

Report of: Planning Business Manager

To: Executive Board

Date: 3rd April 2006,

Item No:

Title of Report : Broad Street Study



Summary and Recommendations



Purpose of report: To inform the committee of the purpose and scope of the Broad Street Study and its relationship with other City Council initiatives and strategies and to seek the committees' support for the key conclusions of the study.

Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Councillor John Tanner

Deputy Responsibility: Environment

Ward(s) affected: Holywell, Carfax

Report Approved by: James Pownall - Legal Services
Michael Crofton-Briggs – Planning
Penny Gardner – Financial Services



Policy Framework: Central South and West Area Plan
Oxford Public Realm Strategy
Adopted Oxford Local Plan 2001-2016



Recommendation(s): The Board is asked to



- a) endorse the study
- b) support the principles it promotes and
- c) use it to inform decisions that it makes about future changes in the City Centre.
- d) support the work of the Steering Group



Background

- 1.0** Broad Street is one of the principal east-west streets in Oxford and is one of the great street urban spaces in Europe with its University buildings and ceremonial activities at the eastern end and its links with the retail core at its western end.
- 1.2** The introduction of the Oxford Transport Strategy in 1992 to relieve traffic congestion in the city centre created the opportunity to rediscover the qualities of the street and in 2000 the City Council's Public Realm Strategy identified some key principles and aspirations to work towards. However, little has happened and local groups and individuals have expressed growing concerns at the plight of the street and themselves promoted a variety of design solutions to give the street a new role, including ideas such as tree planting, seating, kiosk and trade stalls, performance areas, water features, car parking, and even the relocation of the Martyrs Memorial.

The Study

- 2.0** Whilst it is encouraging to know that people value Oxford's historic environment and recognise the contribution the street could make to the economic and social vibrancy of the city it is fraught with difficulties to design solutions without an analysis and understanding of the function of the street (throughout history), its relationship with the rest of the city, identification of the competing needs, and recognition of its special character and historic interest.
- 2.1** It is an approach to managing our public realm that is promoted by government, CABI and English Heritage. The aim is to create successful places not just tackle single issues. To do this designers must consider all potential uses and competing needs as well as respect what makes the space special in the first place.
- 2.2** Oxford Preservation Trust, the City Council and the County Council recognised this and in 2003 set up a steering group to seek a way to enable a more informed approach about future decisions for Broad Street.
- 2.3** The Trust with support from the two local authorities, SEEDA, Oxford Civic Society, CABI, English Heritage, University of Oxford and Trinity College, commissioned consultants to carry out a detailed study of Broad Street.
- 2.4** The study examined the historical development, architectural quality, quality of spaces, contribution of trees and green spaces, colours, materials, movement and activity, surrounding streets and, through various consultation exercises people's perceptions and attitudes. The study concludes by offering a framework to help move specific enhancement projects forward and suggests specific project ideas that could be supported.

- 2.5** This report has been presented to Central South and West Area Committee on 15th March 2006.. The minutes of that meeting are attached as **Appendix 2**. A copy of the Study's executive summary is attached as **Appendix 1**.
- 2.6** The Broad Street Study does not set out to inhibit change or foster one particular perception of what the space should be. It aims to provide a framework to inform decision making. It provides accurate information and comprehensive analysis of the architectural, public realm and historical significance of the street, so that the effects of any change can be measured and negative or positive impacts understood.

Conclusions of the Study

- 3.0** Despite the many attributes of the street – vistas, architecture, materials, morning and evening light, footfall, links with academic and commercial quarters, it is a street that does not quite work. It is cluttered with 20th century traffic management paraphernalia but with few of the benefits. The arrangement effectively divorces the street from the rest of the retail area of the city, and the dramatic sequence of spaces that unfolds from west to east terminates in a dead space of traffic lights and signs. This in turn undermines the link that Hawksmoor once envisaged, from Broad Street through to Cattle Street and the High Street.
- 3.1** To rediscover the space and to allow people to meet, linger and pass through it recommends that attention is focused on:
- Reconnecting the west end with city retail core
 - Enhancing the east end, removing vehicular access
 - De-cluttering the street
 - Make use of opportunity areas such as the platform outside the New Bodleian.

To maintain momentum and focus the Study recommends:

- Launching the study
 - Establishing a Steering Group
 - Securing local authority support
 - Reviewing University library spaces
 - Reviewing Oxford Transport Strategy
 - Developing detailed designs
 - Source funding
- 3.2** The launch was in 2004 with Oxford University's Chancellor, Chris Patten. A Steering Group has been formed with membership from senior managers from the County and City Council, Oxford Preservation Trust and the University. This report seeks to take the study on to the next stage and secure support from the City Council.

City Council Strategies

- 4.0** In endorsing a study such as this it is important that the work and its conclusions link and support the Council's own initiatives and priorities.
- 4.1** **Council's vision** seeks to improve the environments where we live and work. The **Oxford Plan** recognises the role that the historic environment of Oxford performs in creating identity and sense of place and that it is valued highly by its communities. It also acknowledges that working with external partners is important in helping to deliver the Council's vision.
- 4.2** **Central South and West Area Plan** seeks to improve the street scene in the city centre, combat anti social behaviour and crime, improve facilities for pedestrians and in particular seeks to improve the public realm.
- 4.3** The **Cultural Strategy** makes specific mention of Broad Street and the opportunities for enhancement. The **Economic Strategy and Leisure Strategy** recognise the role the historic environment can play in promoting Oxford, supporting its urban renaissance and economic and social vitality and providing opportunities for education and recreation. **The Arts Strategy** recognises the opportunities for involving art in design and development, enhancement of the public realm and use of public spaces.
- 4.4** The **Planning Acts** place a statutory duty on the City Council to preserve and enhance its historic environment and the **Oxford Local Plan 2001-2011** provides a framework for the development control processes to help achieve this.

Managing change

- 5.0** Oxford is under constant pressure of change; its streets are no exception, yet they have been a neglected element of the environment and have not benefited from the level of investment afforded elsewhere. They have to meet a wide variety of needs within a framework of very strict controls – traffic regulations, safety controls, disability regulations and planning policies. How we 'dress' our streets affects people's perception of the place. It is the first thing visitors see and experience. They should be safe and attractive places for people to live and work in. This study seeks to establish key principles and to provide a vision that can achieve this.
- 5.1** The City Council begun to influence the approach to the public realm with its Public Realm Strategy (2000) and change is taking place with a rationalisation of street furniture and signs, traffic management, good quality materials and improved street lighting and architectural lighting. The Council has agreed to review this strategy. Support for the Broad Street Study will not undermine the work to be carried out. More importantly, it provides a finer grain study of a part of the public realm

that may help to inform that review.

- 5.2** The Broad Street Study seeks to build on the high quality of the existing asset and add to the improvements already taking place elsewhere. It is a study that reinforces and builds on the principles and aspirations of the Public Realm Strategy focusing attention on one of Oxford's best but most neglected streets. The study is not about diverting attention from other initiatives and priorities – it seeks to build on and complement what is happening elsewhere in the city. Secure management of the historic core can only assist the urban renaissance in the west end and help to maintain the diverse and thriving cultures that make Oxford special.

Conclusion

- 6.0** Broad Street has befallen the same fate of many of Oxford's streets and has not received the same degree of care in its management as exercised on our buildings and green spaces, despite its international significance. This is not unique to Oxford and is almost a national malaise that English Heritage is now targeting in its *Streets for All* campaign.
- 6.1** Broad Street is identified as a priority for action in Oxford's Public Realm Strategy and whilst the resources have not been available to deliver improvements the Broad Street study does not change this conclusion.
- 6.2** With the many competing needs on the space this is a significant challenge. The Study provides a framework of analysis and understanding that enables proper consideration of all these needs, allowing balanced and informed decisions to be made. Because it is a spacious street – a rare asset for Oxford, there is pressure for it to accommodate many activities that are not possible elsewhere – parking, cycle stands, new street furniture and booths, street cafes, performance space etc. Whilst these may be very legitimate uses and appropriate to the wider aims of the city, decisions about them, which could harm other interests, should be made within the context of a longer-term vision for the street.
- 6.3** These are exciting times for the city as its urban renaissance gathers momentum. Delivery of this long-term strategy is helped by the implementation and success of individual and discreet projects around the city. The Castle Project, re-paving our streets, Radcliffe Square improvements, Bonn Square, proposed improvements in the High Street all physically help to reconnect the various parts of the city, foster business confidence and ensure visitors' first impressions are positive.
- 6.4** The committee is recommended to endorse the study and the work of the Steering Group, support the principles it promotes and use it to inform decisions that it makes about future changes in Broad Street.

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Background papers:

Streets for All. English Heritage. 2005

Broad Street Study. Kim Wilkie Associates. 2004

Oxford Public Realm Strategy. Gillespies. 2000

