

Cabinet

14 October 2020

Towns and Villages Strategy

Key Decision No. REG/01/20



Report of Corporate Management Team

Amy Harhoff, Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth

Councillor Carl Marshall, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economic Regeneration

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide.

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to seek Cabinet approval for the refocused approach to the regeneration of towns and villages across the county. The Towns and Villages Strategy provides an opportunity to deliver the County Durham Vision with a focus on those communities that are most deprived.

Executive summary

- 2 On 12 December 2018, Cabinet agreed an initial report that sought to address the issues that had been identified by local communities as most important to them. The issues ranged from the need to support local retail to problems with vacant buildings and land, the condition of the environment and the impact of private landlords and empty properties, with a range of pilot activity commenced to address some of these immediate priorities. The report acknowledged that the Towns and Villages programme should be aligned to existing regeneration activity, assist in accelerating the delivery of projects and tackle issues which were prioritised by communities.

- 3 The County Durham Towns and Villages Strategy provides the opportunity to enable the accelerated delivery of council strategies and priorities through a greater understanding of both the needs and opportunities that exist within our communities. This will be evidence led using a consistent people based evidence base; to align both Council and partner activity in what is planned; to realign activity to ensure that it meets the specific needs of the communities and then use allocated funding to strengthen and maximise the outcomes particularly related to community resilience and increasing confidence in our most disadvantaged areas.
- 4 The Council has adopted a range of strategies including the launch of the County Durham Vision that celebrates the ongoing change and improvement for the county assist in resolving many of the challenges currently affecting our communities. In addition, the 2019 Housing Strategy sets out a clear plan to ensure our housing stock meets the needs of our communities and ensure that resources are in place to support our residents. The County Durham Plan also provides a context of opportunity in terms of allocation for housing and employment as well as identifying key areas within our communities which need protection or enhancement such as town centres and the general environment. The Towns and Villages Strategy provides a mechanism for accelerating the delivery of these established priorities and themes and provides a particular focus on those areas of the county which are the most deprived.
- 5 Since the original Towns and Villages Cabinet report, the COVID 19 pandemic has become one of the most profound challenges society has faced in more than a generation. We now need to anticipate and respond to how communities are being affected and ensure the investment supports recovery and build long term resilience. During the pandemic, the Council has worked with national, regional and local partners to protect our communities and plan for recovery. As we move towards the future and joining up our thinking through County Durham Together, we will need to acknowledge the rapid changes taking place, continue to support those most affected and adapt to new ways of working, shopping and travelling, including through a refocused approach to regeneration. In particular, the need to develop and strengthen community capacity and resilience going forward is a clear priority in ensuring a strong economic and healthy future.
- 6 In order to ensure that the delivery of the council's priorities and themes are also directed to the regeneration areas where the biggest impacts are possible, an evidence base has been developed using Middle Super Output Areas. There are 66 MSOA geographies across County Durham and this provides the best understanding of issues within a community. It is important that there is a sense check of the issues

identified reflecting that whilst the boundaries are largely in alignment there are some minor discrepancies when compared against the 63 electoral wards. Whilst MSOAs are used to collate evidence to inform consultation, the information gathered will be reflected as places that communities recognise.

- 7 The Towns and Villages Strategy will overlay current activity and projects with a view to improving benefits to our communities by aligning current investment and initiatives to ensure that local priorities are enhanced with funding directed to the most disadvantaged areas.
- 8 In order to deliver the Council's Vision for More and Better Jobs, Long and Independent Lives and Connected Communities, the following five themes for Towns and Villages have been developed: Strategic Investments, Housing and Community, Environment and Health, Built Environment and Transport and Connectivity. The themes cover a broad range of investment types, further detail is included in appendix 2.
- 9 Significant consultation has already taken place with our communities and Area Action Partnerships (AAP's) which include local members, members of the voluntary and community sector, business and the public. This early engagement has helped to shape many of the council's strategies including the Vision, the County Durham Plan and the Housing Strategy. This coupled with a consistent evidence base means that the Towns and Villages Strategy, reflects a detailed understanding of the needs and opportunities of our communities.
- 10 This engagement will continue as part of the further development of the Towns and Villages investment proposals and will be reflected in further updates to cabinet early in 2021.

Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

- (a) agree the County Durham Towns and Villages Strategy as set-out in this report;
- (b) endorse the evidence-based approach to prioritising projects for regeneration;
- (c) support the on-going discussions with our Area Action Partnerships in developing a programme of activity going forward;
- (d) receive a further report, detailing the Towns and Villages Investment Plan following discussions with the Area Action Partnerships; and

- (e) delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth and the Corporate Director of Resources, in consultation with the portfolio holders for Economic Regeneration and Deputy Leader and Finance, to approve any changes to the pilot programme as identified for this financial year.

Background

- 11 The current approach to our towns and villages was agreed by Cabinet on 12 December 2018 and set out the delivery of an enhanced approach to Town and Villages by; supporting an increase in capital programme investment through the capital bidding process; identifying strategic town centre regeneration schemes that alongside, partner investment, can deliver transformational change in key town centres and deprived areas across the County; and agreeing a programme management approach. Since this time, significant work has been undertaken to develop and pilot priority initiatives in line with Towns and Village regeneration priorities and align the key priorities for investment ensuring that the Council's Vision through the five themes (set out later in the report) can be achieved even in our most disadvantaged communities.
- 12 Alongside strategic investment programmes, the ongoing regeneration of the county's towns has remained a constant element of the Council's work with £38 million invested in town centre regeneration over the past ten years. It is important that we build on the successes achieved through this work to date, including the physical changes already seen in our main centres and the improved integration of the working arrangements between the range of services that identify, deliver and maintain the improvements made.
- 13 This integrated approach to regeneration has led to a current operational investment programme of more than £750 million covering Town Centres, Employment, Transport infrastructure and Housing investment schemes across the County.
- 14 The Towns and Villages Strategy seeks to ensure additional resource is directed to communities and programmes with identified needs, wherever possible linking with mainstream Council investment and partner expenditure to coordinate and maximise local investment and change. This approach improves the way we understand our communities by understanding how our residents interact and live within their environment including using evidence such as through County Durham Together.
- 15 With such unprecedented levels of change and investment, the Towns and Villages programme has been developed to support key strategic priorities and be responsive to local and thematic needs. The Council's Vision provides a shared understanding of what County Durham should look like in 15 years' time. It provides direction to key public, private and voluntary sector organisations that make up the County Durham Partnership enabling them to work together to improve the quality of life of our residents. The Vision sets out three strategic

ambitions and a range of outcomes that will be used to ensure that town and villages continue to align to priorities, maximise collaboration and provide added value right across the county. The Vision for 2035 is that County Durham is a place where:

- there are more and better jobs;
- people live long and independent lives; and
- our communities are well connected and supportive.

16 The County Durham Housing Strategy was adopted in July 2019. The Housing Strategy sets out the Council's and its partners' delivery priorities and approach to addressing housing issues in County Durham. The Housing Strategy seeks to put people first and focuses on the housing needs of our residents. The Housing Strategy contains a series of 'key messages' including:

- raising standards across the private rented sector through seeking greater licencing powers in order to tackle poor landlords, as well as continuous engagement with landlords and the extension of the Accredited Landlord Scheme for responsible landlords;
- working with those communities most affected by long term empty properties. This will include working with property owners and landlords with the aim of bringing empty properties back into use wherever possible; and
- improving the quality of the county's housing stock and wider housing environment.

17 The Towns and Villages Strategy will overlay current activity and projects with a view to improving benefits to our communities by aligning current investment and initiatives to ensure that local priorities are enhanced with funding directed to the most disadvantaged areas, in order to deliver the Council's Vision and other strategies such as the Housing Strategy.

Pilot Projects

18. The Cabinet Report in December 2018 identified a number of priorities with particular focus on improving town and village centres and high streets with a view to assessing and rolling out best practice. A range of pilot projects have been commissioned in a number of locations and this will continue to be rolled out as part of the future funding programme as the relative success of these projects have

demonstrated significant change and returning confidence to the areas where they are located.

The Digital High Street initiative

19. Funding has been used to support The Digital High Street Initiative. Initial pilot schemes in Bishop Auckland and Stanley means that free public Wi-Fi has now been installed in their town centres. Following the successful evaluation of the scheme, WiFi will shortly be installed in Chester-le-Street, Barnard Castle and Seaham with further centres to follow. Training is also being developed for retailers and businesses to maximise the use of online sales and promotion alongside opportunities to supporting mobile phone apps. The use of technology and smarter ways of working is seen as an important element of support for retailers to improve their business resilience as part of the economic recovery efforts and the continued changes to retailing.

Sacrison Front Street – Area Improvement Package

20. A central theme of the Towns and Villages strategy is alignment and sequencing of interventions at a local level. Identified on the basis of significant investments in private and social housing across the village, Towns and Villages is also supporting Front Street in Sacrison which is home to 37 operating retail businesses which offer a mix of food retail, leisure and hair and beauty. The focus of the programme is to improve the retail neighbourhood parade. The support builds upon the Sacrison Retail Improvement Project undertaken in 2017 which provided a collective marketing campaign for local businesses and gave 1-2-1 support to businesses. The programme of works also includes a 'Village Spruce Up', improvements to shoppers' car parking spaces and offering grants to support Shop Front Improvements as well as clearing dilapidated property and helping to bring other empty premises back into use. Successes include bringing the prominent former Lloyds Bank and Co-op buildings back into use for local businesses.

Former Easington Colliery School

21. The former Easington Colliery Primary School, in Seaside Lane, has stood empty since 1997. With various owners failing to find a viable use for it, over the past two decades the building's condition has deteriorated significantly and it has become a target for vandals. Its rundown appearance has impacted on both property prices and residents' well-being and local Members have been leading calls for action to be taken. Earlier this year, in line with the focus on vulnerable buildings, the Council consulted with residents on plans for the building's future after bringing it back into public ownership. Due to a lack of interest from developers and the continued failure to find a viable use for the former school, the Council had proposed demolishing the

buildings. Almost 350 people gave their views on the proposal, with 91 per cent agreeing that demolition was the best way of bringing the site back into use. Subject to the outcome of the planning application, monies have been identified for the demolition and restoration of the site into a pocket park until a longer-term solution is found for the site.

The strategy moving forward

22 The Towns and Villages Strategy will overlay current activity and projects with a view to improving benefits to our communities by aligning current investment and initiatives to ensure that local priorities are enhanced with funding directed to the most disadvantaged areas, in order to deliver the Council's Vision. The following five themes have been developed around the ambitions for More and Better Jobs; Long and Independent Lives; and Connected Communities. The themes for accelerating the delivery of the council ambitions and priorities through Towns and Villages are:

- Strategic Investments – to help achieve **more and better Jobs** through support for town and neighbourhood centres; link with Partner and wider investments to maximise outcomes; and to maximise integration between council activity and communities;
- Housing and Community - to support the accelerated delivery of the Housing Strategy; deliver resilient, inclusive and **connected communities**; and maximising the benefits from S106 monies and private investment;
- Environment and Health - to create local opportunities for physical activity; mental well-being through high quality environment; and support opportunities for addressing climate change helping to enable people to live **long and independent lives**;
- Built Environment - to drive and support regeneration activities within our towns and villages; find innovative solutions to underused / derelict land and buildings; support independent retailers and businesses to achieving **more and better jobs**; and to provide clean and attractive built environments that communities are proud of;
- Transport and Connectivity - to ensure **connected communities** through excellent connectivity for businesses, workforce and learning to help ensure our residents can access **more and better jobs**; optimise the use of well-maintained and connected transport corridors; encourage to use of alternative modes of transport including walking and cycling for **long and independent**

lives; and to support business with accessible car parking, utilising the opportunities for green travel.

- 23 Each of these themes is supported by a number of objectives designed to advance the strategy and align activity with the wider work of the Council and partners. These objectives are set out in appendix 2. The more detailed view of the alignment between the Council Vision and the five themes and associated objectives for the Town and Villages Strategy is set out within appendix 3 of this report.

Developing an Evidence Base

- 24 Alongside and building on previous consultation on a range of strategies and initiatives, an evidence base has been developed to assist in the targeting of interventions through the Towns and Villages programme. It considers a range of people based indicators including, employment, housing, health and crime with data considered for all of our communities at the Middle Super Output Area (MSOA) providing a rank of areas in most need of support.
25. The approach is consistent to the evidence base used for other strategies including the Housing Strategy and alongside rural proofing will ensure that we can understand the progress of our communities and how we can further support them further overtime. The use of MSOAs in county Durham is set out in more detail in appendix 4. Whilst MSOAs are used to collate evidence to inform consultation, this will be translated and presented as places that communities recognise.
- 26 As we move toward the future, we will need to continue to support those most affected, including utilising our health impact assessments to inform a refocused approach to regeneration targeting community resources and capacity in terms of help places reset and recover.

Next Steps and Consultation

- 27 The development of the Towns and Villages as a new approach to regeneration and aligned activity has been informed by previous consultations and alignment to the Council's Vision. The development of an interactive GIS mapping system will provide a baseline position of the area and help sequence the delivery of planned investments as well as coordinate the opportunities for future projects.
- 28 Subject to Cabinet approval of the Towns and Villages Strategy further consultation is proposed with each AAP. The Consultation will focus on sharing the evidence base identifying needs and current/ planned investments at a local level alongside the regeneration priorities and proposed towns and villages interventions which will make a positive impact on communities in the coming years. Following the Forum

presentation and discussion, each AAP Board will be asked to consolidate and submit a focused response.

- 29 Following the analysis of responses, an initial proposal for programme of works will be presented to Cabinet for approval in early 2021. This programme will be developed from the existing pipeline of projects and will be aligned against Themes and needs of our communities. The proposed investment decisions will also be the subject of a further round of AAP engagement.
- 30 An initial programme will be presented to Cabinet in early 2021 this will be part on an ongoing approach to regeneration and a place-based focus. Our communities and businesses will be central to this new approach and the AAPs will be mechanism whereby communities will be able to continue to identify issues and suggest future capital programmes and funding applications as they become available.

Phase	Milestone	Date
Setting Strategic Direction	Cabinet report setting out the Towns and Villages Strategy	October 2020
	Consultation with AAP Forums and Boards	Mid October – Mid November 2020
	Feedback to be received from the AAP Boards	Mid to late November
Developing Investment Programmes	Engagement with AAPs to consider initial programme of works.	Early 2021
	Report to Cabinet following engagement with AAPs to agree programme of works.	Early 2021
Monitoring programme impact	Monitoring of priorities and projects to reflect funding opportunities and change at community level through regular discussions with each AAP	On going

Background papers

Town and Villages Cabinet Report (December 2018)
 County Durham Housing Strategy (2019)
 Council Vision

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Whilst there are no legal implications for the adoption of this strategy per se, the projects which take place will involve the exercise of various Council powers.

Finance

The Towns and Villages Strategy will represent an additional demand on capital directed towards town and village regeneration. The proposals as identified seek to maintain the town centre capital programme at its current level while widening work to include support for further regeneration in towns and villages aligned to the themes identified. The Council has identified a budget of £18 million over the next 3 years that helps to address the inequalities faced by all communities.

Consultation

Discussions with the AAPs will take place and inform the Action Plan which will be considered by Cabinet in January 2021. Individual project consultations to be undertaken in line with established processes.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

The Council acknowledges that, in exercising its functions, it has a legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations. This duty applies to all people defined as having protected characteristics under that legislation. Through the Towns and Villages Strategy, positive improvements to communities and their environments will be made, including through improving leisure/social, residential and commercial opportunities.

The Equality impact assessment produced alongside the strategy will be revised following proposed consultation and the development of the Towns and Villages Delivery Plan.

Climate Change

The Towns and Villages Strategy contributes to the aims and objectives in response to the declared climate emergency. Opportunities for addressing climate change will be identified against the Environment and Health theme. Aligning Council activity and adding value to projects coming forward as part of addressing the climate emergency will be undertaken.

Human Rights

Protocol 1 Article 1: Every natural or legal person is entitled to the peaceful enjoyment of his possessions, including their property. Any interference with landowners' rights must be balanced against the wider public. Any implications of enforcement action or compulsory purchase will be considered in detail in the context of specific proposals.

Crime and Disorder

Crime is one of the indicators included to determine the worst performing MSOAs. Any projects identified will seek to reduce vulnerability, increase resilience and ensure public safety and security.

Staffing

No additional staff resource has been identified. The Towns and Villages Strategy will align Council activity and includes a focus on shared information, integrated solutions and better working arrangements across the Council.

Accommodation

There are no accommodation issues currently identified.

Risk

Individual projects will have risks assessed and managed as part of project management processes.

Procurement

When required, projects may require additional expertise commissioned to deliver projects in accordance with the Council's procurement rules/procedures.

Appendix 2 Town and Village Regeneration – themes and objectives

Theme: Strategic Investments

- Objective 1. To support town and neighbourhood centres to adapt to changes and new technology in meeting the needs of their communities;
- Objective 2. To link with Partner and wider investments to maximise outcomes; and
- Objective 3. To maximise integration between council activity and communities.

Theme: Housing and Community

- Objective 4. To support the accelerated delivery of the Housing Strategy – meeting housing needs and improving standards;
- Objective 5. To help deliver resilient and inclusive communities; and
- Objective 6. Maximising the benefits from S106 monies and private investment.

Theme: Environment and Health

- Objective 7. To create local opportunities for physical activity;
- Objective 8. To support mental well-being through high quality environment which is easily accessible to all; and
- Objective 9. To support opportunities for addressing climate change.

Theme: Built Environment

- Objective 10. To drive and support regeneration activities within our towns and villages;
- Objective 11. To find innovative solutions to underused / derelict land and buildings;

- Objective 12. Support independent retailers and businesses enabling them to become resilient and adaptable to rapid changes; and
- Objective 13. To provide clean and attractive built environments that communities are proud of.

Theme: Transport and Connectivity

- Objective 14. To ensure excellent connectivity for businesses, workforce and learning;
- Objective 15. To optimise the use of well-maintained and connected transport corridors;
- Objective 16. To encourage to use of alternative modes of transport to ensure health and well-being of communities;
- Objective 17. To support business with accessible car parking, utilising the opportunities for green travel.

These Themes and Objectives have been reviewed in light of the emergence Council vision and strongly correlate to the priorities and objectives. The alignment between the Council vision and the delivery themes and objectives of the Town and Villages programme is set out in

Appendix 3 Town and Village Regeneration - alignment

County Durham Vision –

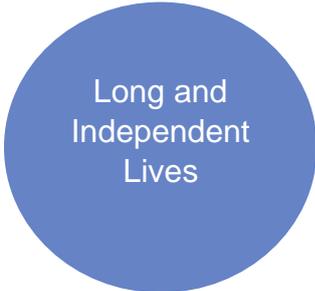
Town & Villages contribution



More and Better Jobs

- Delivery of a range of employment sites across the county
- A strong, competitive economy where County Durham is a premier place in the North East to do business
- A broader experience for residents and visitors to the county
- Young people will have access to good quality education, training and employment
- Helping all people into rewarding work
- Fewer people will be affected by poverty and deprivation within the county

- A focus on more deprived communities, providing more opportunities to the most disadvantaged
 - Helping independent retailers and businesses to become resilient & adaptive to rapid change
 - Ensuring excellent connectivity for business, workforce and learning
- Supporting business with accessible car parking utilising opportunities for green travel



Long and Independent Lives

- Children and young people will enjoy the best start in life, good health and emotional wellbeing
- Children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities will achieve the best possible outcomes
- A physical environment that will contribute to good health
- Promotion of positive behaviours
- Better integration of health and social care services
- People will be supported to live independently for as long as possible by delivering more homes to meet the needs of older and disabled people

- Creating local opportunities for physical activity
 - Supporting mental well being through high quality environment which is easily accessible to all
 - Supporting opportunities to address climate change
- Encouraging the use of alternative modes of transport to ensure the health and well being of communities



Connected
Communities

- All children and young people will have a safe childhood
- Standards will be maintained or improved across County Durham's housing stock
- Our towns and villages will be vibrant, well used, clean, attractive and safe
People will have good access to workplaces, services, retail and leisure opportunities
- Communities will come together and support each other
- Delivery of new high-quality housing which is accessible and meets the needs of our residents
- Meeting Housing Needs and Improving Standards
- Helping deliver resilient & Inclusive Communities
- Driving and support regeneration activity within towns and villages
- Finding innovative solutions to underused / derelict land and buildings
- Providing clean and attractive built environments
communities are proud of Optimising well maintained and connected transport corridors



Excellent
Council

- Our resources will be managed effectively
- We will create a workforce for the future
- We will design our services with the customer
- We will use data and technology more effectively
- We will actively performance manage our services
- Linking with Partner & Wider Investments
- Maximising Integration between communities and Council Activity
- Supporting towns and Villages to adapt to changes and New Technology
- Using a robust evidence base to support decision making and monitor the impacts of change

Maximising the benefits from s106 monies and private investment

Appendix 4 Middle-Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) in County Durham

Middle-Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) are a statistical geography created for the 2011 Census of England and Wales based on population. There are 7,201 MSOAs in England and Wales. They have been created to improve how people based, or demographic, statistics are reported and presented. Populations for MSOA's range from 5,200 to 14,300, with an average 8,000 people.

The number of MSOAs in a local authority depends on the population of the area and in County Durham there are 66 MSOAs. A more rural location in County Durham, for example would cover a larger geographic area but still have a similar population to other MSOAs in the County. All the MSOA boundaries lie within the local authority boundary.

MSOA's can be drilled down further to a smaller statistical geography called Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA's), which follow the same premise but for smaller populations. The population of each LSOA ranges from 900 to 4200 and with an average of 1600; five LSOA's make up one MSOA.

Using MSOA level data is the most appropriate statistical geography to use for the Towns and Villages Strategy as it provides detail at a localised level which is consistent whilst identifying the issues faced within the communities. MSOAs are particularly suitable for keeping track of statistics over time to understand our communities better, see the progress our communities are making and how they are developing and how we can support them.

The ability to analyse, report and present data at this scale for areas in County Durham makes it easier to identify the right types of issues and any cumulative issues more accurately at a localised level that may have been missed if larger or smaller geographies were used.

Each MSOA has a unique code and the names given to the MSOA's allows MSOA level data to be easily presented. The names given to MSOA's are different to names given to Electoral Wards, whose population varies substantially across the country. Sometimes MSOA boundaries align with ward boundaries and other times they are different, so different names are needed. To avoid confusion between MSOA's and Wards, the names are not identical. They give us a resource to distinguish between data based on other boundaries and therefore make it easier to interpret and present the data.