



CASTLE WARD

CABINET

4TH SEPTEMBER 2000

NEW WALK RESTORATION PLAN

Report of the Director of Environment & Development and Director of Commercial Services

1. Purpose of the report

The report updates members on progress with the New Walk Restoration scheme, the bidding process for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and recent public response to the proposals particularly those relating to trees.

2. Summary

Significant improvements have been carried out in New Walk during the last few decades. Nevertheless, it continues to show signs of neglect and in recognition of the need for significant investment to carry out comprehensive improvements, members approved the submission of a bid to the HLF to this end.

External consultants (as required by the HLF) drew up a draft Restoration Scheme based on the philosophy that the Walk should be restored to the point in time, the late 19th century, at which it was complete in its present form as an enclosed built avenue. It should perhaps be emphasised that bids for funds to the HLF *must demonstrate historical accuracy*. The main proposals of the Plan are set out in Appendix 1.

These proposals were generally very well received by the Conservation Advisory Panel, the Friends of New Walk (a group of businesses and others based in and around the Walk), officers internally and by members of the public. Officers staged an exhibition of the proposals at 16 New Walk for two days and (in a press release in the Leicester Mercury) people were invited to come and inspect the Plan at the Council offices or at the Belmont House Hotel. Where appropriate, comments were incorporated into the final Plan which was then submitted to the HLF. A summary of comments received during this consultation period is included as Appendix 2. For clarity, the proposals and details of consultations on the draft Plan as regards trees have been highlighted in bold in Appendices 1 & 2.

The HLF notified us in October last year that we had been successful in achieving a first stage approval and that we should work up details of all the proposals and

submit these by October this year. Our own consultants have been drawing up these details which have recently been the subject of planning applications and which, in the case of proposed works to trees, have stimulated significant public interest.

Concurrently, based on the offer of just under £1million from the HLF, members have approved the allocation of money from the Capital Programme in support of the bid and I have already put in place staff and revenue resources within the department to assist our second stage submission.

The current planning applications form part of the overall consultation process. Plans of proposed works to trees are displayed for the attention of members. It is good practice to have in place a proper management plan for the entire stock of trees that contribute so much to the character of the Walk. It is in this context that proposals have been drawn up, following the consultant's original report by Barrell Treecare, a report by Treelife of Syston commissioned independently by the Friends of New Walk and in consultation with our own Trees and Woodlands Manager. It is clear that some trees need to be removed for safety reasons and because they are dead, diseased or seriously decaying. This applies to 32 trees in the Walk and it is proposed to replant 53 new trees.

In the Oval it is also proposed to remove 6 trees for largely arboricultural reasons.

In light of public response to the loss of so many trees, the Leicester Mercury commissioned its own tree expert to look at the proposals. She "agreed that many of the trees earmarked for felling along New Walk must come down for safety reasons. But she recommended that at least seven of those threatened ... should be retained after surgery or pollarding to make them safe." We have requested a copy of her report and will reconsider proposals for trees in New Walk in light of this.

More contentious are the proposals for De Montfort Square (also on display) which include replacing relatively recently and haphazardly planted trees with others designed to reflect historical accuracy in the context of the overall restoration philosophy referred to above. Here 37 trees are to be removed and replaced with 16 new ones, 9 of which would form a roundel in the centre of the Square.

However this element of the scheme has attracted a great deal of public criticism due to the loss of a large number of trees for aesthetic rather than arboricultural reasons. Broadly there are four options for members to consider in relation to DeMontfort Square:

1. to continue with the scheme as submitted for planning consent
2. to omit the intended works for DeMontfort Square from the scheme
3. to limit the works to trees in DeMontfort Square to those that are dead or dying and represent a potential risk to the public in the near future
4. to approve an alternative scheme for DeMontfort Square which can form an amendment to the planning application

It would not be possible to implement the present scheme and keep the existing trees. Therefore, if we wish to retain as many trees as possible it will be necessary to consider an alternative scheme for the Square. Whilst any alternative plan would

not have the same historical basis as the present proposals we will have to demonstrate that it does have a clear historical purpose in order to satisfy the requirements of the HLF. An alternative scheme is now being considered and plans will be reported directly to this meeting.

One further point concerns the timing of the proposals. For many years there has been a recognition that the mature trees in the Walk were in need of a maintenance strategy and that some would have to be removed for sound arboricultural and safety reasons. The Restoration Plan and the offer of a significant amount of investment from external sources provides the opportunity to do this in a rational and historically sound manner as part of a much more comprehensive scheme and to ensure the continuity of the Walk as an attractive tree lined avenue.

3. Recommendations

Members are asked to reconsider the proposals for DeMontfort Square in the light of comments received from consultation and to decide whether or not to amend the application for planning permission submitted by the Director of Commercial Services.

4. Financial and Legal Implications

There are no financial or legal implications arising directly out of the purpose of the report. Once a bid has been submitted and approved the Council will have to enter in to a contract with the HLF covering the delivery and funding of the Plan.

5. Officers to contact: Steve Bradwell, Senior Building Conservation Officer Helen Oakes, Landscape Architect

APPENDIX 1:

Summary of main proposals contained in the *New Walk Restoration Plan* prepared by Chris Burnett Associates with Ashmead Price

Surfacing: the surface of the Walk should be restored using a resin bound gravel over its entire length and width, reflecting the original surface whilst providing the carrying capacity of a modern flexible bound surface. The setted drainage channels should be replaced by shallow dished natural stone channels giving a safer, more effective and attractive detail than the existing setts.

Railings and boundary treatment: railings should be restored to the majority of properties based on historical evidence where possible.

Trees: an arboriculturist's report is included in the Plan, which advises that the majority of trees be retained and that they should be supplemented by further planting where trees are currently missing. Recommendations for tree surgery are also contained in the Plan. It does recommend the removal of some trees on the grounds of safety and others, in the interests of historical accuracy, in DeMontfort Square, at the Oval and along the northern facade of the Museum.

Street furniture: a range of high quality street furniture should be introduced to unify and enhance the Walk's special qualities.

Entrances and Crossings: entrances at either end of the Walk should be more clearly defined by restoring the historical detailing of railings, bollards and metal arches with fitted lights. Other crossing points should be redesigned to give the pedestrian a sense of priority over cars and also reduce vehicle speeds. The Walk should provide a continuous level route for pedestrians at these points.

Squares and Spaces: proposals are made for DeMontfort Square, the Oval and the Museum forecourt.

DeMontfort Square: gradients should be altered to allow a better visual link between the square and New Walk and should allow a generous boulevard space to be created parallel to the Walk for people to relax and circulate beneath the tree canopy. **The existing cluttered tree planting should be removed and replaced by a roundel of trees in the centre of the space as shown on early maps. Railings and avenue tree planting should be restored to the DeMontfort Street and Princess Road East sides to define and enclose the square.** The electricity sub-station should be relocated.

Museum forecourt: should be divided into three distinctly separate spaces: a protected seating area where visitors can relax and picnic, a formal entrance paved in natural York stone and a circulation and meeting space with simple seating. This will create a return to a more enclosed frontage.

The Oval: existing vegetation should be gradually renewed to the original layout as trees become over mature. The western side should be opened up to encourage pedestrian movement around the entire perimeter and to allow more open views into and out of the space and add diversity to an under used space.

APPENDIX 2

Report of consultations on draft *Plan*

Introduction

The *New Walk Restoration Plan* was delivered to the City Council by Chris Burnett Associates with Ashmead Price in November 1997. The Council, in some cases aided by the consultants, undertook a consultation process to ascertain the views of organisations with a specialist interest in New Walk and of the public at large.

Friends of New Walk

The Friends of New Walk is an organisation representing businesses, residents, and local people interested in New Walk. They have been a focus for consultation over the past few years particularly on the formulation and implementation of the Conservation Area Partnership scheme which preceded the current Heritage Lottery Fund submission. The Friends made a financial contribution to the cost of commissioning the consultants' report. During the course of preparation of the *Plan* a small group from within the Friends organisation has acted as a sounding board for ideas from the consultants and the Council. The group consists of one member who has lived all his life and has a business in New Walk, a resident of Upper New Walk, and a resident of University Road, a few yards from the Walk, who is now retired after a distinguished career in environmental education.

A public meeting was held on 5th December by the Friends which was addressed by Chris Burnett and Sarah Ashmead.

The formal response of the Friends of New Walk was included in a letter dated 20th January 1997 from the Friends' spokesman James Bowie.

The Friends were "very favourably impressed" with the proposals but had detailed reservations. The reservations can be met in the course of detailed implementation and after-care. **One of the Friends' main concerns had been the future of the trees in New Walk and they commissioned their own consultants to comment on the proposals presented by Jeremy Barrell Treecare in the consultants' report.**

The Treelife Report

The report commissioned by the Friends of New Walk from Treelife of Syston near Leicester broadly concurred with Jeremy Barrell's recommendations in the consultants' report and considered them to represent a sound approach to maintaining continuity of tree cover in the avenue. The author of the Treelife report, David Dowson, made a series of detailed recommendations for individual trees. The Council considers that these can be dealt with at implementation stage. Dowson also recommended some extension of the range of three species for replanting recommended by Barrell. In discussion with the Council's Arboricultural Officer and the consultants it was suggested that birches should be retained to the end of their natural life, not felled as recommended by Barrell, and that beech may be included as a replacement species but only to replace the prominent beeches lost in recent years.

The Conservation Advisory Panel

The Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP) is a standing group of councillors and local people with specialist knowledge and expertise who advise the Council on planning applications affecting conservation areas and listed buildings and on conservation matters generally. CAP considered the *Restoration Plan* on 5th December 1997 and, again, were addressed by Chris Burnett and Sarah Ashmead.

The Panel were broadly supportive of the proposals but raised a number of points:

- the links between New Walk and the City centre were highlighted: it was agreed that these matters were important but were outside the remit of the consultants' study,
- adequate measures should be incorporated for emergency access,
- the proposals for the Museum forecourt should pay careful attention to the architecture of the Museum itself,
- less obtrusive road crossings than the pelican crossing at the University Road crossing should be considered (this point was taken up in internal consultations within the Council),
- one Council Member, writing after the Panel meeting considered the proposed surface treatment somewhat austere, made a plea for maintenance of as much as possible of the existing vegetation on property boundaries, and asked that the design of the drainage channels should be such as to deter skateboarders,
- the Panel raised other points which can be dealt with in the course of detailed implementation and after care.

Leicestershire and Rutland Gardens Trust

Michael Taylor, the Council's Building Conservation Officer, introduced the proposals to the Gardens Trust at a meeting on 12th March 1997. The Trust wrote subsequently to "commend highly" the restoration plan and to praise the work done under the Conservation Area Partnership scheme.

Public exhibition

An article in the local press invited members of the public to view copies of the consultants' report which were placed on deposit at the Belmont House Hotel and at the main Council offices during the month of January. Letters were also sent separately to all frontagers of New Walk. An exhibition outlining the consultants main proposals was set up at the Council offices to accompany the report and comments sheets were available for people to note their views if they wished. On 5th and 6th February the exhibition was moved to the Council About 70 members of the public took the opportunity to visit the exhibition and to discuss the proposals with the officers present. Some left written comments or their comments were recorded by officers. Other members of the public wrote after the exhibition to present their views.

The views received may be summarised as follows:

- * consider links across New Walk to the City Centre;
- * some members of the public felt that the Museum forecourt should not be separated from the Walk in the manner suggested and the need for a strong formal element in the design was highlighted; the need for a strong formal link to the interior of the Museum was pointed out;
- * there was some comment on the use of the Walk and the associated spaces by people seen as undesirable;
- * the question of pedestrian access across De Montfort Square was raised and a view expressed that this factor was not adequately catered for in the *Plan*;
- * the proposal to appoint a warden was welcomed;
- * one member of the public suggested the name "Peace Mile", a mosaic in front of the Museum, and a waterfall.

Overall there was a high level of support and approval for the proposals. Many of the comments raised can be considered in the context of detailed design and subsequent management.

Internal Council consultations

In tandem with the external consultation process, colleagues in relevant Council departments and Council Members were also consulted. Most of the comments received related to details of the particular department's operational requirements and would be relevant at detailed design and implementation stages. One proposal, however, did emerge for radical traffic management proposals to improve conditions for pedestrians at the junctions of the Walk with University Road and De Montfort Street. It must be stressed that this is subject to extensive further study but will be pursued by the Council in tandem with submission of the bid to the HLF.

Conclusion

The consultation process reached all the relevant voluntary organisations and Council departments. Many individual members of the public also took the opportunity presented to contribute to the evolution of the proposals. Overall the consultations resulted in a strong expression of support for the proposals. Furthermore many suggestions were made which will help in the final refinement of the proposals prior to submission, in detailed design and implementation, and in setting New Walk into its broader urban context.