

Cabinet – 20 March 2024

Darlaston Long Term Plan for Towns

Portfolio:	Councillor Andrew – Deputy Leader & Regeneration
Related portfolios:	Councillor Perry – Deputy Leader & Resilient Communities
Service:	Economy, Environment and Communities
Wards:	Darlaston South, Bentley & Darlaston North
Key decision:	Yes
Forward plan:	Yes

1. Aim

- 1.1. The Economy, Environment and Communities directorate works to deliver a successful, connected borough with happy and healthy residents across all communities, in places which are attractive, easy and enjoyable to use, with the right jobs, skills and homes in the right locations. With a blend of council funding and externally supported schemes, a range of delivery targets these objectives and those of We Are Walsall 2040 and the Walsall Council Plan. The Darlaston Long Term Plan for Towns will align with this vision to improve the area for residents by leading co-developed local interventions.

2. Summary

- 2.1. Darlaston has been awarded £20million over 10 years as part of the government's Long Term Plan for Towns programme through the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). The purpose of the fund is for communities to drive progress in improving the fortunes of towns by developing programmes to bring life back to high streets and districts, encouraging the return of prosperity to towns around the country. Town Boards, the new decision-making bodies for this fund and the owners of each Long Term Plan, will be run by local people for local people, bringing together residents, business and community leaders to devise and agree a shared vision for the future. The council will show civic leadership by acting as convenor of the Darlaston Town Board and by acting as accountable body for the fund, administering and disbursing funds through an open and accountable governance system to local community driven projects.
- 2.2. The fund will be focused on three themes: safety and security; high streets, heritage and regeneration; and transport and connectivity.
- 2.3. The activity set out in the report to drive the Darlaston Town Plan aligns with the Council Plan themes of supporting a dynamic, resilient, and diverse

economy where businesses invest, and everyone has the right jobs and the right housing; people are supported to maintain or improve their health, wellbeing and quality of life; the people of Walsall feel safe in a cleaner, greener borough

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That Cabinet delegates authority to the Section 151 Officer, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, to perform the accountable body function for the Darlaston Long Term Plan for Towns and to administer funds according to the instructions of the Darlaston Town Board.
- 3.2. That Cabinet delegates authority to the Section 151 Officer to be in receipt of and administer the sums of £50,000 and £200,000 capacity funding followed by the remainder of the £20m fund in a profile yet to be set by the government and to agree with the Darlaston Town Board as to the optimum use of these sums.
- 3.3. That Cabinet delegates authority to the Executive Director for Economy, Environment and Communities in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Regeneration to agree the final Darlaston Town Board membership, governance and operating arrangements.

4. Report detail – know

Context

- 4.1. In September 2023, DLUHC launched the Long-Term Plan for Britain's Towns, a core part of the government's levelling up programme to support projects in places that have not to date been a focus for government support. The principle is to widen the focus from cities, while preserving local communities and give young people a reason to stay living, working and bringing up families in their towns.
- 4.2. The fund is designed to breathe life back into centres, combatting the effects of challenged high streets, to care for the local environment in terms of litter, anti-social behaviour and lack of usage of amenities. The plan will complement existing work and give towns the focus and attention required to improve their fortunes.
- 4.3. This programme puts decision making into the hands of local people through new Town Boards which are to be set up and managed by councils but led by local communities and businesses, so that they can decide on local priorities for the long-term future of the places where they live. Each town will have a new Town Board made up of local community leaders and employers, who will draw up their town's Long-Term Plan for the next 10 years.
- 4.4. This work will be supported by up to £20million of "endowment-style" funding and support to invest over the next decade. Funding will be released over a seven year period and councils will have the flexibility to spend it over a

10 year period with “light-touch” assurance by DLUHC, which is yet to be defined. The funding is indicated to be approximately 75% capital and 25% revenue; full funding profile will be released imminently.

- 4.5. In order to ensure progress, Town Boards have been awarded two sums of capacity funding, for £50,000 and £200,000, so that towns can build their own local capacity, talk to local people about what they want from their town, and move forward with convening the Boards and developing an investment plan. It is intended that these plans and the sums invested by government will act as a catalyst to attract private investment and community capital over the 10 year period of the plans and beyond. Councils are allowed to top slice a proportionate sum of the capacity funding for administration of the board and fund. Towns are discouraged from using this funding to grant large consultancy contracts to create plans, rather they should build community wealth and capacity to develop and deliver projects.
- 4.6. The first sum of £50,000 capacity funding will help localities to convene and set up the new town boards and it is required to complete this stage by 1 April 2024, with a chair appointed and a programme of initial community engagement begun.
- 4.7. The next stage, between April 2024 and August 2024 will see a further £200,000 to support development of the Long Term Plan, comprising a 10 year vision and three year investment plan. Town Boards should advise local authorities on how best to use this money, to support development of the Long Term Plan. The plan will set out how funding will be allocated and spent, with the council ultimately accountable for funding. DLUHC will assess plans as they are submitted and release 2024 to 2025 capital and revenue funding once plans are approved.
- 4.8. According to DLUHC guidance, the independent chair of the board should be invited by the local authority, considering who is best to convene partners and who shows a passion for and knowledge of the place, and the local MP should be engaged in the process. The rest of the board should comprise local councillors, senior police representation, community partners, local businesses, cultural/arts/heritage associations, public agencies and anchor institutions such as schools and colleges.
- 4.9. In support, as information and guidance resource, DLUHC has provided: a data pack for each town, with a local insight profile provided by DLUHC’s Spatial Data Unit; a policy toolkit, outlining powers available to towns and partners; a list of policy interventions with an already agreed case for investment; a dedicated support from the respective area team to help guide the Town Boards and local authorities through the process. Additionally, an independent consultancy style High Streets and Towns Taskforce will be established to support towns after the Long Term Plans are submitted.
- 4.10. Long Term Plans will be driven by three investment themes: safety and security; high streets, heritage and regeneration; and transport and connectivity.

- 4.11. Safety and security - Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour is a priority of the fund to ensure that residents and communities can exist happily and comfortably in their towns. Measures will be considered which will encourage shoppers to use the town centres and their amenities, also to encourage investors by creating a more positive, productive and attractive environment. Interventions could include new and improved security infrastructure such as CCTV and streetlights, as well as other anti-crime measures. Support should be considered for the more vulnerable members of the community to enjoy and feel safe in public spaces.
- 4.12. High streets, heritage and regeneration – to ensure that high streets remain at the heart of town centre activity, they need to diversify activity and adapt the offer to residents, visitors and investors. Interventions could include preserving and improving heritage sites, creating and maintaining parks and green spaces, establishing Business Improvement Districts or running high street rental auctions.
- 4.13. Transport and connectivity – the ease with which residents can access high streets, jobs and local amenities is critical for towns to thrive and a successful transport system is key to this. Options for intervention could include linking different parts of the town with new infrastructure, providing safe routes for walking and cycling into the centre, ensuring public transport routes are viable and accessible. Interventions could include new infrastructure schemes, road improvements such as fixing potholes or improving congested junctions, new programmes to encourage cycling, making the town centre more walkable and accessible.
- 4.14. Geography – Geographic areas (in this case centred on Darlaston) were created by government from Office for National Statistics data on built up areas. Should towns wish to propose a change this should be made with the clear support of the Chair and Board and this will need to have strong rationale as it will require ministerial approval.

Council Plan priorities

- 4.15. The Council Plan 2022-25 sets out the council's aims of reducing inequalities and maximising potential. The Long Term Plan for Darlaston will align with the council plan objectives in:
- supporting a dynamic, resilient, and diverse economy where businesses invest, and everyone has the right jobs and the right housing
 - people are supported to maintain or improve their health, wellbeing and quality of life
 - the people of Walsall feel safe in a cleaner, greener borough

Risk management

- 4.16. As part of Town Board governance and assurance a full risk register will be developed and maintained which will be owned and monitored by the board members on a regular basis in the process of project review.
- 4.17. The Long Term Plan for Towns programme is a government initiative in which there is a prescribed role for local authorities, working with local partners. The council is required to manage the risk of non-compliance by adhering to the guidelines provided by DLUHC and by ensuring that board members and partners do the same. This management will be supported by the toolkit and by working with the task force and with DLUHC officers to ensure that funding is spent in accordance with the guidance and objectives of the programme.

Financial implications

- 4.18. The council will be in receipt of up to £20m to be received over seven years in a funding profile yet to be released by DLUHC, with a spend profile to be set over 10 years. Indicative profile shows payment in advance by years at approximately £1.5million capital and £500,000 revenue per year. The council will act as accountable body for these funds and will allocate funding to activity in consultation with or at the instruction of the Darlaston Town Board. The funding is indicated to be 75% capital and 25% revenue.
- 4.19. There will be complete flexibility to roll unspent funding over to the subsequent years and underspends will not be lost; there will also be in-year flexibility to move funding between projects. There is no flexibility to bring funds forward but there is potential to borrow against future funding.
- 4.20. The council will be in receipt of two sets of capacity funding, £50,000 by 1 April 2024 with which to set up the Darlaston Board and begin community engagement, and £200,000 by August 2024 with which to develop the three year investment plan and 10 year vision.
- 4.21. In line with the Levelling Up Funds Local Authority Assurance Framework, the Section 151 Officer will be required to submit a Statement of Grant Usage and an Assurance Letter to DLUHC. The Section 151 Officer will be required to provide written confirmation that they have undertaken to actively apply all the necessary checks to ensure proper administration of its financial affairs regarding the funding programme, particularly in respect to financial administration and transparency of governance. The first line of defence will also include compliance checks to ensure the governance requirements around the Town Board are being met.

Legal implications

- 4.22. Procurement will work with Legal Services to determine forms of contract suitable for the commission of any activity agreed by the board where the council is required to hold the contract. The undertaking of the Procurement will also ensure compliance with the Council's Contract Rules and the best value obligations under the Local Government Act 1919.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.23. Activity will be procured at the instruction of the board and this may be procured and/or delivered by the council in some cases. The council will work to drive and influence social value by working with local suppliers where possible and ensuring that a broad mix of suppliers and considered and that tender processes reflect social value principles wherever possible.
- 4.24. Where relevant, accountable bodies (in this case the council) must work with all their stakeholders to understand how proposed projects can be delivered in compliance with subsidy control. Accountable bodies should use the assessment framework as well as drawing on their responses in the wider proposal (particularly any deliverability information) in assessing subsidy control

Property implications

- 4.25. There are currently no property implications arising from this report

Health and wellbeing implications

- 4.26. It is a central proposition of the Long Term Plan for Towns that the health and wellbeing of the local population is well served by the environmental and experiential improvements that the fund will bring. By working to reduce crime and fear of crime, and by making the physical environment more attractive, accessible and enjoyable to use, it is intended that a step change in the wellbeing and happiness of residents can be achieved. It is also intended that this improvement will drive investment and bring renewed life to the locality. It is for this reason that it will be important to work with the anchor institutions that support these outcomes, in order to seek guidance and local intelligence, therefore creating the most appropriate interventions.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.27. The Long Term Plan for Towns works to bring together residents and organisations across all communities to create activity that will benefit all under the three themes of the fund. The council, acting as convener and adviser, will ensure that all relevant activity is impact assessed to understand any impact upon protected groups and the wider community groups with which the fund and board will interact to create these programmes.
- 4.28. One of the key themes of Town Plan activity is safety and security; it is particularly important within this area to ensure that interventions are carefully designed to be inclusive and protective of those particularly in need of support, and to build a town experience which is truly inclusive which everyone can enjoy. The representative nature of the Town Board, plus the intelligence and access to consultation which this will bring, will expedite outreach to ensure that co-production of schemes and the assessment of their impact is thorough and successful.

Staffing implications

- 4.29. The council will be required to support the Town Board with capacity and advice, as well as potentially being a delivery agent. Where this may have staffing implications, the council need to access the capacity funding which DLUHC have set out in order to facilitate the programme. This will be quantified as the work begins to take shape and any resource support will be accessed in line with the agreed processes and assurance framework

Consultation

- 4.30. For the reasons set out above, there will be a high level of consultation in the programme activity that will emerge from this fund. In its inception stages, officers are coming together to collate material around the three investment themes, while resilient communities and regeneration officers alongside elected members, community and business leaders are liaising to agree formation of the board.

5. Decide

- 5.1. The council is being asked to agree to a direct mandate from government to act as Accountable Body for the Darlaston Town Fund. This is part of a national initiative and no option is offered for a different decision or response to that which is recommended in the report. Should the council decide not to take up this offer then the mechanism for receipt of funds and administration for the Darlaston fund would be compromised, as would the outcomes for the area.

6. Respond

- 6.1. Should Cabinet agree then the council will assume receipt of the funds and continue to liaise with community and business leaders to form a board. The council will recommend and invite a chair for the board and convene a set of meetings to take forward the formation of the Town Plan for Darlaston.

7. Review

- 7.1. The Town Board will be set up to adhere to the assurance framework already in place and to follow the guidance issued by DLUHC on 18 December 2023, using the toolkit which is now in place. When the Town Plan is created, interventions will be agreed by the board and the execution of these will be regularly monitored and reviewed.

Appendices

None.

Background papers

None.

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