



EXECUTIVE BOARD DECISION

REPORT OF: Executive Member for Regeneration

LEAD OFFICERS: Director of Growth and Development

DATE: 14 March 2019

PORTFOLIO/S AFFECTED: Regeneration

WARD/S AFFECTED: Darwen East Darwen West

KEY DECISION: YES NO

SUBJECT: Future High Street Fund – Darwen Town Centre

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The £675m Future High Street Fund was launched by Government on 26 December 2018. The purpose of the Fund is to help local authorities and their partners improve the performance of their town centres with a focus on those places struggling with rapid changes in the retail sector and consumer behaviour, but with the potential to create viable places which are attractive to residents, visitors, established traders and new business occupiers, as part of a wider place-focused growth strategy. This is a nationally competitive fund with over 400 submissions anticipated.

In the first instance, Government is only seeking an Expressions of Interest (EOI) by 22 March 2019. Government will then assess EOI submissions with a view to inviting selected town centres to develop their plans and business case in detail. However, there is no guarantee of funding, even if selected to develop more detailed plans. The Government's funding decisions will ultimately be subject to HM Treasury Green Book business-case evaluation.

Given the Government's bidding guidance, it is considered that Darwen Town Centre has the strongest strategic fit with this national funding opportunity. This report sets out the opportunity and rationale to bid for funding in support of Darwen.

This report seeks approval to submit an EOI by 22 March 2019. Further updates will be submitted to the Board to update Members of progress.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive Board is asked to:

- Note and approve the decision to submit an Expression of Interest to the Government's Future High Street Fund for Darwen Town Centre by March 22nd 2019;
- Authorise the Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Director of Growth and Development, to finalise the Council's Expression of Interest;
- Request the Director of Growth and Development to provide progress updates to the Executive Board.

3. BACKGROUND

In light of the numerous changes and challenges town centres face, Government has allocated £675M of funding through the Future High Street Fund to support local authorities and their partners to make strategic capital investments and interventions to reinvigorate their high streets.

The key objective of the Fund is to **renew and reshape town centres and high streets in a way that improves experience, drives growth and ensures future sustainability**. Town centres should become thriving places where the community feels engaged with becoming centres where people live, shop, use public services, and spend their leisure time.

Local authorities submitting EOIs to the Government's Fund have been asked to define the specific challenges faced by their high streets, set out their overarching strategic ambition for their town centre and the constraints that need to be addressed to make this possible.

Any identified need for investment is expected to fall under the following themes:

- Investment in physical infrastructure
- Acquisition and assembly of land including to support new housing, workspaces and public realm
- Improvements to transport access, traffic flow and circulation in the area
- Supporting change of use including (where appropriate) housing delivery and densification
- Supporting adaptation of the high street in response to changing technology

The Fund is part of the Government's 'Plan for the High Street' which includes:

- Cutting Business Rates by a third for up to 90% of retail properties for two years, to provide upfront support for high streets;
- Consulting on planning reform to make it simpler to create more homes, jobs and choice in town centres, and trialling a register of empty shops;
- Setting up a High Streets Task Force which will support local leadership with expert advice on helping local high streets to adapt and thrive; and
- Strengthening community assets, including the restoration of the historic buildings that make our high streets special, supporting community groups to use empty properties and providing business rates relief for public toilets and local newspapers.

The Future High Streets Fund forms a central part of the Government's Plan. It will support places by co-funding transformative, structural changes to overcome challenges in their area.

The Fund will operate as a two-round fund with two stages to the application process. This first stage of the application process, Phase 1, calls for places to come forward with Expressions of Interest by 22 March 2019 setting out their challenges and strategic approach to regenerating town centres. These will be assessed against criteria set out within the guidance. An announcement, on which places will move forward to Phase 2 with development of full business cases, is expected in Summer/Autumn.

If the EOI submission is shortlisted to move to a Phase 2 application, there will be some revenue funding available to support the development of town centre strategies, scheme proposals and investment plans. These business cases will be assessed in accordance with HM Treasury Green Book appraisal methodologies and criteria to be published in due course.

There is an expectation that local funding and private investment will be matched with Government funding support but there are no precise details at this point in the process. This will be subject to business case development.

In addition, £55m of the Fund has been allocated to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to support the regeneration of heritage high streets. More information is likely to come forward on this in late Spring.

4. KEY ISSUES & RISKS

Darwen, with its distinctive physical and industrial heritage, economic profile and natural environment has been identified as having a town centre with the right scale, challenges and opportunities to underpin a strong application to the Future High Streets Fund. A targeted bid with an emerging funding ask of c. £5-8m focused on securing business incentives to promote local growth, while delivering physical change that leverages our strategic investment in the area. Recent investment plans have improved road and rail connectivity, delivered new and upgraded public services/facilities/spaces, new housing growth, improved private properties, and support for cultural and community assets. A successful Fund submission will aim to continue and target further interventions in Darwen to encourage new business, employment and housing growth, as part of the wider growth strategy for the area.

The improved transport infrastructure through the Darwen Economic Development Corridor, improved rail link to Manchester and Clitheroe, Pennine Reach and current new investment in the Market Square is and will contribute to make Darwen a more accessible and attractive place to live, work and visit. However, the retail (particularly comparison), leisure and cultural offer of the town centre is not serving the needs of the current local population nor the anticipated growth in new residents. With housing growth underway and planned, the growing number of new residents, particularly families and younger people will provide further demand for an improved town centre alongside the major local employers who are competing to attract talent to meet their recruitment needs.

The importance of place-making and improving the customer experience by providing a distinctive and authentic offer for residents has been demonstrated by successful town centres such as Altrincham. Darwen has an entrepreneurial culture demonstrated by the success of a night time economy with a large proportion of independent businesses and targeted investment as described would support the development of a broader, more rounded offer appealing to all residents and helping to drive the development of a stronger economy and employment growth.

Currently, there is no indication from the Government as to what the match funding requirements will be although this is likely to be relative to the size of the bid. This will become apparent after shortlisting, but early advice has suggested it will be on a case by case basis. However, at the second stage in the bid development process, given the large number of business cases under consideration, it is highly likely that Government officials will focus on value for money criteria as a key determinant of success.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The importance and development of Darwen Town Centre as an important employment, retail, service, leisure and cultural hub for the residents of the borough is identified in the Council's Local Plan, Darwen Town Centre Strategy, Growth Strategy, LSP'S Plan for Prosperity and the Corporate Plan.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

An initial investment of £10,000 in order to access specialist technical support and research has been funded by the Regeneration portfolio to support the initial EOI. If the Council was successful in being shortlisted, some additional funding would be made available from the fund to support the development of a strategic vision, investment plan and business case, in conjunction with local partners and stakeholders.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are currently no legal implications or resources required. This will be reviewed if the EOI is shortlisted.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Staff time from the Growth and Development Department to support the development of the EOI has been allocated.

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

Consultations with the Darwen Town Centre Partnership Board, Darwen Town Council and key businesses in Darwen have been undertaken.

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

None

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DATE:	1/3/2019
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BACKGROUND PAPER:	Future High Streets Fund Prospectus and Supplementary Guidelines.
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