



EXECUTIVE MEMBER DECISION

REPORT OF:	Executive Member for Growth and Development
LEAD OFFICERS:	Strategic Director of Growth & Development
DATE:	10 April 2024

PORTFOLIO/S AFFECTED: Growth and Development

WARD/S AFFECTED: Blackburn Central;

SUBJECT: EMD King William Street High Street Accelerator

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

King William Street, Blackburn has been selected by the High Street Task Force as one of the ten High Street Accelerators. Each High Street Accelerator will be awarded £237,000 funding over 2 years by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC).

A High Street Accelerator is a pilot project and an opportunity to test and trial new ways of working to revitalise the high street and to tackle vacancies.

Led by the Local Authority, the pilot project will bring together residents, local businesses, and town centre organisations to develop a vision for the high street.

Eligible activity can include:

- Recruiting expertise to help research and create a vision
- Projects which help to make the area cleaner, safer and more visually appealing
- Improvements to signage, lighting, street design and shopfronts
- Working with property owners and commercial agents to facilitate new uses
- Testing different types of events
- Greening and environmental works

The Council submitted a proposal specific to the King William Street area as part of the selection process setting out the issues and which was subsequently approved by DHLUC. The report sets out the background and requests approval to begin the project.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Executive Member: Approves both the acceptance of the DLUHC grant and the authority to begin spending and delivery on the King William Street Accelerator pilot project.

3. BACKGROUND

The new High Street Accelerator programme was launched by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). The pilot programme, based on research from the High Street Task Force will provide funding to ten areas to kick start local partnerships and facilitate/test a range of different activities aimed at reviving declining high streets and tackle vacancies.

Each Accelerator will receive £237,000 revenue funding (£50,000 2023/24 and £187,000 2024/25) and the opportunity to apply for additional capital funding in 2024 for high street environmental and greening projects.

The ten local authorities were selected by the High Street Task Force using a metrics-based methodology, involving analysis of commercial vacancy rates and other socio-economic factors. Each local authority was then invited to submit a proposal for the high street area that best met the funding criteria.

The Council submitted a proposal to target the funding to the King William Street Area.

The King William Street 'area' (which also includes Town Hall Street, New Market Street and Northgate) was selected for a number of reasons.

Its historic role as the town's commercial and civic core, and proximity to the Mall Shopping centre means the area retains its physical status as the town main 'high street', yet it in more recent times it no longer operates as traditional high street or focal point of activity for the town.

While economic development and regeneration initiatives have helped other areas of the town centre over the last 15 years, around King William Street the on-going challenges are particularly stark. National and global change is negatively impacting on town and regional centres, and Blackburn is not immune from the scale and speed of these changes.

Vacancies have increased and the quality and mix of offer weakened with the loss of independent retail and leisure, closure of banks and major high street retailers like Debenhams and Wilko. The only remaining retail anchor is M&S, which is likely to close within two years.

This narrow mix of offer means King William Street currently struggles to entice visitors out of the comfort of the shopping centre, footfall continues to decline and this has a knock-on effect to the vitality of other surrounding areas.

A small programme of cultural projects and meanwhile uses supported by small property grants and discretionary rates incentives have been relatively successful in helping to create temporary interest but this is not a long-term solution and benefits cannot be sustained without also tackling issues of lack of funding to properly maintain the environment and badly maintained properties, absent landlords, undesirable uses and developments, and anti-social behaviour.

A Blackburn high street was selected for the submission by the Council rather than a Darwen high street because Darwen was announced recently as one of the 55 towns announced by Government to benefit from a Long Term Plan with £20m funding over 10 years, in addition to the £25m Town Deal.

Led by the Local Authority, the pilot project will bring together residents, local businesses, and town centre organisations to develop a joint vision for the high street and to test ideas to facilitate this.

Activity will be guided by best practice developed by the High Street Task Force and the Council's emerging Cultural Investment Plan. The initial grant is revenue, but some physical improvements that facilitate revenue activity are eligible and encouraged.

Blackburn's cultural offer has an important role to play in reimagining the high street both in the day and evening, creating a rich and diverse experience. The project will seek to encourage an enhanced cultural and leisure offer on King William Street, building on the creative cluster and programme of nationally recognised events already established. The environment will be improved, with cleaner and greener streets, making the space more inviting and safer.

Where properties are vacant or no longer financially viable for retail uses, the project will seek alternative uses. The streets will be animated with markets, events, street art and music to attract and appeal to a wider section of the community. It is important that King William Street can reinvent itself to regain its status as the town's gold standard high street, a desirable destination in its own right but also a gateway to other areas of the town centre.

The ten areas selected for the High Street Accelerators programme are:

- Abingdon Street and Queen Street in Blackpool
- Stoke Town Centre in Stoke-on-Trent
- Queen Street with Blackburn Road and Church Street in Great Harwood Town Centre in Hyndburn
- Scunthorpe High Street in North Lincolnshire
- Union Street and Yorkshire Street in Oldham Town Centre
- The Stepney area of Beverley Road in Hull
- King William Street in Blackburn Town Centre in Blackburn with Darwen
- Grimsby Town Centre in North East Lincolnshire
- Dovercourt Town Centre in Tendring
- Hyde Town Centre in Tameside

It also should be noted that the Council is working with Government to finalise a £20m Levelling Up Partnership funding package, which is principally focused on cultural investment in Blackburn Town Centre. It is hoped that this package will be presented in April to the Council's Executive Board for consideration and approval.

4. KEY ISSUES & RISKS

Risk of not accepting grant

There would be some reputational risk to not accepting the invitation to accept the grant. Blackburn has been selected to participate based on independent research and it is envisaged that the findings of this pilot work will inform future best practice dissemination and funding rounds. The level of funding linked to this initiative is very modest, given the scale of challenges and opportunities in scope, though the funding is designed to complement and support delivery of other larger scale capital projects that Blackburn has recently secured funding for. The scale of funding may increase in future funding rounds should this Government pilot initiative be taken forward.

Risk of not being able to deliver a successful project

The project requires the creation of a new partnership, development of a high street vision and delivery of some trail activity based on guidance from the High Street Task Force. The nature of the pilot means there is no guarantee of success and as long as our activity can be evaluated and provide useful data for the High Street Task Force, then it will be of value and there are no penalties as a result of failing to deliver positive outcomes. However, Blackburn town centre already has a strong track record of partnership working and delivering innovative regeneration projects, and a good understanding of the challenges of King William Street, so it is very much the expectation that this project will provide positive outcomes for our high street and local community.

Risk of not being able to spend grant

If the grant is accepted, the Council is expected to receive the funding in early 2024 with the first £50,000 to be allocated by the end of March 2024. The remaining £187,000 is allocated for activities the following year to March 2025. The first year's expenditure in particular has a very tight deadline and will present some challenges, however, in light of our track record, experience and knowledge mentioned above, we are confident we can hit the ground running to enable us to meet these timescales. There is no penalty if the grant is not spent on time, and any unspent funds may be lost.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

King William Street has an important part of play in the continued growth and vitality of the town centre and in particular in supporting an enhanced culture and leisure offer.

The King William Street Accelerator will kick-start the delivery of the Council's emerging Cultural Investment Plan 2023-33 (currently in consultation) which responds to the need to facilitate development of the town's cultural infrastructure to create a resilient, ambitious and sustainable creative ecology. The pilot project will directly support the Cultural Investment Plan's 5 key missions of: vibrant town centres, aspiration and opportunity, placemaking, community pride and a strong economy.

The pilot project also supports Blackburn with Darwen's Local Plan 2021 to 2037, specifically: Strategic Objective SO12: Town Centres - to widen the range of activities taking place in the Borough's town centres to ensure their future vitality and viability.

Core Policy CP11: Town Centres and Commercial Development –to promote the growth of commercial development and other town centre uses such as leisure, entertainment, offices, education, arts, culture, tourism and housing.

Core Policy CP8: Securing High Quality and Inclusive Design – ensuring high quality design to making places more attractive, locally-distinctive, accessible, sustainable and safe.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no match funding requirements for the project. All grant is paid in advance of expenditure.

	Year 1 2023/24	Year 2 2024/25	Total
High Street Accelerator Grant	£50,000	£187,000	£237,000 revenue
Additional bid for high street greening projects		Share of up to £5 million between 10 pilots	TBC capital

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The Council will be the accountable body for all grant expenditure. All procurement will be carried out in-line with the Council standard procurement policy.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

It is expected that officer time will be committed to support development and delivery of the project. This will come from existing staff within the Growth & Development Department.

9. EQUALITY AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Please select one of the options below. Where appropriate please include the hyperlink to the EIA.

Option 1 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) not required – the EIA checklist has been completed.

Option 2 In determining this matter the Executive Member needs to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. *(insert EIA link here)*

Option 3 In determining this matter the Executive Board Members need to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. *(insert EIA attachment)*

10. CONSULTATIONS

Initial consultation with town centre partners and cultural organisations has been undertaken as part of the development of the Cultural Investment Plan.

The High Street Task Force has been consulted on the development of the proposed King William Street Accelerator pilot.

The project will formalise a new High Street Accelerator Partnership including residents, local businesses, and town centre organisations. The Partnership will help to develop the vision for King William Street and be consulted on the delivery plan.

11. STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE

The recommendations are made further to advice from the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer has confirmed that they do not incur unlawful expenditure. They are also compliant with equality legislation and an equality analysis and impact assessment has been considered. The recommendations reflect the core principles of good governance set out in the Council's Code of Corporate Governance.

12. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

All Declarations of Interest of any Executive Member consulted and note of any dispensation granted by the Chief Executive will be recorded and published if applicable.

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DATE:	21/12/2023
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BACKGROUND PAPER:	
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