

DARLINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL CAPITAL STRATEGY 2025/26



DARLINGTON
Borough Council

Darlington Borough Council

Capital Strategy

Introduction

1. The Capital Strategy has been developed in line with the CIPFA Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities 2024. The Capital Strategy is intended to give a high level overview of how capital expenditure and financing plans are decided upon and provides the framework for the development, management and monitoring of the Council's capital investment plans.
2. The Strategy aligns with the priorities in the Council Plan and focuses on core principles that underpin the Council's approach to capital investments; the governance framework required to ensure the capital programme is delivered and provides value for money for the residents of Darlington.
3. The Strategy is integrated with the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) (which incorporates the Capital Programme, the Asset Management Plan and Treasury Management Strategy) and will be reviewed as such on an annual basis

The Key objective of Darlington's Capital Strategy

4. The **capital strategy** defines and outlines the approach to capital investments and is fundamental to the Council's financial planning process. The key objective of the capital strategy is to deliver a capital programme that.
 - (a) Ensures capital expenditure and investment decisions are used to support the delivery of the services according to the priorities within the Council plan and supporting strategies.
 - (b) Is affordable, financially prudent and sustainable.
 - (c) Ensures the most cost effective use is made of existing assets and new capital investment.
 - (d) Provides Value for Money.
 - (e) Encourages Invest to Save initiatives to make efficiencies within the Council's revenue budget.
 - (f) Ensures the appraisal and prioritisation process for new schemes is robust and captures risks and mitigating factors.

The Council's Vision and Key priorities

5. Capital expenditure should support the Council's continuing commitment to the core principles and ambitions set out within the Council Plan, which articulates the Council's vision of **Darlington is one of the best places to live, learn, work and invest in the UK, with a strong and sustainable economy, healthy thriving communities and opportunities for all**. All capital expenditure proposals should be considered alongside the following priorities which the Council is committed to in order to achieve the vision;
 - (a) Economy: A strong sustainable economy and highly skilled workforce with opportunities for all.
 - (b) Homes: Affordable and secure homes that meet the current and future needs of residents.
 - (c) Living Well: A healthier and better quality of life for longer, supporting those who need it most.
 - (d) Children and Young People: Best start in life, realising potential and raising aspirations for our children and young people.

(e) Communities: Safer, healthier and more engaged communities.

(f) Local Environment: A well-connected, clean and sustainable borough.

6. Overarching all of the above is the focus on the Council being financially stable and being run as effectively and efficiently as possible, ensuring value for money and good governance which this strategy is part of.

Governance Arrangements

7. The Capital Programme is the Council's plan of capital works for future years, including details on the funding of the schemes.

8. The programme is determined by the need to incur capital expenditure, capital resources available; and the revenue implications flowing from the capital expenditure.

9. The Council's Constitution and financial regulations govern the capital programme process and require Full Council to agree the programme annually. The reports of the Executive Director – Resources and Governance will consider the compliance of the proposed schemes in the programme with the medium term financial plan, the capital resources available, the revenue implications of the proposed capital expenditure and any other relevant information.

10. All schemes are formally approved into the capital programme by following a process as set out in the financial regulations and approved by Council. The inclusion of a scheme in the programme does not constitute authority to incur expenditure. Each capital scheme shall be the subject of a written report by the responsible Director to Cabinet and this report shall include the need for the proposed expenditure, its place in the Council's strategic plans, the estimated capital cost analysed as appropriate, the estimated revenue implications (if applicable) and the methods of financing.

11. Cabinet receive regular capital monitoring reports and approve variations to the programme within Cabinet's delegated authority limits.

12. Cabinet also considers new bids that fall outside the annual budget process.

13. Schemes with a final outturn level over £1m are reported to Cabinet comparing actual cost, timeliness and quality with the original and amended approvals.

14. Scrutiny Committees can call in Cabinet reports, receive and scrutinise reports.

15. All projects progressing to the capital programme follow the constitution and financial regulations and the capital programme is subject to internal and external audit.

Investment evaluation and prioritisation

16. As part of the budget planning process services are required to submit capital proposals for consideration to the Asset Management & Capital Projects Review Board (AM & CPRB) for investment decisions. The capital investment appraisal process focuses on:

- (a) Policy and strategic fit
- (b) Affordability and resources
- (c) VFM, cost/benefit

- (d) Options appraisal
- (e) Risk assessment and
- (f) Capability and capacity within the Council to manage and deliver the project

17. Where capital expenditure requirements exceed external funding availability, bids for internal resources are prepared and assessed by the AM & CPRB using a scoring model which has regard to the capital strategy, asset management plan and the Council Plan. AM & CPRB submit to Chief Officers Executive (COE) a list of assessed bids. COE then develop proposals for inclusion in the Capital Programme, Cabinet consider these proposals and make recommendations to Council for final approval.
18. The AM & CPRB, chaired by the Executive Director – Environment, Highways and Community Services and including representation from all departments, maintain a continuous review of capital planning, management and reporting, with regard to best practice, experience and opportunities for improving the Council's capital and asset management.
19. The AM & CPRB oversee implementation of standards and procedures and make recommendations to other parties (Chief Officers Executive, Cabinet, Council) as appropriate. In developing their proposals, AM & CPRB shall, in addition to departmental capital expenditure plans, have due regard to:
- (a) the various funding streams available from government and other grants
 - (b) developer contributions towards capital expenditure under section 106 agreements and any other similar arrangements
 - (c) internal resources available from capital receipts, non-supported borrowing and revenue contributions to capital expenditure.

Invest to save projects

20. Departments are encouraged to consider innovation in service provision that can drive efficiency and deliver cashable savings. Invest to save bids will be considered on the same basis as other capital proposals and need to demonstrate what savings and benefits will be achieved as a result of the proposed initiative. However, as the benefits of these schemes should outweigh the costs it is likely these bids will be prioritised.

Approvals outside the normal budget setting process

21. Any additional capital proposals required within year and outside the annual budget process must be submitted to the AM & CPRB for consideration. The group will then appraise the scheme and it will be reported to Cabinet for approval.

Capital or Treasury Management Investments

22. Treasury Management investment activity covers those investments which arise from the Council's cash flows and debt management activity, and ultimately represent balances which need to be invested until the cash is required for use in the general course of business.
23. For Treasury Management investments the security and liquidity of funds are placed ahead of the investment return. The management of associated risk is set out in the Treasury Management Strategy and the Annual Investment Strategy.

Service and Commercial Investments

24. These are investments for policy reasons outside of normal treasury management activity. This may include:

- (a) **Service Investments** - These are investments held clearly and explicitly in the course of the provision, and for the purposes, of operational services, including economic regeneration. Any potential Service Investment would be presented to Cabinet for approval prior to commencement.
- (b) **Commercial Investment** - These are investments taken mainly for financial reasons and may include investments taken with the aim of making a financial surplus for the Council.

25. Commercial investments also include fixed assets which are held primarily for financial benefit, such as investment properties. Any commercial Investment would be presented to Cabinet for approval prior to commencement.

Due Diligence

26. For all capital investments, the appropriate level of due diligence will be undertaken with the extent and depth reflecting the level of additional risk being considered.

27. Due diligence process and procedures will include:

- (a) Effective scrutiny of proposed investments.
- (b) Identification of the risk to both the capital sums invested and the returns.
- (c) Understanding the extent and nature of any external underwriting of those risks.
- (d) The potential impact on the financial sustainability of the Council if those risks come to fruition.
- (e) Identification of the assets being held for security against debt and any prior charges on those assets.
- (f) Where necessary independent and expert advice will be sought.

Loans to External Bodies or Organisations

28. The Council's capital programme also includes provision to provide loan facilities to external bodies or organisations for activities that are aligned to, and support, Council service objectives and/or corporate priorities. Examples may include, supporting economic growth such as housebuilding and improving the health and wellbeing of local communities.

29. Under statutory regulations these loans are treated as capital expenditure.

30. In making such loans the Council is exposing itself to the risk of the borrower defaulting on loan repayments. The Council, in making these loans must therefore ensure they are prudent and have fully considered the risk implications. The loans for these purposes will be subject to a financial appraisal and a series of due diligence checks, and only be provided if the Council is fully satisfied of the borrower's ability to meet their obligations. Wherever possible, the Council will aim to mitigate its risks and exposure to default by seeking appropriate additional security from the borrower. This may often be in the form of a legal charge over the borrower's property or assets.

31. All such loans are agreed by Cabinet and will be subject to close, regular monitoring.

32. The rate of interest charged on these facilities will be dependent on the nature and structure of the individual loan and the assessed risks to the Council. However, loans would usually only be provided on the basis that

there is no net cost to the Council. In addition, all new loans will need to adhere to subsidy control regulations.

33. The 2024 Prudential Code now also includes a requirement for financing costs to be charged to revenue for commercial loans until the loan is repaid.

Funding Sources

34. The Council's capital programme is funded from a mix of sources including:

- (a) Prudential Borrowing – The introduction of the Prudential code in 2004 allowed the Council to undertake unsupported borrowing itself. This borrowing is subject to the requirements of the Prudential Code for Capital Expenditure for Local Authorities. The Council must ensure that unsupported borrowing is affordable, prudent and cost effective. This funding can also be used as an option to front fund development to stimulate growth. This has provided the Council with the flexibility to raise capital funding as demand and business need have dictated. This type of borrowing has revenue implications for the Council in the form of financing costs.
- (b) External Grants – A proportion of our capital funding comes through as external grant allocations from central government departments such as the Department for Transport via the Tees Valley Combined Authority, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department of Education. In addition, direct funding is received from the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) under the devolved arrangements. The TVCA has an approved investment plan of £588.2m over a ten year period (2019-2029) and Darlington has been successful securing funding for a number of growth projects including £10m for the Town Centre, £25m for Darlington Railway Station and £20m for Hopetown Darlington.
- (c) A significant element of the capital investment programme is funded from the Housing Revenue Account. Funding towards the Council's New Build programme is also received from Homes England (HE). All Housing Capital schemes are funded this way and are prioritised through the Housing Business Plan.
- (d) Section 106 and external contributions – elements of the capital programme are funded by contributions from private sector developers and partners.
- (e) Revenue Funding – The Council can use revenue resources to fund capital projects on a direct basis, however, given the financial climate we are working in and the pressure on services the Council's revenue budget has reduced options in this area and the preference is for Invest to Save projects where feasible.
- (f) Capital Receipts – A capital receipt is an amount of money exceeding £10,000, which is generated from the sale of an asset. The Council is able to generate capital receipts through the sale of surplus assets such as land and buildings. The Council seeks to maximise the level of these resources which will be available to support the Council's plans.

Capital Investment Fund

35. At its meeting of 24 November 2016, the Council established a Capital Investment Fund of £10m which due to its success has subsequently been increased to £50m.
36. Council approved the principle and establishment of the Capital Investment Fund to be used for innovative investment opportunities beyond the traditional Treasury Management Strategy in order to achieve greater returns given the low returns on investment due to the current economic climate.
37. The Council is utilising the fund to achieve greater returns by exploring more innovative approaches whilst at the same time being willing to take on a greater level of risk. Such approaches include loans to other organisations, joint venture house building, property investment or developing sites for sale.
38. The Investment fund also provides for wider benefits which extend further than direct reward and assist with economic regeneration and job opportunities.
39. Since the establishment of the fund and at the time of writing Cabinet have agreed to seventeen uses of the fund for schemes such as housing joint ventures, office development, and pump priming. A number of schemes have been fully repaid and the Joint Ventures have provided higher dividends that initially anticipated. All projects are detailed and reported to Cabinet for approval.

Economic Growth Investment Fund (EGIF)

40. The EGIF was set up in recognition that Economic Growth is a priority for the Council and the Economic Growth Investment plan sets out what needs to be done in order for the Borough to accelerate sustainable, managed and planned economic growth. It also provides the structured framework required to ensure that a programme of investments is created that can deliver the strategic ambitions and goals of the Council.
41. The majority of the Plan is and will be completed in conjunction with the Tees Valley Combined Authority, however the Council needs to pump prime and match fund some of the schemes hence the establishment of the EGIF which is utilised for such needs.
42. Any proceeds from sites which subsequently become operational and sold will be reinvested in the fund for future developments.
43. Specific scheme approvals will be subject to detailed reports to Cabinet to release each scheme as and when they are required.

Risk Management

44. Risk is the threat that an event or action will adversely affect the Council's ability to achieve its objectives and to execute its strategies successfully.
45. Risk management is the process of identifying risks, evaluating their potential consequences and determining the most effective methods of managing them and responding to them. It is both a means of minimising the costs and disruption to the Council caused by undesired events and of ensuring that staff understand and appreciate the element of risk in all of their activities.
46. The aim is to reduce the frequency of adverse risk events occurring, minimise the severity of their consequences if they do occur, or to consider whether risk can be transferred to other parties.

47. To manage risk effectively, an assessment of risk should be taken on every capital project, mitigated where possible and monitored.
48. It is important to identify the appetite for risk by each scheme and for the capital programme as a whole, especially when investing in capital assets held primarily for financial returns. Under the CIPFA Prudential Code these are defined as investments and so the key principle of control of risk and optimising returns consistent with the level of risk applies.

Knowledge and skills

49. The Council has professionally qualified staff across a range of disciplines including finance, legal and property that follow continuous professional development (CPD) and attend courses on an ongoing basis to keep abreast of new developments and skills.
50. The Council establishes project teams from all the professional disciplines from across the council as and when required. External professional advice is taken where required and will always be sought in consideration of any major commercial property investment decision.
51. Internal and external training is offered to Members to ensure they have up to date knowledge and expertise to understand and challenge capital and treasury decisions taken by the Executive Director – Resources and Governance.