

Economy & Enterprise

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

12 January 2024

Masterplan activity in County Durham



Report of Amy Harhoff, Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To outline the process for managing change to the physical fabric of settlements through masterplan activity. This report will
 - (a) Set out what masterplan activity relating to our settlements and town centres has taken place in the County to date.
 - (b) Provide an update on the delivery of schemes identified within the approved local masterplans for those areas.
 - (c) Highlight proposed opportunities to review and replace masterplans with Strategic Place Plans, in line with the principles and priorities of the Inclusive Economic Strategy.

Executive summary

- 2 A strong economy is built on confident, successful places. Vibrant cities, towns and village centres which attract people and footfall allow businesses to adapt, survive, and thrive. This principle has long since guided the development of local masterplans that have sought to set a strategic vision for each local place. This is separate to the bespoke masterplans created for major commercial regeneration sites such as Aykley Heads but are a response to local places and local issues. Since 2009 these masterplans have been adopted, reviewed and refreshed at regular intervals, and have been used to underpin funding bids and investment decisions.
- 3 Having an agreed masterplan is a key factor in securing government funding for a place, with funding programmes predicated on having clearly articulated investment priorities. Over the last 5 years the council

has secured over £100million of funding for spending across the Council's main centres, which has been aligned to the priorities set out in these masterplans.

- 4 Durham County Council already has a bespoke and robust approach creating masterplans, which has been based on developing a spatial approach to each settlement, responding to planning guidance and emerging funding opportunities. It is also unusual to have the breadth and number of bespoke countywide masterplans that we have, covering settlements from large to small.
- 5 However, reflecting an ongoing evolution in our ways of working the new Inclusive Economic Strategy (IES) and supporting Delivery Plan has set out a new approach. Central to this methodology is empowering local communities to be at the heart of shaping the future of their towns and villages, working with local people, businesses and stakeholders to establish shared visions for each place. This agreed vision will then be the foundation on which spatial, investment, and action plans will be developed to create Strategic Place Plans.
- 6 This new approach will ensure that Strategic Place Plans, and the investment and funding bids that they guide, are defined by local communities and targeted directly to the needs of each place. A rolling programme of replacing masterplans with Strategic Place Plans will be developed, starting with the Durham City vision that is an individual action in the IES Delivery Plan, and with pilot reviews in Spennymoor and Shildon/Newton Aycliffe, due to the requirements for new masterplans resulting from the recent £30m government funding announcements for those areas.

Recommendation(s)

- 7 Members of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to consider;
 - a) the previous programme of masterplan development and associated scheme delivery undertaken across County Durham.
 - b) the proposals to refresh the approach to the development of masterplans through a new programme of Strategic Place Plans in line with the principles and priorities of the Inclusive Economic Strategy.

Background

- 8 Within the Council Plan, the connected communities ambition identifies an objective that our towns and villages will be vibrant, well-used, clean attractive and safe.
- 9 The Council can set out the vision and phased development framework for the future development of an area through documents such as the County Durham Plan. This assists in determining detailed decisions on planning applications and changes in the use of our towns and centres. For town centres to prosper, it is vital that decisions are made in the context of wider town centre impacts.
- 10 Since 2009, the Council has sought to provide strategic guidance to align regeneration efforts in the main retail centres across the County through a suite of masterplans and regeneration frameworks. A series of updates to these plans were prepared in 2016 and after this a number of plans have been refreshed or revisited, including Bishop Auckland and Chester-le-Street in 2019.
- 11 Although this has always been a rolling programme, we have accelerated several new masterplans to support emerging funding opportunities including the Levelling Up Fund (LUF) bids. In June 2022 the Council adopted the Durham City Framework and masterplans for Chester-le-Street, Newton Aycliffe, Peterlee, Stanley, and Three Towns (Crooks, Willington and Tow Law).
- 12 Whilst a key driver for this round of masterplans was LUF they were comprehensively prepared including public / stakeholder consultation and contain other projects and proposals to ensure that these projects will be well placed to progress should other sources of funding be identified.
- 13 In addition to town centre masterplans, further spatial planning documents have been developed to aid regeneration and investment efforts. These include a further update for Chester-le-Street was prepared in 2022, a masterplan was prepared for Sniperley Strategic Housing Site (2022) and in the same year. Work commenced on area plans for Easington and Horden to support regeneration projects. A programme of Targeted Delivery Plans (TDPs) has also been completed, providing mini masterplans for seven key residential settlements as part of the Towns and Villages programme.
- 14 While there has been a rolling programme of master plan activity across the County, the Inclusive Economic Strategy (IES) identifies a requirement to further define the scope, prioritisation and scheduling process in support of this work to ensure plans are targeted where they will deliver the best outcomes.

Masterplans

- 15 Masterplans identify current and future development activity across the public and private sectors to provide a coordinated approach to delivery and to maximise opportunities for funding. They are developed by drawing on published and primary data which provides an economic context for the study area along with primary surveys, looking at factors such as retail occupancy, car parking capacity, pedestrian and cycle routes/nodes as well as streetscape and environmental quality.
- 16 To date most of the masterplan work has been undertaken in-house, primarily by officers from Spatial Planning and Regeneration sections working with a core group including specialist services, assets and highways. to work up a vision and undertake targeted consultation with key stakeholders.
- 17 The geographical focus of masterplans can vary from town centres to a whole town approach. A whole town approach enables the Council to consider a more comprehensive set of factors, including for example connectivity and development potential at the settlement edge, while more targeted work supports regeneration or changes within a specific area.
- 18 Potential solutions to improve the commercial or usable areas across the study area are developed and tested through dialogue with a range of council services and external partners where appropriate. These solutions are then the subject of an initial design, costing and validation process before being included within the masterplan.
- 19 Despite the Council's extensive powers and resources, it is recognised that widespread change at a local level can't be delivered without partner and property-owner buy in. A variety of levels of engagement and consultation are therefore built into the development of masterplans dependent on the complexity of proposed interventions.
- 20 All masterplans and produced since 2009 have been approved by Cabinet. By taking this approach the priorities of the masterplan are afforded a policy weighting and can be considered as material planning considerations when applications are being considered.
- 21 In addition to their support of the planning process, masterplans provide the strategic regeneration context for each of the towns. This strategic narrative has become an important aspect of applications for external funding programmes, with approved masterplans used extensively in the bids for all recent Government funding programmes.
- 22 Table 1 below identifies town centre masterplan activity to date:

Table 1 – County Durham town centre masterplan activity to date

Town/Area	First DCC Masterplan / Framework	Progress Update Paper	Subsequent Drafts
Barnard Castle	2012	2016	
Bishop Auckland	2012	2016	2019
Chester-le-Street	2012	2016	2019, 2022
Consett	2010	2016	
Crook*	2012	2016	2022 (including Willington and Tow Law)
Durham City	2014	2016	2022
Newton Aycliffe	2013	2016	2022
Peterlee	2013	2016	2022
Seaham (and Murton)	2012	2016	
Sildon	2013	2016	
Spennymoor	2013	2016	
Stanley	2012	2016	2022

Securing funding linked to Masterplans

- 23 The suite of Masterplans approved by Cabinet are widely used to secure resources to deliver change and improvement at a local level. Council capital allocations to the town centre capital programme are secured in part through a link to the strategic justification for investment, identified through the approved masterplans and the internal and external inputs which support their development.
- 24 As noted previously, there has been an increasing requirement by national funding programmes to demonstrate resources are being secured against strategic plans for settlements. Since 2018 over £133million of funding has been secured and deployed across the Council's main centres, aligned to the priorities in the masterplans.

Details of the funding programmes and their geographical scope is set out in table 2 below.

25 **Table 2** - Recent regeneration programmes drawing upon masterplan priorities (2018-present)

Programme	Value	Source	Geographic Focus
Towns and Villages Programme	£25 million	DCC	Countywide
UK Shared Prosperity Programme	£30.5 million	DLUHC	Countywide
Levelling Up Fund	£20 million	DLUHC	Bishop Auckland - R1 Secured Masterplans developed for priorities in all other constituencies
Rural England Prosperity Programme	£2.8 million	DLUHC	Countywide
Seaham Heritage Townscape	£1.6 million	National Lottery	Seaham
Future High Street Fund	£19.9 million	DLUHC	Bishop Auckland
Stronger Town Fund	£33.2 million	DLUHC	Bishop Auckland
Total	£133 million		

26 It should be noted that this is a very specific snapshot of the Council's wider capital programme of investment and only captures the activity and funding relating directly to local masterplans. Overall, the Council has a £850m capital programme covering a whole range of investments from school builds to focused economic development activity such as NETPark phase 3. There are also other significant investments that specifically benefit local communities across the County, such as the

leisure transformation programme, which play key roles in building strong, confident local communities and places.

Future Programme and Approach for Masterplan activity

- 27 The IES, approved by Cabinet in December 2022, provides a new framework for improving the economic performance across the county and is based on five thematic priority areas People; Productivity; Places; Promotion and Planet. The Place 'P' directly acknowledges the importance of building vibrant and diverse towns and villages.
- 28 Since the adoption of the IES there has been significant stakeholder collaboration to develop a Delivery Plan for the strategy, which was approved by Cabinet in November, and considers the role that masterplans can play in driving delivery in our towns and villages.
- 29 Central to our new approach to building successful places will be empowering local communities to be at the heart of shaping the future of their towns and villages. We will work with local people, businesses and stakeholders to establish visions for each place, with a rolling programme to review existing masterplans to guide future and existing investment, through Strategic Place Plans. A range of new tools will be developed using innovative engagement methods, such as the role out of Place Labs to drive culture-led regeneration. These new plans will articulate the economic role of each of our towns and be developed in line with the IES principles.
- 30 The changing nature of town centres and town centre investments, including continued pressures on brick and mortar retailing, the shift to a greater emphasis on leisure, entertainment and high quality amenity space combined with the ongoing challenges of accessibility and connectivity across a large and diverse county provide the backdrop to a new programme of Strategic Place Plans.
- 31 In contrast to recent masterplans that have developed spatial-led approaches to these challenges, the co-development model will allow Strategic Place Plans to be defined by local communities, with that vision being used to develop the necessary spatial, investment and delivery plans that are appropriate for that place. The framework for the development of these plans is still being refined, but it is proposed that the following process will be applied:
 - Open Brief – a period of direct engagement with the local community and both internal and external stakeholders. Local people define the future role and aspirations for their place through an open conversation, considering existing challenges

and potential opportunities. It is proposed that a range of engagement tools are utilised to ensure a range of different voices are captured in the conversation.

- Draft Vision – building on the outcomes of the open brief a draft vision will be developed, focusing on the role as a place and the ingredients to help it thrive in the future.
- Consultation – a period of public engagement, including both open and focussed stakeholder consultations, will help to refine the vision.
- Adoption – the final version will provide a clear, bespoke future vision for each place, which will also be formally adopted to add weight to support funding and planning submissions. It will serve as the foundation for targeting future investment and supporting funding business cases.
- Delivery Plan –the vision will then be turned in to a Strategic Place Plan through the development of a suite of supporting documents such as a spatial plan, investment framework, and action plans that will drive delivery of the vision. This will also link in to the wider IES Delivery Plan and emerging county-wide Investment Plan.

32 This process of local people shaping what they want their community to be in the future will ensure masterplans are not a top-down approach, and by working up from a clearly agreed vision they will provide greater clarity on investment decisions and funding bids, directly aligned to the needs of the place. Alongside the commitment in the IES Delivery Plan to create a new vision and delivery framework for Durham City, there is a commitment to a rolling programme of reviewing masterplans across the County to be replaced with new Strategic Plan Plans.

33 In the first instance the recent £30m government funding announcements for Spennymoor (Long Term Plan for Towns) and Shildon/Newton Aycliffe (Heritage Places Fund) come with a requirement to have a renewed masterplan, and as such these will form a pilot programme to develop and test the Strategic Place Plan approach which will then start to be rolled out across the County.

Conclusion

34 The previous programme of masterplans produced since 2009 has provided a consistent framework to guide investment and regeneration in the County's main centres.

- 34 In addition to the Council's own resources through the town centre capital programme, over £113 million of additional funding has been leveraged to deliver against these masterplans and has supported the transformation and improvement of our main centres.
- 35 As we move towards the delivery of the IES, stakeholder engagement and analysis of best practice elsewhere has reaffirmed the need for masterplans but identified an opportunity to revise the approach through the creation of Strategic Place Plans through the underpinning co-development principle within the IES. This will allow local people to be at the heart of shaping the future vision for their communities that will guide the next stages of investment and transformation of our towns and villages.

Background papers

[Adopted masterplans](#) for County Durham's main centres

Other Useful Documents

Inclusive Economic Strategy DCC Cabinet December 2022

[Adoption of Inclusive Economic Strategy final, item 4.](#)  PDF 745 KB

[Appendix 2 - County Durham Inclusive Economic Strategy, item 4.](#)  PDF 3 MB

[Appendix 3a - County Durham Economic Review, item 4.](#)  PDF 1 MB

[Appendix 3b - County Durham Economic Review Update, item 4.](#)  PDF 258 KB

[Appendix 4 - County Durham Economic Statement, item 4.](#)  PDF 177 KB

[Appendix 5 - IES Econ-versation Feedback Report, item 4.](#)  PDF 1 MB

[Appendix 6 - Response to Economy and Enterprise OSC, item 4.](#)  PDF 124 KB

[Appendix 7 - IES Equality Impact Assessment, item 4.](#)  PDF 156 KB

Inclusive Economic Strategy Delivery Plan DCC Cabinet November 2023

[Adoption of the Inclusive Economic Strategy Delivery Plan](#)

[Appendix 2: Final Draft Inclusive Economic Strategy Delivery Plan](#)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

None.

Finance

Some masterplans and elements of others have been undertaken by consultants which has had a financial cost. The Masterplans identify a series of projects which have been delivered using Council funding, securing external funding or partner resources. Masterplans or the proposed Strategic Place plans do not guarantee funding for the projects identified.

Consultation

The programme of consultation linked to each masterplan produced since 2009 has been agreed with the Council's Corporate Communications Team and the Council's Consultation Officers Group. Future consultation mechanisms will be enhanced in line with the IES principles of codevelopment of the next generation of plans.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Protocol 1 Article 1: Every natural or legal person is entitled to the peaceful enjoyment of his possessions, including their property. The masterplans and their replacements can propose projects which will affect landowners' rights to develop their land. It is noted, however, that rights afforded under this Article are not absolute but qualified. Therefore, any interference with landowner's rights must be balanced against the wider public interest.

Climate Change

Climate change is a thread running through the masterplans and a significant number of projects relate to encouraging walking, cycling and the use of public transport. Charging points for electric vehicles also feature in several schemes. Any built development projects will have to conform with the policies of the County Durham Plan which seek to mitigate and address the causes of climate change.

Human Rights

None.

Crime and Disorder

Issues of crime and disorder are associated with the reasons for undertaking some of the projects included in the masterplans. Crime and disorder

implications are also considered as part of project identification and development.

Staffing

Masterplans produced to date include significant multi-disciplinary input from across the Council, even where external consultants are used to support the process. Consideration is currently being given to the specific resources required to undertake the co-design elements of the next round of plans.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

Detailed risk assessments will be undertaken at the individual project level.

Procurement

The consultants used in the preparation of some of the plans have been appointed in accordance with the Council's procurement rules and procedures.