

**Cabinet**

**10 February 2021**

**Towns and Villages  
Investment Plan**

**Key Decision No. REG/01/21**



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## **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 update Cabinet on the Towns and Villages programme, which has identified over £750 million of investment across the county as part of a long-term commitment to supporting thriving communities.
- 2 Following the agreement of the Towns and Villages Strategy in October 2020, Cabinet is asked to endorse the Towns and Villages Investment Plan, which sets out the £20 million commitment to our most disadvantaged communities.
- 3 Further to the success of the 14 Area Action Partnership (AAP) consultation events held in October and November 2020, it is recommended that Cabinet also agree an additional £5 million investment, which will further support the Covid Recovery priorities and provide each AAP with a budget in recognition of the opportunities to deliver local priorities raised by communities.

### **Executive Summary**

- 4 As an integrated approach to place-based regeneration, Towns and Villages has identified a conservative estimated investment programme of more than £750 million. A clear program supporting place priorities,

such as the re-use of derelict buildings, walking and cycling improvements, public realm and leisure schemes for our towns and villages across our large and diverse county.

- 5 Towns and Villages is a long-standing priority of the Council. In the context of the impact of the economic recession induced by the restrictions required due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our towns and villages face increased challenges. This significant boost to investment across the county will provide vital stimulus to support our towns and villages to revive and recover.
- 6 By adopting an integrated approach to place-based regeneration, the Towns and Villages Programme ensures stronger outcomes by aligning Council activity and working alongside our Partners.
- 7 The Strategy, as agreed by Cabinet October 2020, was subject to consultation across all 14 AAPs which are open to the public and geographically cover the full County area, this consultation reflected the approach received overwhelming support.
- 8 A key objective of the Towns and Villages Strategy is ensuring added value to investment. By identifying current investment, it is possible to better align projects, realign budgets to priorities and identify gaps or areas where more support will create better community outcomes.
- 9 This includes the delivery of Council services alongside the investment of our Partners across the county such as ensuring quality affordable housing. Towns and Villages provides opportunities to support our businesses and retailers in these unprecedented times; revamping our town centres to make them more resilient to changing economic conditions; developing strategic employment opportunities to create more and better jobs; making improvements to walking and cycling infrastructure and tackling housing issues that currently exist including empty properties and pockets of low demand across the county.
- 10 The Strategy provides the context for future investment decisions to be taken by our partners ensuring that priorities identified directly through the consultation and the supporting evidence can be delivered. It ensures that budgets such as Section 106 money delivered through planning permissions and local transport programmes are aligned to the priorities. Finally, the Investment Plan brings together all investment to provide additional capacity to help those areas in most need to maximise the outcomes particularly relating to community resilience and increasing confidence in our most disadvantaged areas.
- 11 County Durham is primarily a rural county and therefore the future prosperity of our rural areas is central to the success of Towns and Villages. County Durham's rural areas vary widely in character from

remote and sparsely populated areas in the Pennine Dales, to the larger villages located within the former coalfield communities. The specific needs of our rural communities are widespread meaning that issues including rural isolation and community resilience, specific employment and housing needs as well as transport and connectivity is central to this approach.

- 12 County Durham has number of challenges ahead including how it addresses the Climate Change Emergency and how it responds to the impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic. The Strategy will support the county's recovery and build long term resilience by focusing upon these challenges and ensuring all projects are aligned to and take account of these issues when identifying the future investment plan.
- 13 As part of agreeing the Strategy, Cabinet also agreed £20 million to support our most disadvantaged communities. The Strategy brings together three key strands: those that are delivered in conjunction with or by our many partners that operate in County Durham; realigning existing budgets and services delivered by the Council; and the Investment Plan details the additional resource of £20 million.
- 14 Following the success of the consultation events with the AAPs, which were held in October and November 2020 and are open to all communities, it is proposed that a further allocation of £5 million is made to ensure that opportunities to improve local areas can be further enhanced. This raises the overall Towns and Villages programme allocation to £25 million. This financial commitment is to accelerate the delivery of County Council priorities through a greater understanding of both the needs and opportunities that exist within our communities. It also provides an opportunity to ensure that every AAP will benefit from this funding by allocating a specific budget for each area to spend against the agreed priorities of the Strategy.
- 15 The Towns and Villages Investment Plan details the projects and priorities that will deliver targeted improvements to our most disadvantaged communities. This partnership approach will be embedded through regular dialogue with our AAPs including the monitoring of projects and the identification of new opportunities.

## **Recommendation(s)**

- 16 Cabinet is recommended to:
  - (a) agree a further £5 million investment, to bring the Towns and Villages funding allocation to £25 million, to supplement the existing Towns and Villages programme which is delivering over £750 million investment across the County;

- (b) agree the detail contained in the Towns and Villages Investment Plan that sets the investment programme for 2021-2024 years, as set out in Appendix 2;
- (c) endorse the Governance arrangements as detailed within the report; and
- (d) delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth and the interim Corporate Director of Resources, in consultation with the portfolio holders for Economic Regeneration and Deputy Leader and Finance, to approve any changes to the Investment Plan as identified for financial year 2021/22.

## Background

17 The current approach to Towns and Villages was agreed by Cabinet on 12 December 2018 and the Strategy was agreed on 14 October 2020. The Strategy acknowledged that significant work has been undertaken to develop and pilot initiatives in line with Towns and Village place priorities. It also aligns the key priorities for investment to the Council's Vision by setting out five agreed themes:

- Strategic Investments;
- Housing and Community;
- Environment and Health;
- Built Environment; and
- Transport and Connectivity.

18 The ongoing regeneration of the county's towns has remained a constant element of the Council's work. It is important that we build on the successes achieved through this work to date, including the physical changes already seen in our Towns and Villages and the improved integration of the working arrangements between the range of services that identify, deliver and maintain the improvements made. This integrated approach to regeneration has led to a conservative estimated operational investment programme of more than £750 million covering town centres, employment, transport infrastructure and housing investment schemes across the county.



19 As part of the Towns and Villages Strategy £20 million was agreed 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 together with using evidence such as through County Durham Together and the Council's Vision helps us understand how our residents interact and live within their environment.

## Public Engagement

- 20 Following Cabinet agreement to the Strategy and a financial commitment of £20 million, discussions with our Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) took place to help develop a programme of activity as part of a Towns and Villages Investment Plan.
- 21 A series of virtual meetings were hosted between 20 October and 12 November 2020 by each of the 14 AAPs to gather views on a wide range of issues including Towns and Villages. Attendees were informed of the partnership working and alignment of current activity including that Towns and Villages has already helped identify over £750 million of investment across the county. Consultees were provided with an opportunity to influence how a further financial commitment could address the current challenges and opportunities within their AAP area.
- 22 In total over 1,000 comments were received from people who attended the 14 events. The suggestions made during the event were then included within a summary report and considered by each of the AAP Boards. The AAP Board Members were asked whether the summary covered the key areas of focus for their towns and villages; if not, what additional priorities / issues need to be considered and taking all of that into account what the three priorities were for their AAP area. The comments put forward were widespread and included:
- a need to provide support for retailers and businesses;
  - a need to focus on the public realm and general appearance of some town centres and neighbourhood parades;
  - opportunities to repurpose and resolve issues of vacant commercial properties;
  - a need to tackle private landlords and address empty properties;
  - ensure good quality design of our places and spaces;
  - meeting the community's housing needs especially bungalows and specialist accommodation;
  - the identification of improved opportunities for healthy living;
  - improved connectivity through public transport, walking, cycling and broadband connectivity;
  - traffic and parking;
  - investment in community facilities, as well as a growing concern around litter, fly tipping and other anti-social behavior.
- 23 All comments received have been considered and achievable priorities which would meet the Towns and Villages Strategy have been identified

within the Investment Plan. In light of the alignment between the identified community priorities and the agreed Towns and Villages themes, it is recommended to increase the Towns and Villages budget allocation from £20 million to £25 million. This financial commitment will ensure that local schemes and projects can be delivered and will address the challenges and opportunities that are important across all of our communities.

## **Investment Plan**

- 24 Taking into account the £750 million worth of investment across the county and the wishes of the communities raised during the AAP events, an initial proposal for programme of works is set out within the Investment Plan. The Investment Plan demonstrates that there are opportunities for improvements across all of our AAP areas but with a specific emphasis on our most disadvantaged communities in an attempt to provide an equitable approach to regeneration.
- 25 The Council's commitment via Towns and Villages has been the catalyst which has resulted in significant regeneration projects across the county by supporting delivery and maximising outcomes. This has included contributions by acquiring sites and land assembly to deliver strategic investment. Such investments have included the opening of Horden Rail Station which links communities in the east of the county to the local, regional and national network and supports much wider opportunities for more and better jobs and support the commitment to regeneration in Horden. The project delivered £10.55 million of investment following a Council commitment of £3.3 million. Furthermore, as part of our town centre transformation, a £600,000 commitment by the Council has secured a multi-million investment to secure the redevelopment of Festival Walk, Spennymoor which will provide much wider benefits to communities in the area.
- 26 The full Investment Plan is set out at Appendix 2, providing brief details of the projects currently supported through Towns and Villages, the programme allocations and the initial focus for delivery. The Investment Plan will remain under regular review and responsive to challenges and opportunities that arise by providing alignment and additionality with aligned Council and Partner activity.
- 27 The Investment Plan sets out the commitment to date and looks forward to the programme of investment that is coming up. There is activity taking place across all AAP areas but with a specific emphasis on our most disadvantaged communities to ensure an equitable approach to regeneration.

28 The Investment Plan builds upon regeneration activity which is already underway across County Durham and can be broadly summarised into the following five identified themes:

- Strategic Investments

Investment which supports digital innovation and environmental and public realm improvements across all of our town centres is being undertaken. The use of technology and smarter ways of working and the importance of attractive neighbourhood centres was identified as being significantly important during the AAP consultation events. In particular, the need to support our businesses and retailers and improve their business resilience as part of economic recovery efforts and help them to respond to the continued changes to retailing. Opportunities for Targeted Business Improvements scheme has been rolled out with great success, meaning that businesses in towns and villages across the county, including our rural communities, can benefit.

- Housing and Community

Engaging with communities during the AAP events, identified the importance of addressing localised issues of concern particularly those which can help to maintain the social fabric and improve the resilience of local communities. Such projects have included extensions to community buildings to support the delivery or development of services which was particularly important for remote and rural communities.

The importance of ensuring that our community housing needs are met as well as tackling blight caused by empty homes and problem landlords was also raised during the AAP events. For example, the Investment Plan identifies the role of the Housing Opportunities Fund and projects to be delivered via Community Housing opportunities. These schemes are in addition to improving the existing housing stock such as through the Green Home Fuel Efficiency Programme in areas around Ferryhill, Chilton, West Cornforth and Bishop Middleham, meaning that properties with a low energy efficiency rating will be improved, Shildon now also has a Community Action Scheme which tackles issues such as empty properties and noise.

- Built Environment

The need to tackle vulnerable and often vacant buildings was raised by the public during the AAP events. By utilising the economic potential of vulnerable buildings and enabling



opportunities for redevelopment and investment can increase community and social value by addressing issues of anti-social behaviour and, by creating an attractive appearance and safe local environment.

- Environment and Health

Challenges ahead include how the County addresses the Climate Change Emergency and respond to the impacts from the Covid 19 pandemic. Towns and Villages will help support the county's recovery and build long term resilience by focusing on these challenges and ensuring all projects are aligned to them or take them into account when identifying future investment opportunities. Opportunities including the maintenance and improvement of public open spaces, remains a priority for many local communities at the current time, it is anticipated that this theme will need to be responsive to future challenges.

- Transport and Connectivity

The on-going need to ensure that residents can access jobs, services and facilities by public transport was a key challenge identified during the AAP events. Through our existing arrangements, we will continue to encourage bus operators to provide services where they are needed. Specific opportunities to enhance walking and cycling were also identified through the consultation such as projects including: the Stockton-Darlington railway line; the Weardale Way; Murton to Dalton Park and improvements south of Pesspool Wood to Wingate East Durham Rural Corridor at Trimdon link to Coxhoe. Funding has already been committed to help transform the heritage Weardale Railway, as a major visitor attraction. Forthcoming projects to address issues associated with broadband connectivity, particularly in our rural communities and around social isolation in our elderly communities are also likely to come to fruition in future years.

- 29 The Investment Plan clearly demonstrates that all areas of the county will benefit from Towns and Villages. The allocation of an additional £5 million for AAP area programmes will further ensure that there are significant opportunities for our local communities and partners to focus on their own priorities for regeneration. The allocation provides funding amounting to £300,000 (available across 2021/22 – 2023/24) to each of the 14 AAPs to deliver projects identified within their own communities. Bids for funding will be made through the established AAP funding process.

- 30 Given the scope of the Towns and Villages programme and the established process of local priority setting and resourcing, higher value projects may be developed drawing together existing AAP allocations and the uplifted Towns and Villages funding. Full details of the mechanisms for AAPs to access the Towns and Villages Small Area Improvement fund will be circulated to each of the AAPs to allow schemes for 2021/22 to be identified, developed and delivered.

## **Governance**

- 31 In order to ensure that Towns and Villages supports projects that are identified in line with the Strategy, governance arrangements have been put in place which consist of an Officer Project Team (OPT) and the Towns and Villages Board.
- 32 The OPT will ensure the delivery of the projects identified within the Investment Plan including monitoring the success of the Towns and Villages Strategy. The OPT will be responsible for identifying the need for change, based on opportunities that may be forthcoming. Any projects delivered by the AAPs will be fed into the OPT via the two AAP Principal Coordinators.
- 33 The Towns and Villages Board will receive regular updates on the progress of the projects in the Investment Plan and make decisions on any issues that may arise together with considering future project opportunities. The Board is primarily in place to ensure that the projects progress through the use of delegated powers without the need to escalate all decisions to Cabinet. However, Cabinet decisions will continue to be sought in line with the Council's Constitution.

## **Communications and Marketing**

- 34 Given the scope and variety of projects included in the Investment Plan, there is a need for projects delivered by Towns and Villages to be clearly recognisable in a style recognisable by all audiences, so that they can identify a Towns and Villages project.
- 35 A new style template for projects delivered through the Towns and Villages programme will replace the current project design graphics providing both programme identification and locality specific references, building on pilot work undertaken as part of investment projects during 2019 and 2020.

## **Next Steps**

- 36 Public consultation via the AAPs has provided a pipeline of projects to be included within the Investment Plan. It is now essential that the delivery of these projects is secured. In order to ensure that the

challenges and opportunities raised by our communities are embedded into future investment decisions made by the Council and its Partners, on-going conversations will be held with our communities to ensure that their views are at the forefront of future Council and partner activity and investment decisions. This partnership approach will be embedded through regular discussions with our AAPs including the monitoring of progress of projects and the identification of new opportunities.

- 37 As projects identified within the Investment Plan progress, further reports will be considered through the governance arrangements identified and, where appropriate, decisions will be made by Cabinet. This includes site assembly through the use of statutory enforcement powers, the use of Section 106 monies, local transport priorities, a future report on Housing Strategy Targeted Delivery Plans (TDPs) and other budget areas for delivering environmental opportunities.
- 38 TDPs have their origin in the County Durham Housing Strategy and relate to the objective of maintaining and improving the existing housing stock and the wider housing environment. TDPs are being developed as an approach to deliver an intensive, focused and coordinated programme of activities by the Council and its partners in areas most in need across the county. Whilst, there will be a wider programme of TDPs, Cabinet in March will be asked to consider the first round of documents for areas including in New Kyo; Coundon Grange; Blackhall Colliery South; Thickley; Deneside East; and Stanley Hall West.
- 39 The initial Investment Plan as presented is part on an ongoing approach to regeneration and a place-based focus. Our communities and / or businesses will be central to this new approach and the AAPs will be the mechanism whereby communities will be able to continue to identify issues and suggest future capital schemes and funding applications as they emerge. The Investment Plan will continue to evolve through monitoring, further consultation, working of existing and new partners.

## **Background papers**

Town and Villages Cabinet Report (December 2018)

Towns and Villages Strategy Cabinet Report (October 2020)

County Durham Housing Strategy (2019)

Council Vision

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

Whilst there are no legal implications for the Investment Plan per se, the projects which take place will involve the exercise of various Council powers. Legal implications for each individual project will be determined and considered as part of each project plan and risk assessment.

### **Finance**

The Towns and Villages Strategy will represent an additional demand on capital directed towards town and village regeneration. The projects 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.

Following the latest round of AAP engagement, an additional allocation of £5 million is proposed to the Towns and Village programme providing an overall budget of £25 million over the next 3 years that helps to address the inequalities faced by all communities. This additional allocation is possible as a result of ongoing strong financial controls and the prioritisation of resources to meet local needs.

### **Consultation**

Discussions with the AAPs have resulted in more than 1000 comments which have been considered to inform the Investment Plan. Detail of the AAP engagement is detailed within the report. Each AAP will have access to £300,000 across the programme lifetime to deliver projects in line with Town and village programme aims. Individual project consultations for major schemes to be funded through the Town and Village Programme will be undertaken in line with established processes. Monitoring of priorities and projects to reflect funding opportunities and change at community level will be undertaken through regular discussions with each AAP.

### **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 has been revised following the AAP engagement and has informed the Investment Plan and reflects AAP feedback and projects which may impact on those with protected characteristics. The Equality Impact Assessment can be viewed at Appendix 3.

## **Climate Change**

The Towns and Villages Strategy and Investment Plan contributes to the aims and objectives of the Climate Emergency Response Plan. Opportunities for addressing climate change have been identified against the Environment and Health and Transport and Connectivity theme. Aligning Council activity and adding value to projects coming forward as part of addressing the climate emergency will be undertaken. The need to address climate change was a key theme from the AAP engagement.

## **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 identified within the Investment Plan 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.