

## **MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CONSIDERATION OF LIGHTING AND GREENING INITIATIVES FOR MAIDSTONE TOWN CENTRE**

Decision Made: 19 March 2024

#### **Consideration of Lighting and Greening Initiatives for Maidstone Town Centre**

##### **Issue for Decision**

To seek approval of the proposed Lighting and Greening projects for Maidstone Town Centre and phase 1 of a programme of work to achieve the strategic aims and, through this, delivery of the council's commitments for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund for 2024/5.

##### **Decision Made**

That

1. The programme of works for 2024/5 to bring MBC's existing lighting infrastructure in the town centre to modern standards and to improve lighting in the town centre as set out section 3 of the report, be approved;
2. The programme of works for 2024/5 to improve greening and the public realm in the town centre as set out in section 4 of the report, be approved;
3. A budget totalling £600,000 for the programme of lighting and greening works as set out in section 5 of the report, be approved;
4. Delegated responsibility for delivering the programme of works and projects be given to the Director of Strategy, Governance and Insight in consultation with the Leader of the Council; and
5. It be noted that officers will continue to develop a further programme of work for lighting, greening and open spaces in the town centre consistent with the relevant strategy and identify further funding opportunities.

##### **Reasons for Decision**

###### **Context**

MBC is developing a town centre strategy. This is needed to guide future development, including diversifying the economic base, ensuring that any housing growth is balanced by employment opportunities and complemented by new infrastructure, that sustainability and environmental quality are improved and to provide a canvas for activity and events to enhance the experience for town centre residents and businesses, the borough's communities more widely and visitors.

Work to prepare the draft Town Centre Strategy to date has included a thorough interdisciplinary baseline assessment and work on four strategies covering lighting, green and open spaces, movement and community infrastructure. These will all form the evidence base for the draft Town Centre Strategy and when all work is completed in due course, that evidence will be made available as background information via the council's web site, sitting alongside the draft strategy.

The process so far has included extensive research and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders; it has enabled a better understanding of challenges and potential routes to sustaining and improving the town centre and at the same time served to demonstrate that further research, exploration of options for the future and targeted engagement would be helpful before a draft Strategy is formulated for wide public consultation. The workstreams to achieve this were agreed by Cabinet in December 2023.

Notwithstanding this there is a need to improve lighting and the quality of our green and open spaces in the town centre to support the town centre economy and elevate the experience of residents and visitors now as well as in the medium to long term. The report sets out work to date, proposals and high-level costings for a programme of works and projects on lighting and greening to improve the Town Centre.

### **Lighting in the Town Centre**

It has been recognised that the Maidstone scenography has three layers, with each being accentuated or reduced in any given scene.

- The lighting 'baseline palette' supports the adoption of a coordinated best practice approach to illuminance levels, colour temperatures and the mounting heights of public light equipment.
- Accent lighting supports wayfinding along key routes, using subtle visual triggers and motifs to offer intuitive guidance to help navigate the town centre after dark. Accent lighting is proposed along three routes that provide key connections between different parts of the town centre - along the town centre spine (Week Street and Gabriel's Hill), around County Hall and along the Riverside.
- Special lighting treatments allow for the broadening of lighting to help elevate the distinctiveness of Maidstone town centre through lighting to buildings and structures (including Archbishop's palace) and to public spaces (including around the All-Saints complex) and to complement this there are areas of planned darkness – including the River Len, court complex.

The inherently dark corridors of the Rivers Medway and Len divide the different areas of Maidstone, representing the largest open spaces in the town centre. All lighting schemes adjacent to these areas should conform to the ILP/BCT guidance on minimising obtrusive light towards habitats. The Environment Agency will also require assessment of any changes to lighting in terms of river biodiversity including impacts for fish.

Drawing on the strategic assessment and local knowledge it is proposed that initial projects are prioritised as described below:

- Updating MBC's existing lighting infrastructure
- Implementing a digital management system to improve management and maintenance of MBC's lighting infrastructure.
- Projects to enhance safety.
- Projects to elevate the quality of the night time experience with a focus on heritage assets
- Projects to complement open space/greening improvements

The section below sets out proposed actions.

## **Green and Open Spaces**

The key aims of the projects proposed are to improve open space and green infrastructure to support town centre regeneration, elevate the experience of living in and visiting Maidstone and enhance biodiversity.

The main opportunities focus on

- Enhancements to the waterway network
- Improved east-west connections with a green character – linking town centre streets with the river Medway.
- Upgrading existing green spaces including Benchley Gardens and the All-Saints area as a vital component of creating two heritage anchors
- Improvements to open space and green infrastructure
- Public realm improvements including at Earl Street and in the vicinity of Sessions House/Maidstone East
- Creation of a network of green streets to enhance beauty, improve the setting of town centre and residential streets e.g., through increased planting including trees, introduction of SUDs where possible and improving pedestrian and cycle connections in the town so that streets are healthier, quieter and safer.
- Creating a skein of characterful small routes and alleys accentuating existing alleys and where needed upgrading them to create an attractive place which supports the independent retail and hospitality offer
- Adding quality and vitality to our town centre streets and open spaces including street furniture, events, opportunities for play and meanwhile uses

Apart from this it should also be remembered that green and open spaces are also a key theme contained in adopted policies for MBC's town centre opportunity sites.

MBC has secured several S106 contributions for investment in open spaces in and around the town centre which currently total around £404k. £360k of this funding is already spent or committed with investment being made predominantly in Benchley Gardens (£150k) (to improve access, pathways and reinstallation of a water feature) and Whatman Park (£200k) (to improve play, repair the tree top walk and pathway network) in accordance with the legal agreements.

Taking into account the green and open space strategic objectives, feedback from stakeholders and members it is proposed that the next phase of improvements is focussed in the heart of the town centre with the objectives of enhancing and softening the hard landscaped areas. In practice civil engineering work needed to create open and green space in the town centre is heavily constrained e.g., by the presence of utilities. As a result, the projects proposed for this phase of improvements is intended to test innovative methods of achieving greening in our streets and squares.

What is presented in the report is the concept, the "look and feel" of the greening proposals and the expected outcome. The proposals are also designed to be

scalable with opportunities to continue to build upon or move with portability (where possible) as the town evolves with the needs and demands of Maidstone's residents and visitors. It is important to recognise that the full scale of what can be achieved within the budget will not be known until exploratory work is undertaken.

These programmes of work go very much hand in hand and although distinctive should come forward together, to work together. Lighting can enhance greening and vice versa, it is the intention to operate these as separate workstreams and one is not reliant on the other in coming forward, both strategies should complement and intertwine with the other. There are consistencies with priority areas and the overall ambition is the same, to enhance the town centre and improve user experience.

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## **Lighting Proposals**

There are approximately 200 lighting assets owned by the Borough Council within the town centre area (these include traditional lighting columns, down and up lighters, lighting on buildings). The proposed lighting prework will in the first instance identify what is currently not working and ensure where possible our current assets are fully working.

The assets have been surveyed to establish their condition and any repair and renewals required to ensure that our current infrastructure is to modern standard and working. The provisional cost to achieve this is **£140,000**. This work includes painting of all lighting apparatus to MBC colours, replacement of columns that cannot be refurbished, replacement lanterns where refurbishment is not an option.

There is an ambition to install a CMS (Central Management System) for the whole of the lighting assets owned by the Borough Council within the town centre. Such a system would give control to enable lights to be remotely turned on, dimmed, light in different colours and effects. The benefit of a CMS is that it allows for remote dynamic control over every individual lighting asset connected, this allows for energy consumption to be monitored, delivering optimum operational and energy efficiency, reducing carbon emissions. The CMS would also be used to monitor maintenance issues and reduce "manual" scouting for faults. The provisional cost of installing a CMS is **£50,000**, there would be ongoing future programme costs for the system of circa £5,000 pa.

Turning to lighting improvement projects. There are two areas already scheduled for remedial works, Gabriel's Hill and the Victoria Monument. Works to the monument, which include cleaning, repair of the actual monument and remedial works to the lighting attached and surrounding the monument, commenced in January 2024. Works to Gabriel's Hill will include fitting solar powered lanterns to the existing columns that fall within the Council's ownership. To further enhance the lighting in Gabriel's Hill a planning application is to be submitted that if granted would allow for the installation of three lantern style lights to be attached to a premises in Gabriel's Hill. Both the work to the Victoria Monument and Gabriel's Hill will be funded from existing planned maintenance budgets. It should be noted that our initial research suggests that solar powered lighting apparatus is more difficult to connect to a CMS; however, this challenge will be thoroughly explored through the procurement process with the intention of having a totally

comprehensive approach.

Lighting re-engages people with the unloved parts of a town and can turn underused areas into new outdoor social spaces which are safe, attractive, and inclusive. Several areas have been identified for improvement and prioritised. The ambition is to create a safe trail, connecting areas of the town and having the ability to “signpost” a town trail, where the public can follow areas of interest and economy through the town and along both sides of the river nearest to the town centre.

<b>Location/Scheme</b>	<b>Proposal</b>	<b>Funding required</b>
Heritage assets – Archbishops Palace, Maidstone Museum, Hazlitt Theatre and Town Hall	Down lighters (colour changing ability) to spotlight our heritage assets and update lighting	£ 37,000
Millennium Bridge and Blue Bridge	Projection lights to improve appearance and perception of safety	£45,000
Whatman Park	Restoration and replacement of existing lighting. The power supply in this area is cost prohibitive to restore. The lighting in this scheme would be solar powered.	£42,000
Total		£124,000

The costs described above are provisional and there is a degree of uncertainty. To manage this risk, it is proposed to allow a contingency provision of £50k (approximately 15%) and provision for fees of £15k, bringing the cost to a total of £380k.

With greater investment in lighting in the town centre additional resource will be required for the ongoing maintenance and energy costs. Based on the projects set out above it is recommended that a growth item is included in revenue budget planning for 2025/6 this will be identified in 2024/25 as part of budget planning.

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## **Greening Actions**

The Town Centre, particularly Week Street, High Street and Gabriel’s Hill, has become dominated by hard surfacing and due to the positioning of utilities, the incorporation of trees into the regeneration improvements was challenging, and in most cases could not be achieved. In addition, established trees have been lost because of environmental conditions, disease and anti-social behaviour. Seasonal planting has been incorporated in the Town Centre and has been well received. Whilst these offer temporary introductions of colour, they do not offer any significant lasting benefits to biodiversity or the environment. Jubilee Square offers a wide expanse for gatherings or events, with three permanent granite seating areas nestled between the square and the highway.

There is very little shade in this area, and it can become very barren in the peak of Summer.

At the top end of Week Street there is Brenchley Gardens, a historic and highly maintained green space. However, this is surrounded by a densely populated area of the Town Centre with several roads intersecting Week Street. Several trees exist in this expanse of hard surfacing, however there are no green connections between the park and this part of the Town Centre.

The concept for greening the Town Centre is to create green "pockets" that spread throughout the Town Centre, with a consistent appearance that offers natural and more varied textures and colours to the hard surface. This will be interlaced with larger de-paved areas of greening where connections can be made between the existing trees and where people may choose to sit. Examples of this concept are included in Appendix A to the report.

This will largely be concentrated into four key areas:

- Jubilee Square
- Remembrance Square
- Gabriel's Hill
- Week Street junctions with Brewer Street, St Faiths Street and Union Street.

The pockets will create different height levels to incorporate green "carpets" with new trees where possible and additional height through green climbers or small tree clusters. It is proposed to implement this approach in four key areas and review; potentially, subject to there are more opportunities with more funding to expand the concept further.

<b>Location</b>	<b>Proposal</b>	<b>Allocated Budget</b>
Week Street	Seating and planting at the junctions of Brewer Street, Union Street and St. Faiths Street. Permanent closure of the junctions.	£75,000
Jubilee Square	Planting in tree bases and around the existing seating areas	£50,000
Gabriel's Hill	Planters at entrance with The Mall and where possible leading up to Jubilee Square. Reintroduction of some seating.	£50,000
Remembrance Square	Refresh planting scheme and plant in the tree bases	£25,000
A contingency provision of £20,000		
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>£220,000</b>

With greater investment in the green and open spaces in the town centre additional resource will be required for the ongoing maintenance. Based on the initial proposal it is recommended that an additional part time resource is introduced into the Town Centre at a cost of £20k per annum. This operative would be able to tend to the new greening areas, support litter removal in the

green spaces and support the working already being undertaken in Brenchley Gardens, Archbishops Palace and along the river. This will be introduced as a growth item in the revenue budget planning for 2025/6.

### **Finance**

The cost of the proposed programme for lighting and greening/public realm improvement schemes to be delivered in 2024/5 is estimated at £600k. Members should also be aware that these works will be subject to a tender process and due to a current environment of rising costs could increase further.

Funding is available to progress actions from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund was introduced with effect from 2022/3 for the period to 2024/5 to support the UK Government’s commitment to level up all parts of the UK. The primary goal of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund is to build pride in place and increase life chances across the UK. The Local Investment plan allocated the following for greening and lighting projects to be delivered in 2024/25:

- Intervention E1 Improvements to town centres and High Street – Project Lighting and greening the town centre £396,186
- Intervention E2 Creation of and improvements to local green spaces – Project links from the town centre to Lockmeadow £111,298 (£66,500 has been assigned to callisthenic equipment)

MBC has secured £275k in S106 agreements for improvements to the town centre. This is in addition to the S 106 funding for open spaces described in the section above. Improvements to lighting, greening and open space fall within the definition of eligible expenditure. There is also a further £250k in the council’s capital programme for lighting along the river that could be utilised to support this project, but this would require borrowing and based on the funding projections is not needed for the projects outlined here.

Taken together funding from UKSPF and S106 agreements and the funding allocated in the capital programme for lighting along the river is sufficient to fund a significant programme of works in 2024/25 as detailed above and as illustrated in the table below:

	£000
UK SPF Lighting and Greening	396
UK SPF Creation of and improvements to local green spaces (net of contribution to callisthenic equipment)	55
Balance to be funded from Town Centre Section 106 agreements	149
<b>Total available funding</b>	<b>600</b>

The matter was considered by the Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Policy Advisory Committee on 6 March 2024, with it recommended that the Cabinet approve the report recommendations.

### **Alternatives considered and why rejected**

**Option 2.** Approve a reduced programme of works for lighting and greening/public realm with funding limited to that available through the UKSPF. If this option is preferred it is recommended that work is undertaken to bring

current lighting up to standard, implement a CMS system to enable its management and the green/public realm projects programme is progressed except for Remembrance Square. This option is not recommended. It would not lead to demonstrable improvement to lighting of the town centre, although there would be the opportunity to improve the condition and management of existing infrastructure.

**Option 3.** Do not progress works to improve lighting and greening/public realm at this time. This option is not recommended because of the consequences which include forgoing the opportunity for environmental improvements and support for the local economy and jeopardising MBC's UKSPF funding. The allocation from UKSP was approved by the Department of Levelling Up Communities and Housing as part of the council's investment plan which in turn was compliant with the funding criteria; any proposed amendment to the investment plan risks losing the funding.

### **Background Papers**

None.

I have read and approved the above decision for the reasons (including possible alternative options rejected) as set out above.



Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Councillor David Burton – Leader of the Council

Full details of both the report for the decision taken above and any consideration by the relevant Policy Advisory Committee can be found at the following area of the [website](#)

Call-In: Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call-in form signed by any three Members to the Proper Officer by: **5pm on 28 March 2024**