

BISHOP AUCKLAND STRONGER TOWN BOARD

At a Meeting of **Bishop Auckland Stronger Town Board** held in The Elgar Room - Bishop Auckland Town Hall and remotely via Microsoft Teams on **Thursday 28 July 2022 at 1.00 pm**

Present:

David Land - Chair

Board Members

David Maddan	The Auckland Project
Dehenna Davison MP	MP for Bishop Auckland
Councillor Michael Siddle	Mayor, Bishop Auckland Town Council
Nik Turner	Believe Housing
Rob Yorke	SDEA and Teescraft
Mike Matthews	Business consulting
Natalie Davison-Terranova	Bishop Auckland College
Councillor Elizabeth Scott	Cabinet Member for Economy and Partnerships
Geoff Paul	Interim Director of Economy, Regeneration and Growth, DCC

Officers/Also Present

Graham Wood	Economic Development Manager, DCC
Susan Robinson	Head of Corporate Property and Land, DCC
Andrew Walker	AAP Co-ordinator
Mark Jackson	Head of Transport and Contract Services, DCC
Tom Smyth	CLGU
Judith Layfield	Bishop Auckland College
Liz Fisher	The Auckland Project

1 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Bishop Paul Butler, Jonathan Ruffer and Katy Severs.

2 Declarations of Interest

David Land declared an interest as Chair of the Manufacturing Engineering Network which had been referred to in the Springboard to Employment Business Case.

Rob Yorke declared an interest as Chair of South Durham Enterprise Agency in the proposals for the Springboard to Employment project. The SDEA had a project in the town centre which had the potential to be in commercial competition with the Springboard to Employment.

Natalie Davison-Terranova declared an interest in the Springboard to Employment Project. The Board member was employed by Bishop Auckland College which was a delivery partner in the initiative.

3 Minutes of the meeting held on 21 June 2022 and the Special meeting held on 18 July 2022

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21 June 2022 and the Special meeting held on 18 July 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

Matters Arising from the Minutes of the meeting held on 21 June 2022

Variable Message Signage

David Land asked for an update in respect of the variable message signage installations, and it was agreed that an update on progress be presented at the next meeting of the Board.

ESAC

David Land noted that at its meeting of 21 June 2022 it had been agreed that a Board meeting be arranged to consider identified risks, and asked for an update.

Geoff Paul advised that discussions with the development partner regarding planning requirements were ongoing, and a report should be available for presentation to the Board in September which would include detailed risks. David Maddan asked that an overview of the full scheme be included in the report.

4 Stronger Town Board Project Update

Geoff Paul presented a report to the Board which provided a position statement in respect of the Stronger Town Business Cases for the projects which were included in the Town Investment Plan.

Tindale Triangle and Auckland Retail Park

The report provided details of the Board's discussion at its meeting on 18 July 2022 when a proposal to replace the Tindale Triangle project with the Auckland Retail Park project was considered.

At that meeting the report recommended that the Board consider supporting both projects and that the Tindale Triangle project be progressed with the essential works to increase the capacity of key junctions which were currently preventing new development. It was also recommended that the Board receive a report regarding the issues associated with being able to financially support the Auckland Retail Park project.

The Board had been clear that it wanted to support the Auckland Retail Park project and did not agree to the recommendation to support both projects.

Since the meeting on 18 July 2022, a Section 278 agreement had been submitted by the developer of the Auckland Retail Park to seek consent from the LPA that the planning condition relating to highway improvements could be discharged. Council Officers were currently working through the s278 design in detail.

Council Officers also continued to carry out due diligence work with the developer to ensure that the Board would have all the information it needed to make an informed decision and to provide the Section 151 Officer with the level of assurance required for any Business Case sign-off. This information included the consideration of any subsidy control issues, and evidence that the scheme could not be delivered without viability gap funding.

Tom Smyth added that a formal request for an extension to the Business Case submission was also required to CLGU. The extension request would need to include a deadline, and December 2022 was suggested. He encouraged the Board to start spending the allocated monies.

Following a question from Rob Yorke, Mark Jackson confirmed that the McDonald's roundabout was not included in the s278 application but as part of the design assessment Officers would be looking to see that the s278 proposals would resolve the wider traffic issues in the area, including McDonald's roundabout.

AGREED that a formal extension to the deadline from CLGU be requested to allow full consideration of all matters relating to Auckland Retail Park, other growth in the area, and associated transport works required before development could take place.

Walking and Cycling

At its meeting on 18 July 2022 the Board considered an alternative route to the proposal that had been developed for Business Case submission. The route was from Binchester to Witton Park and was known as The Heritage Walk.

The report presented to the Board clearly stated that the estimated cost of the proposal at between £6m and £7m exceeded the STF allocation of £2.5m, and that the scheme must meet DfT design standards because Government funding was being used.

The Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) of the route was 0.49 which was significantly below the STF threshold of 1.2. The report recommended that the Board should not proceed with the project but that the Council would continue to work up a detailed design so that it could be ready for any future funding opportunity.

At the meeting the Board agreed to support the delivery of the Heritage Walk, and following this decision work on completing the Walking and Cycling Business Case had not been progressed. A suggestion had been made at the meeting on 18 July that the length of the route be reduced to connect Binchester with Escomb. Using the same benchmarking data and DfT standard the estimated cost would significantly exceed the available budget and would represent the same poor value for money.

Since the meeting discussions had taken place with the CLGU and the S151 Officer.

CLGU had confirmed that the advice provided to the Board in relation to both options had been appropriate. In terms of the Heritage Walk, a variation request and a request to extend the deadline for the Business Case submission could be made. However, CLGU had advised that as the project was significantly different from the initial project plans and would represent poor value for money their recommendation to Ministers would be to refuse both.

Tom Smyth clarified the process for considering a variation request. CLGU would consider how it related to the original proposals, whether there was a good reason for the variation and if it would represent value for money. In respect of the Heritage Walk proposals, even if the first two considerations could be justified a 0.49 BCR was very poor and he would not be minded to support the request.

The Council's S151 Officer had also advised that he could not support the current proposals for the Heritage Walk scheme, given that he could not be assured that the project met the requirements in terms of value for money, or that it was deliverable.

Given this information the Board was asked how it wished to proceed.

David Land sought clarification in terms of the requirement for an increase in path width to 3m along the route. He appreciated that there may be lengths of the route where 3m was necessary but asked if this had to be rigidly applied, given that a walkway was what was wanted.

Mark Jackson replied that DfT standards required a 3m width for shared walking and cycling routes which was difficult to achieve along the Heritage Walk proposal, and this was reflected in the estimated costs. Part of the ongoing design work would involve discussions with the Public Rights of Way Team to explore potential options within the standards applied to public footpaths. LTN 1/20 design standards were the existing guidelines for cycle routes, however he was aware of potential new rural guidelines coming forward which may look at reviewing these current standards.

Mike Matthews asked if he could be involved in discussions around the cycling elements of the project with Mark Jackson.

David Maddan expressed disappointment that current Government standards were inflexible and hoped that any future changes to guidelines would enable a pragmatic approach.

The Board was concerned at the potential for £2.75m of STF funding being lost and following discussion the consensus was to proceed with the original proposal, and for the Council to continue to work on the detailed design of The Heritage Walk to produce an 'oven ready' scheme.

Geoff Paul asked the Board to agree to a formal request for a short extension to the Walking and Cycling Business Case submission.

Tom Smyth was concerned at the number of extension requests received, but given the issues discussed CLGU would be minded to agree to extend the deadline for the Walking and Cycling proposal to the end of September at the latest.

AGREED that

- a) the original Walking and Cycling business case be progressed;
- b) a formal extension request be submitted to CLGU seeking an extension to the deadline for the submission of the Business Case to September 2022;
- c) the Council continue to work on the detailed design and costs for The Heritage Walk from Binchester to Witton Park so that a 'shovel ready' scheme was in place should a funding opportunity arise.

**Springboard to Employment and Enterprise and SME Support
South Church Enterprise Park Projects**

The summary Business Cases had been circulated to the Board, and the full Business Cases were available at the meeting if members wished to ask any specific questions. Rob Yorke had submitted a number of questions by e-mail in respect of both schemes and the answers were circulated to the Board for information.

Judith Layfield expanded upon the answers provided in respect of the Springboard to Employment project.

Graham Wood provided an overview of the Springboard to Employment Business Case to supplement the summary document, and reminded the Board that central to the Town Investment Plan was inclusivity and sustainability, and these had been guiding principles when looking at the flow of people into opportunities, and the mix of courses and activities which were proposed.

7.5 FTE jobs would be created and a significant building would be brought back into use.

The café on the McIntyre site would provide a training facility which was a different focus for that being brought forward as part of the pop-up retail unit where the focus was on showcasing local products. As focus was on visitor economy an increase in cafes in the town was to be expected. Judith Layfield added that the training kitchen would be future-proofed to allow students to learn the skills they would need.

Mike Matthews asked if he could be involved in discussions around the digital element of the project.

With regard to the South Church Enterprise Park project, Graham Wood provided an overview of the Business Case to supplement the summary document.

A key driver of this project was the low business formation rates. A workspace capacity report produced with Business Durham in 2020 and which had been refreshed in the last month noted that there was a shortage of workspace units in Bishop Auckland.

The project was to be delivered on a site in Council ownership, in an established employment area, would be delivered and managed by DCC and included an element of small business support with the assistance of SDEA and Business Durham.

David Land asked that the County Durham Engineering Network be removed from the Summary Business Case for Springboard to Employment because it was no longer a stakeholder.

David Land continued that he was keen to sign off the Business Cases today but needed to see more detail, and considered that in future it would be helpful for the Board to see the detailed risk assessments for each Business Case. He would therefore run through the full Business Cases with Graham Wood following the meeting.

David Maddan was disappointed that the Board was expected to sign-off Business Cases when these had not been presented to members five working days ahead of the meeting.

Geoff Paul noted the comments made and going forward would include higher level detail in future Business Case sign-offs.

Geoff Paul confirmed that the S151 Officer would also be required to sign-off the Business Cases.

Tom Smyth urged members to monitor the projects once the Business Cases had been submitted to CLGU, and stated that there was an active role for the Board to keep them on track.

AGREED that the Business Cases for Springboard to Employment and Enterprise and SME Support, South Church Enterprise Park be formally approved and submitted to CLGU.

The report also provided an update in respect of ESAC and the Town Centre Diversification and Durham Dales Gateway projects. The report stated that CLGU had acknowledged receipt of the applications for extensions to the Business Case submissions (end of December 2022 for the draft Business Case for ESAC and end of November for TCD and Durham Dales Gateway). By way of update since the report had been circulated, Tom Smyth advised that these requests had been granted.

AGREED that the position in respect of ESAC, and TCD and Durham Dales Gateway be noted.

5 Any Other Business

Newsletter

The Board discussed the importance of marketing the town, in view of the number of vacant premises, and Graham Wood advised that a Strategic Communications Officer had been appointed. He also explained that the vacancy rate had fallen in the last 12 months.

Graham Wood also advised that the first newsletter was currently in print and could be shared electronically with the Board. The new website was in development and would supplement the newsletters to promote the plans for the town.

Rob Yorke stated that he had been sent a message about the newsletter from a resident who had already received it.

Councillor Siddle made the point that the Town Council was central to communications and was looking at ways it could be more pro-active. It should be a conduit for communications activity and was frustrated that it received information second-hand.

Members discussed the branding and suggestions for communication and engagement with local people, which included digital media formats and the use of a small specialist local communications company.

Rob Yorke stated that to attract inward investment all digital media formats should be employed. The fall in the number of vacant premises in the town should be included in the next edition of the newsletter. The Board minutes could be used by the Town Council to disseminate information to local people. The SDEA could also assist with sharing information.

The Board was advised that communications and branding of the overall plans for the Town were within the remit of the Strategic Advisory Panel, which had been set up to keep residents and businesses informed. The Panel was responsible for looking at communicating the Future High Streets Fund projects as well as those being funded by the Stronger Towns Fund.

This was questioned by David Maddan who considered that communications was also part of the Board's responsibility.

AGREED that David Land and Geoff Paul to discuss whether the Board could assist with communications and marketing.

Enabling Fund

David Maddan was pleased to see that the College had drawn from the Enabling Fund to advance the delivery of the Springboard to Employment project. He asked if TAP could discuss access to the Fund in respect of TAP led schemes.

Property Re-use Fund applications

Following a question from Rob Yorke, Graham Wood advised that 2 applications had been approved, 2 applications were under consideration and 17 expressions of interest had been received.

Bus Station and Multi-storey Car Park

Rob Yorke asked if the new proposals for a ground floor car park to replace the proposed multi-storey car park had been completed.

Geoff Paul hoped that this work would be completed within the next 10 days.

6 Date of Next Meeting

AGREED that up to December 2022 monthly meetings of the Board be arranged with the first meeting to be held on a date to be agreed in September 2022.