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**DARLINGTON TOWN CENTRE PEDESTRIAN HEART  
SHOP FRONT GRANT SCHEME**

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**Responsible Cabinet Member – Councillor David Lyonette,  
Regeneration and Planning Portfolio**

**Responsible Director – John Buxton, Director of Development and Environment**

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**Purpose of Report**

1. To seek approval for a grant scheme to help improve the appearance of shop fronts within the town centre with the aim of encouraging further investment and regeneration as part of the wider Darlington Pedestrian Heart scheme.

**Information and Analysis**

2. The main elements of the Pedestrian Heart scheme, described in previous Cabinet reports, will enhance the town centre by reorganising the traffic system and creating a quality environment and a stimulating place for living, shopping, entertainment and relaxing. There is an emphasis on quality design, reinforcing the character and heritage of Darlington. A less well-known element of the scheme is a proposal to accompany the improvement in the public spaces of the centre with an improvement in the appearance of the buildings which front onto them. To encourage owners and occupiers to improve their buildings, it has been suggested that a limited amount of money be made available to them in the form of grants for eligible works. The capital funding for the grants would be provided by One NorthEast (ONE) through the Single Programme. This capital has already been approved as part of the £3,259,000 funding package from ONE and was released by Cabinet on 15 March 2005.
3. The grant scheme would be managed by the Borough Council. Experience with other building grant schemes suggests that progress will be slow to begin with (partly because the scheme needs time to get underway and generate interest and partly because improvements can have long lead-in times), but that it will gather momentum. It is therefore proposed that the scheme should operate over a three-year period, with funding gradually increasing. ONE have consequently made available a total of £150,000 as follows: £25,000 in the current financial year, 2005/06; £50,000 in 2006/07; and £75,000 in 2007/08.
4. It is proposed that the grants would be offered for 50% of the cost of eligible external improvement works to shop fronts, up to a normal maximum grant for a property of £10,000. (In the case of a property with a particularly wide shop front, or which fronts onto two streets, the maximum grant level could be set higher - up to £20,000.). The ONE funding should therefore help to improve at least 15 properties and should bring forward at least £150,000 matching investment in the town centre by owners and occupiers. If

Members approve the scheme today ONE would set the Council a target of improving properties with a total of 1800 sqm of gross floorspace. Officers consider this to be achievable. Although not an ONE target, it is hoped that the grants would help bring back into use some shop premises which have been vacant for some time. This would further help stimulate the economy of the town centre.

5. Day-to-day supervision of the scheme will be carried out by the Council's Conservation Officer within the Planning Services section of the Development and Environment Department. A list of properties eligible in principle for grant will be drawn up, and the following guidelines are proposed as a first sift of the selection process:
  - (a) A property must be within the Town Centre Conservation Area or a street fronting on to the Pedestrian Heart Scheme; and
  - (b) It must be within one of the main shopping frontages. (Essentially Northgate, Prebend Row, Bondgate, High Row, Post House Wynd, Skinnergate, Tubwell Row, Blackwellgate, Horsemarket, Bakehouse Hill, Crown Street, Houndgate and Grange Road): but
  - (c) Excluded will be any building owned or occupied by Darlington Borough Council, a Government department or agency, the Post Office or the owners of the Cornmill and Queen Street shopping centres.
6. About 250 properties fall within these parameters but many are in no obvious need of improvement. The properties in greatest need will be targeted for a direct approach by Council officers. The scheme will include essential repair works to traditional shop fronts which contribute to the character or appearance of the conservation area as well as the replacement of unsatisfactory shop fronts with appropriate reinstatements.
7. Applicants will be required to explain on the application form why grant-aid is necessary to the carrying-out the improvements. This is not intended as a means test as such (for example, an applicant might have the necessary resources to carry out the work but have no particular wish to do so if the shop front sufficiently meets his/her requirements from a business point of view and he/she has no works planned). However, it is likely to rule out grants to major national companies who tend to have adequately-funded, regular, maintenance schedules. It is expected that most of the grants would go to individual shop-owners and small local or regional companies. Grant-aided works will be safeguarded from subsequent inappropriate alteration by the application of normal development control powers (commercial premises do not have the 'permitted development' rights of domestic properties). An appropriate clause in the grant would allow claw back of funds if the shop front design was changed within three years.
8. The formal procedure for offering grants for building works to properties in conservation areas was agreed by Council recently: the Director of Development and Environment in consultation with the Cabinet Member with the Regeneration and Planning Portfolio are granted delegated powers for the approval of grants (Min.91(10)/Apr/05). In terms of process, this will follow a technical assessment of each application by the Conservation Officer, which will often involve negotiation and advice on matters of detailed design. The

criteria for the assessments will be in line with those set by English Heritage for their grant schemes in conservation areas (such as in the successful Northgate Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme).

### **Outcome of Consultations**

9. This is not a scheme for which external consultation was considered necessary but in informal discussions English Heritage have welcomed it.

### **Financial Implications**

10. The cost of the scheme is £150,000 spread over three years: £25,000 in 2005/06; £50,000 in 2006/07; and £75,000 in 2007/08. Match funding of at least £150,000, spread out over the three years, will be received from owners and occupiers taking part. The funding will be provided by One NorthEast through the Single Programme. The revenue costs for managing the scheme will be met from within the Planning Services section budget.

### **Legal Implications**

11. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

### **Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998**

12. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

### **Council Policy Framework**

13. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework.

### **Decision Deadline**

14. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

### **Recommendation**

15. It is recommended that Cabinet approves the setting up of the Darlington Town Centre Shop Front Grant Scheme as outlined in the report.

## **Reasons**

16. The recommendation will help encourage further investment and regeneration in Darlington town centre as part of the Pedestrian Heart scheme.

**John Buxton**  
**Director of Development and Environment**

## **Background Papers**

Reports to Cabinet – ‘Darlington Town Centre Pedestrian Heart’ March 2005

Reports to Cabinet – Capital Programme 2005/6–2006/7 Release of Funding, April 2005

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