

Agenda Item No: 9
Report To: Cabinet
Date of Meeting: 13 June 2019
Report Title: Ashford Borough Heritage Plaque Scheme
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Portfolio Holder: Cllr Peter Feacey
Portfolio Holder for: Culture



Summary:

To agree the establishment of an Ashford Borough Heritage Plaque Scheme so that noteworthy individuals or buildings from Ashford's past that are not widely known or formally recognised across the borough will have a permanent acknowledgment of their existence. The scheme will address this invisibility, celebrate those past Ashford residents and buildings and promote Ashford's history and heritage to support civic pride.

Key Decision: YES

Significantly Affected Wards: All wards in the borough

Recommendations: **The Cabinet is recommended to:-**

- I. Support the establishment of an Ashford Borough Heritage Plaque scheme, including the details of the eligibility criteria, scoring and decision making process and design of the plaque as outlined within the report;**
- II. Commit to a growth budget of £25,000 (to be taken from reserves) to allow the scheme to be established;**
- III. Agree that the Head of Culture in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Culture be authorised to execute and complete all necessary documentation to give effect to the above recommendations.**

Policy Overview: The project responds to Priority 4 of the Corporate Plan (Attractive Ashford: Countryside and Townscape, Tourism and Heritage) and to the Council's Heritage Strategy.

Financial Implications: A sum of £25,000, which is to be funded from reserves, is being sought which will cover the cost of the plaques, the installation, listed building consent fees, where applicable,

and the development of an online trail app.

Legal Implications	The permission of the property owner will need to be sought to enable plaques to be installed and so a legal agreement or license will need to be entered into for each plaque erected. Depending on the status of the building, it may also be necessary to obtain Listed Building consent.
Equalities Impact Assessment	An Equalities Impact Assessment is not required as the project involves the 'celebration' of historic/deceased figures and decisions or actions stemming from the project will not have equalities impacts on residents.
Other Material Implications:	None
Exempt from Publication:	NO
Background Papers:	None
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Report Title: Ashford Borough Heritage Plaque Scheme

Introduction and Background

1. During the work of developing the Ashford Town Centre Heritage Trail, it became apparent that there were many noteworthy individuals from Ashford's past that were not widely known or formally recognised across the borough. Many of these individuals are noted in the trail, however, there is no permanent visible acknowledgment of their existence. The exception being plaques that have been erected in the past for Sir John Furley (founder of the St John Ambulance) in both North Street and Park Mall and for Francis Epps (who founded Hopewell in Virginia) in North Street.
2. The establishment of a heritage plaque scheme is supported in the Council's recently adopted Heritage Strategy, which states in Objective Three (Point 13.6.1) that 'The tourism and visitor potential and economic benefits of the borough's historic environment and heritage assets will be increasingly recognised' while Objective Four is focused on 'Increasing public understanding of, engagement with, access to and enjoyment of the historic environment'.
3. A formal heritage plaque scheme will address this invisibility and celebrate past Ashford Borough residents, other noteworthy individuals with local connections and historically significant buildings, to promote local heritage and civic pride. The scheme could, subject to approval by members, also include new plaques for Sir John Furley and Francis Epps and also potentially be extended to include buildings of note.
4. The objectives of the scheme will be to:
 - a) identify and enhance important heritage assets across the borough;
 - b) reinforce the existing Conservation Area designations and possibly encourage future conservation and to raise awareness of Ashford's intangible and tangible heritage to both residents and visitors and;
 - c) increase borough-wide engagement in Ashford's history by generating civic pride and creating a sense of place and identity.

Proposal

5. It is proposed that the scheme be named the Ashford Borough Heritage Plaque Scheme, but possibly abbreviated to the 'Green Plaque Scheme' given it is proposed that the plaques are to be green. It is recommended not to adopt the Blue Plaque scheme in order to not only differentiate the scheme from the traditional 'blue plaque' scheme in many other town and cities, but also to reflect the Council's corporate colours and Garden of England location.

6. The design of the plaque, similar to other heritage plaques around the country, will include the name of the nominee, a brief description of their lifetime contribution and/or profession and their date of birth. The plaque will also feature the Ashford Borough crest in full colour. A draft design concept is attached to this report for approval.
7. A two stage eligibility criteria and scoring process is proposed. These criteria have been adapted from the national guidelines of the English Heritage Blue Plaque Scheme. The first stage will be focused on whether:
 - i. there is an original, publically accessible physical site or building associated with the nominee;
 - ii. that the person commemorated has been dead for at least 20 years (or deceased until the centenary of their birth) to allow for a period of reflection and the benefit of hindsight;
 - iii. there is demonstrable evidence of their stay in the Ashford Borough.
8. If the nominees meet all the criteria of the first stage, they will then be scored against the second stage eligibility criteria. There are 5 second stage criteria which the nominee will be scored against which are:
 - i. the nominee is recognised locally
 - ii. the nominee is also recognised nationally or internationally
 - iii. the nominee is an exceptional or outstanding person and the well-informed passer-by will recognise their name
 - iv. the nominee is regarded as being eminent by a majority of members of their profession or calling
 - v. the nominee has genuinely contributed to human welfare or happiness and deserves recognition

For each criteria met, the nominee scores one point and therefore they can score a maximum of 5 points. It is suggested that only nominees that achieve a score of three or more are recommended to the selection panel. Some exceptional cases may not meet the criteria, but could still be considered on a case by case basis.

9. In addition to agreeing the eligibility and scoring criteria, the scheme will also involve researching and verifying historical evidence to support nominations; establishing building ownerships and drawing up legal agreements with property owners; establishing any planning consents, such as Listed Building consent that may be needed and identifying the installation process.
10. It is also proposed that a publicity campaign is launched to announce and promote the scheme and that as part of the scheme's legacy an online trail is developed to support the physical trail.

11. It is proposed that a selection panel is formed of council members that will agree the recommended nominees.

Handling

12. Officers in Cultural Services have already carried out research to identify a number of possible nominees from across the borough and so it is proposed that two nominees are put forward in order to get the project started and to thoroughly test the eligibility criteria and understand any issues that may arise relating to legal agreements with owners, planning consents and installation.
13. Once any initial issues have been ironed out, it is proposed that the scheme is opened up to the community for public nominations and that once received these nominations are judged against the eligibility and scoring process as outlined above.
14. It is proposed that Cultural Services will manage the eligibility and scoring process and put forward recommendations to a selection panel that the Cabinet believes appropriate. The panel will endorse those recommendations it wishes to take forward and the Head of Culture, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Culture, will manage the process under delegated authority.
15. It is suggested that the scheme is an on-going rolling programme, where nominations can be submitted at any time, but that the scheme is reviewed in 18 months to ensure that it is fit for purpose and the budget available is sufficient.
16. It is anticipated that initially there may be an influx of nominations when the scheme is first launched, which will require significant officer support. Thus no guarantee on when plaques will be produced and installed can be provided after an application has been made and agreed by the selection panel. It is expected that the panel will meet quarterly in the first year of operation.
17. It is also difficult to estimate the length of time from initial application to a plaque being placed on a building and formally promoted as each nominee or building may need detailed permissions and further research.

Implications and Risk Assessment

18. In order to maintain the integrity and credibility of the proposed scheme, it is important to ensure that the eligibility criteria and scoring are met and not compromised. This may mean that fewer nominations than anticipated are received. This will be monitored and the scheme criteria reviewed annually. Ensuring that adequate historical background research is carried out on the nominees as well as ensuring that the criteria are met, will avoid any potential public objections to the choice of plaque subject and any resulting negative PR.
19. It should also be noted that the scheme is dependent on the consent and agreement of building owners for plaques to be installed and to remain in place if ownership of the building subsequently changes.

Financial Implications

20. It is estimated that each plaque will cost in the region of £1,710 to £2,710 meaning that between nine to fourteen plaques could be erected within the budget being sought. The estimated financial breakdown is as follows:
- Design and production of each plaque – £600
 - Installation of each plaque (dependent on location and height, fixings, type of building and contractor used) – £500 - £1000
 - Legal agreements (possible property owners' solicitor fees) – £500-£1000
 - Planning consents (advertisement consent, if needed) – £110.

Consultation Planned or Undertaken

21. The Council's Planning Conservation Officer has been consulted on the scheme and is supportive of the proposal. The Ashford Borough Museum Society also supports the proposal.

Other Options Considered

22. An online-only trail where users could hover over a map and see virtual plaques and find out more information about the subjects was considered, but rejected as the purpose of the scheme is to encourage personal visits to the site and have a physical location where the nominee is celebrated.

Next Steps in Process

23. Subject to the approval of the scheme by Cabinet, two nominees will be put forward to test the whole process for instance the eligibility and scoring criteria, landowner legal agreements and installation. Officers in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Culture will agree these two nominees. Once any initial issues have been resolved, the full 'green plaque' scheme will be launched and opened up for public nominations.

Portfolio Holder's Views

24. I do fully support the recognition of people who have made a contribution to the borough and the nation. This type of scheme helps to raise awareness of our rich heritage and highlights those individuals for both residence and visitors.

CLlr Peter Feacey – Portfolio Holder for Culture, Tourism and Leisure

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