

North Somerset Council

Report to the Place, Economy and Planning Policy and Scrutiny Panel

Date of meeting: 22nd November 2023

Subject of report: Placemaking and Development updates including Levelling Up Fund and development sites

Town or Parish: All

Officer presenting:

Jenny Ford, Interim Assistant Director, Placemaking & Growth

Key Decision: No

Reason:

Report is for information and scrutiny

Recommendations

- That the Panel note the contents of this report and that it meets a commitment to bring six-monthly updates to the panel on the delivery of the Levelling Up Fund programme.

1. Summary of report

This report provides an update on programme delivery for Placemaking and Development, including:

- Updates on delivery of the Super Weston Placemaking Strategy, including the Levelling Up Fund programme.
- Information on steps to re-start engagement on placemaking strategies and delivery in Portishead, Clevedon and Nailsea.
- Information about the development of a Rural Strategy and a Culture Strategy, which are cross-cutting strategies across all of North Somerset.
- Progress on delivery of the North Somerset Development Strategy, which is focused on the delivery of homes and employment on council-owned land.

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.

These also support delivery of the vision and objectives set out in the Super Weston Placemaking Strategy adopted in September 2020, and of the North Somerset Council Development Strategy adopted in February 2021.

The report provides information on work to date to create Placemaking Strategies and a Rural Strategy for other areas of North Somerset.

3. Details

Placemaking and Rural Strategies

Weston

- 3.1 In September 2020, the council adopted the Super Weston Placemaking Strategy. This followed extensive local and stakeholder engagement, and identified eight key thematic priorities:
- Active Weston.
 - Carbon Neutral Weston.
 - Green Weston.
 - Learning Weston.
 - Weston Experience.
 - Weston Living.
 - Weston Wellbeing.
 - Work Weston.
- 3.2 A copy of the strategy can be found at <https://superweston.net/>. Information about progress on delivery of the priorities can be found in later sections of this report.

Clevedon, Nailsea and Portishead

- 3.3 During 2021 and 2022, North Somerset Council, with the support of Design West Community Interest Company, worked with local communities, business interests and town councils to develop placemaking strategies for Clevedon and Nailsea, with a focus on the town centres. This offered an opportunity for local people to shape visions for the future of their towns, which have not benefited from placemaking programmes in the past. Over 2,400 people engaged with the work.
- 3.4 Alongside this work, the council worked with Portishead Town Council and business and land interests to prepare a Wyndham Way Development Framework. This sought to address a brownfield area of Portishead between the marina and the high street, providing a development framework in response to known development pressures that required coordination.
- 3.5 The resulting strategies and action plans were reported to the Executive in December 2022. Due to local concerns expressed about some of the draft content – specifically around the inclusion of housing sites and numbers, the adoption of the strategies was deferred, and the following resolution agreed:

“That the Executive endorsed, in principle, the Clevedon, Nailsea and Portishead placemaking strategies as the partnership visions for regeneration, placemaking and economic development for the respective towns, and agreed to delegate to the Executive Member for Placemaking and Economy, in consultation with relevant Town Councils and other partners, the authority to determine the final content and wording of the strategies.”

- 3.6 This action was placed on hold during the election period. However officers will shortly be re-commencing work to engage with local stakeholders with a view to resolving issues and if possible to agree revised strategies. These will inform delivery and resource planning and funding bids.

Rural Strategy

- 3.7 Alongside the current development of an updated Corporate Plan, the council is preparing a Rural Strategy, linking in with best practice from the Rural Services Network (RSN - see rsnonline.org.uk).
- 3.8 The outcome of the engagement work for the Corporate Plan is being used to inform strategy development alongside a series of workshops for Town and Parish Councils and North Somerset Together partners.

Culture Strategy

- 3.9 In 2019, the Executive approved a draft 'Framework for Heritage, Arts and Culture' for North Somerset for consultation. However due to the interruption of Covid and changes in staffing, the document was not consulted upon or adopted, and significant elements are now out of date.
- 3.10 Arts Council England have recently made available grant funding to North Somerset Council to enable us to update the draft framework, undertake an audit of cultural activity across North Somerset, and develop a focused Delivery Plan for agreed priorities.
- 3.11 The purpose of this work will be to better understand cultural activity across North Somerset, to agree shared priorities with partners/communities, and to enable the council and partners to align our limited resources to those activities that will have the most benefit in delivering collective ambitions.
- 3.12 In referring to heritage, culture and arts, the Council takes a very wide interpretation. This would include for example live music, libraries and archaeology – as well as theatre and visual arts.
- 3.13 It is expected that this work will be completed within the next six months and a revised draft framework brought to the Executive or Council.

Weston Placemaking delivery

- 3.14 Weston's strategy was an early priority in placemaking for the following reasons:
- It is the largest settlement in North Somerset, with a population of nearly 90,000.
 - It is the fastest growing town, with approaching 13,000 new homes allocated in the Sites and Allocations Plan 2018 and 7,800 in the emerging new Local Plan – as well as significant employment allocations. This presents growth

pressures, but also opportunities through new population, businesses, and developer contributions.

- Our areas of greatest deprivation are within the South and Central Wards of Weston, with particular challenges around health and employment. This was a significant factor in securing £20m Levelling Up Funding from central government for the town.
- The Council owns significant property interests in the town centre, including brownfield development sites and The Sovereign shopping centre, therefore we have greater control over what happens in Weston than in many other areas.

3.15 Following agreement on the strategy, a temporary Weston Placemaking Team was established within the council to lead delivery, and a Place Agency partnership created with key stakeholders such as the Town Council, College and Business Improvement District to coordinate and communicate multi-agency placemaking.

3.16 Key successes in delivery of the programme to date include:

- The Council successfully bid for £20 million Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (please see below for further details).
- Weston hosted the Government funded SEE MONSTER art installation at the Tropicana, drawing visitors and profile from across the globe.
- The SEE MONSTER garden and pétanque court was created using trees and structures from the installation to provide residents and visitors with a positive reminder of the Monster.
- Weston Place Agency partners joint funded Super Weston communications activity including a website, social media channels, podcasts, and films. The activity has raised Weston's online profile, showing hidden gems and challenging traditional perceptions.
- Historic England Heritage Action Zone activity has proved extremely successful, with shopfronts improved across Weston town centre, new trails created, and volunteers trained in local heritage.
- The Grade III listed Birnbeck Pier is now in the ownership of the Council, with partners and funders working with the community to begin the huge refurbishment project.
- The Council successfully bid for Getting Building Fund, administered by the West of England to diversify empty units in the Sovereign into We are Super workspace, the Bike Hub and Can't Dance coffee.
- The town is succeeding in securing increased interest from a range of event organisations and cultural organisations wanting to run activities in the town.
- North Somerset was designated Arts Council England Priority Place status, which has enabled two local National Portfolio Organisations (Super Culture and Trigger Stuff) to attract Arts Council England funding for culture and arts activities (these benefit all of North Somerset, although Super Culture are primarily active in Weston).
- As reported to Council in 2022, a significant inward investment opportunity is being progressed on council-owned land at the Weston Business Quarter, with the prospect of creating 300 good quality new jobs.

Levelling Up Fund

- 3.17 In January 2023, North Somerset Council successfully bid for £20 million from the Government's Levelling Up Fund (LUF) to deliver transformational change in Weston's town centre and seafront. The funding was matched by £3 million of council budget, and seeks to:
- Boost the visitor economy by investing in much-loved but deteriorating heritage assets to create national visitor attractions and creative hubs.
 - Reinvent and diversify our town centre, supporting our creative economy, independent retailers, and food & drink innovators.
 - Deliver wayfinding and quick win public realm improvements to increase footfall and spend and boost local pride in the quality of our environment.

The paragraphs below summarise progress on the projects being delivery by LUF.

Project One: Visitor Economy and Heritage:

Tropicana

- 3.18 The Tropicana is a key seafront destination for Weston-super-Mare but is underused and fails to generate adequate income to fully cover costs. The intention of the LUF project is to revitalise and refurbish the building, increasing its capacity and ensuring facilities are fit for purpose and suitable for a flexible range of activities.
- 3.19 Surveys recently completed highlight priority areas for refurbishment including roofing, heating lighting and ventilation systems, wall and flooring repairs, drainage, and toilet facilities. The project will also increase the venue capacity with the necessary fire, health & safety and people movement infrastructure.
- 3.20 A design contract is currently under procurement, with construction expected to start at the end of summer 2024.
- 3.21 In tandem with the above capital works, the council will also be seeking a commercial operator for the venue. A report setting out the intended procurement process and priorities will be brought to Council early in 2024. A soft market testing exercise earlier this year attracted significant interest from local, regional and national operators.

Birnbeck:

- 3.22 LUF funding for Birnbeck Pier is focused on the restoration of landside buildings for reuse as visitor centre, café and commercial spaces. There will also be public realm enhancements, and some work on the island buildings to commence their restoration.
- 3.23 Separate funding has been secured from the National Lottery Heritage Fund for further works to the landside and island buildings, structures, and public realm, and from Historic England, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the RNLI for restoration of the Pier itself. The RNLI will be funding restoration of the 1904 boathouse and provision of a new lifeboat station on the Island.

Marine Lake

- 3.24 LUF funding will be used to complete the dredging of the Lake and to make improvements and repairs to the perimeter walkway, safety features and the seating area above the Lake.
- 3.25 The design contract is currently under procurement, and the dredging contract has recently been agreed.

Project 2: Town Centre

- 3.26 LUF funding will be used to fully refurbish four High Street units, improving their street appeal, condition, and energy efficiency, and with works expected to begin early in 2024.
- 3.27 The project team has also requested of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities that the incredibly successful Heritage Action Zone shopfront can be extended, with further town centre units brought back into use by improving their street appeal.
- 3.28 Finally, funding will be used to wrap empty town centre units, a technique used successfully elsewhere to improve the look of the town.
- 3.29 LUF funding can only be used for capital works. However the LUF projects are designed to link with UK Shared Prosperity funding, including grants to support businesses to be ready to take on and fit out premises once the new units are released to the market. A further UKSPF project is supporting community, charity, and CIC organisations to potentially take on and maintain premises where they are not commercially let. The UKSPF work is applicable across all of North Somerset, not just Weston.
- 3.30 The LUF initiatives tie into a wide range of other activities to support our high streets. In Weston this has included significant investment in the Sovereign, including conversion of units into managed workspace, a café and bike hub. The Sovereign is managed on the council's behalf by Montagu Evans, who are very proactive in seeking new tenants and in holding activities and events that seek to boost footfall.

Project 3: Connecting Spaces & Places

Grove Park

- 3.31 This LUF project will focus on redesigning the park entrance, attracting attention from the High Street, drawing people in, relocating and replacing the public toilet block, and improving the light, furniture, planting and surfaces to make the site more appealing and attractive. Surveys have been carried out and the design contract procurement is underway.

Wayfinding

- 3.32 Weston's wayfinding signage infrastructure was brightened up ahead of the SEE MONSTER opening last year. The current project will add to the existing system with a mix of signage, design and graphics to encourage people to walk and cycle across the town centre and seafront, including highlighting assets which are harder to find.

The project will link up with England's Coast Path, Pier to Pier cycle route and the public transport system and will highlight accessible routes.

Wider benefits

3.33 Alongside the capital projects, it is essential that the LUF programme ensures that the benefits of these projects are shared as widely as possible across Weston's communities and businesses. The success of the programme will be measured against a range of wider outcomes, including:

- Increased footfall.
- Reduction in town centre vacancy rates.
- Job creation.
- Increased business investment.
- Contractor engagement with local schools and colleges.
- Local supplier engagement.
- Increasing numbers of people experiencing cultural destinations.
- Working with various community groups e.g. Friends of Grove Park, Weston Mudlarks and the Birnbeck volunteers.

3.34 Funding conditions for LUF require that all projects are delivered by March 2025. This is extremely challenging, particularly as there was a six-month delay in the government confirmation of funding beyond the original expected decision date. Councils across the UK, including North Somerset Council, have requested an extension to the planned end date. If agreed, this would allow the Tropicana and possibly Birnbeck LUF funded activity to extend into 25-26.

Development Programme

3.35 In February 2021, the Council adopted a Development Strategy for the delivery of homes and employment on land in its ownership. This included the following four objectives:

- To provide homes and jobs that meet the needs of our communities – current and future – while helping deliver government targets for housing supply.
- To offer better quality and more sustainable developments..
- To deliver sites that the market won't, including difficult brownfield land and employment sites.
- To generate funding to help deliver other priorities, such as investing in schools, transport links and leisure facilities.

3.36 These objectives are closely linked to the placemaking agenda, particularly in the delivery of difficult sites which whilst sitting empty can blight the local area; in improving the standards of development; and in providing homes and jobs for local people that bring additional footfall and spend in the local economy. The capital receipts generated assist in delivery of other capital programmes such as LUF.

3.37 To date, two development sites have been brought forward:

- 425 new homes at Parklands Village in Weston. This includes 30% affordable housing (compared to 12 – 13% on adjacent sites) and 30% net zero homes, with all other homes seeing at least a 75% reduction in carbon emissions

compared to national averages. Our development partner, Keepmoat Homes, is making good progress on site and the first showhome will be launched on 23rd November.

- 52 homes at The Uplands in Nailsea. These homes are high quality design and meet flagship Passivhaus standards. 40% of the homes will be affordable, with an above policy level of adaptable and accessible housing, as including a small number of bungalows. Our development partner, Stonewood Homes, started on site in Summer 2023 and is making good progress with the first homes due to be available in 2024.

- 3.38 Commissioning Plans have previously been agreed for town centre sites in Weston-super-Mare, Parklands Village phase 2, and Castlewood in Clevedon. For the Weston site this included agreement to a draft set of specifications for the sites, which are included in the report (please see list of background papers).
- 3.39 Progress on the Weston sites has been slow, as work was paused following the economic turmoil of autumn 2022. The economic instability and continued cost inflation have increased the financial challenges of the sites, which were already only marginally viable.
- 3.40 Officers have been reviewing options for site delivery. A paper is expected to be taken to January Council providing updates and may also propose changes to delivery options. This is likely to suggest prioritisation of the Dolphin Square, Walliscote Place and Castlewood sites in the first instance. Officers are also re-considering options for partnership with a local authority development company such as Aequus (owned by Bath & North East Somerset Council). This would have the advantage of shortcutting lengthy procurement processes, and that companies such as Aequus take a lower level of profit than private sector developers, increasing the viability of sites.
- 3.41 The Weston town centre sites will nonetheless remain financially challenging, and public sector subsidy from the council or another body such as Homes England is likely to be required. A positive factor is that Homes England has recently revised its Corporate Strategy to place a greater emphasis on the delivery of difficult urban sites and regeneration.
- 3.42 Work will continue on other development sites owned by NSC, including Parklands phase 2, with the intention of creating an ongoing pipeline of delivery. We are also considering the priorities and mix of housing and employment for such sites, including whether there are options to provide specialist or supported affordable housing to meet pressures reported through Adult and Childrens' Services.
- 3.43 The NSC Development Programme is are not restricted to housing development. As reported to the Executive earlier in 2023, Heads of Terms have been signed with a significant manufacturing company which is seeking to build new premises on council-owned land at Weston Business Quarter, creating around 300 jobs.

4. Consultation

- 4.1 The creation of Placemaking and Development strategies has included extensive public and stakeholder engagement. Project delivery includes further consultation, both with Members and wider stakeholders.

- 4.2 A number of the LUF projects will require planning consent, which will include statutory consultation processes.
- 4.3 A consultation on council-owned development sites was held in the summer of 2022 and reported to Council in November 2022 (see www.n-somerset.gov.uk/nscsites). A majority of respondents offered support for the development of sites at Weston Town Centre, Parklands and Castlewood. Individual projects will be subject to further member and public consultation including statutory planning consultations.

5. Financial implications

- 5.1 The creation of Placemaking Strategies does not in themselves bring financial implications. Resources for successful delivery of identified priorities will come in part from the council but will also require successful funding bids to government and other agencies, as well as contributions from partners including local Town and Parish Councils.
- 5.2 The LUF programme value is £23 million, of which £19,979,570 is sourced from Levelling Up grant and £3,040,227 from NSC match-funding. This was approved as part of the Council's Capital Programme and Medium-Term Financial Plan in February 2023.
- 5.3 The Development Programme overall seeks – amongst other objectives – to generate funding to support delivery of other capital priorities. Positive receipts have been secured from the Parklands phase 1 and Uplands sites and are expected from Castlewood and Parklands phase 2. The sites in Weston town centre are likely to require subsidy in order to progress; this may come from NSC or ideally from other bodies such as Homes England. A contribution of £693k was agreed by council in February 2022 to support the provision of affordable housing and/or enhanced sustainability measures at the Weston Town Centre sites.

6. Legal powers and implications

- 6.1 The Council has entered into a Funding Agreement with government for the LUF. 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.
- 6.3 Procurement of development delivery will be subject to procurement regulations, and the council must demonstrate best value in the disposal of sites.

7. Climate Change and environmental implications

- 7.1 The adopted/draft Placemaking Strategies for Weston and other areas place a strong emphasis on climate change and environmental sustainability.

7.2 Mitigating and adapting to climate change are seen as an important part of the LUF 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 and other building 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.

7.3 In bringing forward development on land owned by the council, we will seek to maximise sustainability in both construction and subsequent operation. Examples include the net zero / reduced carbon housing under delivery at Parklands phase 1, and the delivery of Passivhaus homes at The Uplands in Nailsea. As well as reducing emissions, these steps also ensure lower energy bills for future residents, including the residents of the affordable housing.

8. Risk management

8.1 Placemaking Strategies do not in themselves hold significant risks. Delivery projects and actions are subject to risk assessment and mitigation.

8.2 A detailed, quantified risk assessment was prepared as part of LUF bid documentation. This is a 'live' document, kept updated and regularly reviewed throughout the delivery period. Key risks at the current time included:

- The current LUF funding deadline of March 25, mitigated by requesting an extension for certain elements, tight programme management and budget profiling.
- Rising construction costs, mitigated by allowing for a risk pot and contingency through optimism bias, including an allowance within the budget for inflation forecast increase.
- Funding restrictions only allow capital funding, mitigated by the Council capitalising project staff, a small delivery budget from the Government, and the Council budgeting for the delivery team.
- Statutory approvals including planning permission and Marine Management Organisation license for Marine Lake work. All approvals are programmed into the schedule.
- Seafront tides and inclement weather bring construction challenges, mitigated by selecting contractors with marine environment experience.

8.3 Development sites are subject to individual risk assessments as they come forward.

8.4 The programmes and projects referred to in this report are subject to governance and monitoring through the Capital Programme Planning and Delivery Board and the Corporate Assets and Property Board. These are in some cases further supported through topic-specific member working groups.

9. Equality implications

- 9.1 Placemaking Strategies have been developed with a view to tackling inequalities, particularly in areas of significant deprivation.
- 9.2 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. The Project team is regularly engaging with the North Somerset Disability Access Group to discuss scope, designs, and accessibility provision.
 - 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. The Council's Active Weston group is engaged in the programme and will continue to consult and advise, particularly in relation to animating the spaces once refurbished..
- 9.3 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.
- 9.4 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.
- 9.5 Development sites are subject to individual Equality Impact Assessments, and the programme as a whole aims to tackle inequality where possible. Examples include the provision of additional accessible and adaptable homes at The Uplands, the provision of affordable housing, and consideration of how we can incorporate specialist and supported housing into our future delivery.

10. Corporate implications

- 10.1 Delivery of these programmes 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 Options considered for these programmes and projects have been reported separately and/or will be considered in future business case / commissioning reports.

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Appendices:

N/a

Background papers:

- SuperWeston Strategy: www.superweston.net
- Links to placemaking information including Levelling Up Bid: <https://n-somerset.gov.uk/business/regeneration-development/north-somerset-placemaking>
- Report to Executive: Placemaking Strategies for Clevedon, Nailsea, and Portishead: <https://n-somerset.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s4122/10.0%20Council%20report%20on%20Placemaking%20Strategies%20-%20FINAL%202.pdf>
- Draft Framework for Heritage, Culture and Arts: <https://n-somerset.moderngov.co.uk/Data/Executive/202001071000/Agenda/15%20Framework%20for%20Heritage%20Arts%20and%20Culture%20Development.pdf>
- Commissioning Plan for development of sites in Weston-super-Mare: <https://n-somerset.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s3105/21%20Development%20Programme%20-Commissioning%20Plan.pdf>
- Business case and Commissioning Plan for Castlewood site: <https://n-somerset.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s4161/08%20Castlewood%20Council%20report%20FINAL.pdf>
- Outcomes of consultation on further development sites: www.n-somerset.gov.uk/nscsites