

To: City Executive Board

Date: 15 October 2014

Report of: Head of City Development

Title of Report: Frideswide Square: County Council consultation

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To agree a response to the County Council's consultation on its detailed design proposals for Frideswide Square.

Key decision Yes

Executive lead members: Cllr Bob Price, Board Member for Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning and Cllr John Tanner, Board Member for Cleaner, Greener Oxford, Climate Change and Transport

Policy Framework: Corporate Plan - Vibrant and Sustainable Economy, West End Area Action Plan – more attractive spaces.

Recommendations: That the City Executive Board

1. Express support for the County Council's aspiration to achieve a high quality design for Frideswide Square, which strikes a balance between open spaces and excessive definition and clutter.

2. Ask the County Council to give further consideration to the following important points in formulating its final design:

Clearer differentiation of the shared space routes through the use of colour and specific surfacing materials which will improve the clarity of the designation of shared spaces for cyclists and pedestrians and make the Square user friendly for all groups.

Adequate parking and loading bay provision is allowed for traders and businesses in the Square. Proper provision for taxis moving through the Square.

The development of an approach to signage that is shared and agreed with the City Council

The establishment of an agreed formal structure for the management and control of events and activities in the Square.

Engaging artistic and design support for the lamp columns and other important street furniture, and the preparation of a strategy for the lighting of the Square.

Re-locating the Ox sculpture that is currently at the side of the Said Business School

The retention of some form of water feature on the North side of the Square

Context

1. Frideswide Square is of strategic importance in Oxford and Oxfordshire's road network, handling tens of thousands of car, bus, cycle and pedestrian journeys every day. In particular, it is one of the key bottlenecks preventing reliable journey times for people commuting into Oxford.
2. It is also the gateway to the area for rail passengers. Oxford rail station is one of the fastest growing stations in the country, with 50% growth in passenger numbers since 2003. An estimated 5.5 million people pass through the station each year. Frideswide Square is the main point of arrival and departure for people using the station.
3. Transforming Frideswide Square is a vital part of the regeneration of Oxford's West End, and will help to ensure improved access to the major development sites in the Westgate and Oxpens.
4. The County Council is carrying out a major transport and public realm project to change Frideswide Square from a busy and inefficient road junction to a well-managed gateway to the city. It intends that this work will improve traffic flow, reduce journey times and provide a new, attractive public space with far better facilities for pedestrians and cyclists.
5. The aim is to make the new Frideswide Square a modern gateway to the city in keeping with its status as a world class city to visit, to work and to do business. It is one of a number of proposed major developments that will transform the west end of the city centre including the new Oxford Station Master plan and the planned redevelopment of Oxpens and the Westgate Centre.

Proposal

6. The County Council is currently consulting on the detailed design of the soft and hard landscaping proposals. The current design is still open to change as it is out to consultation at present.

Images and plans are presented in the appendix

Consideration of the Design

Hard landscaping

7. The County Council proposes to use high quality material throughout in accordance with the joint Oxford and Oxfordshire Street Scene Manual; the predominant material on the footways is to be York stone.
8. The rest of the hard landscaping in the square is planned to be at low level and to allow flexibility for how people will use it. There will be low level seating along the planters and some fixed seating is also provided
9. A key consideration for the design has been to decide how much street furniture should be inserted into the space between the highway and the buildings. It could be left as a largely open area without definition, creating a series of large flexible spaces. Or it could be extensively filled with planters, trees, smaller kiosks or buildings and comparable feature to create a series of pathways and 'rooms' within the overall square.
10. The objective is to create greater distinction between the spaces on the north side and south side of the square together with the space in front of the Royal Oxford Hotel. It is likely, too, that greater differentiation will emerge once new development on south side and the island site is known.
11. On balance, the proposals seem to offer an appropriate blend of open space and street furniture.

Access and Equality

12. The design allows users to take a wide variety of routes through the square, while at the same time providing interest and opportunities for people to linger in the square rather than simply traverse through it.
13. One of the challenges of such a large space is the need to provide physical clues for the blind and visually impaired. The access groups have been consulted and they advise that the buildings at the edges will themselves provide some reference points. Confining the traffic to the centre of the square is welcomed by the access groups as this enables those they represent to avoid contact with trafficked areas.
14. A variety of pedestrian crossings have been used in the design. Those at major crossing points are zebra style crossings while others facilitate pedestrian movements through traffic islands such as those on the north side of the Royal Oxford hotel.
15. While supporting the general approach, the City Council considers that the shared cycle and pedestrian routes on either side of the square should be more clearly differentiated from the wider pedestrianized area, through the type and colour of the surfacing in order to maximise security and user confidence for both groups.

Soft Landscaping

16. There is a pair of lines of modest height trees through the middle of the square to reinforce the principle of a 'Boulevard' road through the middle of the square. The intention is to create a simple layout while protecting the larger open public spaces from the busy traffic activity that will occur in the centre of the Square.
17. The City Council agrees that there should be a line of trees to define the spaces in front of the north and south sides of the square and to enclose the traffic and bus stops in the centre. The trees must be of a suitable species so that the eye is still drawn through the space and able to take advantage of the views in and out of the square.

Cycling and pedestrians

18. After lengthy consideration of the issues involved, the County Council is proposing that cycling should be allowed on the central areas of the two largest public spaces in the square, in order to allow cyclists if they wish to pass through the square away from general traffic. The intention is that the areas, as highlighted on the plan, are sufficiently large to allow cyclists and pedestrians to share them comfortably and safely. The areas will have carefully designed paving slabs repeated throughout showing cycle and pedestrian symbols.
19. The provision of a wider highway making provision for cycle lanes beside the traffic lanes was considered but is not proposed as this would significantly reduce the extent of the non- highway public realm..
20. As with other aspects of the design, there is a careful balance to be struck to overcome potential conflicts between pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles. The County Council's proposals are pragmatic and seem on balance to be appropriate.
21. The proposals provide a good response to the varied movement types through the square. Vehicles have been confined to the minimum amount of highway practicable enabling the maximum space to be given over to pedestrians. Cyclists will be able to use the central carriageway in the normal way as well as using two wide shared space routes on either side of the square. The generous pavements adjacent to the buildings are protected for pedestrian use only.
22. The City Council considers, however, that there should be a much clearer differentiation of the shared space routes through the type and colour of surfacing.
23. As in other shared spaces, such as new Inn Hall St and St Ebbes St, cyclists and pedestrians will be expected to take notice of other users' needs and to be aware that the space is shared.

Buses

24. There remains a concern that buses may be disadvantaged by their need to share the highway with other traffic. To date there has been reassurance from the County Council that it will keep the matter under close review. Should it emerge that bus journey times are disadvantaged by the highway design there are already traffic lights and bus gates both on the Botley Rd and at the southern end of St Giles. These could be altered if greater priority to buses for buses is felt to be required.

Becket Street, Loading and Taxis

25. The City Council is concerned about the adverse impact on local residents of extra traffic along Becket Street. The City Council is concerned that adequate parking and loading bay provision is allowed for traders and businesses in Frideswide Square. The City Council wants to see proper provision for taxis moving through Frideswide Square.

Signage

26. The design proposals give no indication of any signage, either for traffic, pedestrians, cyclists or for other purposes.
27. The signs, especially large highway signs to guide traffic through space, have the potential to have a marked and possible adverse impact on space. The City Council considers that the County Council should prepare a signage strategy that is shared and agreed with the City Council.

Events and activities

28. Another of the objectives of the designers has been to provide spaces that would enable a wide range of events and other well managed activities to take place from time to time. This might even be on a more permanent basis such as pop up market stalls, art displays, café seating.
29. A lot of consultees have suggested that there is quite a wide range of activities and events that might make use of the spaces to be provided in the square. The range of such activities being suggested is extensive and includes one off events such as temporary exhibitions, open air cinema or theatre or larger public gatherings.
30. These proposals are ones that have much to commend them. While for much of the time the square will be a busy thoroughfare, such activities and events will bring much valuable vitality and interest to the space at this important gateway to the city centre, but it is clear that all of these activities would need to be carefully managed by the City and County Councils in consultation with local residents and building owners
31. The City Council considers that the two councils should put in place a structure for the management and control of events and activities in the square that is both reactive to requests from others as well as being positively planned

Art

32. The County Council has recognised the value of public art and has indicated that, in partnership with the City Council, it will discuss with stakeholders about how public art could form part of the square's design. The City Council has made it a requirement of its grant towards the cost of the square that this should be used for public art and involves its agreement.
33. The City Council seeks the consideration of public art to be brought forward in the design process timetable and not left to something that follows on from the current design of the square.
34. There are important opportunities now to involve the local and wider artistic community in helping to design aspects of the square. In particular some of the key pieces of street furniture should involve artists in their design rather than being chosen from a product catalogue. This could include the street light columns which will be very prominent features in the space together with litter bins, planters and seats. There should also be such artist involvement in the lighting strategy. There is much that can be done beyond simply providing standard highway lighting to meet safety guidelines.

The large Ox sculpture.

35. The County Council is considering the relocation of the Ox statue elsewhere within the square. This sculpture is owed by the University of Oxford and is located on the western side of the Said Business School, facing the current station entrance. Locations being considered include the centre of the largest traffic island. The relocation of the Ox to another part of the square seems sensible in order to give it greater prominence in the re-designed space.

Water

36. The design currently includes a water feature or a rill on the north side of the square. The use of water in physical structures can enhance the environment, help direct people through the space and also give a measure of distinctiveness to the north side of the square and the City Council considers that this feature should be retained and not lost in a subsequent value engineering exercise.

Oxford Design Review Panel Report

37. The ODRP had a presentation from the County Council and reviewed the design of the Square on 17 June 2014. In its report it has commented:

“The proposed design is sound. We applaud the detailed traffic modelling and proposed street design that successfully prioritises pedestrians and cyclists. We recommend developing a clearer identity and use strategy for Frideswide Square to ensure that the space is active throughout the day.”

38. The County Council is considering the ODRP comments as part of its response to the consultation.

Current Timetable

39. Detailed design: May - Oct 2014
- a. End of consultation 12th September
 - b. County Council informal cabinet 26th September
 - c. County Council Cabinet decision on final design 21st October

Enabling works: Sept to Dec 2014

Main work: Feb to Dec 2015

Level of risk

40. This is a County Council project, which will bear all the risks for its project.

Climate change / environmental impact

41. There are no implications directly flowing from this report. However, the County Council's design concept for the Square seeks to ease the flow of traffic and also encourage cycling and pedestrian flows through the Square. This design should reduce the climate change impacts of the motorised traffic currently using this busy junction.

Equalities impact

42. As above, there are no implications directly flowing from this report. However, the County Council's design concept for the Square seeks to ease the flow of traffic and also encourage cycling and pedestrian flows through the square. Improving the ability of pedestrians, in particular, by making the Square a more pleasant environment should meet equalities aspirations.

Financial implications

43. The full cost of the project is £5.5 m. The City Council has agreed to make a contribution of £670,000.
44. The level of grant is capped at £670,000. There has been no request that the City Council contribute to a proportion of the costs of the County Council's project. Therefore the City Council will have no liability should the costs escalate. This point has been confirmed in the legal agreement.

Legal Implications

45. A legal agreement has been agreed with the County Council. The purpose of the agreement is to safeguard the interest of the City Council and ensure that the money is only paid across to the County Council at the appropriate stages and if not used or if the project is abandoned or altered to a much down-graded scheme will be returned to the City Council.

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List of background papers: None