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**REPORT TO: MORAY COUNCIL ON 31 OCTOBER 2018**

**SUBJECT: FORRES CONSERVATION AREA REGENERATION SCHEME**

**BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR (ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT,  
PLANNING & INFRASTRUCTURE)**

**1. REASON FOR REPORT**

- 1.1 To inform the Council of the recently opened round of Historic Environmental Scotland Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme and to authorise funding application for Forres.
- 1.2 This report is submitted to the Council in terms of Section III A (2) of the Council's Scheme of Administration relating to long-term financial plans

**2. REASON FOR URGENCY**

- 2.1 This report is submitted to Council in terms of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, on the Chair certifying that, in her opinion it requires to be considered on the grounds of urgency in order to give early consideration to meet a funding deadline of 15 November 2018.

**3. RECOMMENDATION**

**3.1 It is recommended that the Council agrees**

- (i) **to authorise the submission of a funding application for a Forres Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme (CARS) with no financial implications for the Council**
- (ii) **if successful, to employ a CARS officer, subject to confirmation of match funding by HIE**

**4. BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 The Economic Development & Infrastructure Committee at its meeting on 30 August 2012 (paragraph 4 of minute refers) agreed to carry out the Forres Conservation Area Appraisal, Management, Action and Interpretation plans with the potential development of a Forres Conservation Area Regeneration

Scheme (CARS) as such schemes have demonstrated a positive economic impact on town centres.

- 4.2 The Forres Conservation Area Appraisal highlights that “despite the resounding success of the award-winning floral displays that adorn the town in the summer season and the sporadic efforts to enhance the public realm, the town centre exudes a sense of sad decay and of economic decline”. As with many town centres, Forres requires investment to reverse the trend of decline that it is currently experiencing.
- 4.3 Council considered at its Special Meeting on 29 June 2016 (paragraph 6 of minute refers) a proposal for a Forres CARS. It was concluded that although worthwhile, the Forres CARS project was not affordable in the Council’s current financial position and should not be progressed.
- 4.4 Moray Council has now completed two very successful Conservation Area Regeneration Schemes (CARS) in conjunction with Historic Environment Scotland (HES), which allowed for investment into Keith and Elgin Conservation Areas through grant funding for repair and improvements to historic buildings and public realm. On completion of the Elgin CARS and in acknowledgement of Moray Council’s financial constraints, HES suggested that it would consider a proposal for a Forres CARS without match funding from the Council.
- 4.5 Whilst a Forres CARS would require property owners to provide match funding for any grant requests, however match funding would be required for a CARS Officer. HIE has just recently confirmed that they would consider to provide match funding of £50,000 towards the dedicated staff costs over the duration of the 5 years scheme.
- 4.6 Recently HES opened its 8<sup>th</sup> round of CARS funding programme with a deadline of 15 November 2018. Funding provided can be used over a 5 year period to fund the following:
  - Repair grants for priority projects
  - Grant scheme for home owners or retailers
  - Community engagement through training opportunities in traditional skills including for crafts people and education programmes
  - Public realm conservation and restoration
  - Administration cost through dedicated project officer

The outcome of any proposals will be known in March 2019 and if successful the scheme will run from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2024.

- 4.7 The overall Forres CARS objectives are:
  - To achieve and enhance the visitor experience of Forres Town Centre
  - To provide greater access to local heritage
  - To create a sense of ownership and pride in the historical and environmental legacy within Forres, particularly by the younger generation
  - To improve economic opportunities within Forres Town Centre
  - To create the opportunity to conserve and improve the built, historical, cultural and social environment

- 4.8 The proposed actions include:
- Priority Buildings:** The Conservation Area Action Plan identified priority buildings within the heart of the High Street. These buildings were selected due to their general condition and it was felt that choosing a range of neighbouring buildings rather than a 'scattergun' approach would give the greatest visual impact and cost effectiveness.

The **Market Cross** is also included as a priority project due to the urgent need to arrest stone decay which has resulted in the loss of carved architectural detail, and because it is a focal point within the High Street. The Conservation Appraisal, Management & Action Plan provide full details of the works and cost, including photographs.

**Small Grants Scheme:** (throughout the Conservation Area): It will build on the high levels of demand for Shop Frontages & Fascia Signage and includes some general fabric repairs. Encouragement will be given to shop owners to tackle some of the repairs which would be inordinately costly without financial assistance being made.

**Training & Education:** The scheme will include an exciting programme of community engagement and education activities that will create employment opportunities; give practical skills and encourage a feeling of ownership of Forres' built heritage among a wide range of local stakeholders.

**Public Realm Works** As outlined in the Conservation Area Action Plan improvements to the public realm have the potential to make a considerable difference to the character and appearance of the conservation area.

- 4.9 The proposed work will lead to measureable achievements:
- Redevelopment of sites which preserve and enhance the character and appearance of the conservation area
  - Improvements to shop fronts and fascias
  - Reduction in the number of empty shops
  - Return to use of vacant floor space at the upper floors of properties on the High Street
  - Reduction in number of entries on the Buildings At Risk Register (BARR)
  - Evidence of improved conservation standards being adopted
  - Evidence of improved skills in the conservation of historic fabric
  - Enhanced public realm

A full economic and social impact assessment will be carried out after the project has been completed, which will measure social indicators such as footfall, visitor numbers, jobs created & safeguarded and business performance. Town Centre Health checks will provide data to confirm the success of the scheme.

- 4.10 The HES proposal will be complemented by improved interpretation through the Discover Moray's Great Places Scheme. High quality interpretation would not only support the heritage experience but potentially increase dwell-time and secondary spend in the town. Improving levels of interpretation by itself is

unlikely to be effective, and the various studies and work carried out pinpoint that a range of physical improvements have to be undertaken to achieve this to maximise the visitor experience.

- 4.11 It is also planned to further complement the return of vacant floor space of properties on the High Street for residential use through promoting the Council's empty home loan fund, which can provide interest free loans for any interior works, which can't be funded through the CARS.
- 4.12 Building on the success of the previous Keith and Elgin CARS, it is planned to set up a project specific management group with representatives of the key partners from the development stage such as Forres in Bloom, HIE, Forres Events Ltd, Forres Development and Heritage Trusts, local businesses and the Moray Council (Forres Ward Councillors), which ensures a local partnership approach and decision making procedure. Any decisions made by the group and actions arising therefrom will be in accord with HES grant conditions and council's financial regulations and procurement policies and procedures.

## **5. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS**

### **(a) Corporate Plan and 10 Year Plan (Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP))**

The project will contribute to achieve the corporate plan priority to promote economic development and growth, also the LOIP priority of a growing and sustainable economy.

### **(b) Policy and Legal**

The Council considers support for economic development issues on their merits, against the objective to facilitate sustainable economic growth and the desired outcomes of the Ten Year Plan and Corporate Plan. For CARS grants exceeding £25,000, Legal will be involved in the contractual arrangements.

### **(c) Financial implications**

The overall project cost is £1,643,180 with anticipated match funding from property owners of £616,657, HIE match funding of £50,000 and £34,000 for public realm works from sources such as Common Good / Trust and or Developer contributions. The request to HES is for £945,523. Details are contained in **APPENDIX I**.

All owners of priority buildings have been contacted in view of a potential Regeneration scheme and 87% have so far provided letters of support for the scheme. All businesses and homeowners have been made aware of the plans for a small grants scheme with 70% indicating that they would support the CARS initiative.

Being a 5 year contract there is potential for redundancy payment on termination of employment the amount of which is dependent on personal circumstances, the employee would be given the opportunity through the transform programme to avoid redundancy.

**(d) Risk Implications**

All possible care is taken across departments delivering externally funded projects to mitigate any risks.

Risks associated with not carrying out this project include the gradual decline of the Forres town centre from lack of investment. Grant funding is key to addressing the issues of poor maintenance in the historic building stock and acting as a catalyst for economic activity within the town.

In the event that not all private match funding or the funds to be raised for Public Realm works does not materialise, it does not present a risk to the Council as those specific projects won't go ahead and funds with HES permission will be reallocated.

**(e) Staffing Implications**

The project will be co-ordinated by the Economic Development team with the proposal of an additional dedicated Forres CARS Officer post being created for the duration of the scheme for 5 years on a fixed term contract. The scheme will be supported by staff from the Council's Legal, Finance, Procurement, Planning, Building Standards and Roads sections, which places additional workload on to staff with depleted establishments following the most recent round of budget savings.

As the post is over 4 years the post holder would be entitled to redundancy at the end of the contract, and would be offered the opportunity to seek redeployment through transform. The amount of redundancy would be dependent on the personal circumstances of the post holder.

**(f) Property**

A Forres CARS would allow enhancing the public realm, which further could be complemented by interpretation works.

**(g) Equalities/Socio Economic Impact**

An equality impact assessment is not required as the reason for the report is for the Committee to consider a submission of application for funding.

**(h) Consultations**

Consultation has taken place with the Corporate Director (Economic Development Planning & Infrastructure), the Head of Development Services, the Head of Housing & Property, the Director of Corporate Services, the Equal Opportunities Officer, the Democratic Services Manager, the Head of Financial Services and the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and their comments incorporated within the report.

**6. CONCLUSION**

**6.1 Like other town centres across the UK, Forres is suffering from a lack of investment. The effects of poor building maintenance and empty shops can be clearly seen on the High Street. If the proposal for an application**

**to HES is successful, a Forres CARS will be delivered in a similar way to the Keith and Elgin schemes, which have proved successful in turning this downward trend around.**

**6.2 Poor maintenance is a key issue for the historic building stock across the country. Through grant funding and training & education programmes, this trend can be addressed through both building owners awareness and promoting better practice for contractors and conservation professionals.**

**6.3 Regeneration work in Forres will lead to a healthier town centre which will in turn lead to more external investment from third parties. The CARS will address the problems of poorly maintained building stock, traditional building skills shortages and of a failing high street shopping area, giving Forres the opportunity to develop itself into a tourist destination and securing a sustainable future.**

Author of Report: Reni Milburn, Principal Officer Economic Development  
Background Papers: Documents on file in Economic Development

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