

Committee: **Executive Committee**
Date of meeting: **15th December 2021**
Report Subject: **Ebbw Vale Placemaking Plan**
Portfolio Holder: **Councillor D Davies, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Regeneration and Economic Development**
Report Submitted by: **Richard Crook, Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
16.11.21	18.11.21	30.11.21			8.12.21	15.12.21		

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1. To present and seek approval of the Ebbw Vale Placemaking Plan from the Executive Committee.

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1. As one of five towns across Blaenau Gwent, Ebbw Vale like all towns faces significant challenges as a result of a shift to online retailing and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Many of our regeneration focus on the town in the past has looked at how the town could be refurbished and updated.
- 2.2. Whilst we will still seek to carry out refurbishment of properties in need of attention we must also take a step back and reconsider the spaces and properties in and around our town centre. In Wales placemaking is a statutory requirement of the planning system. We will therefore take a placemaking approach to deliver sustainable development and provide solutions and investment that addresses the needs of Ebbw Vale.
- 2.3. To provide a background to our current work we will first consider historic regeneration projects. In 2002, the multi-storey car park was renovated and a steel and glass canopy was installed along the southern end of one side of Bethcar Street.
- 2.4. In recent years, the town benefitted from EU convergence funding and under the 2010-2015 programme works included streetscape works, new bus and taxi rank, community space and sculpture at Bank Square and refurbishment of 29 properties throughout the town.
- 2.5. In 2020, the Council were awarded funding by Welsh Government from the Transforming Towns programme for development studies towards the costs of

commissioning consultants The Urbanists to develop a Placemaking Plan for Ebbw Vale.

- 2.6. After a competitive tendering exercise the Contract to deliver the placemaking plan was awarded to The Urbanists.
- 2.7. The work undertaken by the Urbanists has been delivered in two parts:
 - i. **Deliverable 1: Placemaking Plan**
A public facing, overarching strategic vision that identifies priority areas for action within the study area.
 - ii. **Deliverable 2: Delivery Plan**
An internally focused, 'detailed delivery plan' that utilises an appropriate methodology for the detailed analysis of the study area sites and puts forward 'evidenced based' recommendations on preferred development/redevelopment options for the Council to take forward.
- 2.8. This report presents the first of their deliverables the Placemaking Plan and overall strategic vision that identifies our core ambitions for the Town. This will then be followed in early 2022 with the proposed Delivery Plan.
- 2.9. The aims of placemaking are outlined within the Placemaking Guide (Placemaking Wales, 2020). The way places are planned, designed, developed and managed has the potential to positively shape where and how people will live, work, socialise move about and engage. Placemaking is ensuring that each new development or intervention contributes positively to creating or enhancing environments. It places people at the heart of the process and results in places that are vibrant, have a clear identity and where people can develop a sense of belonging.
- 2.10. The primary purpose of the Placemaking Plan for Ebbw Vale is to inform and influence future strategic decision making for regeneration activity within the town and act as an evidence base to support the Council with future external funding options and support development of the replacement Local Development Plan (LDP).
- 2.11. The placemaking plan study area includes the town centre, the northern area of The Works, the Civic Centre site and Eugene Cross Park. The plan aims to provide a new vision for Ebbw Vale and identifies the type of projects and investment that we want to attract to the town. All the proposals within the plan are 'people centred' with each focussed on improving experiences of the town.
- 2.12. Like many towns across the UK, Ebbw Vale in recent years has faced extremely challenging times. Along with the continued increase in online shopping, the town has faced one of the most significant and challenging periods for our economy during the Covid-19 pandemic. It has exacerbated challenges already being faced as a result of town centre decline and we need to look at how we can refocus and reinvent the town centre spaces.

2.13. The overall vision of the Ebbw Vale Placemaking Plan is:

“We want Ebbw Vale to be a smart, resilient and sustainable town that is a great place to work, have a business, live and visit.”

2.14. Delivery of our vision shall be done by exploiting three opportunity areas for Ebbw Vale Town:

- i. Connect the town with the locality and destinations
- ii. Build on the area’s green legacy
- iii. Exploit tech and digital investment opportunities

2.15. Within the draft Ebbw Vale Placemaking Plan six core ambitions have been identified to support us in transforming the town and delivering upon our vision. these are:

1. Establish the high street as a ‘test-bed’ for new business and entrepreneurs, but also cultivate an environment of growth for existing businesses.
2. Create a series of new entrance spaces into the town centre that open up the high street, enhance the retail environment, green the centre and create new space for homes, work spaces and leisure uses.
3. Revitalise connections between the town centre and The Works to give pedestrians greater choice, reliability and quality.
4. Transform The Works into a vibrant and active destination; a place of arrival, culture, learning, working and living.
5. Establish Eugene Cross Park as a regionally renowned sporting destination that caters for specialist, elite and community teams and improve its connections to the town centre and The Works.
6. Transform the Civic Centre site into an exemplary neighbourhood of modern homes in a green sustainable setting.

2.16. Taking forward these ambitions, the plan identifies a series of intervention areas and high level actions including:

1. **Northern Gateway** – new entrance space from the north prioritising pedestrians, new green space and redevelopment of key buildings to create an attractive and engaging townscape.
2. **Eastern Gateway** – new entrance from the southern end of the town with an improved pedestrian environment, better public realm which opens the entrance to the town and connects the centre to The Works. Redevelopment of key blocks to offer a greater mix of viable uses in the centre.
3. **Town Centre Core** – restored buildings and shopfronts that include a diverse mix of uses that include retail businesses, workspaces, incubator and tester units for ‘start-ups’, leisure uses, homes and live/work spaces.

4. **The Works** – new landmark entrance to Ebbw Vale by rail with new terminus building and station square development to provide new civic and cultural and outdoor event spaces. Enhanced pedestrian connections to the town centre.
 5. **A4046 Corridor** – an enhanced active travel environment with space for cycle lanes, planting and priority pedestrian crossings to connect the town centre and The Works. Improved integration of the bus station and taxi rank into Bethcar Street and treatment of rear properties.
 6. **Civic Centre Site** – new green neighbourhood with energy efficient homes and new active travel corridors that provide access to the town centre, The Works and Eugene Cross Park.
 7. **Eugene Cross Park** – to create a modern sports and community destination with training and all weather facilities, enhanced active travel and vehicle connections.
- 2.17. The projects listed above are predominantly physical regeneration projects. Non-physical projects are not included in the intervention areas, but they are pivotal for the success of the town centre and are also included within the Placemaking Plan.
- 2.18. Each of the interventions are discussed in sections 2.19 to 2.34 of this report. They consider the issues for each of the intervention areas and then potential opportunities/projects to address these issues. More detailed information is contained within the Placemaking document that has been included as background paper to this report (**Appendix One**).

Town Centre Core

- 2.19. Main issues within the Town Centre Core are discussed on page 30 of the Placemaking Plan (**Appendix One**).
- 2.20. Projects that could be delivered within the overall town centre core include:
- Creation of flexible commercial units that can be used for ‘test trading’.
 - Restoration and refurbishment of building facades and shop fronts to enhance town centre character.
 - Rationalise street furniture and ensure maintenance measures are in place to maintain retained furniture.
 - Establishment of a Local Development Order to provide greater flexibility for changes of use that complement the town centre and will help increase activity and footfall.
 - Promote the town centre as a ‘pilot project’ to test the benefits of freezing or reducing business rates for town centre businesses.
 - Develop an online digital presence for the town centre that promotes the town and its businesses and provides a means for retailers to trade online.

- 2.21. Greening town spaces have well documented benefits on peoples physical and mental well-being as well as environmental benefits. Urban green spaces can provide:
- greater levels of social activity,
 - improved health and well-being,
 - decarbonisation and tackling climate change
 - improved air quality
 - reduce flood risk and better manage water quality
- 2.22. Whilst it will be important to include more green space, it will also be essential that this is designed in ways that require low levels of management and maintenance (see examples on page 12 of **Appendix One**). It will also be necessary to ensure that suitable resourcing from a people and financial perspective are put in place by the Council to ensure that these areas are maintained and not allowed to become overgrown or fall into disrepair.

Northern Gateway

- 2.23. Main issues within the northern gateway are discussed on page 32 of the Placemaking Plan (**Appendix One**).
- 2.24. Projects that could be delivered within the Northern Gateway of the town include:
- Creation of an improved pedestrian entrance into the town centre by simplifying the A4046 junctions serving Market Street, Libanus Road, Market Square and James Street to prioritise pedestrian movement.
 - Redevelop key development plots to create a landmark visual entrance into the town centre, deliver a greater mix of uses and revitalise the street scene.
 - Creation of a green public open space on Market Square to provide a green core that softens the town centre street scene.
 - Integrate new commercial development into the town centre.

Eastern Gateway

- 2.25. Main issues within the eastern gateway are discussed on page 34 of the Placemaking Plan (**Appendix One**).
- 2.26. Potential projects that could be delivered within the Eastern Gateway of the town include:
- Future redevelopment of the police station to include green space and improve west/east pedestrian movement and enhance views of the town centre from the A4046.
 - Open the southern façade of the old bank building so commercial activity could spill out onto Old Bank Square.
 - Repurpose “The Walk” shopping centre to include a mix of uses and spaces that prioritise pedestrians and open up access to the high street from the east of the centre and The Works.

- Redevelopment of vacant development plots to create a southern landmark for the town centre and diversify uses in the town.
- Reduce the vehicle dominated design of the walk by improving pedestrian connections.
- Consider the requirement for signalisation of the junction connecting The Walk and A4046.

A4046 Corridor

2.27. Main issues within the A4046 Corridor are discussed on page 36 of the Placemaking Plan (**Appendix One**).

2.28. Potential projects that could be delivered on the A4046 corridor include:

- Reduce the design speed of the A4046 as it passes through the Town Centre and prioritise movement of pedestrians, including wider west /east movement between the town centre and The Works.
- Targeted treatment of the rear of properties on Bethcar Street and Market Street to reduce the viability of poor quality backs.
- Include wider pavement, enhanced pedestrian crossing, removal of barriers and street clutter.
- Integrate the bus station into Bethcar Street via targeted removal of poor quality structures and infrastructure to improve pedestrian connections and create views to the high street and new northern gateway.

The Works

2.29. Main issues within The Works are discussed on page 38 of the Placemaking Plan (**Appendix One**). These include poor wayfinding and sense of arrival, lack of pedestrian access to the town centre through ramp/stairs and a lack of activities and footfall away from the education and public sector buildings.

2.30. Potential projects that could be delivered at The Works include:

- New development on Station Square to include floor space for new uses such as a multi-functional cultural venue, café/restaurants and active frontages onto the public spaces.
- Upgrading the existing train station terminal building to create more of an experience when approaching Ebbw Vale by train.
- General Offices extension would build upon the modern extension constructed in 2010 to accommodate Gwent Archives.
- Regeneration of the public space to create safe, attractive and active spaces through integration of green infrastructure, wayfinding system and signature lighting.

Eugene Cross Park

- 2.31. Main issues within Eugene Cross Park are discussed on page 42 of the Placemaking Plan (**Appendix One**).
- 2.32. Potential projects that could be delivered within the Eugene Cross Park site include:
- Provision of dynamic multi-purpose sports and community facility that provides a new entrance to the park and integrates the River Centre.
 - Enhance existing vehicle access into the middle of the Park from Newchurch Road to improve access to the facilities.
 - Create a 4G training facility with parking and indoor changing facilities.

Civic Centre Site

- 2.33. Main issues within Civic Centre Site are discussed on page 49 of the Placemaking Plan (Appendix One).
- 2.34. Potential projects that could be delivered within the Civic Centre site include:
- Residential development of the Civic Centre site and adjacent land to create a vibrant green neighbourhood with a mix of modern energy efficient homes.
 - Integrate the existing health centre and residential development to create a wellness village.
 - Establish an active travel corridor that connects the Civic Centre site and the town centre to enable residents to move easily and quickly to the town centre.
 - Enhance pedestrian connections from the Civic Centre site to Eugene Cross Park and The Works.
- 2.35. In addition to the above, the Civic Centre site presents an opportunity to develop a net zero carbon homes site and this would mirror Council aspirations for decarbonisation.

Town Centre Wide Projects and Digital Interventions

- 2.36. Town centre wide projects that apply to the whole study area could include:
- Consolidated town centre signage to reduce clutter while clearly signposting attractions, parking and highway requirements.
 - Expand on the existing programme of events to develop a consistent calendar of activity that includes heritage, food, music and recreation.
 - Work with existing businesses to improve diversity of retail and hospitality offer within the town centre.
 - 5G connectivity throughout the town centre with 5G classroom at The Works site.

- Create a digital high street through development of an app that allows interaction with Ebbw Vale and provides access to local businesses.

Transport and Movement Strategy

- 2.37. An appraisal of current transport options and the development of additional or alternative proposals was included within the commission and have followed the WELTAG process.
- 2.38. One of the key areas around transport and movement would be to remove redundant road infrastructure along the A4046 and to provide a safe and attractive active travel corridor for pedestrians and cyclists. Connecting it to the existing 466 cycle route.
- 2.39. Section 5 (page 48) of the Placemaking Plan in **Appendix One** discusses our transport and movement strategy in greater detail and explores areas including improving cycle routes, bike parking provision and better integration of bus and taxi services into the town centre.
- 2.40. We will look to enhance existing pedestrian connections between The Works and the town centre and create a welcoming and functional train gateway to the town with new terminal station, high-quality public realm and improved wayfinding.
- 2.41. The potential interventions are by no means exhaustive and will need to be updated as new opportunities emerge. Further detail around the issues and opportunities is contained within **Appendix One**.

Stakeholder Engagement

- 2.42. As a result of COVID-19 engagement has been undertaken with key stakeholders via online workshops. Engagement with business stakeholders was done using one to one telephone discussions.

- 2.43. Stakeholder engagement is being undertaken in three stages:



- 2.44. Stakeholders that have formed part of the engagement for Stages A and B included:

- The Council (Officers and Elected Members)
- Welsh Government
- Key Landowners
- Local Businesses
- Eugene Cross Park Stakeholders
- Design Commission for Wales
- Transport for Wales

- Coleg Gwent
- Ebbw Fawr Learning Community
- Aneurin Leisure Trust

- 2.45. The initial engagement has supported the assessment of issues and opportunities that face Ebbw Vale Town. Pages 14-17 of **Appendix One** provide details of the issues and opportunities that were identified by the Urbanists along with stakeholder feedback on these and any other issues / opportunities that were identified.
- 2.46. Wider public engagement is also to be undertaken and will be used to support development of the delivery plan which will support this placemaking plan.

Decarbonisation

- 2.47. The Council has set a target for the Local Authority to become net zero by 2030. Mirroring this ambition there is a commitment towards supporting the borough of Blaenau Gwent to become net zero. The projects that emerge from the Placemaking Plan offer an opportunity to support further decarbonisation across Blaenau Gwent.
- 2.48. Green urban areas can be used to offset carbon emissions of businesses that operate within the town. They can also help improve overall air quality.
- 2.49. New build and refurbishment projects can be used to deliver buildings that have a lower carbon impact. This can include using local supply chains to reduce travel of materials, energy efficient lighting and appliances.
- 2.50. Transport and movement projects can also support decarbonisation. Improved active travel routes alongside multi-modal transport systems and wayfinding can assist with reducing dependence upon car travel within the Town Centre.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

- 3.1 This report will be considered by the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee on 8th December 2021, and any feedback will be provided verbally to the Executive.
- 3.1. The options contained within this report relate only to the approval of the overall vision and series of core ambitions contained within the Placemaking Plan in Appendix One. Future reports will be submitted in relation to the delivery plan and details of potential projects to be developed and implemented in order for us to achieve our overall vision.

Option 1 – Do Nothing

- 3.2. Note the contents of the Placemaking Plan and take no further action. Without Council endorsement of the projects contained within the plan it is unlikely that we would be successful in securing Welsh Government Transforming Towns money for redevelopment/refurbishment of the Town.

Option 2 – Endorse the Placemaking Plan

- 3.3. Agree the Ebbw Vale Placemaking Plan, its vision and core ambitions for the future. This will enable us to finalise the draft of the delivery plan and steps towards implementation of the projects that will be contained within it.

Preferred Option

- 3.4. The preferred option is Option Two. This will enable the projects that will support achievement of the core ambitions to be brought forward as part of the Delivery Plan. Such projects are likely to be eligible to apply for funding through the Transforming Towns funding.
- 3.5. Projects which show a strategic vision and delivery approach that are supported by Placemaking Plans will be more positively received by potential funders such as the Welsh Government than ad-hoc projects which don't consider overall impact upon the area.
- 3.6. A placemaking approach will be taken for all towns across Blaenau Gwent. Work is already underway on the Tredegar and this will be closely followed by Abertillery and Brynmawr. Work to develop a placemaking plan for Blaina is expected to commence in early 2022.

4. Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan

Future Wales – The National Plan 2040

- 4.1. Future Wales – The National Plan 2040 is the national development framework, setting the direction for development in Wales to 2040. It is a development plan with a strategy for addressing national priorities through the planning system. As the national development framework, Future Wales is the highest tier of development plan and focused on challenges at a national scale.
- 4.2. Policy 2 of the plan is Shaping Urban Growth and Regeneration – Strategic Placemaking. The aspirations of Future Wales are an opportunity to regenerate our towns. The plan sets out the policy for a strategic placemaking approach and principles to help shape urban growth and regeneration.
- 4.3. Policy 3 of the plan is Supporting Urban Growth and Regeneration – Public Sector Leadership. This policy highlights the role the public sector can play in assembling land and enabling development to realise aspirations.
- 4.4. It also supports delivery of the Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan:
 - Safe and friendly communities;
 - To look after and protect the environment;
 - To forge new pathways to prosperity; and

- To encourage and enable people to make healthy lifestyle choices in the places that they live, learn, work and play
- 4.5. The Town Centre strategy will seek to ensure that our town centres are safe and friendly communities for our residents and visitors to shop within. This will include projects to maintain and enhance the local environment, increase business occupancy and create an environment in our town centres that encourages our residents to spend time there for work, learning and leisure.
- 4.6. The report supports the following Corporate Plan priorities:
- To protect and enhance our environment and infrastructure to benefit our communities;
 - To support a fairer sustainable economy and community; and
 - An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services we know matter to our communities.
- 4.7. Town Centres are one of the key themes identified for the Regeneration and Community Services which support delivery of the priority areas identified in the Council's Corporate Plan 2018/22.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)

- 5.1. Option 1 – there would be no financial implications associated with option one of this report.
- 5.2. Option 2 – there would be no immediate budgetary implications as a result of endorsing the Ebbw Vale Placemaking Plan. There would however be medium and long term capital and revenue implications associated with taking forward the emerging projects that will form the Delivery Plan.
- 5.3. In the medium to long term taking forward Option 2 will result in future development and implementation costs. It is likely that development costs such as surveys, feasibility studies would be eligible under the Transforming Towns programme (subject to a successful application) but this would only be for up to 50% of the eligible costs and there would be a need for the Council to identify suitable revenue match funding for the remaining 50%.
- 5.4. Implementation costs are also likely to be eligible for capital funding under the Transforming Towns programme (subject to successful application) but this would only be able to cover up to 80% of these costs and the Council would need to identify capital match funding for the remaining 20%.
- 5.5. Further detail on development and implementation costs will be included within the Delivery Plan which will be presented for approval in early 2022.
- 5.6. The future maintenance cost implications will be incorporated into the project proposals when they are presented for approval. All project proposals will be

developed to limit maintenance liabilities for the Council and this will be included in the proposals along with proposals to establish a maintenance budget.

Risk including Mitigating Actions

- 5.7. Option 1 – if no further action is taken there is risk that sites will remain undeveloped or fall into disrepair.
- 5.8. Option 1 – footfall within the town centre associated with retail has been severely hit with the increase in online shopping and enforced lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key to recovery will be intervention that supports repurposing and reinventing our town centres. This would not happen if option 1 is chosen and then we would have a further risk of deterioration in footfall.
- 5.9. Option 2 – further work to develop / implement projects that will achieve the core ambitions would require revenue and capital funding. Such funding is likely to be eligible for application under the Transforming Towns programme but there is a requirement to identify a suitable source of match funding to fully meet the costs.

Legal

- 5.10. There are no direct legal implications for any of the options considered within this report. The report seeks endorsement of a Vision and set of ambitions that set out our approach to future regeneration of Ebbw Vale Town Centre.
- 5.11. Legal implications associated with project delivery will be explored as part of the delivery plan.

Human Resources

- 5.12. Staff within Regeneration and Development are leading the preparatory work and working across other service areas within the Council where required.

6. Supporting Evidence

Performance Information and Data

- 6.1. A health check of the study area was carried out in January 2021. The health check identified key issues within the town:
 - Retail is suffering with a number of empty units creating 'holes' in the high street.
 - Lack of night-time and leisure economy with residents travelling to Cardiff, Abergavenny and Brynmawr.
 - Retail units are generally small and less well suited to modern requirements.
 - The commercial premises on Bethcar Street and Market Street stretch longer than the number of retail units and active uses can support and therefore 'fades out' in the north and south.

- Car dominated retail in the south undermines activity on Bethcar Street.
- Development opportunities at The Works site are currently divorced from the Town Centre.

Expected outcome for the public

- 6.2. Some of the sites included within the study area are no longer fit for purpose or underutilised. The Placemaking Plan seeks to identify these sites and identify alternative uses or opportunities for refurbishment or redevelopment.
- 6.3. Active travel routes between the town and sites such as the works need improvement. Improved active travel will provide greater accessibility for residents and visitors to move within the area.

Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)

- 6.4. Initial engagement was undertaken with the stakeholders to understand how the town works currently and what ambitions there are for the future. The initial phase of engagement included fact finding and this was used to identify the issues and opportunities discussed within the Placemaking Plan (**Appendix One**).
- 6.5. As a result of COVID-19 much of the engagement has been undertaken with stakeholders via online workshops or by one-to-one telephone discussions.

Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)

- 6.6. The Placemaking plan sets a vision and series of core ambitions that are aimed at planning for the long term future of the Town Centre.

Preventative focus

- 6.7. Taking forward the outcomes of the placemaking plan will ensure that areas of the town that are in need of attention are protected and enhanced in the future.

Collaboration / partnership working

- 6.8. Many of the projects that will be identified to deliver on our core ambitions for Ebbw Vale Town Centre will require collaborative approaches to delivery. This will be developed further alongside stakeholders subject to endorsement of this report and the delivery plan.
- 6.9. In September 2021, the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee endorsed proposals to establish a partnership delivery approach towards town centre regeneration and to set up an advisory group to help steer progress in the future. This was subsequently agreed by the Executive Committee and work will now begin on identifying the membership of the group together with setting up the first meeting to agree their terms of reference.

Integration(across service areas)

- 6.10. As outlined above, initial consultation has been undertaken across service areas within the Council. This includes service areas such as highways, housing, planning and education.

Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions

- 6.11. Blaenau Gwent declared a Climate Emergency in 2020 and as a Council we have committed towards achievement of net zero carbon emissions by 2030. Creating high quality green spaces in the town centre will help with decarbonisation and offsetting carbon emissions. It will also help improve air quality.

7. Monitoring Arrangements

- 7.1. Progress will be reported through the Regeneration and Development business plan.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- *Appendix One - Ebbw Vale Town Centre Placemaking Plan*