

North Somerset Council

Report to the Strategic Planning, Economic Development and Regeneration Policy Scrutiny Panel (SPEDR)

Date of Meeting: 25th November 2020

Subject of Report: Urban renewal activity across North Somerset

Town or Parish: Various

Officer/Member Presenting: Alex Hearn

Key Decision: No

Reason: Update report for information / discussion

Recommendations

To note and discuss the updates on urban renewal activity across North Somerset

1. Summary of report

This report provides an update on urban renewal activity across North Somerset (Clevedon, Nailsea, Portishead, Weston-super-Mare). It includes updates on the following:

- Placemaking strategies.
- Economic development and business support, including high streets.
- Local Plan allocations and delivery of brownfield sites.

2. Policy

Urban renewal activity supports the Corporate Plan objective of creating a Thriving and Sustainable Place.

3. Details

3.1 Context

- 3.1.1 North Somerset's four towns of Clevedon, Nailsea, Portishead and Weston-super-Mare represent a total population of c. 160,000 out of the area's total population of approaching 215,000. They are further used by many of those in surrounding areas and visited by tourists and others from much further afield.
- 3.1.2 The towns remain core to the economic and community vitality of North Somerset, however have for many years faced significant challenges, exacerbated this year by the Covid-19 emergency. These include:

- The rise of the online economy, bringing increased competition to more locally based shops and services.
- Comparatively low residential values reflecting the market preference for 'easier' and higher-value greenfield sites – coupled in some cases with a prevalence of low quality private rented accommodation.
- In some cases, higher rates of social and economic deprivation than in other areas of North Somerset.

3.1.3 Nonetheless, our urban areas also offer great opportunities which form the base for future renewal and growth:

- High quality, although sometimes jaded, public realm and heritage buildings, with the potential to be brought back into use and restored for use as homes, businesses and services.
- Despite the online competition, our towns and high streets remain a focus of economic and cultural activity. Many of those operating retail and other businesses in these areas have already succeeded in reinventing themselves to offer benefits not available online – better service, better specialist knowledge, and a better experience.
- There is evidence, that, whilst large city centres, may be suffering from the exodus of workers during the Covid-19, other smaller centres are seeing some benefits from having an increased proportion of the local population at home during the day and choosing to use local shops and workspaces.
- The increased focus on sustainability is reinvigorating interest and investment in urban living and renewal.
- Improved accessibility compared to other locations.

3.1.4 The Council has limited resources available for urban renewal, and, whilst there are reasonably frequent opportunities for government funding, these are often relatively small amounts and short-term, which makes a long-term strategic approach more difficult. A key part of supporting urban renewal will be to maximise the alignment, opportunities and benefits of our core activities, and to communicate effectively the positive work and results that are already taking place.

3.2 Economic development and business support

3.2.1 Businesses across North Somerset's town centres have a variety of support offers open to them. These range from start-up support through to advice on intellectual property, accountancy and developing the skills of their workforce. The business support platform is the West of England Growth Hub (<https://www.wearegrowth.co.uk/>) which is a partnership between the Local Enterprise Partnership and the four unitary authorities. This offers a 'no wrong door' approach to business support, with specialist Enterprise Advisers on hand to help triage and navigate businesses towards the most relevant support packages.

3.2.2 In addition to the Growth Hub offer, North Somerset Council has been providing some targeted support for town centre businesses, including:

- Outdoor public seating: projected completed in October 2020.
- Online shopping platforms: match-funding to each town centre to allow them to work with local businesses to develop a shared platform which will allow online shopping to provide resilience through further social distancing measures and restrictions.

- Locating support offers in town centres –making it easy for businesses to access support.
- Programmatic interventions to encourage visitor footfall, including North Somerset Cultural Programme
- Exploring options to expedite the provision of full fibre connectivity across Weston.
- Targeted package of support for visitor economy businesses (outlined in appendix B) – many of which are in our town centres.

3.2.3 To assist local people to safely access their high streets within the social distancing constraints of Covid-19, placemaking and highways teams have been using government funding from the DfT and the Reopening the High Streets Safely Fund. This has been used to put up signage reminding people of the need for social distancing, and in some locations to ‘widen’ pavements by suspending parking barriers or partially closing roads, to ensure that there is space for pedestrians and cycling to pass one another safely. Officers are aware that not all aspects of the schemes have been viewed as a success, and we continue to review feedback and make amendments to layouts where this proves necessary. Where possible we will also be replacing the red and white water filled barriers with more attractive timber planters in the near future.

3.3 Placemaking Strategies

3.3.1 A Placemaking Strategy for Weston-super-Mare was agreed by the Executive on 9th September. The report can be viewed at:

<https://apps.n-somerset.gov.uk/Meetings/document/report/NSCPM-111-555>

3.3.2 A monitoring report on the programmes and projects within the Weston Placemaking Strategy can be viewed at Appendix A. Highlights and issues (beyond those covered elsewhere in this report) include:

- The “Weston Place Agency” is a network to drive collaborative leadership amongst partners in the town. An initial 12 month steering group has been created and is meeting regularly to drive forward and coordinate events, cultural activity and communications. An online launch event is planned for the 1st December inviting businesses, community groups, investors and partners to become part of the network.
- Alexandra Parade: subject to Executive Member agreement, changes have been recommended to this scheme, including the de-scoping of some aspects around Station Road, due to budget pressures. These are instead expected to be delivered using the DfT Emergency Active Travel Fund.
- Workspace: “The Stable”, which was set up by NSC, has gone from strength to strength during lockdown and has taken on a number of new buildings, with a waiting list for their individual offices. Other future options are under discussion as part of the Weston General Stores project and through discussion with potential interested investors.
- Birnbeck Pier: NSC’s work with Historic England and the RNLI to compulsory purchase the pier and bring it back into use as a lifeboat launch station has received significant positive press coverage, including at national level, along with extremely high levels of social media interest. The current owner (CNM Estates) has lodged a formal objection and application for a ‘stay’ on proceedings, but this will be opposed by NSC and Historic England. Statements of Case are under preparation for the hearings. Officers are

working with the RNLI to facilitate surveys and the preparation of a planning application.

- Town Centre cultural programme: this has started delivering in partnership with Theatre Orchard. Events so far include Spray Jam and Weston Poster Project. The cultural programme has secured match-funding of £20k from the Town Council in support of the Culture Weston Winter Lights event, which will now be held in Jan/Feb.
- Sovereign Centre: footfall had remained a steady 25% down year on year compared with last year prior to the renewed lockdown, although most businesses were reporting decent trading. With the new lockdown, six units remain open and click and collect arrangements have been put in place for the use of all stores. Work has commenced on a revised business plan looking at the long-term future of the centre, and a business case is being prepared for an initial flagship project – the “Weston General Stores”, which has been allocated £1.7m national funding to be delivered by March 2022.
- Visitor economy: a project to support the visitor economy has commenced with Visit Somerset, although the formal launch has been postponed due to Covid. This focuses on business support to the visitor economy, including business support webinars and a ‘Visitor Economy Academy’ with Weston College to provide individual businesses with one-to-one training based on skills gaps. It will also include a North Somerset visitor economy marketing campaign focused on linking places to stay, shop, eat, drink and buy with our other attractions. Additionally, there is work to develop a programme of high quality events for 2021.

3.3.3 Initial scoping work is commencing for a fresh look at the J21 Enterprise Area to understand how it can be better positioned regionally and respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by accelerated changes in commercial land use and investment. A separate paper has been prepared for the panel to consider.

3.3.4 Work on a placemaking strategy for brownfield land in Portishead has recently commenced in conjunction with Portishead Town Council and a major landowner, Aberdeen Standard Investments. The Wyndham Way Study Area project is currently undertaking an initial exercise to gather evidence, which will inform a set of objectives and a brief for a future masterplan or development framework.

3.3.5 Very substantial public investment to deliver Portishead Rail is increasing developer and investor interest in the brownfield land that sits between the marina and the high street. The area is currently dominated by retail sheds, surface car parks and industrial units and represents a significant barrier to good quality connections and walking and cycling in the area. The intention is that the framework provides a planning basis for good placemaking principles for mixed use, mixed tenure and mixed density development in a sustainable location.

3.3.6 It is hoped in due course that, subject to capacity and resources, placemaking strategies for Clevedon and Nailsea can be pursued, in partnership with Town Councils and communities. In Clevedon this would be likely to focus in particular on the main town centre area and the emerging planning application for the B&M site (see below), as well as seeking to make even more of the Hill Road shopping centre and seafront. In Nailsea, key issues relate to the area of the shopping precinct around the library building, and to the opportunities and pressures created by a growing number of planning applications around the town.

3.4 Development sites

- 3.4.1 The development of brownfield urban sites is a critical part of urban renewal and sustainable growth, but the sales values achieved in such locations are frequently low compared with the costs of construction and borrowing, such that the return on investment does not warrant the financial risk. This is a fundamental problem in Weston, but much less so in Portishead, where the 'market making' investment in the marina area over the past 20+ years, and the future rail link to Bristol have made urban living highly attractive. Clevedon and Nailsea sit somewhere between the two, in that they have secured a degree of investment, but to date this has been primarily small-scale and/or focused on retirement living.
- 3.4.2 In Weston, renewed efforts are being made to bring forward sites in Homes England ownership and those of North Somerset Council. At Homes England, the resourcing applied has increased from a single officer to around six members of staff, and work to complete surveys, technical work and to resolve any legal issues is actively underway. The intention is to take the sites to market on a freehold basis in the Spring – although Locking Road car park and Sunnyside Road may be slightly ahead of Dolphin Square due to complications with demolitions and the sub-station on the latter. This approach is being pursued due to the outcomes of soft market testing that suggested a freehold sale would generate more market interest than the restrictions of a Homes England building lease, however it will also mean that HE will have more limited control of the sites thereafter, placing a greater onus on the planning system to manage quality. Officers are discussing this issue with HE with a view to striking a suitable balance between the level of control and the level of market freedom.
- 3.4.3 At Walliscote Place, the council is hoping shortly to restart work on bringing the site forward. This is likely to commence with a commission to gather market intelligence on questions such as whether to split the sites (i.e. the police station and the magistrate's court) and on whether a planning consent is beneficial or not in advance of disposal. Where possible we are seeking government funding to support and de-risk the development.
- 3.4.5 A key site in Nailsea is the Weston College building adjacent to Nailsea Library in the shopping precinct. The college building is not in NSC ownership, but we have a small degree of leverage due to access rights and a flying freehold. The college building is allocated for residential development, and has generated some degree of interest, but was also considered earlier in the year for an extension of a nearby medical practice (unfortunately this was affected by Covid and fell through). Nailsea Town Council are keen to promote an option for managed workspace either in this building or elsewhere. The future of this location is linked to wider questions about NSC assets and service provision in the town, and it is proposed that a facilitated workshop be held to further explore the options.
- 3.4.6 In Clevedon, a planning application (ref 20/P/1673/FUL) has been submitted for age restricted accommodation on part of the car park of B&M, together with the redevelopment and expansion of the B&M building to allow for a gym and smaller retail units below. This proposal will be subject to determination through the planning system; members are reminded that they should not pre-determine that process.

4. Consultation

No specific consultation has been carried out in relation to this report, however most of the individual programmes and projects reported have been, or will be, subject to extensive consultation internally within NSC and externally with communities and stakeholders.

5. Financial implications

Direct financial implications of the activities described within this report have been reported separately.

Costs

N/a

Funding

N/a

6. Legal Powers and Implications

N/a (update report).

7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

Urban renewal is critical to environmental sustainability, in ensuring the continued and improved provision of range of sustainable local facilities that reduce the need for travel, and in renewing the use of sites and buildings that are already in existence.

Direct environmental implications of specific programmes and projects have been reported separately.

8. Risk management

Risks of specific programmes and projects have been reported separately.

9. Equality implications

Have you undertaken an Equality Impact Assessment? – NO

EIAs are carried out for individual programmes and projects where required.

10. Corporate implications

Urban renewal activity supports the Corporate Plan objective of creating a Thriving and Sustainable Place.

11. Options Considered

N/a

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Appendices:

Appendix A: Weston Placemaking Strategy: Monitoring Report
Appendix B: Visitor Economy Support Package

Background papers:

N/a

Visitor Economy Support Package

Description	When
Provision of data and intelligence to support targeted business support and marketing activity.	Surveys and research starting in November 2020.
A package of business support webinars including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability awareness • LGBTQ+ Markets • Infection control • Accounting and financial acumen • Local Food Producers and Buying Local - The importance of local provenance • Digital strategy and building digital markets. 	Starting in December 2020 to support business readiness for the summer season.
Two positive national press stories.	By January 2021 Visit Somerset predict they will have built up enough content and understanding to start delivering USP media releases to national press and specific specialist publications.
A Visitor Economy Academy - working directly Weston College to provide individual businesses with one to one training based on skills gaps.	From February 2021
A North Somerset visitor economy marketing campaign.	February 2021 Visit Somerset will collate intelligence from analytics and Visit Britain on latest visitor trends. Start to formulate personas for potential marketing strategy starting in Spring in accordance with target markets and interests
4 themed itineraries, linking places to stay, shop, eat, drink and buy with our attractions.	Spring 2021 (we will be pushing for delivery of these ahead of peak season).
Up to 40 bronze memberships for NS businesses.	Will launch with press release this month.