

The Highland Council

Agenda Item	6
Report No	LA/4/24

Committee: Lochaber Area

Date: 23 January 2024

Report Title: Draft Fort William Town Centre Masterplan & Delivery Framework

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 To inform Elected Members of the full draft Town Centre Masterplan and Delivery Framework for Fort William as detailed in **Appendix 1**, including next steps.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:-

- i. **Agree** the content of the draft Masterplan and Delivery Framework, including stakeholder feedback obtained to date; and
- ii. **Agree** to conduct a 12-week period of public engagement under the auspices of Fort William 2040 (FW2040).

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** - There are no immediate financial implications for the Council arising from this Masterplan and Delivery Framework for Fort William. However, the documents will inform future projects that will invariably require investment in both their development and delivery. External funding will be pursued where they contribute to strategic objectives. The Masterplan highlights that public sector finance should lever additional private sector investment.

3.2 **Legal** – Developing a place-based approach is encouraged through the Scottish Government’s Place Principle, the Christie Commission recommendations and is required by the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 for community planning.

There are no immediate legal requirements for the Council associated with the production of the Masterplan and Delivery Framework. Legal resources will be required to progress individual projects in the action plan and requirements will be assessed as these projects are developed.

- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)** - The Town Centre Masterplan and Delivery Framework for Fort William promotes an ethos of inclusive placemaking that seeks to improve the lives of all citizens in line with Strategic Partnership Priority (SPP) 4 “Place – Place Based Planning and Investment in Communities.
- 3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** - The Masterplan and Delivery Framework promotes the concept of sustainable development, promoting opportunities for building reuse and repurposing, active travel, increased biodiversity and greening, and is being developed to further the town’s response to the climate and ecological emergency.
- 3.5 **Risk** – There are no identified risks for the Council associated with the development of the Masterplan and Delivery Framework.
- 3.6 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no identified risks for the Council associated with the development of the Masterplan and Delivery Framework.
- 3.7 **Gaelic** - A focus on place, and considering the priorities for a local area, will support a focus on Gaelic language and culture.

4 Background

- 4.1 The Covid pandemic rapidly accelerated pre-existing trends that were already altering the physical fabric of town centres across the UK. Changing investor and occupier demands, coupled with digital/technological advances have resulted in significant challenges for town centres in Highland. This, combined with the impacts of the pandemic and the need to overhaul built environments to respond to the climate and ecological emergency, means that it is critical for town centres to refocus.
- 4.2 Lingering post-pandemic behaviour, changes in the way we work, shop and travel and ongoing economic pressures highlight the need for ‘planned intervention’ and collaboration to successfully manage structural changes for Fort William town centre to continue being vibrant in future, it must restructure and diversify its offer to ensure greater activity. It must grow its resident population, increase its cultural and leisure attractions, satisfy changing property needs and take advantage of its world class natural assets.
- 4.3 FW2040 is at a critical stage in terms of implementing the agreed Vision. Several key projects are either complete or nearing completion and there is now a need to position Fort William town centre at the core of the FW2040 Programme. The Draft Town Centre Masterplan and Delivery Framework seeks to build upon the Council’s 2015 Fort William Town Centre Action Plan and provide the FW2040 Programme Board with a framework to realise a vibrant and active town centre. Furthermore, the recent adoption of NPF4 means that there is now an even greater need to take a fresh look at Fort William town centre.
- 4.4 National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) is a long-term plan for Scotland’s development and infrastructure needs and, together with The Highland Council’s Local Development Plans and Supplementary Guidance, forms the Development Plan that influences planning decisions for Fort William.

NPF4 embodies the Place Principle. It contains six spatial principles that promote shared understanding and collaboration in planning Scotland’s future places:

- **Just Transition** – empowers people to shape their places and supports fair and inclusive net-zero transition.
- **Conserving and Recycling Assets** – makes productive use of existing buildings, places, infrastructure and services, to lock in carbon and minimise waste.
- **Local Living** – improves health and wellbeing through easy local access to services, greenspace, learning, work and leisure.
- **Compact Urban Growth** – limits urban expansion to optimise land use for services and resources, including flood risk management and biodiversity.
- **Rebalanced Development** – targets development to create opportunities for communities and investment in areas of past decline.
- **Rural Revitalisation** – encourages sustainable rural development, to grow and support urban and rural communities together.

By applying these principles, Scotland's spatial strategy supports the planning and delivery of three key Place themes: **Sustainable – Liveable – Productive**.

The Place Principle is being utilised to develop a shared understanding between partners and communities of what Fort William town centre is and what it wants to become.

- 4.5 In July 2023, the Highland Council (Lead Partner), working with Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Lochaber Chamber of Commerce appointed a consultant team led by Threesixty Architecture to develop a refreshed Town Centre Masterplan for Fort William.
- 4.6 The new Masterplan and Delivery Framework aims to establish a renewed regeneration direction for Fort William town centre, that will provide clarity and confidence to investors, developers, residents and businesses going forward. It will allow for the coordinated consideration of key issues, such as retail space contraction, repurposing of vacant land/buildings and growing town centre living, alongside the potential contribution of significant regeneration proposals, such as the Marina being led by Fort William Marina Shoreline Community Interest Company. The Masterplan seeks to identify priorities for intervention and investment, by both the public and private sectors, that will support recovery and longer-term resilience.

5 The Draft Masterplan and Delivery Framework Key Messages

- 5.1 The Draft Masterplan is structured around six themes:-
- (i) **Balanced** – considers the range and balance of uses now and in future of a deliberately concentrated town centre boundary. It supports the concentration of smaller units on the High Street and adjoining vennels that focus on more distinctive and independent retail and food/beverage offers rather than national chain retailers.
 - (ii) **Legible** – analyses how we access and move around the core of the town centre. How we do so can contribute to more sustainable travel, increased permeability, and enhancement of connected urban spaces.

- (iii) **Living** - explores the important role the town centre can play in meeting demand for residential dwellings. It considers opportunities to create new homes of various tenures and formats, including affordable, family, student and later living homes. It demonstrates the opportunity for new and repurposed buildings and upper floors, and the need to provide centrally located community facilities and services to enable their development.
- (iv) **Working** – responds to changing demands for new, including agile, office space and highlights the opportunities around the town centre to create new workspace. Nurturing links with educational institutions and community groups is also explored.
- (v) **Vibrant** – explores how social and cultural attractors are a major catalyst for positive change and offer important opportunities to drive more visits into the town centre and thus increases footfall. By doing so it can contribute to the attractiveness of the town as a day and evening destination.

5.2 The Draft Masterplan promotes a number of bold interventions. Whilst the changing patterns of retail have created challenges, this shift provides a once in a lifetime opportunity to rebalance town centres. Repurposing a large single use asset can transform a town centre in one bold move, repopulating the heart of the town centre and increasing permeability by breaking down large blocks into new streets and lanes. Now is the time to reintroduce uses that serve the needs of communities.

5.3 To this end, the Draft Masterplan identifies five redevelopment opportunities to transform the town centre:-

1. Lochaber Leisure Centre site – proposed residential site.
2. Nevis Centre site – potential new leisure centre or residential development.
3. Hospital / Former school site – proposed residential development.
4. Library / Former M&Co site – potential civic building / mixed-use residential led development.
5. West End Car park site – proposed leisure development.

Two significant repurposing opportunities are also explored:-

1. Tesco building – at the time of commissioning, the property was vacant but at the time of writing now occupied. Nonetheless, the two repurposing options that Draft Masterplan explores remain credible and worthy of further investigation if the property becomes available in the future.
2. Mari MacIntyre Building – retained retail or F&B unit / residential units or gallery / venue / creative co-work / rooftop venue and viewing deck.

5.4 The Draft Masterplan also explores interventions that seeks to mitigate the physical barrier that is the A82 and also create development opportunities. Option 1 is transformational in nature and seeks to improve the pedestrian experience through a combination of two key moves:

1. The removal of a section of Middle Street from its junction with Belford Road through to the rear of Lochaber House.
2. The reduction of the dual carriageway section of the A82 along the edge of Loch Linnhe to a single lane in either direction between the two roundabouts, commensurate with the remainder of the road both north and south of the town centre.

Option 2 retains Middle Street but still seeks to reduce the dual carriageway section of the A82 along the edge of Loch Linnhe to a single lane in either direction between the two roundabouts.

6 Stakeholder Engagement

6.1 Threesixty Architecture led the stakeholder engagement which sought to capture a range of perspectives and intelligence around change and ideas for the future. It is worth noting that a significant body of stakeholder opinion exists in relation to town centre issues and aspirations as result of the ongoing FW2040 Programme. Therefore, the Town Centre Masterplan stakeholder engagement exercise sought to add value to that knowledge base.

Particular events included:-

- Stakeholder workshop on 2 October 2023. Invited group of key stakeholders who have contributed to the development of the FW2040 Programme.
- Public Exhibition on 15 November 2023.
- A number of focused 1-2-1 engagement meetings with key stakeholders.

6.2 Details of stakeholder events and the key issues and ideas contributed can be viewed on pages 38-39 of **Appendix 2** and **Appendix 3**. Key elements can be summarised as follows:

- Further engagement required. Specifically with town centre businesses, residents and generally the younger demographic.
- Potential negative impact of narrowing A82 and removing the pedestrian underpass.
- Concerns about a loss in overall parking and restrictions on vehicular access to the High Street.
- The need to make sure new accommodation and business premises are affordable and serve community needs.
- A positive response to the proposals to better link to, and develop, the waterfront.

7. Next Steps

7.1 Given the nature of the feedback received to date it. A period (12 weeks) of further tailored stakeholder engagement will take place as detailed in **Appendix 4** prior to Lochaber Area Committee being asked to support the Fort William Town Centre Masterplan.

7.2 The expectation is that the Masterplan will be embedded in the FW2040 Programme, and the ambitions incorporated into all future strategies and policies for the town. The FW2040 Programme Board will ultimately oversee and drive the associated Masterplan Delivery Framework and as such all organisations represented on the Board will be expected to make a full and active contribution to realising the vision.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Date: 3 January 2024

Author: Alan Webster, Programme Manager – Growth Investment

Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 - Fort William Town Centre Draft Masterplan & Delivery Framework
Appendix 2 - Fort William Town Centre Draft Masterplan & Delivery Framework Appendices
Appendix 3 - Stakeholder engagement feedback 15 November 2023
Appendix 4 - Draft stakeholder engagement proposal

Stakeholder engagement feedback (15 November 2023)

The stakeholder engagement feedback summarised below is that received on the day at the Public Exhibition in the Nevis Centre (paper forms) or received afterwards (by email). The feedback comprises 15 paper forms and 8 emails. Two of the forms are from respondents who also emailed, and they cover the same issues. To avoid double counting, this summary is therefore based on a total of 21 unique responses.

Demographic, employment, and residence information was incomplete; however, some details can still be provided. Of those who completed the relevant sections on the feedback forms, the vast majority (86% - 18 of the 21 respondents) were resident in Lochaber with one respondent based in the central belt of Scotland and two unknowns. Of the 15 respondents who provided age information, 13% were under 36 (one respondent was under 18 and one was 18-35 years old). The remaining 87% of respondents were aged over 36 with 47% aged 36 to 59 (7 respondents) and 40% aged 60+ (6 respondents).

At least six of those who responded owned businesses locally, including within the town centre. A further four indicated they were employed locally and at least another four had connections with a community group, charity, or social enterprise.

A range of feedback was received covering different aspects of the Masterplan and encompassed both positive and negative views. There was no overwhelming consensus on specific proposals with some attracting equally positive and negative feedback e.g., changes to parking arrangements. However, being given the opportunity to engage was predominantly well received and many respondents requested being kept informed as plans develop.

Several respondents raised concerns about specific proposals e.g., changes to Monzie Square, or commented on elements which would be picked up at a detailed design stage e.g., the 'look' and aesthetics of any new buildings.

Rather than presenting an analysis of the feedback, word by word, the following provides a summary of the key themes which have emerged to date:

- Over half of respondents (11) specifically commented on transport related aspects of the Masterplan (changes to the A82/the proposed new transport hub/parking reconfiguration). Concerns raised about changes to the bypass and pedestrian access into town were particularly prevalent in addition to potential changes in parking encompassing a potential multi-storey car park. Respondents were keen to see the improved 'flow' of the town for pedestrians and vehicles and most of those who commented welcomed the changes to the transport hub. However, key questions were raised as to how removing lanes on the bypass and creating overpass pedestrian crossings would impact on seasonal congestion issues as well as pedestrian safety. How the plans would affect vehicular access (delivery and disabled visitor) for businesses in the High Street was also mentioned.
- Several respondents (7) commented on the need to make sure that the provision of more housing and business premises within the town centre was

genuinely affordable, representing mixed use and tenure, and the provision of businesses which serve the community - "*regeneration not gentrification*".

- Four respondents specifically highlighted that better engagement was needed with business owners and residents in the town centre about the Masterplan proposals.
- A number of respondents (4) were positive about the proposals for an improved link to the waterfront but felt that more information on the detail was needed and there should be better links with work being undertaken to progress the Fort William Marina.
- New gathering and green spaces were well received (4) and the value of the historic environment, specifically the architecture of particular High Street buildings and the Old Fort was also mentioned (2).
- A small number of respondents (3) raised more strategic concerns, specifically what would the Masterplan proposals would potentially cost and where would the funding come from?

Due to the small number of younger respondents, a summary of their feedback is also provided, this was focussed on the environment, arts, and leisure. One of the two respondents under age 36 mentioned the importance of net zero and sustainability measures being properly implemented, with the other respondent highlighting the importance of the provision of a range of activities and areas which meet different age groups and interests, suggesting options such as public access astro turf at a new leisure centre, indoor football, a youth café, and crazy golf.

Draft stakeholder engagement proposal



Town Centre Masterplan Programme of Engagement: Jan 2024

Fort William Town Centre Masterplan
12-week Engagement Programme

Background

In December 2023, Threesixty Architecture (360) delivered a draft Masterplan for Fort William Town Centre. The draft Masterplan was subsequently reviewed by the partnership of commissioning clients - Highland Council (HC), Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), and the Lochaber Chamber of Commerce (LCC). As part of that review an outline of next steps has been developed. One of those key next steps is the proposal for a further 12-week programme of engagement to build on work already undertaken and to ensure continued buy in to the Masterplan as well as to help identify key issues and opportunities for delivery and implementation.

Outline and Key Considerations

The purpose of this engagement programme is to identify any gaps in terms of key groups, individuals, or organisations who may not have been picked up in the engagement work undertaken to date, and crucially, to address those gaps and provide opportunities for feedback. To this end the following programme is recommended:

1. **Direct town centre community contact** – proactive contact with those who live (residents) and operate (businesses/services) in the town centre should be undertaken. It is recommended that a mailshot be delivered to all town centre premises (commercial and residential), defined as those encapsulated within the red and black line boundaries in the Masterplan (p25). This mailshot would provide a summary of the Masterplan work to date and signpost to more information (specifically the poster display described in the next bullet), options for feedback, and contact information. This is particularly important for the owners/occupants of buildings currently illustrated as having the potential to undergo significant change in the Masterplan e.g., the former Tesco store. The importance of the town in serving the wider area of Lochaber and acting as a gateway to the Highlands must also be recognised and therefore seeking the views of those from out with the Masterplan defined town centre would be addressed through other engagement methods detailed below.

2. **Masterplan poster display** – a physical space in town would be identified where people can go and view the Masterplan posters presented previously at the Nevis Centre engagement event in November 2023. In this space there would be signposting to where people can access more information and give feedback on the proposals and contact information. The option to leave feedback e.g., in a dropbox would be provided. The location and accessibility of the space would need consideration, as to, would the potential for dedicated manning at points. A physical space provides essential accessibility to those who won't/can't get online or can't make single event dates, it can be preferable to searching for and viewing information online, it allows multiple return visits, and it also gives the opportunity to engage the serendipitous passerby and helps to raise awareness. Information on display for a period of weeks could be particularly effective for accessing the views of local business owners/proprietors, the elderly, children, and those with caring responsibilities.
3. **Communication and media** – a range of signposting to the Masterplan would be undertaken, including direct emails to key stakeholders (as identified through the FW2040 Board network), newspaper articles, Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and the Chamber of Commerce social media feeds, and information on local community noticeboards. This would provide a brief outline of the Masterplan and the engagement programme and signpost to online information including feedback forms, details of the poster display, and contact information.
4. **Targeted group engagement** – further targeted engagement for specific groups and organisations would also be undertaken. This relates specifically to any groups or organisations which have not yet been so directly engaged. Currently a need has been identified to canvas the views of young people. Two presentation and feedback sessions would therefore be delivered by 360 to High School pupils (through a session in Lochaber High School) and students (through a session in the West Highland College). A presentation to the FW2040 Community Stakeholder Group is also recommended and the identification of others for targeted engagement by the members is invited (with an estimated capacity for another 2 group sessions).
5. **Feedback** – at all stages feedback on the proposals would be invited, primarily in the shape of feedback forms. - These would be collated, analysed, and reported to assist in documenting the engagement process, but also importantly, where feasible, incorporated within the Masterplan.
6. **Launch event** – at the end of this 12-week engagement programme the delivery of a 'launch' event for the Masterplan is recommended. The potential to present a physical model and/or video would be explored with the architects (funding dependent). This would be a platform to launch the work done to date in providing a vision and overarching principles for the town, and to demonstrate the process of engagement and how the Masterplan has evolved based on the community feedback received.

7. **Risks** – the principal risk for this process is the potential to miss stakeholders. A lack of actual engagement, or perceived lack of engagement, could alienate important elements of the community e.g., property/landowners, businesses, town centre residents, small organisations/hard to reach or more marginal community members etc., ultimately impacting on the deliverability of the proposals. It is the intent of this engagement programme to try to mitigate this risk. To this end a stakeholder mapping exercise has been undertaken. Key to this process will also be the careful wording of all material pertaining to the Masterplan and the master-planning process to accurately convey what the Masterplan is (and isn't) seeking to do. Fundamentally, the Masterplan is not 'set in stone' but rather as a 'living' document it is designed to provide a starting point for an ongoing conversation about what Fort William town centre *could be*, and to help frame the detail and delivery of future town centre developments and regeneration.

8. Timings

12 WEEKS	Pre	Wk1	Wk2	Wk3	Wk4	Wk5	Wk6	Wk7	Wk8	Wk9	Wk10	Wk11	Wk12
TASKS													
Programme finalised													
Online information finalised													
Feedback forms finalised													
Email - signposting key stakeholders													
Media - article, twitter/FB, noticeboards													
Mailshot - town centre residents and businesses													
Masterplan posters display (4 weeks)													
Targetted events (no.5) - LHS, WHC, CSG, Other?													
Feedback collation, analysis and incorporation													
Masterplan finalised													
Launch event*													

* The detail and timing of this event depends on budget and scheduling with each client organisation's reporting requirements e.g., Council Committees. This event can be mentioned in engagement material with a 'spring/summer date and venue' to be announced.

Alison Martin
 FW2040 Project Manager
 10 January 2024