

Committee: **Cabinet**

Date of meeting: **29th November 2023**

Report Subject: **Abertillery Placemaking Plan**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr J.C Morgan, Cabinet Member for Place and Regeneration and Economic Development**

Report Submitted by: **Ellie Fry, Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
3.10.23	5.10.23	08.11.23			17.10.23	29.11.23		

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1. To present and seek approval of the Abertillery Placemaking Plan from Cabinet.

2. Scope and Background

2.1. As one of five towns across Blaenau Gwent, Abertillery like all towns faces significant challenges as a result of a shift to online retailing.

2.2. 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 Abertillery.

2.3. 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. 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.

2.4. The Placemaking Plan highlights opportunities to diversify the town centre to support existing businesses and facilities and to create the conditions to attract new enterprise. These opportunities have been considered in the context of available funding and delivery streams, and the particular economic conditions of Abertillery.

2.5. As a result of a competitive tendering exercise, the Contract to deliver the Placemaking Plan was awarded to Arup.

2.6. This report presents the first of their deliverables – the Placemaking Plan that identifies our overall strategic vision and core ambitions for the Town. This will then be followed by a Delivery Plan that will become a fluid and evolving document that will be used to identify and measure progress of the projects.

- 2.7. The work undertaken by Arup will be 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 'evidence-based' recommendations on development/redevelopment for the Council to take forward.
- 2.8. This report introduces the Placemaking Plan, a critical first step in our strategic vision to rejuvenate Abertillery. The Placemaking Plan outlines our core ambitions for the town, setting the stage for our future development initiatives. Following this, we anticipate preparing a first iteration of the Delivery Plan in late 2023. The Delivery Plan will provide a comprehensive roadmap, complete with actionable steps and projects, to turn our vision into reality.
- 2.9. The primary focus of the Placemaking Plan for Abertillery is to inform and influence strategic decision-making for regeneration activity within the town, act as an evidence base to support the Council with future external funding options and support the development of the replacement Local Development Plan (LDP). All placemaking plans will be used to form the town centre policies that will be used to support future planning decisions within the towns. It is the intention that placemaking plans will all be complete or substantially complete in advance of the finalisation of the Local Development Plan.
- 2.10. The previous Placemaking plan placed a strong emphasis on physical interventions within Church Street some of which were implemented. However, the results of these physical changes have yielded mixed responses and impacts upon activity that takes place in the town. The placemaking plan will consider these areas but also aims to be less focused on physical changes, recognising the additional challenges the town faces beyond those resulting from previous project.
- 2.11. The draft Placemaking plan identifies the five biggest strengths and opportunities that could support us with our role transforming the Town. These strengths and opportunities provide a solid foundation upon which to build Abertillery's future prosperity and community well-being:
- **Local Community Pride:** There is a palpable sense of pride and a strong desire for improvement within Abertillery. The town benefits from numerous local champions who organise events and initiatives aimed at enhancing the area. Notable examples include the rejuvenation of Abertillery Park and the Abertillery Workmen's Welfare Institute.
 - **Unique Landscape Assets:** Abertillery is surrounded by significant landscape features, including steep valley sides and Abertillery Park.

These natural assets have the potential to be better connected to the town and more effectively utilised for various recreational and leisure activities. Additionally, the nearby Cwmtillery Lakes offer tourism opportunities and the potential to drive footfall to the town.

- **Historical Significance:** As a former thriving mining town, Abertillery boasts a rich history and evidence of its past success. The town centre showcases quality architecture, including Trinity Chapel. The well-defined Church Street contributes to the town's unique character.
- **Victorian Arcade:** Abertillery is home to the only Victorian Arcade within Blaenau Gwent, presenting a distinctive feature that sets it apart from neighbouring towns. The Victorian Arcade, while currently underutilized, offers substantial potential, particularly for bolstering the town's night-time economy.
- **Improved Rail Accessibility:** Plans for a new rail station in Abertillery, located adjacent to the Tesco site as a spur off the Ebbw Vale line, represent a significant opportunity. This rail link will dramatically enhance the town's accessibility, facilitating easier transportation and connectivity to neighbouring areas.

2.12. The fact that the Local Authority does not own any commercial properties in our Town Centres presents both challenges and limitations. This lack of ownership means that the Council cannot unilaterally decide what businesses or activities are established in these properties. It also means that projects that require use of shop premises need us to establish working relationships with building owners.

2.13. The placemaking plan has identified several possible projects which could act as catalysts for regeneration and help realise the vision for Abertillery. For the first phase projects or “quick wins” are actionable wins to achieve visible and tangible change.

Jubilee Square

2.14. Unlocking Jubilee Square's potential benefits residents and St. Michael's Church. It offers a gathering space for residents, that could also support local entrepreneurship, and enhance the town centre's vibrancy. The square also serves as a great venue for events, aligning with our goal of a dynamic, community-centered town centre.

Cleansing strategy

2.15. A common message from the engagement undertaken was the perceived poor cleanliness of the street. It was seen as grubby and dirty and many local residents saw the appearance of the Town as a major concern. It is suggested that a consistent and regular cleaning strategy for the Town will quickly create tangible change.

Trinity Chapel

- 2.16. The proposal to relocate the existing Castle Street library to a modern, 'state of the art' library facility at the Former Trinity Chapel building on Church Street is a positive step forward and should be supported. This strategic move offers several potential benefits for Abertillery:
- Relocating the library to the High Street area enhances its accessibility to residents and visitors, making core services more readily available. This creates a dynamic hub that caters to a broader range of community needs, fostering collaboration and engagement.

- 2.17. This proposal aligns with the goal of enhancing accessibility to services and promoting the use of modern amenities within the town centre. In addition to traditional library offerings, the new library facility will be strategically designed to accommodate adult education services.

Pedestrianisation of Somerset Street

- 2.18. Community engagement efforts have revealed a clear demand for enhancing the pedestrian environment on Somerset Street in Abertillery. This presents an opportunity to explore temporary measures to transform the street and evaluate its success. A potential approach involves temporarily restricting traffic on Somerset Street to create additional space for local businesses to trade outside.

- 2.19. The success of this initiative would be evaluated on a test and trial basis, with the initial phase serving as an experiment. Implementing this as a temporary project allows for cost-effective testing of its feasibility and further business and community engagement before considering more permanent solutions.

The Arcade

- 2.20. The Victorian Arcade in Abertillery stands as a unique asset within Blaenau Gwent. Recognising its distinctiveness, there is an opportunity to explore diverse uses for the Arcade beyond traditional retail, thus ensuring its continued vitality and viability. Existing retail and hospitality businesses need to be supported by filling the remaining empty units and the smaller unit sizes of the arcade present excellent opportunities for uses and service businesses.

The Metropole

- 2.21. From engagement activities, it is clear that 'The Met' is a valued community asset. The theatre continues to host a range of successful events. The Met should be encouraged to explore additional events in new and different locations, opening up an opportunity for a greater range of events such as connecting with Abertillery Park or utilising the top deck of the multi-storey car park for larger outdoor events.

- 2.22. The placemaking plan has identified **medium** and **longer-term developments** and enhancements. These are set out below.

Gateway

- 2.23. Currently, Abertillery faces the challenge of not having a distinct and recognisable focal point that signals the entrance to its town centre, which could provide a genuine sense of arrival for both residents and visitors. There are several points of entrance to the town and these need to be exploited to create more of a sense of arrival. The towns overall branding and perception are linked to this and they

should be used to celebrate Abertillery and its rich history. These could complement The Guardian of The Valleys as part of a series of local landmarks.

Abertillery Multi-Storey Car Park (High Street)

- 2.24. Extending the Abertillery multi-storey car park's hours can improve late shopping and the evening economy. If successful, we can explore more options, including events on the top deck. Measures to mitigate antisocial behaviour (ASB) are also being explored.

Church Street configuration

- 2.26. Church Street remains the heart of Abertillery, the ongoing engagement efforts have highlighted the need for a more detailed redesign to address issues like excessive street furniture, and narrow parking bays, striking a delicate balance between accommodating vehicles and pedestrians. There is currently a WelTag study being undertaken that will focus on Church Street to develop proposals / options for Church Street reconfiguration.

Abertillery Workmen's Welfare Institute

- 2.27. Community Action has made strides in securing funding to improve the Abertillery Workingman's Welfare Institute, a crucial community asset. However, additional support is necessary to fully realise the potential of this strategic location. A proposed change to the building's frontage, facing towards the town centre, is under consideration. Further investment in the building itself represents a valuable opportunity to create a key community asset accessible to all age groups, including youth clubs and senior events. This development would contribute to establishing another vibrant destination within the town.

Cwmtillery Lakes

- 2.28. While located outside the town centre study boundary, Cwmtillery Lakes is a significant asset that has the potential to attract visitors and draw footfall to Abertillery. Building upon its existing popularity for activities like walking and fishing, there is an opportunity to expand its offerings with other outdoor and water-based activities. Linking our work to develop the offering in the town to the needs of the visitors and users of Cwmtillery Lakes will ensure we are best placed to exploit the opportunities they present to improve vitality of the town.

Abertillery Park

- 2.29. Abertillery Park currently serves as a valuable space for sports groups and the local community, providing essential outdoor areas. However, there is a unique opportunity to envision a more ambitious use for the park—one that transforms it into a new regional sports and leisure destination. This vision encompasses addressing highway issues on Glandwr Street, considering a proposed vehicle link, exploring possibilities for a 4G pitch, increasing car parking facilities on the northern end, and enhancing the cricket pavilion.

Anvil Court

- 2.30. Anvil Court is one of the Council's key buildings that is used to provide office / desk space for Council employees. The Council's current lease for Anvil Court will expire in 2025.

Railway Link

2.31. The report highlights the significance of the proposed new rail link and train station at the "Former Lo-Cost Site," which will establish a crucial connection between Abertillery and the Ebbw Valley rail line. This presents a substantial opportunity for enhancing public transport accessibility within the town.

2.32. *Transport and Movement Strategy*

The Council has engaged Arcadis to conduct a WeITAG Assessment.

23.3. The core concept underpinning this Placemaking plan is the vision of creating a walkable Abertillery. This concept aligns with global trends and focuses on reducing car travel, enhancing community cohesion, and promoting walking and cycling. The fundamental idea is to ensure that the daily needs and desires of residents are conveniently accessible within a short walk from their front door.

3. *Options for Recommendation*

3.1 The Place Scrutiny Committee supported Option 2, at its meeting on 17th October 2023.

3.2 The options contained within this report relate only to the endorsement 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 projects that emerge through development of the delivery plan and details of potential projects to be developed and implemented for us to achieve our overall vision.

Option 1 – Do Nothing

3.3 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

3.4 Endorse the Abertillery Placemaking Plan, its vision and core ambitions for the future. This will enable us to finalise the draft of the delivery plan and take steps towards the implementation of the projects that will be contained within it.

Preferred Option

3.5 The preferred option is Option Two. This will enable the projects that will support the 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 Transforming Towns funding.

3.6 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 the overall impact upon the area.

4. Evidence of how 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 they live, learn, work and play.
- 4.5 The Placemaking plan will work 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.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Corporate Plan 2022-2027

- 4.6 The vision of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council:

‘Blaenau Gwent – a place that is fair, open and welcoming to all by working with and for our communities’.

The Corporate Plan 2022/27 sets out an ambitious programme of activity for the Council over the next five years. The Corporate Plan 2022/27 priorities are:

- Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities – we aim to greatly reduce carbon emissions and provide an environment which supports growth and well-being and connects communities.
- An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place – working in partnership to provide high-quality

services to meet local needs and improve the quality of life and well-being within the community.

- Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent, and resilient increasing resilience of communities, where everyone is welcome and safe which minimises dependency and maximises independence.

5. Implications Against Each Option

Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)

- 5.1 Option 1 – there would be no immediate financial implications associated with option one of this report. If the Council does not endorse and adopt a placemaking plan for Abertillery it is unlikely that projects from Abertillery would be considered for funding through the Welsh Governments Transforming Towns programme. Without the support of transforming towns funding, the amount of financial support the Council would be able to access to enable regeneration of the towns would be extremely restricted.
- 5.2 Option 2 – there would be no immediate budgetary implications as a result of endorsing the Abertillery Placemaking Plan. There would however be medium and long-term capital and revenue implications associated with taking forward the emerging projects that are identified in 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 for Council led projects 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 70% of these costs and for Council led projects we would need to identify capital match funding for the remaining 30%.
- 5.5 Further detail on development and implementation costs will be included within the Delivery Plan which will be prepared in late 2023.
- 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 a risk that sites will remain undeveloped or fall into disrepair.*
The footfall within the town centre associated with retail has been severely hit by the increase in online shopping. It has also failed to return to pre-covid levels. Key to recovery will be the intervention that supports repurposing and reinventing

our town centres. This would not happen if option 1 is chosen and there is a risk of further deterioration in footfall. The total number of visitors to Abertillery Town Centre for the last 52 weeks is 797,743 which is 4.7% down on the previous year. The total number of visitors for the year to date is 555,322 which is 6.4% down on the previous year.

5.8 *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. There is a risk that without sufficient match funding from the Council it is unlikely we will be able to deliver on the strategic vision and ambitions of the Placemaking Plan.

Legal

5.9 There are no direct legal implications for any of the options considered within this report. The report seeks the endorsement of a Vision and set of ambitions that set out our approach to the future regeneration of Abertillery Town Centre

5.10 Legal implications associated with project delivery will be explored as part of the delivery plan.

Human Resources

5.11 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 undertaken in July 2022. The health check identified key issues within the town centre, which can be found on page 13 of the Placemaking Plan:

- There are known issues with the management of local assets such as the market.
- The increase in vacancies around the town centre is a key warning and trigger for change.
- The retail vacancy rate in Abertillery is higher (17% in 2020), than the Welsh average of 14.5%
- Local 'place champions' exist who could be catalysts for future change
- The night-time economy is a perceived strength of Abertillery.
- A number of national retailers have pulled out of Abertillery in recent years, however, a limited amount of national retailers (Greggs, Iceland and Boots) have remained in the Town Centre.
- Currently there are no banks within the town.
- The concentration of vacant units towards Somerset Street would suggest the retail offer is oversized.

- The presence of a Victorian Arcade is a unique strength.
- There is a Tesco adjoined to the town which competes with the town centre and poses further challenges to traders in the town

Expected outcome for the public

- 6.2 There has been a sustained decrease in footfall in the town centre which presents a real challenge. There must therefore be a focus on projects and measures that will attract people to the centre.
- 6.3 Active travel routes and access to Abertillery Park need improvement. Improved active travel will provide greater accessibility for residents and visitors to move within the area.

Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)

- 6.4 Engagement has also taken place through Public Consultation, and engagement with Businesses and stakeholders including Elected Members.
- 6.5 Stakeholders that have formed part of the engagement to date include:
- The Council (Officers and Elected Members)
 - Welsh Government
 - Public Consultation
 - Gwent Police
 - Local businesses
 - Design Commission for Wales
 - Abertillery Aspirations Group
 - The Trustees of Abertillery Institute

- 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. These were presented to businesses and the community of Abertillery in January 2023 through a two-day public consultation event hosted in the Abertillery Metropole. The comments and feedback gathered from the public consultation event were used to inform and develop the placemaking plan.
- 6.7 A briefing session with elected Ward Members to present details of the Placemaking plan prior to it being presented to Place Scrutiny Committee for consideration was held on 11th September 2023.

Preventative focus

- 6.8 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

- 6.9 Many of the projects that will be identified to deliver on our core ambitions for Abertillery Town Centre will require collaborative approaches to delivery. This will be developed further alongside stakeholders subject to the endorsement of this report and the delivery plan.
- 6.10 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 has been undertaken to identify the membership of the group.

Integration (across service areas)

- 6.11 As previously mentioned, we have successfully initiated consultations across various service areas within the Council. These areas encompass crucial sectors including highways, housing, planning, and education.

Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions

- 6.12 Blaenau Gwent declared a Climate Emergency in 2020 and as a Council, we have committed towards the achievement of net zero carbon emissions by 2030. The projects that emerge from the Placemaking Plan offer an opportunity to support further decarbonisation across Blaenau Gwent. Creating high-quality green spaces in the town centre will help with decarbonisation and offset carbon emissions. It will also help improve air quality.
- 6.13 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.
- 6.14 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.

7. Monitoring Arrangements

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

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- *Appendix One – Abertillery Placemaking Plan*