

## Future high streets

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We would hope that our readers had more exciting plans on Boxing Day than checking the gov.uk website for news, yet it is perhaps symbolic that the first real details of the [Future High Streets Fund](#) (the 'Fund') were issued on a day synonymous with retail sales.

Announced in the budget, the Fund is the government's attempt to help reinvigorate struggling town centres, in addition to some minor changes to business rates. The continued pressures on bricks and mortar retail will not abate and the foreword to the Fund prospectus acknowledges that these changes will mean that the high street will need to evolve from retail led to offering a community experience which cannot be replicated online.

These details come a week after the publication of Sir John Timpson's [High Street Report](#). The report goes wider than just looking at the Fund, and considers also the establishment of a High Street Task force together with short term measures which can be implemented now. Whilst this article considers only the Fund we would recommend anyone interested in town centre regeneration reads the full report.

So, what exactly is the Fund? Who can apply and how will it work? What restrictions are there and, perhaps most importantly, what are the key ingredients for a successful bid?

The government views the Fund as the central part of their plan for the high street and the total value of the fund is £675m. However, £55m of that has already been allocated to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for the regeneration of 'heritage high streets'. The remainder is being allocated over 2 rounds, with each round having 2 phases. The first phase of each is the expression of interest stage. Successful applicants are then invited to present full cases. There is no guarantee of any funding to those applicants who progress to the second phase. The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government will however provide support, both strategic and in some cases small levels of funding towards putting together the full case.

The first deadline is the submission of expressions of interest which need to be made by the relatively close deadline of 22 March 2019. Thereafter the timetable becomes more vague. The successful phase 2 applicants will find out during the Summer and the first business cases will be submitted late 2019. The government's expectation is that the requests for investment in this first round will largely be 'shovel ready' so if you have not previously thought of applying you may think it is better to consider making a submission in the second round.

However, what is not clear from the prospectus is whether there is a limit on how much of the fund will be allocated in the first round or whether there may be little or no funds available for the second round. The date of the second round is also not known but it will not be before 2020. What is clear however is that there is a cap of £25m on any request for investment. This is a cap, not a target, and the government expects most business cases to be requesting between £5m and £10m.

It is envisaged that local authorities will take the lead in submitting applications due to the control they hold over the 'strategic levers' needed to bring forward projects. Where there is a two-tier system then district councils would make the submission. There is expectation however that there will be significant support and engagement with local stakeholders such as Business Improvement Districts, Local Enterprise Partnerships, community groups and the private sector. Indeed there is hope that successful bids will incorporate an element of private sector funding within the proposals.

The expectation is that successful bids for investment will fall under one of the following themes:

- investment in physical infrastructure
- acquisition and assembly of land including to support new housing, workspaces and public realm
- improvements to transport access, traffic flow and circulation in the area
- supporting change of use including (where appropriate) housing delivery and densification
- supporting adaptation of the high street in response to changing technology.

The application form sets out three areas against which cases which be judged. These are:

- defining the place
- setting out the challenges
- strategic ambition.

'Defining the place' will be particularly important. Small parades of shops are not viewed by the Fund as high streets or town centres. Central Business Districts and major city centres are also excluded. Proposals must focus on a single high street or town centre; those covering regions will not be eligible.

It is encouraging that the government is making it clear that it sees town centres playing an important role in community matters at large. The encouragement of health and residential uses, together with the emphasis on experience and wellbeing, compliments the continuing initiatives on integration of health and social care, with particular focus on mental health.

It should be remembered however that funding is not the panacea to all ills of the town centre. The Timpson report identified other issues such as planning, shortage of available expertise and lack of forward thinking and inspirational leadership. Issues such as these must be considered and addressed in any robust business plan and it is just as important that they remain a key focus throughout delivery. Financing is however vitally important and often the most visible barrier to project development. The Fund therefore represents a great opportunity for dynamic local authorities and their partners to get the initial capital needed to begin to deliver their specific visions for real change in their town centres.

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