

Chairman's Report

Update on Town Deal Accelerated Capital Projects

Darwen Town Deal Board

10 July 2020

Introduction

The purpose of this report is two-fold. Firstly, to share the welcome news that Government intends to provide a grant of £750,000 to enable the Darwen Town Deal Board to accelerate the delivery of key projects. Secondly, to seek Board approval to develop three “accelerated” project proposals for consideration by Government by the deadline of 14 August.

Context

Government has made a number of announcements regarding national investment plans, including £5 Billion in new infrastructure developments, with an additional £100M for the Town Deal programme.

Darwen is one of 101 Town Deal initiatives in England and has been allocated £750,000 in grant funding to enable the Board to accelerate the delivery of key projects – projects that can be further developed within our Town Investment Plan (TIP).

The Government's unexpected grant funding offer must be spent by 31 March 2021. As discussed at our last Board meeting, we intend to submit our TIP no later than January 2021, therefore, in our case, we are likely to be advancing the delivery of projects before the formal agreement of our overarching TIP, which is positive in many ways.

However, given the need to spend this funding by the end of this financial year, Government requires the Board's confirmation by 14 August of its project delivery priorities. As the Town Deal's accountable body, Blackburn with Darwen Council is also required to confirm to Government that these accelerated project proposals provide good value for money and are consistent with the national Town Deal investment framework.

Project Proposals

Given the need for urgency in securing this welcome funding support, I recommend the Board focuses on project proposals that can:

- Meet Government spending requirements;
- Meet the VFM and assurance requirements of Blackburn with Darwen Council, as the Board's accountable body;
- Evidence a significant level of commitment from project sponsors, including financial support for their project proposal;

- Deliver strategic outcomes that will support the early delivery of our TIP – its objectives priorities and outcomes – with the potential to be further developed in our TIP over the coming years; and
- Signal the early ambition and relevance of the Town Deal initiative to improving the long-term prospects of Darwen.

With the above in mind, I recommend we focus on three key projects, which can meet the tests outlined above, though they will require a deeper level of assessment by the Board before submission to Government. The three project proposals are:

Darwen Tower

The Tower was built in 1898 by public subscription to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The Tower is a grade 2 listed building.

There is a highly developed project proposal to repair and upgrade the Tower, the emblem of Darwen, and a landmark of regional significance, with strong connectivity to the town centre.

Darwen Rotary has led community fund raising activities that have helped to secure £60,000 in support for this project. A maximum Town Deal funding contribution of £250,000 would secure the improvement of this cherished local monument and visitor landmark, with the potential to deliver additional upgrades, including environmentally friendly illumination.

There is also the opportunity to establish whether further local funding support can be secured to enhance this proposal.

The Tower is the responsibility of Blackburn with Darwen Council and they would be the lead project sponsor with the support of community partners.

J4 Skate Park

The Skate Park is a regional facility, based in Darwen, located next to Darwen Vale School, and serves over 5,000 active BMX, skateboard and scooter users.

The proposal would create a new Urban Sports Village, which would increase the current capacity of the facility by 300% by adding a new outdoor, all-weather arena that meets Olympic (and COVID secure) standards. There is the potential to establish Darwen as the Northern-base of the British Olympic BMX and skateboard teams.

The enhanced venue would have the capability and capacity to host Olympic trials, national and world championships.

The venue and its provision is capable of delivering inclusive and high quality alternative education and apprenticeship / employment opportunities to some of our most disadvantaged young people.

The proposal also intends to deliver new business premises and employment opportunities in support services, and retail and food concessions, located in designer freight containers, pioneered in Box Park, Shoreditch, London, and many leading European cities.

The proposal offers the opportunity for a further phase of development, including the provision of a hotel to support extended training camps of GB teams and provide

summer camp / holiday experiences for enthusiasts / new starters and their families and friends.

The first phase of this project is seeking £250,000 in Town Deal funding which would be matched with a similar level of funding secured from Sports England, British Cycling and business sponsors.

The project sponsor is J4 Skate Park CIC.

AFC Darwen

The AFC Darwen was formed in 1870. The club is one of the oldest established football teams in the world, but has endeavoured to evolve, compete and continue to serve the local community.

Unlike most amateur and professional clubs, AFC Darwen is debt free but resources are limited in delivering a step-change in existing facilities.

However, a private investment programme valued at £550,000 has recently delivered a new 3G pitch and upgraded the club's changing facilities. The ground is owned by Blackburn with Darwen Council on a 75-year lease to AFC Darwen.

Proposals are in development to bring forward new and complementary sporting and community facilities with income generating potential.

It is proposed that the Town Deal provides £250,000 to match private investment support to accelerate the provision and upgrade of new sporting and community facilities.

The project applicant is AFC Darwen.

Conclusion

The project proposals set out in this report both celebrate the illustrious history of Darwen and look forward to a new future. The projects are well embedded and highly regarded by the local communities, users and stakeholders they serve.

The Tower is central to defining and shaping the cultural identity of Darwen and plays a key role in promoting the area as a place to live, visit and enjoy.

The Skate Park and AFC Darwen proposals alone are strong, but perhaps more importantly when combined they could create a sporting and leisure spatial cluster of regional significance while serving local needs.

At this stage, I anticipate the three proposals would fully utilise the £750,000 made available by Government.

The development of our TIP will create further opportunities to strengthen these assets and cross-linkages. Our TIP will allow other cultural and sporting opportunities to come forward as part of a compelling investment programme that drives growth and supports a healthy, creative and happy Darwen.

Government timescales are very demanding but we must respond positively to the opportunity provided. To make progress, I suggest project sponsors are invited to present their proposals to the next Board meeting with the accountable body providing an assessment of each proposal.

I welcome the views of the Board on seizing this unexpected opportunity to make an early and positive difference in Darwin and to signal the Board's intentions more widely, with further transformational change delivered by our TIP in the coming years.

Recommendations

The Board is asked to:

1. Note and comment on the contents of this report;
2. Agree that the three projects set out in this report - Darwin Tower, J4 Skate Park and AFC Darwin - form the basis of the Board's accelerated capital projects submission to Government by the deadline of 14 August;
3. In support of the above, request further details on each project proposal for consideration by the Board at its next meeting, with a presentation from each project sponsor; and
4. Request an assessment of each project by the accountable body, consistent with the requirements of Government.