

Securing Future Facilities for Chard (Executive Decision)

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Purpose of the Report

To seek approval to fund a condition survey of Chard School as part of the strategy to protect and enhance the use of historically important buildings in Chard Town Centre.

Recommendation

- 1) To approve the allocation of £5,000 from Area West towards the costs of a building condition survey.

Background

Chard has a number of important buildings that sit within the historic town centre including Godworthy House (Chard Museum), 7-13 Fore Street (containing no.9 which includes the Courthouse), Chard School and Holyrood Lacemill.

Chard Regeneration Scheme Project Board recognise the important role played by Chard's Town Centre "Heritage Buildings". All of them contribute to the life of Chard, but they all have problems which threaten their viability. They all cost "too much" to run and maintain, because they do not generate enough income and the return on any investment is seen as poor.

The CRS project board see the development of more successful offers of public access and interpretation that generate a better, viable return through both income and footfall as vital to the successful regeneration of Chard and its town centre.

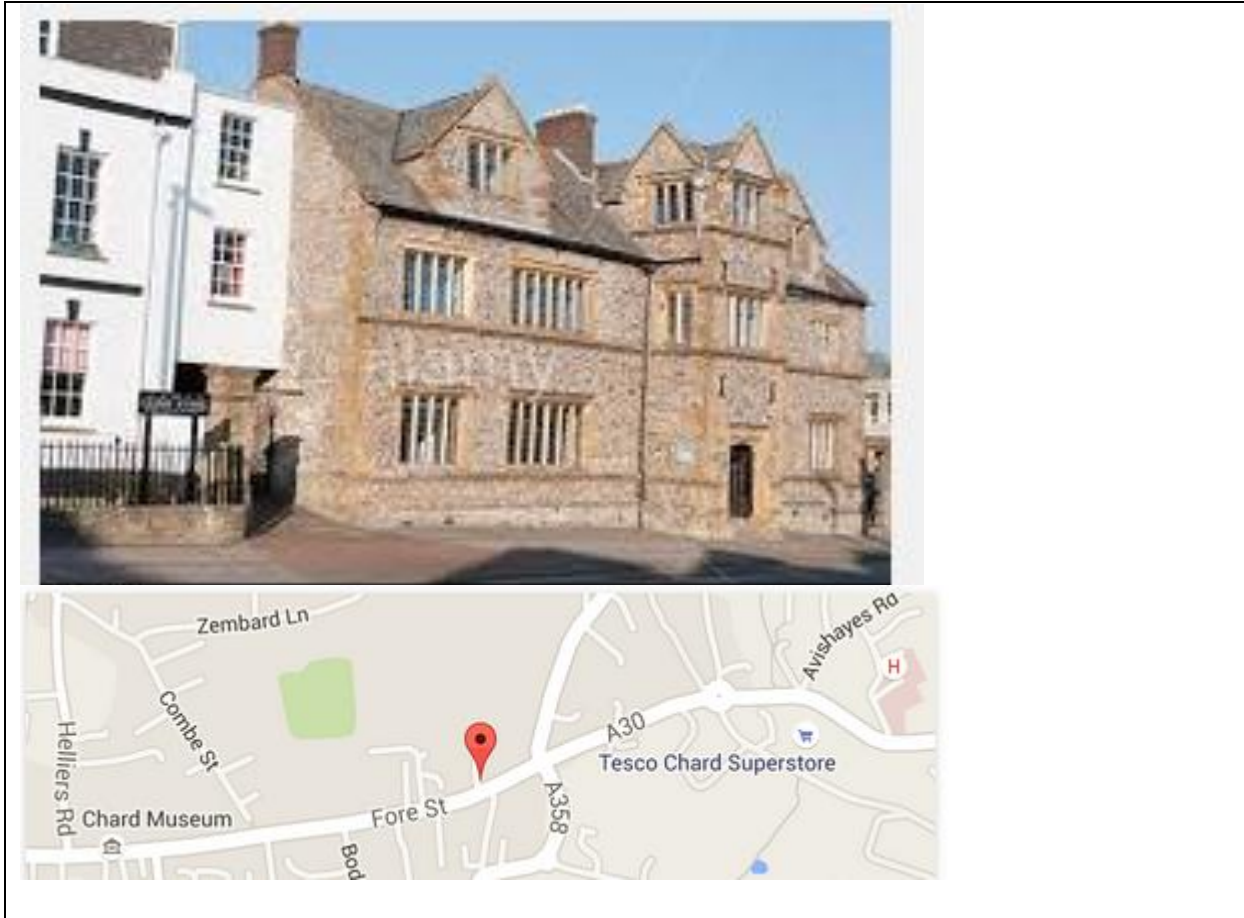
The Area West Development Team continue to work on a set of proposals to address these complex issues and relationships.

As these emerge, we will be bringing them for discussion and agreement on funding to the Area West Committee in the first instance and provide updates to the CRS Board. The following report concerns the Chard School buildings.

Report

Chard School

Fig. 1.0 : Chard School frontages and location plan



Chard School has a long and unique history. Its main building is a beautiful sixteenth century town house, which is listed Grade II*, putting it in the top 5% of buildings of historic and architectural importance.

Built in 1583 for a wealthy local merchant, John Symes, the house was donated to the town of Chard as a Grammar School by his successors in 1671, and there has been a school on the site continuously ever since.

It remained the town's grammar school until 1890, when it became a public boarding school. In 1972 the present school was established, as an independent co-educational preparatory school.

Over the years adjacent buildings were added, including the thatched Elizabethan chapel and the 18th century Monmouth House, also Grade II* listed.

Saved from Closure

In December 2013 it was announced that Chard School was facing financial difficulties due to falling pupil numbers and was at high risk of imminent closure. The surprise announcement prompted the establishment of a steering committee of parents who very quickly and effectively drew up plans that ensured that the school could continue to operate and in doing so, contribute to the vibrancy of Fore Street and the rest of the Town.

Looking after the Buildings

For many years, in an effort to contain costs, there has been low or no maintenance of some of the external and internal fabric of the school buildings. In Summer 2015, having saved the school from closure and addressed day to day maintenance issues, the Governors turned their attention to the long term upkeep and, in places, restoration of the school buildings and sought advice from SSDC's Conservation team on the work needed and potential sources of funding to help them carry it out.

The Conservation team confirm that the buildings are not only of the most significant in Fore street and a stand-out feature of the town along with Nos. 7-13 but also of much wider significance because surviving complete Elizabethan town houses like this are unusual in the towns of south Somerset

They advised that a condition survey of Chard School was required in order to identify areas of damage, deterioration and maintenance issues of medium and long term concern accompanied by an outline schedule of the specialist work needed. The estimated costings for this would allow the School Governors to seek grant funding to help pay for the works that are needed.

Through the Regeneration Scheme, SSDC has an interest in investing in the Town Centre. It is the opinion of officers that it would be both sensible and prudent if SSDC paid £5,000 towards the costs of the necessary condition survey and retained ownership of the contents whilst sharing these freely with Chard School to assist their efforts to attract grant funding.

Public Access and Interpretation

In keeping with the regeneration scheme and the information in the Background section of this report, the School Governors are keen to explore opportunities to develop better interpretation of and public access to their buildings, especially at times such as the summer holidays, when the school would otherwise be closed.

Financial Implications

A suitable condition survey will cost c£6,500. It is recommended that a contribution of £5,000 is made towards this to be funded from the Area West Reserve through partial re-allocation of provision made to underwrite community grants.

Work has not been undertaken to determine precisely what external sources of funding may be available at this stage.

Corporate Priority Implications

This project would contribute to the following aims within both the Jobs and Environment focus of the Council Plan:

- Progress the Chard Regeneration Scheme to create a vibrant town centre
- Continue to deliver schemes with local communities that enhance the appearance of their local areas

Equality and Diversity Implications

None

Background Papers: *Chard Regeneration Strategy 2010*
