

# North Somerset Council

## Report to the Place Policy and Scrutiny Panel

**Date of meeting: 8th March 2023**

**Subject of report: Levelling Up Fund update**

**Town or Parish: Weston-super-Mare**

**Officer presenting: Jenny Ford, Head of Development & Placemaking**

**Key Decision: No**

### **Reason:**

Report is for information and scrutiny

### **Recommendations**

- That the Panel note the contents of this report.
- That the Panel confirm that they wish for progress reports to be brought to the committee on a six-monthly basis.

## **1. Summary of report**

This report provides an update on the Levelling Up Fund programme for Weston, following the government announcement in Jan 2023 that the council's bid to the fund had been successful.

## **2. Policy**

The funding and activities referenced in this report will support delivery of the Corporate Plan priority of creating a Thriving and Sustainable Place and delivery of the vision and objectives set out in the SuperWeston Placemaking Strategy adopted in September 2020.

## **3. Details**

- 3.1 In January 2023, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities announced that the council had been successful in a bid to the Levelling Up Fund, awarding £19,979,570 for a programme of works across Weston.
- 3.2 This funding is matched by £3.04m from NSC, comprising £0.64m spend already incurred at the Sovereign Centre (backdated expenditure within the existing financial year can be included as match-funding), and £2.4m within the council's Capital Programme relating to placemaking improvements. The total programme value is £23,019,797. Formal approval for the addition of the expenditure to the Council's Capital Programme was agreed as part of budget reports in February 2023.
- 3.3 The themes and purpose of the bid and its delivery are to:

- Boost the visitor economy by investing in much-loved but deteriorating heritage assets to create national visitor attractions and creative hubs.
- Reinventing and diversifying Weston town centre, supporting the creative economy, independent retailers and food & drink innovators.
- Delivering wayfinding and quick win public realm improvements to increase footfall and spend and boost local pride in the quality of our environment.

3.4 In delivering the bid, it is hoped to bring further momentum to already changing perceptions of Weston, attracting further investment, and creating a positive cycle of ongoing change and reinvention. Residents will benefit from more diverse and higher quality employment; employers from a town that attracts and retains talent; and visitors from a year-round offer. Linking also with other activities such as those funded by UKSPF, the programme will seek to help make progress on long-term issues of deprivation relating to employment, health & well-being, quality of life, and crime.

3.5 The bid and its projects emerged from the consultations and partnerships involved in the creation of the Weston Placemaking Strategy, adopted by NSC in 2020. A report to Council in July 2021 agreed the focus as the basis for Levelling Up bids.

3.6 Specific projects to be delivered are as follows:

(i) Project 1: a year-round destination:

- Tropicana: creating a fit-for-purpose, future-proofed events facility, increasing the capacity from 3,000 to 8,000 and making the arena area more 'ready to go' for operators and events. An additional bid has been made to the Cultural Development Fund which if successful would allow complementary investments to the internal areas (decision expected March 2023).
- Birnbeck Pier: further to the emergency repairs and decking to be carried out using other funds, LUF will restore a number of buildings at the pier, allowing them to be used as entry booths, visitor centre, café etc.
- Marine Lake: following on from the Council's previous investments, completing restoration of walkways, steps and ramps, installing additional seating, service points for food trucks, and potentially small-scale changing facilities.

(ii) Project 2: reinventing the Town Centre:

LUF funding will support the refurbishment of vacant high street units within the Sovereign Centre ownership, as well as some additional external improvements. Photos of the existing condition of some of the units in question are provided below:



The works to shop units will tie in with wider efforts to revitalise the high street through the Economy Team and programmes such as UKSPF, including supporting small independent traders and Meanwhile Uses.

(iii) Wayfinding and Grove Park:

Improvements to wayfinding across the town centre and seafront, linking in particular with the forthcoming opening of new coastal routes. The project also includes investments to improve the entrance area to Grove Park.

- 3.7 In addition to the capital spend, it is important that the LUF bid achieves the wider objectives of the programme relating to tackling deprivation in Weston, specifically in South and Central Wards which include neighbourhoods within the 2% most deprived nationally. The programme will include close working with colleagues such as those from Procurement, the Economy Team and others involved in the UKSPF programme to maximise the outcomes both in terms of contractual social value, and in linking into other responsibilities and activities of the council to align wherever possible in addressing issues such as unemployment and health and well-being. Partners including Weston College, the Business Improvement District and Town Council will also be critical here.
- 3.8 Steps have been taken to establish robust programme governance and management. A Programme Coordination Group and Programme Steering Group have been set up, including representatives from CLT, and will meet monthly, supported by working groups for each of the different projects. The Steering Group as the senior grouping will in turn report into the Council's capital and asset governance structures. Project/Programme documentation is being compiled, including a Programme Management Plan and updates to the Quantified Risk Assessment submitted with the bid. Reports will be brought to the Executive and Council as part of normal financial monitoring, and it is proposed that more detailed update reports are brought to the Place Scrutiny Panel on a six-monthly basis.
- 3.9 The timeline for delivery is rapid: all expenditure is to be completed by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025. Projects will therefore be mobilised as soon as possible.
- 3.10 The programme total of £23m includes allowances for fees, overheads, contingency, inflation and Optimism Bias in line with in line with specialist advice and government funding guidance. This helps protect the deliverability of the projects.

#### **4. Consultation**

- 4.1 The projects in this bid emerged from extensive consultation carried out in creating the Weston Placemaking Strategy.
- 4.2 Project delivery will involve further consultation, both with members and wider stakeholders; this will focus on key delivery issues and how we maximise the benefits of the investments (for example at the Tropicana we will seek industry input into arena improvements). However there is limited, if any, scope to change the focus of the projects, as these have been agreed with government through the funding bid. Additional/alternative projects cannot be added in at this stage.
- 4.3 Many of the projects will require planning consent, which will include statutory consultation processes.

## **5. Financial implications**

- 5.1 The total programme value is £23m, of which £19,979,570 is sourced from Levelling Up grant and £3,040,227 from NSC match-funding. This has been reported and approved as part of the Council's Capital Programme and Medium-Term Financial Plan.

## **6. Legal powers and implications**

- 6.1 The Council is required to enter into a Funding Agreement with government. This sets terms and conditions as to the expenditure of the funding, including requirements relating to timescales, outputs and monitoring.
- 6.2 Legal advice has been secured on Subsidy Control implications of the projects to ensure no improper subsidy or economic activity on the part of the council.

## **7. Climate Change and environmental implications**

- 7.1 Mitigating and adapting to climate change are seen as an important part of this programme. More detail will be confirmed as the detail of projects are finalised, but is expected to include:
- Works to be delivered to a high environmental standard.
  - Tropicana investments to be aligned with wider energy efficiency and decarbonisation initiatives.
  - Encouraging active travel and sustainable tourism through wayfinding measures, esp. linking to new coastal routes.

## **8. Risk management**

- 8.1 A detailed, quantified risk assessment was prepared as part of bid documentation. This will be a 'live' document to be kept updated and regularly reviewed throughout the delivery period.
- 8.2 Key risks include:
- Delivering within the required timeline, particularly given delays from government in confirming funding: programme and project managers have been identified from within the council's Capital Projects Team to allow for rapid mobilisation and commissioning of preparatory work. Budget approvals have been secured, and a degree of additional authority delegated to the Section 151 officer to be able to progress procurement approvals during the election period. Officers will liaise with government contacts on a regular basis to update them on progress and if necessary to discuss whether any extension to the funding period is possible.
  - Funding is inadequate to deliver projects, either due to unexpected delivery issues or continued high levels of inflation: the bid includes allowances for contingency and inflation in line with specialist advice and government guidance. In the event that these were inadequate, officers would review how best to reduce costs without compromising outcomes; this would be subject to separate reports and decisions.

- Investment in capital works does not lead to deliver of wider Levelling Up outcomes: stakeholder and community engagement will be an important part of the programme. Procurement activity will seek to maximise Social Value contributions. The delivery team will work closely with colleagues across the council and with external partners to maximise opportunities for alignment with other initiatives such as UKSPF.

## **9. Equality implications**

9.1 An initial Equalities Impact Assessment was carried out in support of NSC's Levelling Up bid. This identified significant positive benefits for people from groups with one or more protected characteristics and/or other individuals facing disadvantage, including those detailed below:

- Improved access to facilities and across the town for people with disabilities, or other people with mobility issues.
- Improved signage for those with visibility impairments.
- Improved economic opportunities and support (jobs and training) for those on a low income, and/or for individuals from groups with protected characteristics that statistically are likely to have a low income.
- Improved health and wellbeing benefits, including mental health benefits, through encouraging access to the open air and facilities of Weston seafront and town centre.

9.2 These benefits are particularly significant in the context of the data showing high levels of deprivation and disadvantage in Weston, specifically issues in relation to health and employment. Opportunities arising from the scheme – such as employment and training opportunities – will seek to target groups known to be disadvantaged or otherwise unable to easily access the employment market.

9.3 Further assessments will be carried out as part of programme / project delivery to ensure that benefits are maximised and any negative impacts are considered and addressed.

## **10. Corporate implications**

10.1 Programme delivery will require significant input from a wide range of teams from across the council including placemaking, seafronts, capital projects, procurement, finance, legal, planning and property teams.

10.2 Governance and reporting structures have been put in place to ensure coordination of these teams and the project/programme activities.

## **11. Options considered**

11.1 To accept LUF funding and deliver associated projects: this is the agreed option as it will bring much-needed regeneration and placemaking investment in Weston.

11.2 To reject LUF funding: this has been rejected as there are limited opportunities for government funding of placemaking investments, and the projects are in line with the agreed priorities of the Weston Placemaking Strategy.

11.3 To seek a change in the amount or terms of LUF funding: this would be unacceptable to government, who have been clear that funding agreements will be based on the content of bids. Minor changes to the detail of delivery may be possible at a later stage and subject to government approval, however any changes must be minimal and not impact on the overall objectives and outcomes.

**Author:**

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**Appendices:**

N/a

**Background papers:**

The Levelling Up bid will be added to the council's public website in the next few weeks.