

# REPORT TO ASSETS AND OPERATIONS COMMITTEE

## STRATEGIC PLAN ACTIONS 2023/24



**Report Reference** A-23-01  
**Meeting Date** 26<sup>th</sup> June 2023  
**Agenda Item** 8  
**Prepared by** Town Clerk

### 1.0 BACKGROUND

The Town Council has adopted a new Strategic Plan, setting out its six strategic aims for the ensuing decade. Each aim is supported by a series of objectives, each of which has been assigned to a committee for implementation. Full Council has tasked each committee with determining its actions for the current financial year (through to 31<sup>st</sup> March).

The Strategic Plan is ambitious and many objectives will require work over a number of years to successfully complete. It is important that the council carefully plans its work over the period to ensure a manageable workload whilst also ensuring it successfully delivers for the community.

Appendix A contains the suggested actions from the community consultation relevant to this committee. It includes a commentary/guidance from the Town Clerk.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES ASSIGNED TO THIS COMMITTEE

The following objectives have been assigned to the Assets and Operations Committee:

REF	Objective
C3	Expand the Town Ranger service to increase the cleanliness, maintenance and attractiveness of the town
S5	Ensure the Council's built assets are financially sustainable with the usage and community benefit maximised

These are discussed further individually below, with some ideas for how the council could work to meet these objectives in the current financial year.

#### 2.1 C3 – EXPANDING THE TOWN RANGER SERVICE

*We will continue to ensure Knutsford is a well-maintained town in which residents have pride through expanding the Town Ranger service and tackling more of those jobs that somebody should do.*

The town ranger service undertakes a broad range of activity for the council, this includes tackling minor town maintenance issues (clearing overgrowth, cleaning signage, litter picking, weeding etc) and maintenance of council assets (bench repairs, maintenance of council office/library grounds,

maintenance of the obelisk green etc). The role was recently expanded to include delivery of the floriculture watering service and as a trial this year the planting of baskets/barriers has also been undertaken in house (by the Town Ranger and Cemetery Groundskeeper).

The Town Ranger workload is presently at/exceeding capacity, therefore there is not scope to increase duties without an increase in resource. Recent changes to prohibit use of weedkiller (decision of the Environment and General Purposes Committee) have exacerbated this and led to a decline in standards. Under this objective, the Personnel Committee will be discussing how resource could be increased, with the suggestion of creating an apprentice ranger role.

The committee should consider whether there are additional duties (e.g. aspects not presently undertaken or aspects undertaken more frequently or comprehensively) it would like to see the service undertake.

Since the service was introduced, the council has gradually acquired a range of machinery and tools to enable the range of duties to be undertaken. This has been funded from annual equipment budgets for minor items (e.g. replacement strimmers etc). There are some areas where additional equipment could be beneficial, for example a trailer, leaf collectors and debris removers. These are both more expensive (exceeding the small annual budgets allocated) and larger, requiring storage space.

Storage space is limited. The freeholders hut is well used, some items are stored at the cemetery garage and others in the council offices. In addition, the Town Ranger does not have a dedicated work area for undertaking jobs which require work space (for example, planting up the town barrier planters was undertaken at the cemetery, renovating benches has been undertaken in the parking area of the council offices); whilst these are of lesser frequency the lack of space inhibits efficiency. The council currently uses space at the Cheshire East Council depot on Longridge for parking the van and, informally, storing some larger items (spare planters, for example). The Town Clerk and Planning and Facilities Officer have discussed the benefits of greater use of the depot, for example to situate a storage container for town council storage and creating an outdoor work space.

The suggested actions for this year would be:

- Assets and Operations Committee to review scope of Town Ranger service (this meeting)
- Personnel Committee (and then Council) to consider increasing staffing resource for Town Ranger service
- Planning and Facilities Officer undertake a review of equipment and bring proposals forward to committee
- Planning and Facilities Officer to explore enhanced use of CEC depot at Longridge.

## **2.2 S5 – SUSTAINABLE COUNCIL ASSETS**

*We will work to maximise the benefit of our buildings to the local community whilst also minimising operational costs and maximising income. This will include investing in renovations the Market Hall and Council Offices.*

The council has 7 built assets: Council Offices, Market Hall, public toilets (x2), freeholders hut (currently leased, freehold transfer pending), 60 King Street and the Tabley Hill Chapel. The Market Hall now comes under the remit of the Town Centre Committee, which has this objective co-assigned for that purpose. Below provides an overview of the operation of each asset under this committee's

remit (excluding the Freeholders Hut<sup>1</sup>)

### 2.2.1 Council Offices

The council acquired the council offices in April 2022 and has developed plans for a renovation. A costing exercise for these plans was undertaken and considered by the Council Offices sub-committee in April 2023 (ref CO-22-01)

*KOK Surveyors were commissioned to develop an indicative cost estimate for the works. The total estimate, inclusive of contingency and professional fees, is £1,447,181. This valuation is based on the latest drawings, includes an allowance for inflation to 2023Q4 and assumes single stage competitive tender. The estimate is to an accuracy of +/- 10% (range £1,302,463 to £1,591,899). It excludes replacement glazing and windows and provision of air conditioning. It assumes existing services are sufficient for alterations. A detailed summary is provided in the appendix. The total costings include preliminaries of £146k, contingency (10%) and inflation of 156k and professional fees (15%) of £191k.*

*The sub-committee will be aware that construction inflation is tracking higher than consumer inflation. The sub-committee will also be aware that interest rates have significantly increased over the last year. Borrowing £1.5m over a 50-year period would see fixed repayments of £79,662 per year and an interest rate of 4.82%. As interest rates change this amount will obviously vary, for example in 2021 the cost would have been £48,600 per year at 2.1%. This has a material effect on the affordability of the project. A £1m borrowing would be £53k per year, a £500k borrowing would be £27k per year, or £34.5k per year over 25 years. The plans for the building would provide four commercial lettings raising £23k per year income (the four first floor offices)*

*There are extremely limited opportunities for grant funding. The second phase of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund is closed, there may be a third phase which could (potentially) contribute funds to reduce the costs in respect of energy efficiency improvements. If works were phased (in distinct phases) there may be the potential to secure funds from the FCC Foundation (up to £100k for projects of no more than £500k). Some CIL funding could be allocated to the project in the event of development proceeding at Manchester Road and/or Longridge (which would both generate several hundred thousand pounds of CIL – although there are other projects in the community which would benefit from CIL funding.*

The sub-committee agreed that a phased renovation programme should be developed. Subsequently, the Town Clerk has submitted an expression of interest to the government's Community Ownership Fund<sup>2</sup> as it may be a viable project under this funding stream. An outcome on the EOI is due within the next month.

The current budget for the building has operational costs of £34.5k per year. The building currently generates no income. The council will need to understand the VAT implications of generating income from room hires/rentals before implementing any charging<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The Freeholders Hut is a small storage room. It has negligible operational costs (repairs as required) and no income.

<sup>2</sup> Through successful lobbying from NALC (National Association of Local Councils) this fund is now open to parish and town councils.

<sup>3</sup> Councils are restricted as to the amount of VAT that can be recovered from exempt business activity. Presently the building is a 'non-business' asset, generating income would make it a business asset to which the restrictions may apply. Before introducing charges the council would need to understand the impact on its

The suggested actions for this year would be:

- Town Clerk to investigate income generation from building in current form, including to understand the VAT impact of any income on the council's overall VAT recovery and report to committee on proposals
- Council Offices sub-committee to develop a phased programme for renovation

### **2.2.2 Public Toilets**

The council acquired the two public toilet buildings (Malt Street and Bexton Road) in 2013, following which the council contracted with Danfo on a 25-year contract for the creation of three cubicles per site and the ongoing servicing. Income from public toilet use is deducted from service payments.

In 2021 the council undertook works to create commercial lettings in the vacant space within each building. In May 2023, it installed card readers on two cubicles to enable contactless payments for use of the public toilets and increased the usage fee from 20p to 30p.

The annual contract cost as of 1<sup>st</sup> June 2022 is £38,989, this increases by CPI annually. Utilities cost approximately £6k Income from coin use is around £3.5k per year (impact of fee change and contactless usage to be measured during the current financial year). The council derives an income of £22,420 per year from the commercial spaces, leaving a net operational cost of approximately £19k.

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The suggested actions for this year would be:

- Monitor impact of change in usage fee and introduction of contactless payments

### **2.2.3 Tabley Hill Chapel**

The chapel is a grade II listed building in the centre of the cemetery. The net budget is for a minor operating cost of £530, dependent upon income. The building was renovated in 2021 using a grant from Cheshire East Council and proceeds from the sale of the cemetery lodge. In the 2022/23 financial year there were six funeral hires, one wedding hire and one casual hire for the chapel.

More needs to be done to promote the chapel and drive bookings. A promotional leaflet is currently under production.

The suggested actions for this year would be:

- Delivery of the promotional leaflet for dissemination via funeral directors and others
- Development of a marketing plan to generate further bookings

### **2.2.4 60 King Street**

60 King Street (aka Kings Coffee House, formerly tenanted by La Belle Epoque) is a grade II\* listed

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ability to recover VAT across its exempt activity and whether an option to tax would be sensible.

building gifted to the urban district council in 1914. The building has been vacant since the previous tenant's insolvency in 2019. The future of the building has been subject to recent (2023) discussion by full council and the reports for these meetings are available on the council website under the relevant meetings (January 2023 and March 20<sup>th</sup> 2023).

The Town Council is currently in discussion with Bruntwood on the future use of the building. The company presented to this committee in March and are in the process of developing a detailed proposal for the terms of occupation and how the building will be used. A meeting with the committee will be programmed in due course to progress this.

The suggested actions for this year would be:

- Agree terms with Bruntwood for their occupation of the building

### **3.0 DECISIONS REQUIRED**

The committee should:

- a) Consider whether there are additional duties (e.g. aspects not presently undertaken or aspects undertaken more frequently or comprehensively) it would like to see the Town Ranger service undertake.
- b) Agree a series of specific actions for the current financial year to begin delivery of the strategic plan. These would then be shaped into SMART targets for monitoring.
- c) Discuss potential future actions for the delivery of the plan, these will be recorded and used to inform future action plan creation and begin to create a multi-year action plan
- d) Consider the suggestions put forward in Appendix A and whether these should feature in future/current action plans

## APENDIX A: ACTIONS FROM STRATEGIC PLAN CONSULTATION

Ref	Action	Objective	Comments
1	Ensure community aspirations for 60 King Street are met	S5	The council is awaiting a detailed proposal from Bruntwood. Our priority will be to see the building renovated and actively used, but Bruntwood is aware of the community aspirations identified in previous consultation.
45	Be transparent with detail on how funds are spent in services and facilities.	S5	The Town Council's budget is published on its website and details how it spends funds/income received. As part of a revised format for the Annual Report, increased detail in reports linked to the strategic plan could be included.
114	Create another toilet block near Canute Place or Tatton St car park.	S5	No available space for a facility by Canute Place. Tatton St car park owned by Cheshire East Council, though if ambitions of the <i>From Top to Bottom Street</i> report progress (development of multistorey car park) this could be investigated.
142	Employ a ranger with a dedicated role of maintaining paths/active travel networks e.g. focused on keeping widths clear, cutting back overgrowth, removing litter etc	C3	The Town Ranger does do some aspects of this at present, though with current resources it is not as frequently as desired.
143	Employ a second ranger.	C3	Covered by suggested actions.
144	Encourage the public to identify jobs for the Town Ranger to benefit the town.	C3	Town Ranger uses social media (twitter) and residents often report issues via that, or via email to the Council Offices. In event of any increase in provision, local publicity could take place to detail what the Town Ranger can/does/can't/doesn't do.