

Minutes of the Bishop Auckland Stronger Towns Board
Bishop Auckland Town Hall
Wednesday 4th May 2022 at 8.30a.m.

Attendees:

David Land	(DL)	Chair
David Maddan	(DM)	The Auckland Project
Rob Yorke	(RY)	SDEA & Teescraft (Private Sector Representative)
Jonathan Ruffer (<i>online</i>)	(JR)	The Auckland Project (Founder)
Rachel Edmunds	(RE)	Believe Housing & BASH AAP Chair
Natalie Davison-Terranova (<i>online</i>)	(NDT)	Bishop Auckland College
Amy Harhoff	(AH)	Durham County Council
CLlr Elizabeth Scott	(ES)	Durham County Council

Liz Fisher	(LF)	The Auckland Project
Dave Wafer	(DW)	Durham County Council
Geoff Paul	(GP)	Durham County Council
Tom Smyth	(TS)	BEIS North East
Graham Wood	(GW)	Durham County Council
Jonathan Gilroy (<i>online</i>)	(JG)	BEIS North East
Gill Branch (Minutes)	(GB)	Durham County Council

Apologies:

Rt Rev Paul Butler	(PB)	Bishop of Durham
Katy Severs	(KS)	Job Centre Plus
Dehenna Davison	(DD)	Conservative MP for Bishop Auckland
Mike Matthews	(MM)	Business Consulting (Private Sector Representative)

Item

Action

1. Welcome and Introductions

1.1 The Chair welcomed Board members to the meeting and explained that the purpose of the meeting was to consider progress in developing STF project business cases.

2. Minutes of the Last Meeting/Matters Arising

2.1 DM said that under Item 5 Town Centre Diversification, discussion took place around formal project extension but was not represented in the minutes. TS explained that rather than it being a formal extension, it was a clarification of the deadline being July rather than June as previously reported.

2.2 DM said that under Item 9 Any Other Business, there had been discussion around variable signage and the production of 12 bases, with a plan indicating delivery sites to be circulated. DM asked that the minutes be amended to include this. GW said he would circulate a copy of the plan and ask for minutes to be amended.

2.3 DL suggested that quick win projects be included as an agenda item at future meetings.

2.4 DL had identified several incorrect attendees had been recorded at the 19th June meeting apologised for the error. The minutes had been amended accordingly.

2.5 DL said that under Item 5 it was stated that a Town Centre Diversification Theme Group

GW

GW

GW

meeting had taken place on 2nd March, however, it actually took place on 28th February.

CB to be asked to amend minutes

CB

2.0 Minutes of the Last Meeting/Matters Arising (cont'd)

2.6 The minutes were approved, subject to amendments, as discussed.

2.7 AH said that minutes were required to be published on the website within 10 days and members agreed that they should be completed, approved and published within this timescale.

GB/CB

3.0 Declarations of Interest

3.1 AH reminded all members of their responsibility around declarations of interest in line with their Register of Interest on the Board's website. This would include members declaring meetings, businesses, companies, charities, and personal interest in any of the projects, at the start of each meeting.

3.2 NDT declared an interest as project sponsor for the Springboard to Employment project.

3.3 DM declared an interest on behalf of TAP as a funding recipient.

4.0 Strategic Advisory Panel – Verbal update

4.1 ES reported that a number of public meetings had taken place where calls for wider discussion had been raised. In response, a Strategic Advisory Panel had been formed to discuss and share ideas. The group had met at the end of February with the main issue identified as being communication. DCC had commissioned Gardner Richardson to look at branding options and newsletters and website would be produced when branding agreed. The next meeting of the Panel was scheduled for 10th May.

4.2

4.3 LF asked if Gardner Richardson's communications plan was for the STF only and ES confirmed that it was not just for the STF but for Bishop Auckland. GP said that the intention of the commission was to produce assets for use by a range of other organisations.

4.4 RY said that the proposed newsletter was crucial to ensure the public were informed of progress. ES said that if branding and text were agreed at the meeting on 10th May, this could be progressed.

5.0 The Auckland Project – Jonathan Ruffer Statement

5.1 JR referred to his recent statement announcing that he would not be investing any further funding into TAP until a proper collaboration with Durham County Council had been re-established and wished to make it clear that none of the TAP projects within the FHSF or STF would be impacted by his statement. JR said that DL had been called to a meeting yesterday and informed by DCC that it was re-evaluating those projects which involved TAP following JR's statement. JR said he wished to have a closer collaboration with DCC, working together to serve the community.

5.2 To ensure transparency and clarity, AH explained that GP had written to DM and AID, with JR copied in, to relay information relating to submission of business cases to ensure Investment Plan timescales were met. AH said that this was not an attempt to undermine any of the programme schemes and confirmed that DCC had already invested large sums of money on the development of schemes, in particular the Eastern Sustainable Access Corridor scheme. AH said it was regrettable if this course of action had been misconstrued, however the intention had been to inform Board members of potential risks to projects in a transparent manner before discussing with them and addressing at this meeting.

AH suggested an urgent meeting be called to address the Board and the accountable body

6.0 Business Case Development Process

6.1 GP presented a report which he explained consisted of two parts; the first gave an overview of the position of the seven individual projects in terms of development of business cases, and the second dealt with the outstanding issue in relation to town centre diversification.

6.2 Background

In 2020 a Town Investment Plan (TIP) was produced with suggested projects to bid for STF funding. Thematic Groups set up to look at individual projects and different themes and by December 2020 a short list of projects totalling £46.8m, together with an Investment Plan, had been agreed by the Board. Public consultation undertaken in December 2020 and January 2021 with nearly 1,000 responses and generally positive support for both Strategic Plan and projects. TIP submitted to Government in January 2021 and in June 2021 Government confirmed funding offer of £33.2m. Board held several sessions during the Summer to look at prioritising projects from £46.8m to £33.2m and in late August agreed a project list for £33.2m. Board was aware of an outstanding issue with Newgate Street canopy with an understanding that town centre diversification for it would require further discussion. In November 2021 Government approved project list and set out an indicative funding profile. The Board meeting in March 2022 agreed a Business Case Strategy agreeing two feedback dates to look at development detail for business cases in advance of July submission to Government.

6.3 *Business Case Development* – GP referred to Table 1 Stronger Towns Business Case Summary 2022 and explained that 4 out of the 7 projects were developing in accordance with anticipated delivery timescales, with 3 projects requiring further consideration by the Board:

- (a) Eastern Sustainable Access Corridor (ESAC) – project is linked to future investment and any issue with future investment relating to Eco Farm, Binchester and Day Park would directly impact on increased number of visitors and negatively impact on both DCC's ability to approve a planning application and its Section 151 Officer to sign off business case. Formal request to Government for extension of business case submission to be approved by Board members.
- (b) Town Centre Diversification Project – deadline for business case submission not achievable therefore members asked to consider and approve a request to Government for an extension.
- (c) Durham Dales Gateway – insufficient information from sponsor TAP to date so a high risk of business case not being developed for submission deadline.

7.0 Project Development Updates

7.1 *Eastern Sustainable Access Corridor* – DW reported that the project was on track. Ecological surveys were to be carried out with the results informing design work and would be a fundamental risk to planning applications if not done. Route evaluation being undertaken which required the demonstration of alternative options. Work on junction arrangements to be completed for planning application. DW said that the strategy was for planning application for road and visitor attractions to be submitted as one. Business case for ESAC would be different to and more detailed than other projects due to the higher level of funding assigned and the requirement for assessment by The Department of Transport.

7.0 Project Development Updates (cont'd)

7.1 Eastern Sustainable Access Corridor (cont'd)

DM said he wished to add context around the suggestion that the project was dependent on future funding; he said the premise of the road was to benefit visitor attractions and to avoid gridlock within the town. TAP projected 1.5m visitors (in a decade) and threshold for gridlock identified by Jacobs as 400k visitors. Projected visitor numbers for the Eco Farm and Binchester Roman Fort were 200k leaving a balance of 1.3million visitors which was far above the gridlock threshold, therefore future funding of the attractions was immaterial to development of the project.

7.1.1 In response, DW said that confirmation of whether the two projects were going ahead was needed now to inform the business case and to ensure it was consistent with the planning application. DL asked for confirmation of the submission timeline for the joint application and ES said it was Spring 2023.

7.1.2 TS said it was critical that planning application was submitted as soon as possible and advised that JG had offered to work with DCC to ensure the ESAC business case met the requirements of BFT and DEDOC colleagues.

7.1.3 DW advised that the greatest project risks were submission of planning application, land, business case and construction.

7.1.4 DL expressed concerns around lack of information on the project and in response AH said a meeting between herself, GP and DM would be arranged next week to discuss project details and cohesive partnership working going forward with the outcome to be reported to the Board. GP said it was important that the meeting also included discussions around the planning application requirements of DCC's Senior Planning Officers to ensure an understanding of the challenges and parameters of the application.

AH/GP/DM

7.1.5 RY asked AH whether the £5m allocation for the roundabout was secure within the medium term financial plan and AH confirmed that DCC has allocated that amount to the project although expenditure was currently being incurred.

7.1.6 TS said the decision of the Board to request a delay on the ESAC project business case submission should be formally agreed. GW confirmed that a draft business case should be drawn up by the end of 2022 and finalised Summer 2023. Members agreed than a formal request to Government for a delay on the ESAC business case submission be made.

7.1.7 DM said he needed an understanding of how work on the potential roundabout location on DCC land was progressing. DM pointed out that a deal with the Church Commissioners (CC) had not yet been agreed for covenants on purchase of land at Park Head and discussion with the CC was needed around CPO for mines and minerals and change of use. DM said that any additional costs accrued from late change of proposed route should be covered from funding.

7.2 Town Centre Diversification

7.2.1 RY reported that as delivery of the canopy scheme would not be going ahead, meetings had taken place to discuss the re-allocation of the £8.1m funding. RY reported that 7 revised projects had been identified for STF Board approval:

- (a) Market Place Public Realm – £900K allocated
- (b) Newgate Street Property Re-Use Fund - £1.1m allocated – targeting North end of town.
- (c) Business Loan Scheme - £200K allocated – subject to DCC approval.

7.0 Project Development Updates (cont'd)

7.2 Town Centre Diversification (cont'd)

(d) Property Re-Use Fund (Hotel Development) – west side Market Square - £2m allocated – TAP proposal to

move hotel from Queen's Head site to the West side of town following discussions with hoteliers and negotiations with DCC were underway. DM confirmed that the £15m scheme for a 4* hotel and 5* hotel was progressing with a 20% contribution from the FHSF and STF

GP advised the Chair that it was inappropriate for a Board member to speak in support of a project which clearly benefitted the organisation that they represented.

(e) Fore Bondgate Development - £1m allocated

(f) Vinovium House Development - £900k allocated – developer interest and considering as potential North East office for events management company Artichoke. Proposals included a bursary scheme for 8 national and 2 local artists. LF said that Artichoke would create a hub for the creative industries and would have an impact both on the town and the North East.

RE asked if there was a guarantee of occupation from Artichoke and RY said that detailed reports from both the developer and Artichoke were anticipated this week and he would circulate copies to the Board.

RY

(g) Beales Hotel Development - £2m allocated – plans to demolish three buildings opposite and creation of car park would enhance the scheme. A viable alternative scheme identified as re-purposing of Burtons, Masonic Hall and Mechanics Institute buildings should hotel scheme not proceed. DL said that BA HAZ values were important and should be considered.

7.2.2. RY said that work around project sponsor details, statutory permissions, deliverability assessment, and public consultation was to be undertaken for projects.

DW stated that information around costs, risks, outputs and value for money was required for the business case.

7.2.3 GP said that the Board needed to consider a number of stages: (i) decision to run with projects; (ii) consider issues (highlighted by RY above) as projects all newly identified; (iii) period of public consultation; (iv) sign off by Board. GP advised the Board to move projects into the domain of DCC specialists to provide project detail and that an extension of 3-4 months would be appropriate.

DL/GW

7.2.4 Agreed actions were:

(i) Submit formal request for delay of 4 months

DL/GW

(ii) Undertake consultation period on projects and alternatives

DL/GW

(iii) Thematic leads RY and DW to meet next week to discuss project details

RY/DW

7.2.5 RE invited Board dialogue with the Area Action Partnership (AAP) and suggested that as the AAP Chairs changed on a regular basis, it would be beneficial for an AAP Coordinator to be a representative on the Board to provide consistency. DL said he would take advice on this and report back.

DL

7.3 Gateway to the Dales

7.3.1 DM reported that the project remained as commercial in confidence and work on land assembly was to be completed for business case. DM requested a two-month project extension.

7.3.2 GP said that further project detail was required at the earliest opportunity to enable DCC to carry out due process checks. AH said that an NDI could be considered, and she would look into this. DM and DW were to meet to discuss project in more detail and AH asked that they email the Board with feedback.

AH
DM/DW

7.0 Project Development Updates (cont'd)

7.4 Springboard to Employment

7.4.1 NDT said that the project, agreed by the Board 18 months ago, following a detailed brief prepared by a number of partners and stakeholders, consisted of three elements; (i) digital skills; (ii) specialist training for the visitor economy and (iii) health & social care. Central element of project was Town Centre Business & Community Hub comprising digital café, workspaces for emerging micro-businesses, non-profit recruitment agency and a training space. Another element was the upgrading and capacity building of Health & Social Care facilities. The project would also host community activities with the training café helping to underpin financial sustainability of the initiative. Business case progressing well and lease on 25 Newgate agreed. Currently working with architects and preparing CAGS application.

7.4.2 DL questioned how works could be commissioned before the Board had approved business case and had concerns around State Aid issues. AH explained that the Investment Plan had been agreed by Government in 2021 and an MoU had been signed. In principle, all investments within the £33.3m scheme had been agreed.

7.4.3 GP suggested that the scheme was a good example of a detailed business case being developed which met the criteria of the TI Board and there were no emerging issues for concern. He recommended the Board to fully support the scheme.

7.4.4 DM advised that TAP had an alternative project suggestion to deliver a similar, but wider scheme at Bar Mondo's. GP raised a point of order stating that TAP's proposition of an alternative project to that already agreed for delivery by BAC presented a conflict. ES said she would be unable to support TAP's proposal.

7.4.5 AH said that as there was no rationale for a counter proposal, DCC would be unable to support this.

7.4.6 DL said that all information needed to be evaluated, with a full discussion at the next meeting, before a final decision was made.

7.4.7 GP said that as an advisor to the Board he must remind Board members that there was a clear conflict of interest around members proposing projects for their own benefit and to be mindful of this going forward. In view of this, AH asked GP to obtain guidance from DCC's Monitoring Officer which would be tabled at the next meeting.

GP
DL

7.4.8 RE declared an interest in this item regarding employability and her capacity as Engagement and Corporate Social Responsibility Manager with Believe Housing.

7.5 South Church Workspace

7.5.1 GP reported an emerging issue around the capital costs budget and that DCC was working to resolve this.

7.5.2 GW said that in terms of timescales, the aim was to have planning, construction and occupation completed by September 2024.

7.0 Project Development Updates (cont'd)

7.6 Personnel Changes

7.6.1 AH advised that DW would be leaving DCC at the end of May and would be an immense loss to the authority. DW's replacement would commence early July. Members extended their thanks to DW for his support. DM wished to thank DW on behalf of TAP.

7.6.2 AH advised that she would be commencing a period of maternity leave at the end of May and GP would be taking over as interim in her absence.

AH, ES, DW, LF and GP left the meeting (10.40am).

7.7 Heritage Walking & Cycling Routes

7.7.1 RY said he had met with DW and two routes had been suggested. RY said that one of the proposals had been a singular 10km route which would link many BA visitor attractions and assets and could be a visitor attraction in its own right. RY went on to say that clarity was needed from DCC as to the route and what money would be spent on.

7.7.2 GW said it was important to have sight of DCC's proposed route map and he would arrange for a copy to be circulated to the Board prior to the next meeting.

7.7.3 DL said a meeting with CM would be useful and this was to be arranged.

GW
CM/GW/
DW/DL

7.8 Tindale Triangle

7.8.1 GW gave an outline of proposals and desired outcomes of the project which were to alleviate congestion around Woodhouse Close area and to facilitate the development of two housing schemes which would provide new social and mixed tenure housing.

7.8.2 DL said he had received a developer's counter proposal via a Board member for tabling. The proposal was for the development of a retail outlet creating 470 jobs and attracting £40m private sector investment and DL suggested this should be considered before submitting a final business proposal. DL said he would discuss proposal detail with AH.

DL/AH

7.8.3 GW said that there were issues around the introduction of a new proposal as a project for the Tindale Triangle had already been through Heads of Terms agreement process and a new proposal would require the developer to bring forward detailed consideration around Subsidy Control.

7.8.4 RY said that in addition to job creation and private sector investment, the counter proposal would attract many visitors and would not conflict with the town centre offer.

7.8.5 TS had some concerns about the number of projects going into delay or change and which could cause the Government to question whether the Town Deal still had merit.

8.0 Any Other Business

8.1 There were no items.

9.0 Date and Time of Next Meeting

9.1 Tuesday 21st June 2022. DM asked if the meeting could be re-scheduled as he had a diary conflict. DL suggested an interim meeting should be held before the next scheduled meeting.

