to set up a shop front improvement grant scheme in 2016 for the Lower Mill Street area, funded separately. The Council could be criticised for concentrating too much investment in property owners and local

businesses rather than investing in improvements which will benefit all town centre users equally.

For these reasons it is recommended this option is not pursued.

Option 6

Highway Improvements

The £1M has been made available to support town centre regeneration. There is scope to invest in the highway network around the town centre to facilitate the movement of vehicles, reduce congestion and make a more pedestrian friendly environment. Discussions with stakeholders do not, however, tend to highlight these issues as those most negatively affecting town centre vitality.

It is possible however that highway improvements could be rolled up into a wider public realm improvement project.

Option 7

Town Centre Wifi

This has the potential to improve connectivity in the town centre with a view to aiding local businesses who wish to take advantage of online access. However, there is debate over whether this is necessary. Certainly this has not been highlighted by engagement with stakeholders as a priority for action.

For these reasons it is recommended this option is not pursued.

Option 8

Wow Factor

This is as yet undefined, but would be a high impact, very visual investment into a landmark piece of work to promote and distinguish Macclesfield town centre, acting as an attraction in the town and with the potential to change perceptions of the town centre; there would, however, potentially be questions over whether this is a worthwhile investment, as it is potentially quite subjective. There is however, potential to incorporate a 'wow factor', on a smaller scale, into a wider public realm improvement scheme.

For these reasons it is recommended this option is not pursued in isolation but taken forward as an aspiration in a wider public realm enhancement project.

Option 9

Public Art

Investment in public art would enhance and promote that aspect of Macclesfield's unique identity, highlighted by the Heritage and Culture Strategy, as a 'creative' town.

The disadvantages are that art can be very subjective and potentially provoke criticism as a waste of resources at a time when services are facing cut backs. There

is the potential, however, to incorporate an element of public art into a wider public realm improvement programme of works and taking into account the economic benefits of reinforcing a distinctive sense of place it is recommended that an element of funding is used for public art as part of a wider package of public realm enhancements.