

TITLE OF REPORT: Chopwell and Blackhall Mill 10 Year Plan

REPORT OF: Paul Dowling, Strategic Director, Communities and Environment

Purpose of the Report

1. Cabinet is asked to agree the Chopwell and Blackhall Mill 10 Year Plan (“the Plan”), its implementation from summer 2018 and to the potential cumulative allocation of up to £1m investment based on the indicative costs assigned to the key actions requiring Council investment over the 10-year life of the Plan.

Background

2. Previous attempts have been made to address socio economic issues and support sustainability in Chopwell with some limited success. However, the longer-term regeneration initiatives such as house building, that are key to the area’s future vitality have been stifled due to wider issues like the broader economic climate, austerity and the impact of regeneration across other local authority boundaries. This Plan incorporates these elements within a wider socio-economic approach to the area. Appendix 1 offers additional background information.
3. Cabinet agreed (July 2017) the development of a sustainable communities’ plan for Chopwell in consultation with local residents. It considered and agreed (December 2017) the key themes emerging from the initial consultation and to receive this report seeking agreement on the high-level plan and its implementation from the summer of 2018.
4. The Plan (appendix 2 offers the current iteration for consideration) sets out the key costed high-level actions requiring Council investment to help improve the future sustainability of the villages.

Proposal

5. The Chopwell and Blackhall Mill 10 Year Plan reflects local needs and has been developed with the community through two phases of community consultation. Whilst it currently captures the community’s priorities, main areas for improvement and likely delivery timescales, it will undoubtedly evolve and change over the Plan’s lifetime.
6. The Plan comprises a range of short, medium and long-term actions, some of which have commenced and/or are deliverable within existing budget envelopes. Others will require further detailed design, third party investment, external funding bids (for example private sector housing developments) and may be subject to statutory permissions (for example Development Control). The Plan aims to capture the breadth and extent of the actions proposed so far and where possible, at this time, will identify indicative associated costs, some of which are sought as part of this report.

7. It is proposed that the Plan be implemented from the summer of 2018 subject to Cabinet's agreement and that any assigned resources are deployed over its lifetime, retaining flexibility to redirect/reallocate if necessary. For example, some realignment may be required to respond to new opportunities (such as match funding or Council led development) or where external factors impact on the deliverability of specific actions (such as market conditions and third-party investment/development).
8. In addition to informing the Plan, the community recognises and embraces its key role as one of the main delivery partners, through its community infrastructure, volunteering and community led development. This community led development role includes aspirations to redevelop the dilapidated and privately owned "Chopwell Hotel". Improving the Hotel, which occupies a prominent central position on Chopwell Front Street, would offer a tangible public realm improvement along with increasing local infrastructure. Subject to feasibility, Council investment to purchase the site or secure an option to purchase the site will be specifically costed and included as part of the Plan. This potentially could become a business centre for the Chopwell area.
9. The Council is also leading an ERDF bid to support a circa £15m investment (£8m Council contribution), focused on Chopwell and Blackhall Mill which complements and is included as part of the Chopwell Plan. If successful, it will help to reduce fuel poverty and improve housing comfort and quality by offering energy efficiency measures such as solid wall insulation and solar panels from 2020.
10. Based on the initial costs associated with the sum of the Plan's key actions it is estimated that Council investment of up to £1m is required to stimulate the implementation of the Plan. It is anticipated that by front loading the Council's investment this will encourage external investment and generate additional resources as the plan matures.
11. Cabinet will be asked to agree any significant projects or deviations from the Plan as part of an ongoing annual review process.
12. Subject to Cabinet agreement, it is proposed to implement the Plan from June 2018 in partnership with the local community along with any associated communications/publicity.

Recommendations

13. It is recommended that Cabinet:
 - (i) Agrees the Chopwell and Blackhall Mill 10 Year Plan and its implementation from June 2018.
 - (ii) Agrees to receive an annual review report that updates on delivery progress and informs ongoing resource allocation assigned to the Plan.
 - (iii) Agrees to the allocation of up to £1m for the implementation of the specifically identified costed actions within the Plan.

For the following reasons:

- (i) To ensure investment is targeted in the most appropriate way and that it is focused on long term outcomes and community needs.
- (ii) To support sustainable housing and economic growth.
- (ii) To support the Council's Thrive pledges.

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APPENDIX 1

Policy Context

1. The proposal supports Vision 2030 by contributing to City of Gateshead, Sustainable Gateshead and Gateshead Volunteers Big Ideas.
2. The proposals also support all five pledges within Making Gateshead a Place Where Everyone Thrives. Each of the themes identified through the consultation contributes toward the pledges.

Background

3. Chopwell faces a variety of challenges including a declining population, low demand for properties, poor retail offer, low economic base and other social economic deprivation. These challenges, compounded by rural isolation, require the Council's intervention to stimulate an improved housing and economic offer to support the future viability of the area. A number of previous development-led plans for Chopwell have had limited effect, with some successes including the time limited private sector landlord licensing (2010-15) and some small scale environmental improvements. However, the more strategic, longer term interventions required have experienced difficulties due to the broader economic climate, austerity agenda and impact of developments across local authority boundaries. It was also accepted at the time that interventions would be dependent upon availability of resources.
4. Much of the previous work centred on the potential housing offer, though the market was unable to support this. The number of long term voids in the area along with the lower than average property values are ongoing challenges and demand for Council homes in the area is low compared to other areas.
5. A retail survey has identified that around 50% of properties are vacant which will impact upon the economic viability of the area including its visitor appeal.
6. The Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan for Gateshead and Newcastle upon Tyne 2010-2030 identified specific sites in Chopwell to be progressed. Land was allocated for 305 homes on two specific sites at Middle Chopwell and South Chopwell. In addition, the Heartlands site has been earmarked for development through the Gateshead Regeneration Partnership in the period after 2020. The existing challenges and constraints of the site along with the current economic climate currently make it a difficult site to develop at this stage in the partnership.
7. The Chopwell and Blackhall Mill 10 Year Plan incorporates these developments and community led elements within wider socio-economic framework for the area that will evolve as part of its implementation.

Progress so far

8. Initial consultation took place in October/November 2017, comprising a door to door and online survey (86 responses) and three public engagement meetings (over 100 attendees). Findings from the consultation were then used to inform a draft action

plan that was taken back out to a further consultation event requested by the Community in March 2018 ahead of seeking Cabinet's agreement for the Plan in May 2018.

9. The consultation questions were designed to be open, exploring what was good about the area as well as what could be improved, and were consistent throughout the consultation process. Consequently, responses differed in terms of breadth, detail and content and at times were contradictory. There was a good balance between positive and negative responses with many valuing the rural, countryside location and strong community spirit. There was recognition that the community could do a lot to help with improving the villages but that investment and support was essential to make lasting change. Responses were grouped into emerging themes, with potential actions and identified leads to create the Plan.
10. The emerging themes were Housing; Environment and Public realm; Economy; Citizenship; Transport and Community safety. The resulting proposed actions range from immediate small-scale actions such as tackling litter to long term interventions to improve the area's vitality and sustainability, such as improved housing and retail provision and employment/business opportunities. It is recognised that the Plan will evolve with its implementation over its lifetime and actions may need to change to reflect this.
11. The consultation with the community confirmed that residents and businesses should play an active role in helping to implement the Plan to improve the sustainability of the area. Numerous local community groups have confirmed that they will look to increase volunteering, oversee local community led development and take more responsibility for some of the village's local assets. Businesses are exploring the potential of developing a local business forum and a new Neighbourhood Watch initiative has been established with over 600 members. The Community has successfully engaged both Newcastle University and University of Northumbria to explore the future viability of the village and the feasibility of some of the Community's aspirations.

Proposal and resources to deliver

12. Having consulted Cabinet, relevant Portfolios, ward councillors and the local community a range of key actions have been identified for inclusion in the Plan that help meet the following high-level objectives over the next 10 years:
 - Improve the local housing offer through housing development that achieves the right balance of homes available in Chopwell. This includes matching land supply and viability for development. It also includes exploring options to maximize the potential of the existing housing stock.
 - Support economic growth with a stronger more viable business presence building on the strengths of Chopwell and Blackhall Mill.
 - Maximize local connectivity and transport links
 - Improve the local environment and public realm of the village.
 - Continue to work with the local community to maximize its potential to contribute towards the sustainability and viability of the local area
 - Ensure the community feels safe.
 - Promote Chopwell and Blackhall Mill to make the most of the rural location, history and heritage.

13. Whilst the Plan captures the community's priorities, main areas for improvement and anticipated delivery timescales, it will undoubtedly evolve and change over the Plan's lifetime.
14. Furthermore, the nature and unpredictability of market conditions, a reliance on third party investment and development, along with maximizing any opportunities for external/additional resources necessitate flexibility in the allocation of resources. This includes retaining an ability to shift between revenue and capital allocations along with profiling over the 10-year life of the Plan.
15. The local community has already recognized and embraced its key role as one of the main delivery partners, through its community infrastructure, volunteering and community led development. This community led development role includes aspirations to redevelop the dilapidated and privately owned "Chopwell Hotel". Improving the Hotel, which occupies a prominent central position on Chopwell Front Street, would offer a tangible public realm improvement along with increasing local infrastructure. Subject to feasibility, Council investment to purchase the site or secure an option to purchase the site will be specifically costed and included as part of the Plan.
16. The Council is also leading an ERDF bid to support a circa £15m investment (£8m Council contribution), focused on Chopwell and Blackhall Mill, which complements and is included as part of the Chopwell Plan. If successful, it will help to reduce fuel poverty and improve housing comfort and quality by offering energy efficiency measures such as solid wall insulation and solar panels from 2020. It is likely that dedicated staffing resources will be required though the Plan to help deliver this capital initiative.
17. Based on the initial costs associated with the sum of the Plan's key actions it is estimated that Council investment of up to £1m is required to stimulate the implementation of the Plan. It is anticipated that by front loading the Council's investment this will encourage external investment and generate additional resources as the plan matures.
18. Subject to Cabinet's agreement the Plan will be implemented from the summer of 2018.
19. It is proposed that the Plan will be reviewed annually by Cabinet to receive updates on delivery and agree any significant projects or deviations from previous iterations. Relevant Portfolios and Chopwell and Rowlands Gill Ward Councillors, supported by bespoke officer working arrangements, will review the plan at least on a six-monthly basis.

Consultation

20. This report has been prepared following consultation with Cabinet Members and Chopwell and Rowlands Gill Ward Councillors.

Alternative Options

21. The alternative options would be to either take a lower level approach to intervention in the area or to take no action to intervene. While the former would

utilise fewer resources it would be unlikely to make a long-lasting impact given the interrelated issues within the area. The latter would leave the area to market forces and current analysis suggests that this is failing to make real or sustainable improvement.

22. Although at an early stage, it is suggested that the recommended option would offer the best chance in shaping Chopwell and Blackhall Mill for the future and contributing towards longer term sustainability.

Implications of Recommended Option

23. Resources:

- a) **Financial Implications** – The Strategic Director, Corporate Resources confirms that the cost of the individual proposals within the 10 year Plan will be addressed within the revenue and capital budgets as appropriate, subject to an assessment of their viability, when further details are known.
- b) **Human Resources Implications** – There are no direct human resource implications arising from this report.
- c) **Property Implications** - There are no direct implications arising from this report.

24. **Risk Management Implication** - There are no risk management implications for the Council from the proposals.

25. **Equality and Diversity Implications** - There are no direct implications arising as result of the proposals described in the report, though the resulting plan would identify and assess any implications relating to equality and diversity and protected characteristics, with actions identified to mitigate potential adverse impact.

26. **Crime and Disorder Implications** – The consultation identified community safety issues and the Plan includes actions to be to address these concerns as part of its implementation.

27. **Health Implications** - There are no direct health implications resulting from this report, the Plan will contribute to healthier communities in the Chopwell and Blackhall Mill area.

28. **Sustainability Implications** - The proposals aim to support the area to be more sustainable including housing and economic growth potential.

29. **Human Rights Implications** - There are no implications arising from this report. Any further recommendations that have Human Rights implications will be reported to Cabinet.

30. **Area and Ward Implications** - The proposal affects Chopwell and Rowlands Gill ward in the West area, however, any successful regeneration would potentially benefit other nearby rural communities.