

## Rother District Council

Report to	-	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date	-	25 November 2019
Report of the	-	Executive Director
Subject	-	The progression of the Rother District Public Realm Strategic Framework

---

**Recommendation:** It be **RESOLVED:** That Cabinet be requested to recommend to Council that the Rother District Public Realm Strategic Framework be approved and adopted.

---

**Head of Service: Tim Hickling**

---

### Introduction

1. The purpose of this report is to present to Members a Public Realm Strategic Framework (PRSF) for recommendation to Cabinet. Attached as Appendix 1.
2. The draft framework has been consulted on with key stakeholders and the public, as agreed by Members at Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Minute OSC18/30 refers) and Cabinet (Minute CB18/58 refers). The responses from that consultation have informed the final draft of the PRSF.

### Background

3. The formulation of a PRSF was a key recommendation of the Public Realm Working Group (PRWG).
4. The PRSF is informed by the evidence gathered by the PRWG. It sets out the vision, objectives and key principles for the public realm in Rother district, and aims to address the need for better and more co-ordinated plans, standards and procedures to guide successful management of, and improvements in, Rother district's public realm in co-operation with relevant stakeholders. It is a strategic document that aligns with the Council's Planning Core Strategy policies to manage and improve the district's public realm. This supports a number of the Core Aims and Broad Outcomes of Rother District Council's Corporate Plan 2014 – 2021.
5. The PRSF is structured in three sections;
  - i. **Section 1** This introduces the subject and scope of the document, the local policy context, a vision for the district's public realm, a set of strategic objectives, an overview of national best practice guidance, and a summary of the challenges and opportunities facing the district's public realm, including case studies of recent public realm improvement schemes in the district.

- ii. **Section 2** Analyses the different spatial areas of the district; the towns (Battle, Bexhill and Rye), the villages, and the rural areas. This provides an overview of the current quality and condition of the district wide public realm and proposes place-specific priorities and principles for public realm management, maintenance and potential intervention.
  - iii. **Section 3** Sets out delivery mechanisms and translates into policy, along with funding mechanisms, and explores the roles and responsibilities of the various local authorities, statutory undertakers/utility companies and other key stakeholders (including the local community, businesses and developers) and sets out a number of future actions and initiatives to be developed through a collaborative, multi-agency approach.
6. Rother's role in delivering the actions set out in Section 3 may be varied from enabling, coordinating and supporting, through to direct delivery. Partnership working and a multi-agency approach is highlighted throughout the PRSF as key to successful delivery. The development of many of the actions and initiatives will be a collaborative task between different departments within Rother District Council as relevant, and liaison with appropriate external organisations, statutory agencies and town and parish councils.
  7. A number of actions within the PRSF could potentially benefit from Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds at both district level (through the Regulation 123 list) and locally through Parish and Town Council's CIL fund for improvement to the public realm.

### **Consultation Feedback**

8. A six week consultation exercise was completed in March 2019. A resident and stakeholder consultation was undertaken via an on-line survey. In total, 98 local, regional and national organisations were invited to take part in the consultation, including organisations with an interest in culture, heritage, the environment, and representing the disabled, neighbourhood and residents associations, along with all Rother town and parish councils and neighbourhood planning groups, and statutory agencies with responsibilities for the public realm. Responses were received from 21 of these organisations, and from 48 members of the public, who were all Rother residents.
9. Additionally, due to the specific role of East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Highways with regard to the public realm, officers held a workshop in March with key ESCC officers representing both strategic and operational highways activities.
10. The consultation feedback demonstrated that the PRSF was well received in content, especially well received in its purpose and has widespread support, with 89% of respondents agreeing with the vision and strategic direction. Disagreements with the content were very rare, and related to whether a principle or priority action was deliverable and not about its inclusion.
11. A detailed summary of the feedback, including outcomes by document section in response to the consultation feedback, is available in the Members' Room.

12. A substantial amount of detailed feedback was highly place-specific; localised commentary on specific issues, potential future work-streams or projects. This feedback has not been incorporated into the PRSF itself as it is a high level strategic document, but the feedback will be retained and used to inform any relevant future site-specific delivery plans that come forward through the next stages of delivery programming.
13. Feedback from statutory agencies was low. Disappointingly, no replies were received from Network Rail, British Telecom, Royal Mail Property Group, UK Power Networks, Natural England and Historic England, amongst others. Agencies that did reply, i.e. The Environment Agency, and Southern Gas Network, appeared to have misunderstood the document and commented as if it were a development plan document, for example setting out requirements for others designing and maintaining the public realm in development proposals, rather than acknowledging that they themselves had responsibilities. Both agencies did subsequently forward the document to their estates team for comment, but no further feedback was forthcoming. This highlights the tremendous difficulty with engaging with the statutory agencies and organisations on public realm matters. Highways England commented they would be concerned with proposals that have the potential to impact the safe and efficient operation of the strategic road network, but that they stand *'ready to work with RDC with regard to any works affecting the public realm on the Strategic Road Network within the district.'* Only Southern Water were able to helpfully acknowledge and clarify their statutory responsibilities with regard to the public realm.
14. ESCC Strategic Economic Infrastructure Team commented that:

*"We recognise the role that making places attractive can have in terms of economic benefit and we look to consider opportunities for public realm improvements, where appropriate, as part of schemes within our capital programme for local transport improvements."*
15. East Sussex Highways (ESH) commented that:

*"East Sussex Highways recognise the important contribution that the streetscape can make to the character of the public realm and its significance in supporting local communities. We value the District Council's local knowledge and involvement in our asset management processes for highway maintenance and development."*

*Where funding is limited, work that improves safety for road users will remain our top priority. However we welcome Rother District Council's proposals for a more collaborative approach to help ensure the best use is made of the available resources."*
16. ESH's full detailed comments on the PRSF priorities and delivery actions are included in the detailed summary of the feedback available in the Members' Room, and it is intended that these comments will be followed up with ESCC and ESH through relevant delivery plans that come forward through the next stages of delivery programming.
17. As a result of the consultation feedback, a number of amendments and additions have been made to the document, for example in the Challenges list

on page 15, reference has been added to the limited resources in agencies responsible for the public realm (in response to points made by a number of parish councils), in the Bexhill: Character and Public Realm Analysis section on page 26, specific reference has been added to the two designated Bexhill Conservation Areas and to the Edwardian shelters on East Parade, and in the Public Realm Priorities for the Villages on page 35, reference has been added regarding the maintenance of green features in the public realm. In addition, minor editorial changes have been made to clarify and strengthen certain points, and to ensure factual accuracy.

18. However, a comment from ESH, who, in response to the ESCC Delivery Actions section on page 42, said that they could not agree to the '*presumption of preservation of character historic public realm features*' but would '*aim to preserve the character historic public realm features, where funding and safety allows*'. Officers consider that to delete the 'presumption of preservation' from the Delivery Actions would undermine the strength of the Framework and therefore the original text has been retained in the final document, but acknowledging that funding and safety is a consideration.

### **Delivery, Future Monitoring and Updates**

19. The PRSF exists to set out a strategy to meet the current Rother Corporate Plan (Core Aim 4). Subject to the current review of the Corporate Plan, it is envisaged that delivery of the PRSF will be a Corporate Priority Project in the new Corporate Plan. As such, it is intended that annual updates will be provided as part of the Annual Corporate Plan Update Report. These will provide information initially on project programming and the development of a delivery plan to align with the Corporate Plan 2020-2027, and subsequently on delivery plan progress.

### **Conclusion**

20. The PRSF will help drive a cultural step change to embed the goal of achieving a quality public realm in Rother, supporting planning policies in the Rother District Core Strategy, and the Corporate Plan Vision, including the delivery of a number of the Broad Outcomes of the Corporate Plan. It will encourage a more co-ordinated and consistent approach to public realm design, quality and appearance throughout the district and will promote local distinctiveness, helping to deliver community and civic pride in the environment, and economic prosperity and regeneration initiatives.
20. The consultation and the strategic framework have created a starting point for further discussions with responders through the development of a public realm project plan and delivery programme as part of the Corporate Plan.

Dr Anthony Leonard  
Executive Director

### **Risk Assessment Statement**

There are reputational and strategic risks to the Council in not acting on the results of this scrutiny review. Taking the opportunity to create a positive impact on the public realm has the potential to create economic, social and financial benefit.