

# **SIMPLIFICATION PATHFINDER PILOT BOARD**

Monday, 30 June 2025

## Present:

Councillor Mark Skillicorn (Chair)

Councillor Jo Bird – Bromborough Ward

Councillor Pat Cleary – Birkenhead and Tranmere Ward

Councillor Andrew Gardner – Ex Officio Conservative Group

Councillor Phil Gilchrist – Ex Officio Liberal Democrat Group

Councillor Julie McManus – Bidston and St James Ward

Andrew Ellams – Wirral Metropolitan College

Liam Kelly – Make CIC

Ian Lewis – Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

Gareth Prytherch – Wirral CVS

Leigh-Anne Stradeski – Eureka! Science + Discovery

## In Attendance:

Marcus Shaw - Director of Regeneration and Place

Rebecca Lowry – Assistant Director: Chief Regeneration Officer

Matthew Neal – Lead Principal Lawyer (Regeneration, Planning and Property)

Charlotte Carroll - Grants Manager (Regeneration)

Sinead Griffiths - Grants Officer (Regeneration)

## **WELCOME AND APOLOGIES**

The Chair welcomed everybody to the meeting and introduced himself as the new Chair of the Council's Economy, Regeneration and Housing Committee. The Chair reminded Members that the role of the Simplification Pathfinder Board was to make recommendations and give advice to the Council's Economy Regeneration and Housing Committee Borough Council in respect of the responsibilities as set out in the Board's Terms of Reference. He reminded Members that the Board was an advisory body, and where possible recommendations would be reached by consensus.

It was reported that apologies for absence had been received from:

- Justin Madders MP
- Chief Inspector Matthew Moscrop
- Neil Coles, Wirral Chamber of Commerce
- Adrian Jones, Department for Work and Pensions

## **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Board members were asked to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests and any other relevant interest and to state the nature of the interest.

No such interests were declared.

## **MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

The Board was invited to approve the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 25 February 2025.

The Chair noted that the minutes included an inaccuracy on page 3 of the agenda pack.

It was reported that the minutes referenced that findings from the IMB report concluded that even with an extension of timescale, Big Heritage CIC's revised scheme would not be deliverable. It was reported the minutes should have reflected that findings from the IMB report concluded that even with an extension of time, delivery of Big Heritage CIC's revised scheme would be unrealistic by March 26 and, given the complexity and the interdependencies particularly around the lease arrangement but also funding and planning activities, completion by March 27 is also unlikely.

Following a discussion in respect of this matter, due to the time elapsed and nature of concerns raised at that meeting, Members agreed that the original wording would remain but that the minutes would be updated to the effect that concerns were raised in relation to the timeliness of information provided to the Board and concerns were raised by some Board members regarding movement of funding from external stakeholders.

On a motion proposed by Councillor Jo Bird, Seconded by Councillor Pat Cleary, it was therefore:

**Resolved (5:0) (2 Abstentions) – That the minutes of meeting held on 25 February 2025 be approved as an accurate record subject to the corrections outlined.**

## **REVIEW TERMS OF REFERENCE UPDATES**

The Chair requested that the Board deferred the consideration of the review of the Terms of Reference for the Simplification Pathfinder Pilot Board in order to allow Board members more time to consider the Terms of Reference and to input any proposals they may have in respect of these.

On a motion proposed by Councillor Mark Skillicorn, Seconded by Councillor Julie McManus, it was therefore:

**Resolved – That the item be deferred for consideration at a future meeting.**

## **AMENDMENTS TO THE PROGRAMME**

The Assistant Director – Chief Regeneration Officer presented the report which detailed requests for extensions from projects within the Simplification Pathfinder programme for consideration by the Simplification Pathfinder Board members before being presented to Economy Regeneration and Housing Committee on 10th July 2025. It was reported that the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) notified officers of the approval of an extension of time across the programme from 31st March 2026 to 31st March 2027 and that the extension applied programme wide in line with the approach of the Simplification Pathfinder Pilot to maintain flexibility across the programme. It was further reported that decisions on extension at a local level were to be considered on a case-by-case basis and that any additional extensions of time would be reported to the Pathfinder Board and Economy Regeneration and Housing Committee.

The report outlined extensions to two projects: the Birkenhead Market project and the International Battle of the Atlantic project. In the case of the International Battle of the Atlantic Project, it was reported that the grant funding agreement which would end in March 2026 would need to be amended in line with the extended deadline.

The Lead Principal Lawyer reported that the recommendations to the Board had been updated to reflect that due to the extension of all projects by MHCLG, there was no requirement to seek authority to action extensions on all projects, therefore the information was for noting. In addition, the amended recommendation requested that the Economy, Regeneration and Housing Committee authorised the Director of Law and Corporate Services, in conjunction with Director of Regeneration and Place, to enter into all such necessary legal agreements required to implement the extensions. The updated recommendations from officers were therefore that the Simplification Pathfinder Pilot Board was recommended to:

- 1. note the extension of timescales for all Council projects within the Simplification Pathfinder Pilot granted by the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government; and*
- 2. note the amendments to the programmes for the Birkenhead Market project and the International Battle of the Atlantic project as set out in the report; and recommend that the Economy and Regeneration and Housing Committee authorise the Director of Law and Corporate Services, in consultation with the*

*Director of Regeneration and Place to enter into all such necessary legal agreements required to implement the associated timescale extensions*

The Meeting was adjourned at 1:33pm in order for Board members to consider the updated recommendations.

The meeting resumed at 1:48pm.

Board Members sought clarity on when the Council received confirmation from MHCLG on the extension of projects to March 2027. The Assistant Director confirmed that the Council received notification in April 2025, and the Chair of the Board was notified with an agreement for an update to be provided at this meeting.

Members discussed the Birkenhead market project in further detail and in light of extra time provided by the extension, sought clarity on whether the Board could make a recommendation to the Economy, Regeneration and Housing Committee to pause the project and re-assess alternative options for future market provision, including retention of a market within the footprint of the existing site. The Board discussed the implications of this. Several Members supported the proposals in light of opposition to moving the market into the former Argos site, whilst other Members noted that given the progress and work undertaken in delivering the existing project so far, alongside contractual commitments, pausing and creating further delays would create significant risks and challenges.

In addition, Independent Members of the Board noted difficulties in contributing their expertise and knowledge in respect of the discussions due to the formality of the Board and difficulties in voting on contentious or difficult recommendations in the absence of details on the full implications of such decisions within the reports. It was further noted that it remained challenging for independent members to add value within this environment.

In response to the discussion in respect of the market, the Lead Principal Lawyer advised that under article 13 of the constitution, decisions should be taken following the receipt of professional advice from officers in the form of a report. As a Board operating within the Council's governance arrangements, it was therefore advised that it would not be appropriate for the Board to recommend a pause to the project without a comprehensive report setting out the full implications of the options.

Board Members therefore suggested that consideration of the Birkenhead market project be deferred to the next available meeting to consider a report on the matter, with a workshop beforehand to explore in further detail. On a motion by Councillor Jo Bird, Seconded by Councillor Pat Cleary, it was therefore:

## **Resolved – That**

- 1. the extension of timescales for all Council projects within the Simplification Pathfinder Pilot granted by the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government be noted;**
- 2. the amendment to the programme International Battle of the Atlantic project as set out in the report be noted and the Economy and Regeneration and Housing Committee be recommended to authorise the Director of Law and Corporate Services, in consultation with the Director of Regeneration and Place and Chair and Group Spokespersons of Economy Regeneration and Housing Committee , to enter into all such necessary legal agreements required to implement the associated timescale extensions; and**
- 3. consideration of the amendment of the market programme proposal be deferred to the next available meeting as a matter of urgency.**

## **REVIEW OF INVESTMENT PLAN**

The Assistant Director – Chief Regeneration Officer introduced the report which provided an update which detailed the approved changes so far within the Simplification Pathfinder programme and the impact of the changes against the initial investment plan submitted to Government in 2023. A summary of the changes was outlined. It was reported that three projects (Sustainability Central, Woodside Ferry Village, and Transport Visitor Attraction) had been removed from the portfolio. 2 projects had their allocation of funding reduced:

- Birkenhead Market (outputs maintained); and
- Europa Residential (outputs reduced)

It was reported a further 8 projects received additional Pathfinder funding:

- JOY Wellbeing and Opportunity hub (outputs maintained);
- Start Yard (outputs increased);
- Future Yard (outputs maintained);
- Argyle Street Creative Hub (outputs maintained);
- International Battle of the Atlantic (outputs maintained);
- Charing Cross & Grange Road (outputs maintained); and
- Conway & Europa Boulevard (outputs maintained)

In addition, the Assistant Director noted that there was a total sum of £2.2m within the programme, resulting from £1.83m unallocated (£1.5m associated with the Transport Museum project and £330,000 from a budget line associated with the Birkenhead Market project) and a further £456k available due the abortive costs of the original Transport Visitor Attraction project not

being eligible expenditure of the grant funding. A recommendation for re-allocation would therefore be brought to Pathfinder Board prior to consideration by the Economy Regeneration and Housing Committee.

The Grants Manager (Regeneration) provided further details on the changes to the allocations as set out in appendix 1 of the report.

Members raised concerns in respect of the £1.3m allocation for Europa Residential despite a reduction in allocation as a result of reduced outputs, relating to a development partner not currently being in place. In response the Assistant Director reported that the Council was working closely with Homes England and the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority in respect of grant funding options to progress the development. Outputs needed to be delivered by 2030 and the Council believed they were on track with Homes England for a mutually agreeable and deliverable scheme. Independent Members noted their support for the allocation in the context of adding momentum to housing developments and affirmed that Homes England recognised the importance of getting the progressing the project.

Board Members also discussed the Charing Cross & Grange Road/Conway & Europa Boulevard projects works. Members raised concerns in respect of the delays to completion of the works and the disruption caused. In response to queries relating to the allocation of pathfinder funding of £11.6m, the Director of Regeneration and Place confirmed that the capital allocation for the project included additional funding from an active travel grant taking the total allocation to £16.5m. In response to the concerns raised, the Director reported that the Assistant Director for Highways was undertaking a review of the programme with the Council's contractor. It was further reported that subject to the review the project was anticipated to be completed in Quarter 1 2026.

Members requested that any review established the reasons for the delays and subsequent lessons learned to ensure future delivery did not encounter similar challenges. Board members also noted the disruption the works would have over the Christmas period to local businesses and shoppers in the town centre.

Members discussed the £2.2m of Pathfinder funding which was to be reallocated. The Board noted that this presented an opportunity to support projects with extra funds to deliver and requested that options in respect of re-allocation ensure deliverability is prioritised and welcomed a workshop to consider how the funding could be allocated before coming back to a formal Board meeting.

**Resolved – That the update be noted.**

**ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

No further matters were raised.

**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The Chair reported that the next meeting was scheduled for 30 July 2025.