

Leader's response to Call-In of executive decision made on 7 January 2020

Introduction

The report considered on the 7th January related to one element of a £23 million package of work that originates as far back as 2012. The purpose of the package of work was to improve sustainable travel around and through Guildford. This had been developed in conjunction with Surrey County Council and the LEP.

The Executive had previously considered reports and agreed that the replacement of the Walnut Bridge should proceed.

The report on the 7th January sought additional funding primarily due to the fact that the prices quoted by bidders to construct the bridge were significantly higher than had originally been estimated.

In response to the concerns raised (that are to be considered in the open part of this meeting) I would offer the following responses:

Supporting Evidence

(i) that there was insufficient, misleading, or inaccurate information available to the decision-maker;

The Executive decision was based upon the Report dated 7th January 2020 (the report) which

- *contains insufficient information on the background to the Bridge Project from July 2016 to the date of the Executive meeting on 7th January 2020*

Response: This project has been in existence since 2012 and has been the subject of numerous Executive and other reports. These are referred to in the report considered on 7th January (reference para 3). It has also been the subject of a planning application which included public consultation in 2018.

- contains insufficient information and detail concerning the works carried out and the costs incurred to progress the Bridge Project generally to date and in particular since July 2016

Response: This project has been reported to a number of Executive meetings: 21/07/15 Exec Item 8, 24/11/15 Exec Item 16, 19/07/16 Exec Item 8, 22/05/18 Exec Item 10, 28/08/18 Exec Item 4

These meetings have been in public and the reports made available on the Council's web site.

The project has also been reported on at meetings of the Major Project Portfolio Board throughout its life. The MPPB comprises lead councillors, including the Leader, Deputy leader, Lead Councillor for Finance, Assets and Customer Services the lead councillor for Planning and the lead councillor for Regeneration. A summary report on all live projects along with individual reports are circulated and discussed where necessary or requested at each MPPB. MPPB has been held on a monthly basis since its inception around 2015 unless agreed otherwise with the Chair of the Board.

Additionally, there have been at least 5 specific presentations (Jan & Sept 2019, Apr 2018, May, Jul & Nov 2017) on Walnut Bridge at MPPB and it has been referenced in a number of other more general presentations.

Finally, meetings were held with the lead councillors for Planning, Regeneration and Finance, Assets and Customers services prior to the Executive to answer any questions. The report was also considered by the management Team/Executive liaison meeting prior to the executive meeting.

All of the above show that Executive members have had the information needed or have had the opportunity to ask for additional information, if required, before making a decision.

The costs incurred are shown at paragraph 6 of the (exempt) appendix 3.

- *does not contain any evaluation of the risks and assumptions around the new funding requirement e.g. The virement could have to be increased if any of the s106 monies and/or construction savings and / or consultancy reduction is not achieved.*

Dealt with in the exempt section in Appendix 4.

- *Contains insufficient information about how the construction savings could be achieved and what would have to be sacrificed in order to do so.*

Dealt with in the exempt section in Appendix 4.

- *States in para 10.1 '...however, the carbon cost of constructing a new bridge is currently not measurable.' We believe that it is possible to estimate such costs. A quick look at google reveals a few different tools.*

Response: The comment related to the whole project i.e. the carbon impact of demolishing the existing bridge; the impact of fabricating, transporting and constructing the new bridge and the potential carbon savings through encouraging and facilitating more sustainable travel by the public over the future lifetime of the bridge. The Council has recently invested significantly in resources to provide more information on the climate change implications of reports and proposals but are not in a position to do this at this time.

- *does not consider how the s106 monies would otherwise have been utilised and therefore what other opportunities are being foregone*

Dealt with in exempt section in Appendix 4

- *provides little background or information about the Bedford Plaza Public Realm Project (other than reference to bringing The Public Realm contract back into the Bridge contract - paras 3.14 to 3.17) to explain and justify the transfer of a further £350,000 from the provisional to approved budget*

Response: The landscaping scheme itself was the subject of a report to the Executive on 22nd January 2019. This is in the public domain. One of the recommendations in the report considered on the 7th January was simply to bring together the two schemes. The justification and benefits for doing this is shown in paragraphs 3.15, 3.16 and 3.17

Report to Executive August 2018 states

- *3.16 There would remain an important element of landscaping and provision of public art around the bridge structure. It is unclear whether this is still the case.*

Response: this report was simply seeking additional funding. All other elements remain unchanged.

(ii) that all the relevant facts had not been taken into account and/or properly assessed;

- *Part of the savings are hoped to arise from savings in consultancy. However, given the mistakes made by the consultants so far, how much faith can we have in them? Should we not consider alternative consultants?*

Dealt with in the exempt section in Appendix 4.

- *does not take account of the fact that, on 23rd July 2019, the Council resolved: "That the process for bringing forward, within the term of this Council, a sustainable Town Centre Master Plan Development Plan Document be commenced immediately, and the Director of Planning and Regeneration be authorised to engage external master-planning consultancy advice to assist in this process".*

Response: This was known however the Council, along with Surrey County Council and the LEP, had been developing this scheme as a part of a package of measures since 2012. This was supported by a grant from the LEP of £1.5 million (and this has been spent).

The resolution referred to did not say that all development in the town centre should stop whilst work on a plan took place. Members will be aware that there are other schemes progressing such as work to Chapel St, Castle St, Swan Lane and the museum. Feasibility work is also progressing on North Street and we are also starting work on the Bus station and how that could be incorporated into North Street plans. There is also development work being undertaken on a flood alleviation scheme.

The Bridge is the one project that can be delivered in the Bedford Wharf flood plain, has been numerous stages of development and challenge and already has planning consent.

The question is how long would we wait for a developed Masterplan and once we had a plan how quickly could any associated works begin especially as there are long term leases in place with at least one tenant.

If the council does stop this project to wait for a town centre masterplan (and subsequent development proposals), the issues that resulted in the scheme being proposed in the first place (safe sustainable travel around and through Guildford) will continue not to be addressed and the money will have to be re-paid to the LEP.

- *only considers two options – to cease the project or agree the additional funding. It does not consider any other options such as request LEP to authorise a delay, or seek a cheaper and/or more flexible solution to avoid impeding the Town Centre Masterplan*

Response: the agreement with the LEP requires that the project is completed by March 2021 or the grant has to be re-paid. An undertaking was given at the Executive meeting to work further on the design. Any material change would however mean a further planning application and

renegotiation with both the Environmental Agency and National Trust – all of which have, so far, taken longer than expected.

- *states in s 9.1 'the delivery of the bridge would however improve accessibility for those with mobility challenges.' In 12.1 it states the bridge part of plans.....'providing improved travel routes for cyclists and pedestrians.' However, there is no cycle or disabled access to / from the towpath which provides a key link to other parts of the town.*

Response: this is correct. The Bridge is primarily seeking to improve access and safe travel between the station and town centre as part of a package of measures.

- *States in paragraph 12.2, 'the projects have been tested and evaluated on numerous occasions. However, we do not think that O&S has ever scrutinised the bridge project. The project has featured in several reports but has changed substantially from the original concept and it is now time to look at the whole picture and not just the incremental stage*

Response: It is for O&S to decide what it would like to scrutinise. The question about looking at the “whole picture” is a different question to the one being considered by the Executive on 7th January 2020.

(iv) that the decision is not in accordance with the decision-making principles set out in the constitution

- *Report dated 7th January 2020 records that In July 2016 The Executive endorsed the Bridge project with a Budget of £3.4 million (para 3.12 of the report). The report concentrates on the virement of £450k. However, this obscures the fact that the budget has overall increased by £1.75m, which is over 50%. This does not seem to be in accord with the principles of decision making – particularly openness in s 14.2 (d) of Part 2 of the Constitution*

Dealt with in the exempt section in Appendix 4.

In summary, the rationale and stages of this project have been considered by many members and committees since its conception.

With regard to the meeting of the 7th January I believe that Executive members had sufficient information upon which to vote (either for or against) the recommendations.

In terms of the Executive's choices it was either to:

- a) Approve further expenditure in order to deliver the bridge or,**
- b) Cease the project, repay £1.535 million to the LEP and leave Guildford residents, commuters and visitors with a bridge that was not fit for purpose.**