

Bishop Auckland Stronger Town Board

At a Meeting of **Bishop Auckland Stronger Town Board** held in The Elgar Room - Bishop Auckland Town Hall on **Monday 10 June 2024 at 3.00 pm**

Present:

Councillor D Land (Chair)

Board Members:

Councillor Elizabeth Scott	Portfolio Holder for Economy and Partnerships, DCC
Councillor Mike Harker	Mayor, Bishop Auckland Town Council (BATC)
Rob Yorke	SDEA
Nik Turner	Believe Housing
Edward Perry	The Auckland Project (TAP)
Jonathan Ruffer	The Auckland Project (TAP)
Shaun Hope	Bishop Auckland College

Officers:

Graham Wood	Economic Development Manager, DCC
Andrew Walker	Programme Manager, DCC

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from A Harhoff, M Jackson, Dr C Knight, J Gilroy, T Smyth, J Layfield and M Matthews.

2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 March 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

3 Declarations of interest

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

E Perry declared TAP's interest Durham Dales Gateway, Kingsway Square, Market Place Hotel, Bishops Gateway/ESAC and Artists' Hub.

S Hope declared an interest in the Springboard to Employment Project as Bishop Auckland College were a delivery partner in the initiative.

4 Programme Update

The Board received a presentation which updates on the following items (see slides for details).

- a) Bishops Gateway/ESAC Town Centre Diversification
- b) Durham Dales Gateway
- c) South Church Enterprise Park
- d) Springboard to Employment
- e) Heritage Walking and Cycling
- f) Tindale Triangle

G Wood confirmed that schemes were moving at pace and construction had started, with more work expected to begin over the coming weeks. He had submitted the half yearly claim to DLUHC, including a variation to the funding profile. It was a mandatory requirement for accumulative subsidy control for schemes in excess of £10m and details were being finalised with TAP to be submitted by the end of June. After submission a notification would be published for 30 days in which it would be open to public scrutiny. It would take a further 10 working days to receive approval.

The Board were advised that in the event that the submission was challenged the strength of any concern would be balanced against the submission and in his opinion, it was strong enough due to the national significance of the funding programme and established needs for the area.

Concerns were raised in relation to the timeline as the funding had been expected in April and it was likely to be August. G Wood confirmed that whilst he was not able to envisage the outcome he was aware of another submission which had been challenged and the decision upheld. The subsidy control submission only affected grants that could provide financial benefit, for eg Bishops Gateway, Artists Hub and Kingsway, however he reassured the Board that all schemes were subsidy appropriate.

With regards to Bishop Gateway, G Wood advised that meetings with the project team at TAP had increased in order to progress the project and the focus was on the requirements for a valid planning application. Due to the current pre-election period, schemes heavily reliant on government funding were unable to go out to public consultation and therefore it had been moved to September to avoid the summer holiday period. The planning application was due for submission by the end of 2024.

The Chair noted that ground investigations had been due to commence in summer 2024 and sought reassurance that the timeline would not slip. G Wood confirmed that weekly meetings would ensure work was completed by the recorded timescales.

With regards to the number of proposed car parking spaces, the Chair was aware that the visual impact had been addressed in order to satisfy Historic England, however there was still some variables that required confirmation including the number of Electric Charge Vehicle Points and costs associated.

E Perry confirmed that the Council had started ground investigations and it was important that communications were prepared to inform the public about the benefits of the scheme as he anticipated a significant response to the consultation. The delay of the consultation suited 11 Arches as they needed to raise awareness about the benefit and impact of the programme without the approved parking. There had been a reduction in parking spaces from 4200 to 3000 spaces and 11 Arches were concerned that this may not be enough.

J Ruffer added that on average each vehicle would carry 2.5 passengers and therefore 7500 was the maximum number of predicted visitors. Given that £80m had been invested in the first and second phase it was likely numbers would be greater if successful and 3000 was the absolute minimum required.

The Chair confirmed that projected visitor numbers were 8000 for an evening and it this was likely to be exceeded by day visitors. He requested a detailed report for the next Board meeting in September which included an update on ECVP's.

G Wood confirmed that the issues were due to National Planning Policy Guidance and the insistence that 5% of spaces would be equipped with EVCP's which would require a substation for power. Work to consider mitigating factors was ongoing and an update would be provided to the Board in September.

R Yorke confirmed that more information was required with regards to the Visitor Centre, including costs and operational details to ensure that there would be links to TAP and other organisations.

N Turner was concerned with the planning risk and delays should objections be raised. G Wood confirmed that there had been a series of internal meetings and regular dialogue with the Planning Authority and other internal consultees to take account of any emerging policy changes and minimise impact as the schemes progressed. The biggest issue would be the consultation in September as the proposal was likely to generate public

interest. It was vital to be clear about the scale of public benefit, the attractions that would be created and visitor numbers generated.

Councillor Scott advised it was imperative to engage with local interest groups as early as possible during the process and G Wood confirmed that prior to public consultation, contact was made with some smaller entities such as CPRE. E Perry referred to the positivity generated by a recent article published about the independent shops on Fore Bondgate and the Board agreed that positive communications would be vital to generate positive public interest.

Councillor Harker had been reassured by the responses regarding the timescales and reiterated the importance of engaging with local businesses at the earliest stage.

5 Town Centre Diversification

Art Hub

G Wood confirmed that whilst there had been previous discussions with TAP regarding changes to the scheme, it had reverted to the original business case. E Perry confirmed that a temporary exhibition space within No. 43 would be a hive of activity and with a lack of venues for activities, it was expected that external organisations would be interested in using the space. Councillor Scott shared details of a provisional agreement by the National Football Museum to consider bringing the North East Hall of Fame to Bishop Auckland. Other plans included holding the opening of the Stockton and Darlington 200 festival in March 2025.

The Board were advised that the event organiser had created a programme which included an extended Christmas Town, events at Auckland Castle, a Weardale Railway event and other plans included street food markets and a family festival. Referring to the subsidy control delay, the Chair queried whether it was feasible to issue a letter of intent to the organiser on the basis that the submission was approved. S Hope queried the impact if another provider was to propose an events programme. R Yorke advised that TAP had awarded the funding to the organiser as a junior project partner.

G Wood confirmed that the Council had recently tendered interest for street markets and events organisers with little feedback, however any expression of interest would be considered on a case by case basis and the programme was not limited to one organisation.

Market Place Hotel

E Perry advised that funding from TAP had been secured however the Planning Authority could not support the demolition of properties due to their listed buildings status. A delisting application had been submitted and an update was expected within four weeks. It was important to raise awareness with regards to the public benefit of the hotel which would create jobs and visitor spend, not just in Bishop Auckland but the wider area. With no restaurant, the facility would directly benefit local businesses. On average a day visitor spend was £26 in comparison to an overnight visitor spend of £90, with additional accommodation revenue.

Expressions of interest had been received from six architects and following a tender process two had been shortlisted and interviewed and an appointment was expected to be made by the end of June. He advised that the Park Head Hotel was going well and had a good mix of customers for business and leisure and occupancy was good, however the Market Place Hotel was a vital initiative to provide much needed accommodation to coincide with the launch of new attractions.

J Ruffer added that the offering in the north end of the town took at least 1.5 days to explore in full. Overall visitor numbers were up at Auckland Castle, however whilst the Miners Gallery and Spanish Gallery were comfortably up, they were not at the same level. People required more time to explore the attractions and with a shortage of bedrooms, the hotel was a fundamental part of the scheme.

The Chair agreed that the hotel would change the purpose of the market place and G Wood added that there were other vacant buildings that could be brought back through change of use for Air B&B's.

Public realm

G Wood confirmed that the expected completion of the lighting scheme was September, however plans to consult on other projects had been delayed due to the pre-election period. Local interest groups would be contacted as part of the consultation process.

Councillor Harker advised that the bollards had reduced the ability for pavement parking, however there had been complaints from businesses that it had curtailed business. He reported that the small alley adjacent to the mural required some tidying and G Wood confirmed that this would be dealt with as part of the wider public realm scheme.

With regards to the Newgate Centre, G Wood advised that a consultant had been instructed to undertake a retail and leisure capacity study which would

include a comparison to other towns in the region. The new Centre Manager had reduced antisocial behaviour and a letting agent had been appointed and confirmed that there had been interest in the units.

Durham Dales gateway

E Perry advised the Board that demolition had started and a planning application submitted. The scheme was on schedule for completion in October.

South Church

G Wood confirmed that the scheme had been approved by Cabinet and would be managed by Business Durham who had funding to support new businesses to grow into units.

It was agreed that communications be issued to share details of the scheme at an appropriate time during the programme.

Springboard to Employment

S Hope advised that the facility had been expected to open in September however due to delays to the fitting schedule and it had been moved to October. This would reduce turnover, however he was confident that this could be managed. The delay had allowed Bishop Auckland College to make stronger links with the Job Centre and a lot of interest had been received from businesses. There were also training opportunities linked to the scheme from UKSPF.

Photographs of the progress would be shared with the Board following the meeting.

Heritage Walking and Cycling Routes

G Wood advised that the Project Manager had left and work had been reassigned however there were some capacity issues in order to ensure Bishops Gateway/ESAC were getting the right level of support.

A number of smaller improvements had been made to the projected turns and links at junctions to make the route safe for cyclists.

S Hope advised that from his own experience in town planning, cycle routes had the most public criticism and he encouraged engagement with local cycling and walking clubs. RY confirmed that there had been some engagement with 2-3 different groups.

Tindale Triangle

G Wood confirmed that the final phase of the highway work was being implemented. There had been a number of openings on site.

The letting agent had offered discussions on wraparound support however nobody had taken this up. There had been strong interest in the jobs offered and recruitment had been increased from the expected 450 to 600.

Councillor Scott queried whether there had been any impact on traffic in the area and was advised that it was no different.

The Chair noted the significant delay to the design of the junction which was out of the developer's control and Councillor Scott suggested inviting a representative to a future meeting.

Lighting design

The Board considered a conceptual design of the approved lighting scheme.

R Yorke reported that St Anne's Church was in a state of disrepair and as it was used by voluntary groups, he queried whether there was any grant funding available to them which could be signposted by the Council. G Wood confirmed that the Design and Conservation Team had held lengthy discussions about solar lighting to reduce running costs.

N Turner noted that some of the projects had been delayed and suggested a collective table of data be shared with details of delays and any impact.

6 Governance Review

The Board were advised that following the Governance Review report presented in December 2023, with the offer DLUHC support and inception meeting had been held on 8 March 2024 followed by a steering group meeting on 3 May 2024.

Questionnaires had been sent to the Board and Stakeholders, and it was anticipated that the review would be completed in July. Findings and recommendations would be presented to the Board and a special meeting could be required.

Recent Communications

The Board received data on visits to the Bishop Auckland Regeneration website, and highest viewing figures.

No further communications would be issued due to the pre-election publicity period therefore the next edition of the newsletter had been postponed until 8 July 2024.

E Perry was delighted to report that Auckland Castle had won three RIBA awards including Building of the Year, Conservation Project and North East Regional Award. They had been entered into the national competition in July. In addition the Spanish Gallery had won Best Small Visitor Attraction in the North East England Tourism Awards.

7 Date and Time of Meetings

The next meeting would be held on 9 September 2024.