


Agenda Item No:	5	
Committee:	Cabinet	
Date:	22 March 2022	
Report Title:	Wisbech - Levelling Up Fund progress update	

1 Purpose / Summary

For Cabinet to note the Council's progress towards preparing and submitting a bid to the Government's Levelling Up Fund – Round 2.

2 Key issues

- 2.1 Government launched the Levelling up Fund (LUF) in 2021, with a tight deadline for Round 1 bid submission. Following internal discussions, Members felt that submitting a considered and well worked up bid in Round 2 would give Fenland the best chance of success in what is likely to be a very competitive process.
- 2.2 Fenland has been assessed as a Category 2 priority place for the LUF process. Unfortunately, this means that the Council receives no Government support to develop a bid. In August 2021, Cabinet agreed that the Council should develop a Town Centre Spatial Plan for Wisbech (Wisbech Master Plan) with an accompanying LUF bid at a cost in the region of £75,000 - £100,000.
- 2.3 Consultants have been appointed to develop the Wisbech Master Plan, with a further specialist appointed to support the Council in developing a compelling LUF bid, based on the emerging Master Plan. This consultant was part of the team that helped the Council to successfully secure Future High Street Funding for March.
- 2.4 Members have met with consultants on a number of occasions to discuss potential opportunities in the town, guiding the development of the master planning work.
- 2.5 Members have also met with the bid development consultant who has described the process as competitive, requiring a bid that is cohesive with projects linking together well and a bid that is compelling in terms of its economic impact and resultant benefit-cost ratio.
- 2.6 In parallel with the Council's work, the MP's office has commissioned a piece of place shaping work through [thinkingplace](#) - developing a narrative for Fenland. It is expected that this work will also support the Council's Wisbech LUF bid submission.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet notes the contents of this report and the positive progress being made towards the development of a LUF Round 2 bid, namely:
 - The Wisbech Master Plan is now at a draft stage with the Plan due to be completed and project selection for the LUF bid expected to take place in the coming weeks
 - Experienced LUF bid supporting consultant appointed
 - Phase 1 of the MP funded thinkingplace work for the wider district completed
 - Anglian Water and partners are funding Stage 2 of the thinkingplace district place shaping work

Wards Affected	Wisbech Wards
Forward Plan Reference	KEY/14MAY21/01
Portfolio Holder	Cllr Chris Seaton - Portfolio Holder for Heritage and Social Mobility
Report Originator	Phil Hughes - Interim Assistant Director
Contact Officers	Paul Medd - Chief Executive Simon Machen - Corporate Growth and Regeneration Advisor Phil Hughes - Interim Assistant Director Simon Jackson - Economic Growth Manager Jo Blackmore - Executive Officer
Background Papers	Levelling Up Fund Prospectus - Round 1 (2021)

1 Background / introduction

- 1.1 Government's response to Covid-19 through Build Back Better and the Levelling Up Fund (LUF) agenda offers a unique opportunity to attract significant levels of funding to Fenland which is designated as a 'Priority 2' area. The recent success of the March Future High Street Fund (FHSF) bid demonstrates that with the right professional input, stakeholder engagement and political prioritisation, the Council is capable of pulling together a credible and compelling business case for investment.
- 1.2 The Growing Fenland Masterplans, funded by the Combined Authority, for March, Wisbech, Chatteris and Whittlesey were coordinated by the District Council with support from economic analysts Metro Dynamics who worked closely with key stakeholders. The master plans were endorsed by the District Council, respective Town Councils, the County Council and Combined Authority. They include a set of well informed and evidenced strategic priorities for each town.

2 Levelling Up Fund

- 2.1 Announced at the Spending Review in 2020, the Levelling Up Fund (LUF) will invest in capital investment in local infrastructure that improves everyday life across the UK. Building on and consolidating prior programmes such as the Local Growth Fund and Towns Fund, it will have a visible and tangible impact on people and places and support economic recovery. In doing so it will also create opportunity across the country, prioritising bids that invest in regeneration and growth in places of need and areas of low productivity and connectivity.
- 2.2 The £4.8 billion fund will support town and city centre regeneration to deliver economic and social levelling-up. In round one, the emphasis was on town centre regeneration, culture and heritage. LUF provides a new approach to tackling economic differences between areas and driving prosperity in towns and cities that have been left behind, and which have now been prioritised by Government for support.
- 2.3 The Fund is intended to support investment in places where it can make the biggest difference to everyday life, including ex-industrial areas, deprived towns, and coastal communities. Bidding and funding criteria are not yet known for round two but there remains an expectation of it being similar to round one with the prospectus outlining the priorities below.
- 2.4 **Regeneration and town centre investment**, building on the Towns Fund framework to upgrade eyesore buildings and dated infrastructure, acquire and regenerate brownfield sites, invest in secure community infrastructure and crime reduction, and bring public services and safe community spaces into town and city centres.
- 2.5 **Cultural investment** maintaining, regenerating, or creatively repurposing museums, galleries, visitor attractions (and associated green spaces) and heritage assets as well as creating new community-owned spaces to support the arts and serve as cultural spaces.
- 2.6 It should also be noted Government's **Net Zero and wider environmental ambitions** represent a key part of the commitment to Build Back Better – and this is particularly important with regards to capital and infrastructure projects which have a visible impact on surroundings. Projects should be aligned to and support Net Zero goals: for instance, be based on low or zero carbon best practice; adopt and support innovative clean tech and/or support the growth of green skills and sustainable supply chains.
- 2.7 The bid assessment process is likely to focus on the following key criteria:

- Characteristics of the place – each local authority is sorted into category 1, 2 or 3 based on Government's published assessment metrics, with category 1 representing the highest level of identified need. Fenland falls into category level 2.
- Deliverability - will be based on supplementary finance, business and commercial cases, with bids able to demonstrate delivery on the ground within 2022-23 financial year prioritised in round 2.
- Strategic fit with local and Fund priorities – this should be addressed in the strategic case of submissions and should include support from stakeholders.
- Value for money – an economic case should be submitted to explain the benefits of the bid and how it represents value for money.

2.8 The key information for LUF Round 2 that is currently known includes:

- The detailed round 2 prospectus is expected to be released this spring.
- Bidders can submit one bid or a 'package' bid of no more than 3 linked projects per MP constituency.
- MPs must support any bid in writing as a gateway criterion for a bid.
- Match funding, formally secured, of at least 10% will be a gateway criterion.
- If a bid is unsuccessful, Lead Authorities can submit again in later rounds with a revised bid or other proposed bids.
- Once funding awards are decided, relevant local institutions are responsible for their delivery. Further contributions from the Fund will not be provided to meet cost overruns after funding has been agreed.

Progress in developing the necessary supporting evidence and prioritised plans for LUF Round 2 bid development

3 Wisbech Master Plan

- 3.1 The Wisbech Growing Fenland document sets out a clear list of priorities for the town and town centre.
- 3.2 To further develop this approach with spatial, map-based expression to these priorities and to identify further opportunities for regeneration and investment, a Wisbech Master Plan has been commissioned from Norr Consulting.
- 3.3 This work directly supports the development of the town's quality of life offer and economic growth ambitions. The March FHSF fund bid was successful due to the funded investment in consultancy support. We were able to very clearly demonstrate how each of the projects included within the long list, and refined through business case development, met the Master Plan's priorities. This is the expectation for the Wisbech Master Plan to enable any LUF bid to meet the Government's criteria.
- 3.4 Following site visits and discussions with Members, Norr has been developing site information and the potential future opportunities for those sites within a Master Plan document. The Plan is at an advanced draft stage and should be sufficiently developed to share with Cabinet in the coming weeks. Work is on track to fit with the expected timetable for Government's LUF Round 2 prospectus.
- 3.5 The Plan includes:
- Analysis - consideration of the key ingredients of the wider town centre including its physical context, historic context, urban grain, connectivity, views and landmarks, land use, social infrastructure, open space and public realm
 - Identifying barriers and constraints to growth and change

- Identifying opportunity sites and character areas across the wider town centre for renewal and investment
- A high-level illustrative masterplan and spatial vision for the wider town centre which is visual in its design, featuring a number of artists impressions, plans/maps and photographs
- Renewal and regeneration options for opportunity sites and character areas
- The physical and social infrastructure provision required to support and future proof business growth and promote inward investment
- A high-level public realm strategy including improved connectivity and accessibility

3.6 It is important to stress that this Plan will build on work already completed through extensive partner and community engagement on the Wisbech Growing Fenland project. It will be integrated into the Council's emerging Local Plan to give it significant weight in the planning process, giving it greater status when being used to form the basis of the Wisbech LUF bid.

4 Place Shaping documentation for Fenland

4.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly highlighted the importance of where we live, how we live and the role of the local community. This period of disruption is an excellent opportunity to review the services and projects we are delivering to ensure that they will drive the socio-economic and structural changes needed for our towns to thrive.

Place shaping work - Phase 1

4.2 Building on the success of the Growing Fenland Plans, the local MP appointed place shaping specialists [thinkingplace](#) to create a simple, clear and impactful story that highlights Fenland's assets and opportunities, helping to develop an anchor point for future strategy development and bid submissions. The initial cost met by Steve Barclay MP for phase 1 of the place shaping work will form a basis on which to lever in much greater amounts of funding in the short to medium term.

4.3 Phase 1 of the place shaping work identified Fenland as an area with potential and opportunities including:

- Improvements made possible through the levelling up agenda
- Marketing the Fens as an Agri Research Hub
- Improved internet/broadband connectivity
- The creation of higher skilled job opportunities for young people
- Attracting residents from 'overheating' Cambridge
- Start up support facilities for businesses
- Building on biodiversity
- Green energy
- Managing our water resources

4.4 The work also identified the need to demonstrate the area's relevance to Government, investors and relocators.

4.5 The recommendations from Phase 1 of this work included using an external branding of **North Cambridgeshire: the natural capital** to:

- Provide a recognisable place reference point
- Allow integration of wider assets within a 'fuzzy geography'

- Provide further alignment with the Oxford/Cambridge Arc and the Innovation Corridor
- Leverage in the globally respected Cambridge Brand

4.6 The North Cambridgeshire brand would include three key themes:

Fresh Green Futures focussing on:

- Water management
- Biodiversity
- Renewable energy
- University links to Cambridge and Peterborough
- Carbon capture
- Knowledge and new skills
- Knowledge-led businesses
- Grow-your-own-talent with a focus on youth
- Sustainability

Our living and growing opportunity focussing on:

- Repurposing town centre buildings
- Improving social and physical infrastructure
- Land availability
- Affordability
- Work/live opportunities
- Open spaces and outdoor lifestyle
- Social mobility
- Big skies, sunsets, horizons and clean air

Focussed on food, linked to:

- Farming heritage
- Fertile and productive land
- Food processing
- Leading on the future of food production
- Agri-research hub potential
- Links to Norwich Research Park and Cambridge University
- Leading on the future of food production

4.7 Another recommendation was to form a **North Cambridgeshire 'Place Board'** to harness and align the talent with the local area, extend resources and externalise locally determined messages to specific audiences. This recommended active collaboration of local knowledge and leadership will compliment local authority activity and enable the 'place' to reach out to cities, universities, developers and Government.

4.8 However, it is important to stress that this work is not intended to rewrite or reinvent our current socio-economic strategy and priorities. Those have been subject to extensive stakeholder engagement and are endorsed by FDC, the CPCA and by our town councils. The Growing Fenland Master Plans remain the starting point, with the need to show a clear 'golden thread' back to these from any future work.

Place shaping work - Phase 2

- 4.9 Following the presentation of the outcomes and recommendations of phase 1 of the place shaping work to a number of partner organisations and Stephen Barclay MP, Anglian Water and partners have committed to funding the next phase of the project which will cost circa £50,000.
- 4.10 Phase 2 of the place shaping work will involve developing a Brand Strategy for North Cambridgeshire including:
- Place brand visual language and identity
 - Photography
 - A masterclass for designers and commissioners
 - A prospectus including content development, copywriting, design and print
 - Cascading and implementation including a launch event
 - Development of a Place Development Board

Links between the LUF bid requirements and place shaping work

- 4.11 There are clear crossovers between the place shaping recommendations and LUF criteria as set out in the table below:

LUF REQUIREMENT	ASSOCIATED PLACE SHAPING RECOMMENDATION OR IDENTIFIED OPPORTUNITY
<p>Regeneration and town centre investment, building on the Towns Fund framework to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • upgrade eyesore buildings and dated infrastructure • acquire and regenerate brownfield sites • invest in secure community infrastructure and crime reduction • bring public services and safe community spaces into town and city centres. 	<p>Our living and growing opportunity focussing on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repurposing town centre buildings • Improving social and physical infrastructure • Land availability • Affordability • Work/live opportunities • Open spaces and outdoor lifestyle • Social mobility • Big skies, sunsets, horizons and clean air
<p>Net Zero and wider environmental ambitions. Projects should be aligned to and support Net Zero goals including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low or zero carbon best practice • adopt and support innovative clean tech and/or support the growth of green skills and sustainable supply chains. 	<p>Fresh Green Futures focussing on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water management • Biodiversity • Renewable energy • University links to Cambridge and Peterborough • Carbon capture • Knowledge and new skills

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge-led businesses • Grow-your-own-talent with a focus on youth • Sustainability
<p>Strategic fit with local and fund priorities – this should be addressed in the strategic case of submissions and should include support from stakeholders.</p>	<p>Formation of a North Cambridgeshire Place Board</p>

5 Appointment of a Bid Development Consultant

- 5.1 The Council has secured the support of Avison Young to develop the Round 2 LUF bid. Avison Young is a very experienced team of consultants with a successful track record in the development of bids - including LUF round 1 bids for other areas.
- 5.2 Avison Young will work closely with Members, Norr and council officers in the next 2 months to develop a compelling round 2 LUF bid. Any bid will be developed following the Round 2 prospectus that is expected to be published in the spring, with a 2 - 3 month bidding window following its publication.
- 5.3 The Norr developed Master Plan will contain a pipeline of potential projects for Wisbech that sets out a plan for the future. Some projects may suit a LUF bid, others may be more longer-term and will be in place for future opportunities. This approach puts Fenland in a strong position as Government rolls out further funding opportunities to improve places.
- 5.4 In the short-term, Members will be presented with the long list of potential projects and a matrix highlighting how those projects fit into LUF criteria. This will allow Members to select projects that are more likely to lead to a successful LUF bid. It is anticipated that this process will take place in the coming weeks.
- 5.5 Criteria for successful LUF projects are expected to include the following (this based on LUF Round 1 prospectus):
- Filter 1 – must have the expenditure completed within three years, although Round 1 stated: ‘expect all funding provided from the Fund to be spent by 31 March 2024, and, exceptionally, into 2024-25 for larger schemes’.
 - Filter 2 - must cover one or more of the following LUF themes:
 - a) Regeneration and town centre investment, building on the Towns Fund framework to upgrade eyesore buildings and dated infrastructure, acquire and regenerate brownfield sites, invest in secure community infrastructure and crime reduction, and bring public services and safe community spaces into town and city centres.
 - b) Cultural investment maintaining, regenerating, or creatively repurposing museums, galleries, visitor attractions (and associated green spaces) and heritage assets as well as creating new community-owned spaces to support the arts and serve as cultural spaces
 - Filter 4 – Capital only fund.
 - Filter 5 - Package bids can have up to two or three projects only. Package bids must clearly explain how their component elements are aligned with each other and represent a coherent set of interventions. Package bids can include a mix of projects

from the Fund's investment themes but should not include multiple unrelated investments.

6 Legal Implications

- 6.1 There are no specific legal implications in relation to this report, however each bid and/or funding allocation will be managed in accordance with the Council's constitutional requirements with separate and specific legal advice being sought in relation to potential subsidy and/or procurement implications on a case-by-case basis.

7 Financial Implications

- 7.1 This report updates Cabinet on the progress of work that Cabinet has already approved - namely the Wisbech Master Plan and bid support consultants costing in the region of £75,000 - £100,000.

8 Effect on corporate objectives

The corporate objectives which link to the projects and proposals discussed in this report are as follows:

8.1 Communities

- Support vulnerable members of our community
- Promote health & wellbeing for all
- Work with partners to promote Fenland through culture and heritage

8.2 Environment

- Work with partners and the community on projects that improve the environment and our street scene
- Work with partners to keep people safe in their neighbourhoods by reducing crime and anti-social behaviour and promoting social cohesion

8.3 Economy

- Attract new businesses, jobs and opportunities whilst supporting our existing businesses in Fenland
- Promote and enable housing growth, economic growth and regeneration across Fenland
- Promote and lobby for infrastructure improvements across the district