

TOWN CENTRE MASTERPLAN

Executive Summary

The Council has committed to prepare a newly defined Town Centre Masterplan to help guide future sustainable development within the Town Centre. As highlighted in the Corporate Plan, the Council is establishing a stronger commitment to embedding a culture of consultation into decision making process, empowering communities and making decisions alongside communities. The Town Centre Masterplan has arisen out of this commitment and is further supported by concerns expressed by Members, residents and developers about the lack of a single planning document that sets out a positive framework to guide development and investment in the Town Centre, including guidance on heights for tall buildings. The report provides an overview of:

- the concept Masterplanning and the objectives of the Woking Town Centre Masterplan;
- the journey so far to focus most new development in the Town Centre;
- the process for preparing the Masterplan and its planning status;
- the options for the Masterplan;
- the timescale for preparing the Masterplan;
- the estimated budget for preparing the Masterplan; and
- the community engagement and consultation that would be undertaken to inform the Masterplan.

The Executive is requested to note the overview as detailed in the report and to approve the budget of £100,000 for the preparation of the Masterplan. Delegated authority should be given to the Director of Planning in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning to oversee the preparation of the Masterplan to its completion and required specifications.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RESOLVE That

- (i) the overview of the Town Centre Masterplan, as set out in the report, be noted;
- (ii) the budget for the preparation of the Masterplan, which is estimated to be £100,000, be approved; and
- (iii) delegated authority be given to the Director of Planning, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, to oversee the preparation of the Town Centre Masterplan to its adoption.

Reasons for Decision

Reason: To help provide a framework to guide development within the Town Centre.

The Executive has the authority to determine the recommendations set out above.

Town Centre Masterplan

Background Papers: None.

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1.0 Introduction and why the Masterplan is being prepared

- 1.1 The Council has committed to preparing a newly defined Town Centre Masterplan to set out the long term vision for the Town Centre up to 2027, and to provide the necessary framework to help guide development decisions within the Town Centre. As highlighted in the Corporate Plan, the Council is establishing a stronger commitment to embedding a culture of consultation into the decision making process, empowering communities and making decisions alongside communities.
- 1.2 There are a number of different views about what the height limit of buildings in the Town Centre should be. This is impacting on decisions on planning applications with implications for future housing provision. Presently, there is no single document that sets out the framework to guide development at the Town Centre. As a result, there is uncertainty about how the Council's planned future development up to 2030 would visually manifest itself on the ground. The Town Centre Masterplan is intended to address these concerns by setting out the necessary framework to guide development decisions.
- 1.3 The Masterplan cannot concern itself only with the heights of future tall buildings. The Masterplan needs to support sustainable development and investment in the town to support the vibrancy and vitality of the centre following the soon to be completed Victoria Place development. This significant investment in the town is a catalyst for further change and presents an opportunity to bring further positive change.
- 1.4 The Council has invested a significant amount of capital and has adopted various policies and strategies to improve the overall environment of the Town Centre. This includes investment in the public realm and improved cycling and pedestrian options. The Town Centre Masterplan will bring the investment and policies together to provide a single document that could be used to showcase the opportunities that exists within the Town Centre to attract further investment.
- 1.5 The justification for the Masterplan has been well debated by the Executive at its meeting on 25 March 2021 and resolved by Council at its meeting on 8 April 2021. There is broad political support for its preparation.
- 1.6 The geographical definition of the Town Centre for the purposes of the Masterplan is the Town Centre boundary defined by the Proposals Map of the Core Strategy. The Proposals Map can be accessed by visiting: <https://www.woking2027.info/allocations/propmapinsets2018.pdf>.
- 1.7 The Council has an adopted policy, Policy CS1 (A Spatial Strategy for Woking Borough) of the Core Strategy that identifies the Town Centre as the primary focus of sustainable growth to maintain its status as an economic hub with a diverse and innovative economy, and a transport hub which provides transport services, links and communication linking people to jobs, services and facilities. The Core Strategy directs most new development to previously developed land in the Town Centre which offers the best access to a range of services and facilities to minimise the need to travel. The Town Centre is a sustainable location for the future direction of development. The Core Strategy encourages high density development that could include tall buildings in the Town Centre in a way that builds on its overall character and appearance and does not compromise that of nearby areas. This approach to the spatial distribution of development across the Borough is intended to minimise the amount of land that would be needed to be released from the Green Belt to meet future development needs.
- 1.8 In quantitative terms, Policy CS2 of the Core Strategy earmarks the Town Centre to accommodate 2,180 new dwellings, 27,000 sq.m of office floorspace and 75,300 sq.m of retail floorspace between 2010 and 2027. In addition to these figures, the Council has accepted a Housing and Infrastructure Fund (HIF) award of £95M to replace the Victoria Arch. The award requires the Council to deliver housing on its own sites, and use its best endeavours to deliver an additional 3,304 new dwellings in the Town Centre by 2030 over and above what has been committed in the Core Strategy. Overall, from now to 2030, taking into account housing delivery

to date, the Town Centre is identified to accommodate about 4,555 new homes. With this volume of planned development, the Town Centre is expected to undergo a significant change, which in part, had already started with developments such as Victoria Square. The change has to be managed to be sustainable, and the Masterplan will assist in achieving that. Without a Masterplan, it is difficult to engage and promote the town and how the level of development proposed will look and feel and how the level of development will support the vibrant mixed use town centre which is aspired.

- 1.9 There is no doubt about the impact of the pandemic on the economic vitality of the Town Centre. Developers, investors, local businesses and residents need certainty to invest and consistency in the decision making process of the Council. The Town Centre Masterplan would provide detailed framework and certainty on how the delivery of the development requirements of the Core Strategy and the HIF award will be managed.

2.0 What is a Masterplan and the objectives of the Woking Town Centre Masterplan

- 2.1 There is no legal planning definition of a Masterplan. It has been used by various people to mean different things. For the purposes of the newly defined Woking Town Centre Masterplan, it is an overarching one stop planning document and a spatial layout that sets out the opportunities that exists in the Town Centre for businesses to thrive, for people to live and work and as a destination to visit for cultural and other recreational activities. It is a document that will be used to structure proposed land uses and development within the Town Centre and sets out the principles and standards of what would make development acceptable. It will provide a long term conceptual layout and vision that paints a picture of how the Town Centre would look like by 2030 when the planned developments have been achieved. It will set out detailed standards and principles to guide the day to day decisions to achieve the vision. The Masterplan will be a document that is informed by a robust evidence base with an iterative community engagement central to its preparation. It would be about setting a vision for what the future could look like and working in partnership with all key stakeholders to achieve that.

- 2.2 Within the context of the above definition, the objectives of the Woking Town Centre Masterplan are:

- Provide a vision for the Town Centre that will drive investment decisions in a coherent and sustainable manner and ensure that Woking continues to be a destination of choice;
- Provide a clear framework and principles for development in the town centre to allow proposals to be assessed in a comprehensive manner;
- Provide a visual illustration of the skyline for the Town Centre, with height guidance for tall buildings, taking into account the topography and other factors that exists with the Town Centre;
- Bring uses and buildings together to create a unique sense of place for people to live, work and visit whilst enhancing the ecological value of the area and the wellbeing of people who live within it;
- Map out connectivity of people to key services and facilities such as the station and jobs and highlight opportunities to improve non car based transport options;
- Provide clear principles and standards of what would be acceptable development;
- To create a town centre environment that would attract investment to respond to the post pandemic local economic, environmental and social conditions;
- Set out the quality and quantity of open space and the public realm;
- Provide certainty to developers, local residents and businesses on the future direction of growth of the Town Centre;
- To provide an opportunity for the local community to be involved in the masterplanning of the town centre.

3.0 What is the journey so far – rationale for the spatial distribution of development in the Borough

3.1 The story about why and how the Council had been focusing most new development in the Town Centre needs to be revisited as part of the big conversation to inform the Masterplan. The overall strategy to accommodate most new development in high density development within the Town Centre had evolved over many years with significant local community input. A knowledge of the journey so far is important to understanding why the Town Centre is earmarked to be the focus on most new development.

3.2 In 2009, the Council spent a significant amount of time to engage with local residents, businesses, key stakeholders and Members to understand and agree the issues that the community would like the Council to address in the Core Strategy. There was broad consensus for:

- Housing to meet the diverse needs of the community, in particular, Affordable Housing;
- High quality jobs; in particular, support for small and medium sized enterprise formation by encouraging a range of types and sizes of premises;
- Improved retail offer;
- Leisure and community facilities;
- Infrastructure and services to support development;
- Improved transport and accessibility;
- Measures to address and adapt to climate change and protect the environment and heritage assets.

3.3 The Council had understood at the time that any strategy to address the above issues would need a vision that gives a clear idea of the destination when everything had been achieved. In this regard, there was an extensive community engagement about what the community would like the Borough to look by 2027 when all the issues they had identified had been addressed. Three options for the spatial distribution of development were discussed with the community. These options were:

- Directing most new development to previously developed land in the town, district and local centres with minimum encroachment into the Green Belt as possible;
- Intensifying development densities in the less dense areas of the Borough such as Hook Heath and Horsell; and
- Significant extension on development into the Green Belt.

3.4 There was unanimous agreement to focus most new development on previously development, in well designed, high density development that could include tall buildings within the Town Centre. The spatial strategy for the Borough and the Town Centre specific policy of the Core Strategy – Policies CS1 and CS2 of the Core Strategy were born out of the outcome of the community engagement. Full details of the chronology of the journey so far is included in Appendix 1.

3.5 The Masterplan will be informed by the ‘big conversation’ with the community. Part of this big conversation would be explaining to the public the journey so far, in particular, the options for the spatial distribution of development to determine if the agreed approach continue to have broad community support.

4.0 Options for the Masterplan

4.1 Three realistic options for the Masterplan have been identified for consultation. The description for each of them is set out in the Table below. The comments that would be received during the consultation on the concept and options for Masterplan will inform the selection of the preferred option for the Masterplan. At this stage, Members are only requested to note the options. The options identified for consultation are:

Options	Description
Option 1	<p>Woking Townscape Strategy - This Masterplan will focus on the visual illustration of an acceptable skyline for the Town Centre, with a clear definition of the limit on height of tall buildings. It will be a single themed Masterplan that is limited in scope of its coverage. It will be adopted as Planning Document with the status of a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). It can be prepared within the existing strategic planning policy framework. It will be relatively less expensive to prepare and would take less time to prepare. It could be done within 6 months – 9 months.</p>
Option 2	<p>Town Centre Integrated Masterplan - This Masterplan will bring uses and buildings together with clearly mapped out connectivity of people to jobs, key services and facilities. It will set a clear limit on height of tall buildings and their impacts on the wider area. It will provide clear principles and standards of what would make development acceptable. It would create a Town Centre environment that would attract investment to respond to the post pandemic local economic, social and environmental conditions. It will provide a clear framework for decision making on development proposals. It will be an expression of all current commitments to 2030. It can be prepared within the context of the existing planning policy framework. There is the risk that it could be undermined by the debate on height of buildings. It will be a planning document with a statutory status as Supplementary Planning Document. It would take about 12 - 14 months to complete.</p>
Option 3	<p>Town Centre Holistic Masterplan - This Masterplan will be all-encompassing document that goes beyond planning matters. It would seek to analyse existing conditions and what had been done so far and identify what else could be done to create an environment for future inclusive growth, enhancing sustainability and liveability of the Town Centre. It will create an identity that will define the future character for the Town Centre and harness its cultural and heritage assets. It will set out proposals for blue and green infrastructure. It will articulate a new vision for the Town Centre. It will bring together the long term economic, social and environmental aspirations of the community. Given its wider scope, it will not be a</p>

	<p>planning document. There is the risk that it would not have the necessary legal planning status to defend planning decisions. It might trigger the review of the Core Strategy. There could be potential conflict with the adopted development plan for the area. It would be relatively more expensive to prepare and would take a long time to prepare. It could take between 24 months to 36 months to prepare.</p>
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5.0 Consultation and engagement and how the Masterplan will be prepared

- 5.1 Community engagement will be central to the preparation of the Masterplan. Most of the work will be done in-house, however, specialist consultants will be used to support the Council, initially for community engagement and for defining the skyline and height of buildings.
- 5.2 The preparation of the Masterplan will be used as a test to begin the process of establishing a new dialogue with the local community about what they envisage the Town Centre to be by 2030 and the role that they think the Masterplan could play to achieve that. The initial engagement will focus on the concept of Masterplanning rather than the detailed contents of a Masterplan. In parallel to this initial consultation, the story about the journey to date will be explained and discussed to seek views on whether the trajectory of the spatial distribution of development as set out in Appendix 1 should continue into the future. Given the importance of the initial engagement, and the necessity to reach as many sections of the community as possible, a specialist consultant will be engaged to work with the Council to undertake this consultation exercise. The outcome will inform the preferred option for Masterplan.
- 5.3 The Council has agreed to deliver about 3300 additional new homes over and above the Core Strategy requirement within the Town Centre on the back of the HIF award. The Council would have wished to consult the public before submitting the bid for the award, however, it was not possible to do so due to the time period that was given by the Government to submit bids. The road network under Victoria Arch is a key congestion hotspot in the Town Centre. Cycling and walking under the Arch does not meet the standard the Council aspires to. It had been a long term ambition of the Council to address the problem. This has not been possible to date due to the cost of the scheme and the inability to fund it through developer contributions and/or other public sector funding sources. The HIF award was once in a life time opportunity to secure the necessary funding to do something substantial to address the congestion in the area and unlock a number of sites for development that the Council believed added significant additional value to the vision for the Town Centre. The scheme will also lay the foundation for significant rail improvements such as the Woking Flyover. Given the scale of the housing provision, it is appropriate to seek views from the community about the overall scale of the housing to be provided and how it should be spatially managed. The initial consultation on the Masterplan will also cover this particular matter. In particular, the consultation would provide opportunity to update the community on what had been done so far to deliver the scheme.
- 5.4 The Council has adopted a digital engagement platform to provide a civic site for engagement and consultation, as highlighted in the Corporate Plan. The platform, the Woking Community Forum, will be used as the platform for the community engagement. The community engagement will be an iterative process where everyone would have the opportunity to comment on each stage of the process and for the Council to note and respond.
- 5.5 After the initial engagement, the next stage will be a comprehensive review and feasibility work to understand the social, economic and environment context within which the Masterplan is prepared. This will assist in refining the scope and objectives of the Masterplan. It will also help to define any gaps in evidence base studies that would be needed to support the Masterplan. The Woking Community Forum would allow the local community to input into this task.

- 5.6 Baseline information will be assembled, including housing, retail and employment data and future infrastructure delivery.
- 5.7 Design consultants will be engaged to create a Town Centre skyline with a defined limit on height of development taken into account the baseline data.
- 5.8 Opportunities that exist on individual key sites will be mapped out. The relationship between sites, uses and services and facilities will be mapped. This will be overlaid by the connectivity between them and existing/proposed infrastructure. A draft Masterplan will be prepared.
- 5.9 There will be significant Members' engagement. There will be a Private Members' Briefing on the emerging outcome of the Masterplan. The draft Masterplan will be reported to the LDF Working Group, Executive and Council to seek their comments and an authority to formally consult the wider public. Working communities will be given sufficient time to engage in the process. Representations received will be integral to how proposals are developed. The Final Draft Masterplan will be reported to the Local Development Framework (LDF) Working Group, Executive and, if required, Council for adoption as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).

6.0 Timescale for the key stages of the Masterplan

- 6.1 The Council is keen to begin the Masterplanning process as soon as possible. The first and critical part of the process is community engagement on the concept of Masterplan and what the Town Centre Masterplan should be. Part of the community engagement would also be about how the spatial distribution of development has evolved and the role of the Town Centre in meeting future development needs. To work with and support the Council, a specialist consultant will be engaged to undertake this community engagement. It is expected that the community engagement will begin in July 2021. The outcome of this initial engagement will help determine the nature and type of Masterplan for the Town Centre and how long it will take to prepare. Members will be updated in due course on the timing of the subsequent stages of the process when that becomes clear.

7.0 Budget

- 7.1 It is estimated that the Masterplan would cost about £100,000 to prepare. This will include the cost of appointing two separate specialist consultants to support various technical aspects of the Masterplan. The budget will be funded from the Investment Programme and Planning Services' Service Plan budget.

8.0 Corporate Strategy

- 8.1 The Masterplan will provide a single document to showcase the opportunities for investment in the Town Centre. It will set a clear direction and framework to provide certainty and consistency in decisions. This is necessary to creating the necessary environment for businesses to invest. It will provide space for partnership working to deliver corporate objectives. The Masterplan directs most new development to previously developed land to ensure sustainable development and efficient use of land. It will lay good foundation for smart and strong economic growth of the Town Centre. It will facilitate the delivery of housing, in particular, affordable housing. Its preparation will be informed by continuous community and Members' involvement. The masterplan supports the following objectives of the Corporate Plan:

People – A healthy, inclusive and engaged community-

- Improving the health and wellbeing of all residents – the masterplan will set out areas of open space, health and leisure provision and support the town centre as a cultural hub. The masterplan will support the emerging Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

- Reducing social inequality – the masterplan will guide the delivery of new housing and affordable housing developments and support both the Homelessness and Housing Strategy.
- Engaging our communities – engagement will be central to the preparation of the masterplan.

Place – An enterprising, vibrant and sustainable borough-

- Promoting a strong economy – setting a vision for the town centre will promote investment, support business retention and promote Woking as a destination for business to relocate to.
- Improving the Borough’s biodiversity and green infrastructure – the masterplan will set out the quality and quantity of open space.
- Sustainable development – The masterplan will highlight the vision of a sustainable and inclusive town centre and identify further opportunities for energy efficiency and generation.

Us – An innovative, proactive and effective Council -

- Strengthening partnerships – the masterplan will be developed following engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders and the wider community.
- Effective use of resources –setting a clear vision of the town centre would support the effective use of limited resources

9.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 9.1 It is estimated that the preparation of the Masterplan will cost about £100,000. It is proposed for the budget to be funded from the Investment Programme. The Executive is requested to approve the budget for the Masterplan. Most of the work will be done in-house. However, there are some technical specialist aspects of the Masterplan that would require consultancy support. The quality of those technical aspects of the Masterplan could be undermined if the budget is not approved. The indirect benefits that the Masterplan is likely to generate would far outweigh the cost of preparing the Masterplan.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 9.2 There are no equalities and human resource implications. This will be monitored and reported if any arise.

Legal

- 9.3 Planning law would require the Masterplan to be prepared in accordance with the development plan for the area. Care will be taken to ensure that this is adhered to.
- 9.4 Appointment of consultants will follow due processes of the Council.

10.0 Corporate Leadership Team and Members involvement

- 10.1 The Corporate Leadership Team has identified the Town Centre Masterplan as a priority project. A Project Mandate has been agreed to start the Masterplan, subject to Executive approving the recommendations of this report. The Director of Planning is the Project Sponsor for the Masterplan and can be contacted by: giorgio.framalitto@woking.gov.uk. The Planning Policy Manager is the Project Manager and can be contacted by: ernest.amoako@woking.gov.uk. They will be willing to clarify any issues that Members might have throughout the process. Members’ involvement will be key to ensuring that the

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Masterplan addresses their concerns and that of local residents. All effort will be made to ensure that the Executive is informed at each stage of its preparation.

10.2 The draft Masterplan will be reported to the LDF Working Group, the Executive and Council before it is adopted.

REPORT ENDS