

## **Ashington Investment Plan/Projects Progress Report**

Report by: Neil Quinn, Economic Growth and Regeneration Team at Northumberland County Council

Report to: Ashington Town Council

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### **Background**

Northumberland County Council held a range of stakeholder workshops in November 2020 and January 2021 on their aspirations for economic growth in Ashington. Following the workshops partners volunteered to become part of a new economic growth board called the Ashington Town Board. The board membership and Terms of Reference closely followed the guidance provided by central government for good governance in Town Deal boards. Board membership is drawn from the private, public and community and voluntary sector with a private sector chair. This approach was taken to put Ashington in a strong position of readiness when future government funding streams were announced.

### **Ashington Investment Plan/Spatial Plan**

Ashington Town Board prioritised the development of an Investment Plan to serve as a regeneration framework for current and future economic investment in Ashington. Within the Ashington Town Board Terms of Reference there are clear guidelines on how the Ashington Investment Plan should be developed: -

Development of the submission will involve:

- Collation of a draft town wide investment plan
- A series of workshops during 2021 with the Ashington Town Board members. Workshops to explore and challenge the contents of the draft investment plan, including a longlist of projects
- Board approval of the draft investment plan at a board meeting
- Selection of eligible and most appropriate projects/interventions for inclusion in the Ashington Investment Plan (externally moderated)

- Approval of the short list of projects for progression in the Ashington Investment Plan at an Ashington Town Board Meeting
- Board update on consultation and Ashington Investment Plan development at an Ashington Town Board meeting
- Board approval of the Ashington Investment Plan at an Ashington Town Board meeting

The final Ashington Investment Plan will be signed off by:

- The Chair of the Ashington Town Board
- The Chief Executive of Northumberland County Council
- The Leader of Northumberland County Council

The development of the Ashington Investment Plan (AIP) was supported by New Skills Consulting and Northumberland County Council. Public consultation on the AIP was carried out in the summer of 2021 and feedback was used to shape the draft AIP. The consultation exercise demonstrated public support for the vision and strategic objectives and provided important feedback on what residents would like to see in the town to support economic growth.

This work produced clear Priorities for Action and Investment to support each of the 6 Investment Themes identified by the Board (Skills, education and aspiration; Business Growth and jobs; Town centre improvements; Transport and connectivity; Housing and quality of place; Enhanced culture, leisure and retail offer). This information was then included in the Ashington Investment Plan Call for Projects Prospectus circulated in Summer 2021 to generate project development ideas.

The call out process generated 30 project ideas submitted via proforma. Northumberland County Council (NCC) officers then assessed each of the projects against the set criteria, based on learning and intelligence from the previous national funding calls, and this information was fed back to the town board in November 2021. Town Board agreed that the Task and Finish Group Chairs and NCC Officers should now consider the projects for opportunities for joint collaborative proposals where project ideas demonstrated similar objectives and also to identify gaps. Following this work project applicants were asked to meet with similar projects and come back to the board with refined project proposals. This process resulted in a range of reworked projects and supported a more collaborative approach to the project development proposals. The identified projects have now provided a suite of potential projects to support the seeking of suitable funding streams.

The Ashington Town Board has also produced a Spatial Plan of the town to use as a working document when discussing potential future developments/projects in Ashington.

The Ashington Investment Plan is still in draft form and is due for completion by winter of 2022.

### **Levelling Up Fund (LUF)**

The Levelling Up Fund, administered by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, is designed to invest in infrastructure that improves everyday life across the UK. The fund will support town centre and high street regeneration, local transport plans, and cultural and heritage assets.

In Ashington, two town centre projects were submitted as a package bid to the Levelling Up Fund Round 2 on 2 August 2022. The outcome of this bid is anticipated in the next few months.

The two projects included in the LUF bid are the Wansbeck Square Creative Community Hub and the Portland Park Cinema. Funding is sought from the Levelling Up Fund to contribute to the overall costs of these projects of approximately £24.4m.

Both projects have been subject to public consultation exercises and there is demonstrable support for both.

### **High Street Innovation Programme (HSIP) 22/23 and 23/24**

NCC submitted a successful bid for Ashington to the North of Tyne Combined Authority for £1.9m to the Town and High Street Innovation Fund.

The HSIP fund has three strands: -

- 1) Accelerate Ashington - business support: Targeted support will include pre-start, digital sales and promotion, advice and marketing aimed at creating a resilient and adaptable business base. Information on business support can be found at <https://accelerateashington.com/>. This strand will also include co-ordination of workshops with town centre businesses similar to those offered by the national High Street Task Force. These workshops will be designed to fully explore the fast-changing consumer base and understand how the high street will evolve, establishing the framework for future interventions.
- 2) Public Realm and Connectivity (Grand Corner and Station Road West): Project will improve pedestrian movements in the town centre by removing physical barriers and creating attractive, green public gateways and routes to key destinations as the first stage of large-scale investments in the town centre.
- 3) Animating Ashington: Programme will be designed to deliver new cultural events and activities that engage local people, attract visitors, and support the wider economic growth plans for the town. It will create animation and drive footfall, as well as raising the perception of the town and draw together cultural organisations to raise confidence and increase delivery capacity

The process undertaken to develop the HSIP bid utilised and built upon relevant projects submitted as part of the Ashington Investment Plan Call Out Process, particularly in relation to improved town centre connectivity and town centre creative activity and also helped fill a gap in the call out process in relation to direct business support, which was not reflected in any of the project proposals to the call out.

### **Forward Plan:**

Following submission of the High Street Innovation Programme and Levelling Up Fund bids the Ashington Town Board has highlighted several areas which require further work and/or investment as mentioned below: -

- 1) Hirst Masterplan: - A request to see a plan developed for the Hirst was submitted through the Callout Process in 2021. A masterplan is being commissioned by Advance Northumberland, Bernicia, and Northumberland County Council. The Masterplan Report should be completed by spring 2023.
- 2) Finalise Ashington Investment Plan: - Due for completion by winter 2022/23.
- 3) North of Ashington: - ATB have expressed a view that making better use of the land to the north of the town and improving connectivity between the town centre and the existing and new assets is important. This may require the development of a masterplan/study for the North of Ashington.
- 4) Work with Project Sponsors/Partners to provide support with projects that complement the priorities in the Ashington Investment Plan

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