

Bishop Auckland Stronger Town Board

At a Meeting of **Bishop Auckland Stronger Town Board** held in The Elgar Room - Bishop Auckland Town Hall and via Microsoft Teams on **Wednesday 11 January 2023 at 1.00 pm**

Present:

Councillor D Land (Chair)

Board Members:

Natalie Davison-Terranova	Bishop Auckland College
Jonathan Ruffer	The Auckland Project
David Maddan	The Auckland Project
Councillor Michael Siddle	Mayor, Bishop Auckland Town Council
Rob Yorke	SDEA and Teescraft
Mike Matthews	Private Sector Representative
Jack Bell	(for Dehenna Davison MP)

Officers

Graham Wood	Economic Development Manager, DCC
Mark Jackson	Head of Transport and Contract Services, DCC
Craig MacLennan	Transport and Infrastructure Manager, DCC
Jonathan Gilroy	CLGU
Stephen Bowyer	The Auckland Project

1 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Bishop Paul Butler, Katy Severs, Dehenna Davison MP, Nik Turner and Andrew Walker.

2 Declarations of interest

Rob Yorke declared that he was the Chair of The Auckland Project (TAP).

Prior to the start of the business David Land apologised for the late receipt of the papers for the meeting but understood the level of work involved in producing the Business Cases. He conveyed his thanks to Craig MacLennan for his hard work over the Christmas period.

3 Minutes of the meeting held on 30 November 2022

The Minutes of the meeting held on 30 November 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

Councillor Michael Siddle expressed his concern at both the late receipt of papers and the recent arrangements for calling Board meetings. The decisions required of the Board were of high importance and little time was given to members to read the content of the Business Case reports. He appreciated the amount of work involved and he had been assured previously that the Team had sufficient resources but he again queried whether capacity was an issue. He had written to Councillor Scott and David Land with his concerns which he asked to be addressed.

David Land and Councillor Scott supported the points made by Councillor Siddle and the importance of the Board's governance arrangements, including scheduling meetings and circulating papers in advance, but it was also important to note the work involved in the preparation of the Business Cases. The Team relied upon information from external partners before a Business Case could be finalised to meet the deadline set by Government.

Mark Jackson confirmed that completion of a Business Case relied upon the receipt of information from partners, and although the Team always endeavoured to produce Business Case reports on time, it was not always possible because of these constraints. If a cut-off point for circulating information to the Board was imposed this could have a detrimental impact on the quality of the Business Case submitted to Government.

Following discussion it was suggested that the governance arrangements be discussed at a future meeting.

4 STF Project: Tindale

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration Economy and Growth which provided a summary of the Business Case for the Tindale project.

By way of background Mark Jackson reminded the Board that the Town Investment Plan (TIP), developed and agreed by the Board and subsequently approved by Government, included a project to undertake traffic capacity enhancement works to facilitate adjacent commercial and housing development, tourism trips and to improve general traffic conditions.

The Board subsequently agreed the expansion of the project to provide financial support to enable the delivery of the nearby leisure-retail park, including allocations from the original Tindale Triangle and Town Centre Diversification Stronger Town Fund allocations.

The junction improvements and enabling works to facilitate the leisure-retail park were set out in the report.

The Section 278 agreement brought by the developer met the requirements for the Tindale Crescent/Maude Terrace junction and A688/Watling Road roundabout, to mitigate the traffic impact of the leisure-retail park. The Section 278 design of the A688/West Auckland Road junction was insufficient to deliver wider traffic capacity, and needed upgrading.

The Council undertook a costing estimate exercise for the S278 junctions, which had been validated by the developer. These costs had been included in the Business Case and were set out in the report, together with the estimated costs for the larger West Auckland junction, and the enabling works.

A total £4.5m STF would be allocated to the developer and their contractor(s), on condition they would be responsible for the delivery of two S278 junctions, the larger West Auckland Road junction, and the on-site enabling works to guarantee the full build of the leisure-retail park. The funding profile, including the private sector contributions were detailed in the report.

Viability gap funding of £1,987,976 in STF grant support had been confirmed to make the site commercially viable for the developer.

The economic benefits achieved from the junction improvements and enabling works would contribute to an initial BCR of 3.19 offering High Value for Money, and this would increase to 3.48 if distributional impacts were added.

Durham County Council would be responsible for the ongoing operation and maintenance of the junctions, and the developer would be responsible for the ongoing maintenance of the enabling works and the remainder of the leisure-retail site.

A legal agreement was required between DCC/Stronger Town Board and the developer of the leisure-retail park, to ensure the proposal was delivered as agreed.

In terms of timescales, delivery of the highway improvements and enabling works were due to commence in Spring-Summer 2023.

Jonathan Gilroy confirmed that a project variation request would be considered alongside the Business Case and did not envisage any difficulties with the BCR.

Following a question from Rob Yorke, Craig MacLennan confirmed that a micro-simulation model of the transport design had been completed and it was suggested that this be presented at the next Board meeting.

AGREED that

- (a) the Business Case be approved and submitted to Government for combined transport and enabling works; and

- (b) the funding profile of £4,500,000 STF and £1,072,276 private sector match in the Business Case, which would enable £33,399,521 of further private sector investment, be noted.

5 STF Project: Town Centre Diversification

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration Economy and Growth which provided a summary of the Stronger Town Funding – Town Centre Diversification Business Case.

By way of background, Graham Wood reminded the Board of the schemes to replace the Canopy proposals initially identified in the Town Investment Plan. The projects agreed were listed in paragraph 4 of the report.

In Autumn 2022, the Board approved £1.75m to be redirected to support the commercial viability of the leisure-retail park at Tindale, from Town Centre Diversification. The projects identified were further reviewed, as follows:

Property Re-Use Fund

This scheme had been hugely positive with four grant awards to date. Extending the scheme would re-use and re-purpose under-utilised town centre floorspace, reducing vacancy rates and improving economic outputs.

Public Realm Improvements

The public realm improvements were to be based on three key themes: vibrancy, connectivity, and inclusive and prosperous. The report detailed the works proposed as part of the project to regenerate Fore Bondgate, Market Place and North Newgate Street, with images included at Appendix 3.

Artists Hub

The project would re-furbish no. 43 Market Place into an artist's hub, helping to facilitate and expand the artist-led community in the town, bringing about social and cultural benefits as well as bringing a vacant building back into use.

The economic benefits offered by the overall proposals would achieve an initial BCR of 1.51, offering Medium Value for Money, which was above the threshold of 1.2. If distributional impacts and wider GVA were added the adjusted BCR would increase to 3.06, offering High Value for Money.

Jonathan Gilroy confirmed that a project variation request would be considered alongside the Business Case. The BCR was above the threshold. He did not envisage any issues with the extension of the Property Re-Use Fund.

Natalie Davison-Terranova asked if there were plans for Vinovium House and was informed that improvements required to the building were not achievable through the Stronger Town Fund.

Natalie Davison-Terranova also asked about the outcomes from the public consultation and it was suggested that these be appended to the minutes. Five drop-in events had been held attended by 85 people. 178 on-line responses had been received following 700+ hits on the website. 50% of respondents to the six core questions had agreed or strongly agreed with the projects.

Councillor Siddle confirmed that from the Town Council's perspective residents were generally supportive of the projects but that more could be done in the town centre. The Town Council had also received concerns about the short consultation window.

David Land stated that the public meeting would be an opportunity to convey to residents what was planned for the town centre.

Rob Yorke made the comment that the previous consultation had a greater response and emphasised the importance of publicising projects as they were announced.

AGREED that

- a) the Business Case for the Town Centre Diversification proposals, including the Artist's hub, public realm improvements and PRF2, be approved and submitted to Government; and
- b) funding profile of £6,350,000 STF in the Business Case, which will also leverage private sector funding for PRF2, which for purposes of the Economic Case were calculated at £2,444,992, be noted. Of the STF, £600,000 will be revenue funding for the Artist's Hub. For public realm improvements, this will build upon a planned FHSF on North Newgate Street, which has £158,000 FHSF and £158,000 DCC funding linked to it.

6 STF Project: Eastern Sustainable Access Corridor (ESAC)

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration Economy and Growth which provided a summary of the Stronger Town Funding – Outline Business Case - Eastern Sustainable Access Corridor.

The Town Investment Plan, developed and agreed by the Board and subsequently approved by Government, included a project to provide

transport and parking infrastructure to facilitate a growth in tourism trips, linked to significant future investment in tourism development.

A range of potential transport infrastructure solutions across different modes and of varying scale had been identified, and subsequently assessed and sifted against a set of key criteria.

Following the options assessment process, the Eastern Sustainable Access Corridor (ESAC) scheme had emerged as the strongest individual option, and was the key to unlocking the development of the visitor attractions and programme of special events that would draw a projected 1.8m additional visitors per year to Bishop Auckland.

Included in the Government overall £33.2m STF award, there was a £15.7 million allocation for a transport/parking solution, with a further £5m match allocated from DCC.

The Business Case had been developed in accordance with the Department for Transport's (DfT) Transport Business Case major guidance (2013). Further Levelling Up guidance was expected and any revisions required as a result could be made during the Business Case process.

The report provided details of the current road network and parking arrangements.

The success of the TAP tourism developments and special events were dependent upon ESAC, and the report included maps of the location of the attractions and events in relation to the ESAC route and proposed car parks.

The report also included details of projected visitor numbers, annually and daily, taking factors into account such as time of year, holidays, visitor attractions and special events.

Details of the scheme were listed in the report which included a footbridge linking to the Flatts Farm site. Discussions in respect of this were ongoing with the Environment Agency.

A preliminary cost estimate had been produced by the private sector which would be subject to change as the scheme progressed to delivery.

The economic benefits achieved would contribute to an initial High Value for Money BCR over 2.

Provisional timescales were set out in the report with construction and opening expected between April 2024 and March 2026.

Jonathan Gilroy noted that this was a very complex project. CLGU were due to meet with DfT the following week and he would provide feedback. He stressed the importance of being mindful of the 2026 deadline.

Jonathan Ruffer acknowledged the hard work that Craig MacLennan had put into the report over the Christmas period and expressed his appreciation. This was echoed by the Board.

Councillor Siddle asked if there was a Plan B to minimise the risk of the deadline not being met. Mark Jackson confirmed that governance arrangements were in place to ensure that the scheme progressed in line with the timescales. As referred to in the report a full sifting exercise of options had been undertaken and the alternatives to ESAC had not been viable. Once the Business Case had been signed off the Team would look at governance arrangements for project delivery to ensure that there was no slippage towards the 2026 deadline.

Graham Wood advised that to date the focus had been on the production of the Business Cases. Amended Guidance had recently been issued for Stronger Town Boards which addressed the change in focus from preparing Business Cases to project delivery. The proposed Board discussion about governance arrangements would include this. The Guidance would be appended to the minutes for information.

AGREED that

- a) the Outline Business Case for ESAC, be approved and submitted to Government. It be noted that potentially the OBC maybe updated with new census data, amendments following advice from the DfT and potential modelling refinements.
- b) the funding profile of £15,700,000 STF and £5,000,000 DCC match in the Outline Business Case, be noted.

7 Any Other Business

Binchester Earth

Councillor Scott informed the Board that Cabinet had identified contingency funds to replace the scaffolding around the building to allow visitors to continue to visit and view the excavations.

Public Meeting

Following a question from Rob Yorke, the Board were informed of the format of the public meeting to be held on 16 January 2023. 120 people had registered to attend to date and had been asked to submit questions beforehand where possible.

8 Date of Next Meeting

AGREED that the next meeting be held at the end of March 2023. Members to be informed of the date as soon as possible.