

**4 July 2017**

**ITEM: 6**

**Planning, Transport and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Grays Master Plan**

**Wards and communities affected:**

Grays Riverside, Grays Thurrock

**Key Decision:**

Key

**Report of:** Brian Priestley, Regeneration Programme Manager

**Accountable Head of Service:** Andy Millard, Head of Planning and Growth

**Accountable Director:** Steve Cox, Corporate Director of Environment and Place

**This report is Public**

**Executive Summary**

Grays is identified in the Economic Growth Strategy and the Adopted Local Plan as one of the Growth Hubs in the Borough where regeneration and growth is to be concentrated.

A vision for Grays town centre was adopted by the Council's Cabinet in July 2013 and in March 2016 Cabinet adopted a Development Framework to provide the spatial context for implementing the Council's ongoing regeneration programme. Since adoption of the vision a number of projects referenced in the original programme have or are being implemented including the opening of South Essex College and the Magistrates Court business centre, beginning removal of the one-way system and the formation of the Grays Town Partnership which is promoting the town centre through the 'Love Grays' campaign. All these projects have helped diversify the local offer and attract additional footfall into the town. In addition growing market interest in Grays from the private sector continues to provide clear opportunities to further enhance the role of the town centre and its riverfront.

A key barrier to the regeneration of Grays remains the railway line which bisects the town and in particular the increasing frequency and duration of closures of the pedestrian level crossing. The Council has been working with Network Rail, C2C and other stakeholders for some time to develop proposals to close the existing level crossing and replace it with a new pedestrian rail crossing which will allow the free flow of pedestrians through an underpass regardless of railway operations. The recent announcement of over £10.8m funding from Government via the Local Growth Fund to secure the pedestrian crossing was reported to Cabinet in April 2017 and means that the Council is now in a position to progress plans for the implementation of the scheme which will further enhance the town centre and offer new opportunities for commercial development and for connection to the riverfront.

Furthermore, the Paramount Park proposals on the Swanscombe Peninsular in Kent provide potential opportunities for cross river boat connections from Grays.

Given the progress made in recent years and the combined opportunities that will be presented by private sector investment, a new approach to Council service delivery and asset management it is considered to be an appropriate time to refresh the masterplan to guide the next stage of growth and regeneration in Grays. This report reviews the progress that has already been made, highlights opportunities which have prompted the need for a review at this time and sets out the proposed approach to undertaking this refresh.

## **1. Recommendation(s)**

### **1.1 Planning, Transport and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to comment on the proposed approach to updating the existing Masterplan for Grays set out in this report.**

## **2. Introduction and Background**

2.1 Grays is an important market town and the civic and administrative centre of Thurrock. The town has been identified in the Council's Economic Growth Strategy and in the Local Plan as one of six growth hubs in the borough – areas where regeneration investment and growth activity are to be concentrated.

*The Council, through an extensive public and stakeholder consultation exercise, has developed the following vision for Grays.*

*“Building on its strengths as a Chartered Market Town, Grays will be an exciting, high quality destination for people to live, work, learn, shop and socialise. Reconnected to the River Thames, Grays will support growing resident, student and business communities throughout the day and entertain a diverse and vibrant population through the evening.*

*Cafés, bars, restaurants, shops and markets will combine with culture, entertainment and events in unique venues to provide a safe and attractive place for communities to meet and businesses to thrive.”*

2.2 The vision was then distilled into four themes around which the regeneration programme was developed. These themes and a review of progress that has been made against each theme are set out below:

2.3 *Theme a - Building the local economy which would be based on a diverse retail and leisure offer, supply of housing and of business accommodation:*

- South Essex College Grays Campus has been completed and opened in September 2014;

- The former Grays Magistrates Court has been converted into business units. The Old Court House – as it is now known - opened in January 2015;
- The Grays Town Partnership which draws together local retailers and other key stakeholders to promote and improve the town centre has been established and is driving the 'Love Grays' campaign;
- The Council has appointed a Town Centre Coordinator to work closely with the Grays Town Partnership and with other stakeholders to drive improvements in the town centre and promote Grays to local residents;
- The market has been recognised as an important asset in Grays Town Centre and improvements have been made to the offer which will be built on later this year with the introduction of more specialist markets and a greater range of products on offer. Lessons from work in Grays will be used to inform a Markets and Busking strategy for the borough;
- The Council has worked with the private sector to secure the acquisition of the State Cinema by JD Wetherspoon who propose to open a restaurant and public house;
- A development framework to guide development of the town centre was agreed;

#### 2.4 *Theme b - Making it easier to travel in to and move around the town centre:*

- Work has started to remove the one way road system and improve access to and around the town centre;
- In April 2017 Cabinet received a report outlining progress developing proposals for the replacement of the railway line with a pedestrian crossing. The report highlighted the recent £10.8m award of funding from the Local Growth Fund which completes the funding package for the scheme;

#### 2.5 *Theme c - Enhancing the quality of the public realm:*

- The South Essex College facility has made a significant enhancement to the public realm and urban design quality in the New Road area.
- Work on the replacement of the railway pedestrian crossing recognises the key role that this will have on improving the public realm in this area.

#### 2.6 *Theme d - Supporting Thurrock's communities through opportunities for community activities:*

- The Village Beach Festival was held at Grays Beach in 2015 and 2016 and the Grays Town Partnership has worked with the Council and South Essex College to host Christmas and other events which now form part of the 'Love Grays' campaign promoting the town centre ;

### **3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options**

- 3.1 Positive progress that has been made to date in revitalising Grays Town Centre. Whilst the regeneration programme as previously articulated is by no means complete new opportunities driven by Council service reviews and private sector interest are now being identified. There is a clear need for these new opportunities to be coordinated and ensure that they deliver the maximum benefit for Thurrock residents and it is therefore considered to be a prudent time to update the existing Grays Masterplan to take into account this changed context. It is anticipated that the proposed review will focus on the following core areas.

#### **Exploiting maximum benefit from private sector development**

- 3.2 There are clear indications of increasing market interest in Grays town centre from nationally recognised brands such as Costa Coffee and J D Wetherspoons. Additionally private sector proposals for residential development on sites close to the town centre are expected to come forward in the near future. A current Masterplan is required to enable a coordinated approach to achieving the Council's vision and maximising benefit from private sector development in and around the town centre.

#### **Taking advantage of opportunities from revised Council Service Delivery**

- 3.3 The Council has a clear strategy to consolidate civic functions where possible and to provide customers with a modern and digital based offer. A review of Council assets including the Thameside Complex, Civic Offices, Mulberry Square and Grays Beach may prompt changes to the approach set out in the current Development Framework. Additionally the Council owns a number of other sites around the town centre (for instance the Adult Community Education site at Richmond Road and most of the Manor Way Industrial Estate on Curzon Drive) which were not included in the previous Development Framework. Given the revised focus on using Council assets to support growth and regeneration it is considered that these sites should now be included in a revised Masterplan document.

#### **Making it easier to travel in to and to move around the Town Centre**

- 3.4 Proposals to replace the level crossing of the rail line will improve connectivity between North and South Grays and creates an opportunity to extend the

town centre towards the riverfront. Delivery of this project will also visibly change the public realm in Grays and therefore needs to be very closely managed. It is recognised that further improvements to accessibility in to and within the town centre are also needed. Proposals are underway to remove the one-way system and consider car parking facilities. A new masterplan should reflect the progress on these work streams.

### **Enhancing the public realm**

- 3.5 A range of development opportunities in and around the town centre have been highlighted in this report. Whilst all the highlighted opportunities are positive for the Town Centre there is a risk of significant changes being brought forward in a piecemeal fashion. A refresh of the Masterplan provides an opportunity to address these issues and to provide design guidelines that can be applied to all projects affecting the public realm thereby securing a properly coordinated and higher quality approach.

### **Proposed approach**

- 3.6 It is proposed to refresh and update the Area Concept Plans within the current Development Framework to reflect the emerging opportunities discussed above and to provide a Masterplan that can guide the next phase of regeneration in Grays town centre. The Masterplan will also reflect new opportunities such as those identified in the Connected Thurrock Digital and ICT strategy. It is anticipated that this stage of the review will be completed over the summer and presented to Cabinet in the autumn. A more detailed review would follow as part of the process required for the new Local Plan and to ensure compliance with planning policy and regulations relating to the formulation of Local Plans.

## **4. Reasons for Recommendation**

- 4.1 The Council identifies Grays as one of the Borough's Growth Hubs where housing and employment growth are to be concentrated. Grays Town Centre faces significant pressures for development and growth and whilst opportunities exist there is a need to develop a coordinated approach to ensure that benefits are maximised. The current Masterplan has provided a framework which has secured significant improvements in Grays. These successes now need to be reflected in a new baseline which also takes into account the changed economic climate. The recommended action would provide a framework that builds on previous success, that can be incorporated in to the Local Plan and that provides clear and up to date context for the Council's ongoing planning and regeneration activities.

## **5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)**

5.1 None at this stage. The programme outlined in the report includes stakeholder engagement.

## **6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact**

6.1 The Council's Economic Growth Strategy and LDF Core Strategy identify Grays as a Growth Hub where regeneration activity will be focussed. The Council approved a vision for Grays town centre in 2013. The Masterplan will provide a current framework for the Council's regeneration activity in the area and will support the emerging Local Plan.

## **7. Implications**

### **7.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **Laura Last**  
**Management Accountant**

None. The cost of producing the Master Plans will be funded from existing departmental budgets.

### **7.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: **Vivien Williams**  
**Planning and Regeneration Solicitor**

None at this stage

### **7.3 Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**  
**Community Development and Equalities Manager**

Diversity and Equalities issues will need to be addressed through a Community & Equality Impact Assessment informed and developed by appropriate Stakeholder Engagement.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

None

**8. Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- Cabinet Report: Delivering the new Pedestrian Rail Crossing. Decision 01104419 April 2017.
- Cabinet Report: Grays Development Framework. Decision 01104368 March 2016.

**9. Appendices to the report**

None.

**Report Author:**

Brian Priestley

Regeneration Programme Manager

Regeneration