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INVESTMENT PLAN SUMMARY



Plan for Neighbourhoods

Investment Plan Summary

1. Programme Summary

In March 2024 Government launched its prospectus for Plan for Neighbourhoods which built on the previously announced Long Term Plan for Towns programme and included part of Dudley borough. The programme is now part of Government's Pride in Place Programme so you may also hear it called that. It requires the programme to be overseen by a Neighbourhood Board and for a vision for the 10 years, together with governance arrangements, and a focus on the first 4 years to be developed, based on local priorities and data. These have been generated through a period of engagement over the summer of 2025 alongside analysis of statistics and data.

This document summarises the responses submitted to MHCLG for approval via an online form, focused on the first 4 years of activity. The Regeneration Plan, which sets out the context for the area and long-term vision, is a stand-alone document which this Investment Plan sits alongside. The council is the Accountable Body for the programme and is also providing programme team support and secretariat to the Board.

The programme guidance from Government sets out three overarching goals: Thriving Places, Stronger Communities and Taking Back Control. Over the lifetime of the programme we expect to contribute positively towards each of these.

The guidance then provides eight themes against which funding could be spent, and within each theme a list of 'pre-approved interventions' i.e. activities which Government considers eligible under the programme and in principle offer value for money. We are able to go 'off-menu', i.e. pursue activities which don't sit within the pre-approved interventions, should there be strong community feedback that that is needed, however the feedback and data that we have received indicate that we will not need to go off-menu in the first investment period.

This is a 10-year programme, split into 3 investment periods: years 1-4, 5-7 and 8-10. We will be required to submit a new Investment Plan for each of these.

2. Who did we engage with and how?

Community engagement is at the heart of our programme and the cornerstone of our approach to developing our Plans. From the start, we have been focussed on our grassroots; committed to being inclusive, visible and accessible and ensuring that discussions and decisions are shaped by those who live, study, visit and work across the area. We've embedded inclusive, locally-led dialogue throughout, ensuring that priorities reflect the lived experiences of those who live, work, study and visit the area. We are committed to meaningful engagement and methods which both build capacity and ensure we hear local voices – especially those often underrepresented – to shape priorities and proposals.

We designed a multi-layered, participatory process that goes beyond traditional consultation, rooted in principles of empowerment, visibility and co-creation. This was live July-September 2025 but is not a one-off but rather the start of an iterative, meaningful community conversation about our area that we will continue throughout our 10-year programme. We are committed to this ongoing, two-way dialogue with and within the community about the programme, and will continue to evolve, build capacity and make space for those in deprived or marginalised communities to be heard.

Our engagement comprised three main strands:

- Training and development of a Community Researcher Network who facilitated great community conversations
- Online and printed surveys
- Dudley Conversations, Pop-ups, Drop-ins and Events (Dudley Council)

Who we engaged

By using these mixed approaches, we aimed to hear about the priorities, challenges and ambitions from a broad range of local people who reflected the lived experience of our communities within the programme area. This included:

- Residents – of all ages and in all geographies within the programme area. (30,984 households receiving information and surveys)
- Businesses – within the boundary area including large employers, market traders and social enterprises (~2,000 businesses through surveys, newsletters and ebulletins)
- Students and young people – particularly at local colleges (Dudley College) and sixth forms (via our Community Researchers).
- Local faith groups, charities, and community organisations who support people whose voices are not always heard, including ethnic minority communities, disabled residents, people with SEND, those experiencing homelessness, migrants, refugees, and older people for example (via our Community Researchers).
- Public sector stakeholders – including internal council teams, local housing associations (Black Country Housing Group), Healthcare providers (NHS) and the West Midlands Police (via our Community Researchers and open access events). Additionally, we have also engaged with Councillors and the MPs whose constituencies make up the majority of the programme area.

In total we have heard over 2,000 voices directly in relation to the programme which we have utilised to shape the priorities in our investment plan.

How we engaged

We engaged the community in a variety of ways. This included peer to peer conversations, surveys and attending open access engagement opportunities within the community at events and in shared public spaces. Our focus was to build trust, to be transparent and visible, and to ensure people understood that this programme is developed by a community-led Board, and that local people really do have the opportunity to make a difference and influence change. Most significantly, we utilised this opportunity to experiment with more meaningful approaches to engagement.

This is not to say that traditional forms of consultation and engagement weren't used, rather it recognised the gaps and limitations of these and complemented them with a richness of community insight and reaching many more of those who live, work and play in the area.

As a Board passionate about supporting our 'grass roots' we decided early on not to merely ask local community organisations to consult for us, but to work in collaboration and empower them through facilitated support and 'thank you payments' for the time, energy and effort put in to shape meaningful engagement and conversations within their local communities in the ways

only they know how. This was a conscious choice to ensure mutual benefit for all stakeholders participating in community engagement.

I. Community Researchers Programme

The cornerstone of our summer 2025 engagement was the creation of a network of 17 community researchers who received two half day workshops providing them with the tools and methods they could utilise to engage creatively through participation in their communities as community researchers. The community researchers each represent a local organisation which engages with different demographics and neighbourhood areas. The opportunity to participate in this programme was by invitation through the board with representatives identified through collective mapping of local community organisations operating within the programme area and identifying gaps. Correspondingly, as trusted local community leaders and representatives several of our Board members also became Community Researchers.

We commissioned a locally based engagement specialist, Beatfrecks, to provide the training in participatory engagement tools and techniques to empower the researchers as facilitators of conversations in places and spaces familiar to the community. This approach has been highly successful in reaching groups less likely to respond to traditional surveys and is reflected in the demographics of respondents to our more traditional survey consultation which ran alongside. Thus, this community-led model supports the need to engage with communities within their settings, where they are comfortable, and in open dialogue with empowered leaders who they trust.

Of the 17 trained, 15 of the Community Researchers organised over 25 in-person events, conversations and community gatherings during the engagement period. Community researchers engaged with a much broader range of people through their representative groups, many of whom would not usually respond to a survey. They represented lesser heard voices with engagement through faith groups, sporting communities such as football groups, support groups, and community organisations. Collectively they reached and engaged with c.880 people, representing almost 50% of total number of people engaged and most notably reaching groups whose voices are not usually heard including:

- Children and young people, aged 6-25, including students, autistic young people and those with SEND
- Minoritised communities, specifically asylum seekers, migrant women and the Afro-Caribbean community, however other groups referenced ethnic diversity within their gatherings.
- Older people
- People experiencing poverty and homelessness

Community Researchers also provided geographical coverage with voices heard from across the PfN boundary area, and in areas of high deprivation, including; Netherton, Primrose Hill, Dudley Wood, Saltwells, Russell's Hall estate, Wrens Nest, Priory, Primrose Hill, Holly Hall, and Woodside.

During training sessions community researchers were supported to trial different engagement methods and exercises. These included Visioning exercises such as Community mapping, postcards/voice notes from the future and a vision wall; prioritising exercises such as dot scoring, budget and card games, and idea generating

exercises such as the prompt jar, roll with it and solution tree. Community Researchers then designed and implemented their own plans, either using or adapting methods from the training.

II. Surveys – online and hard copy

To complement the community researchers' local conversations, we launched a survey which was open to all residents, businesses, students and stakeholders. The survey ran from 2nd July 2025 to 12th September 2025 and was available in both online and hard copy, with alternative formats provided. Hard copies were delivered by post to all households within the Dudley boundary (30,984 residences). This was supported by a targeted communications campaign across social media channels, local networks, press releases, ebulletins and through partner organisations to inform and encourage people to have their say. The survey was live for ten weeks and received 1032 responses. Responses helped us to identify key themes, issues and opportunities and allowed us to compare community views across different neighbourhoods and demographics.

The Council stepped in to help us get going with our comms and marketing swiftly. Going forward we plan to develop a model to build local capacity working with students, job seekers or local media enthusiasts in the future to develop our communications plan and deliver this as a Board as we become more established.

III. Dudley outreach, pop-ups, drop ins and events

We recognise that not everyone wants to, or can, attend formal meetings, so we also took the conversation to the places where people meet, gather and visit. To bolster our reach and increase visibility Council colleagues and Board members attended a total of 7 existing events, gatherings and festivals in familiar settings such as faith venues, community centres, parks and markets and also hosted 4 drop-ins in local libraries and community venues such as Dudley Library, and Castle & Priory and Dudley Wood Neighbourhood Learning Centres. These informal engagements helped us to spontaneously capture honest views about what people value and what they want to see change in their areas.

Engagement was tailored to the audiences, so at Play week, – a free event for families and children to attend and take part in various activities, with over 1,000 attendees - there were lawn games and activities for the children and also paper, flip charts, pens, large format maps and post its where we actively asked for people to tell us about the area, what they love, issues, or what they might like to see improved and to mark this on the map.

Building Capacity and Next Steps

Our engagement process has been designed for longevity and local empowerment. The training has equipped researchers with transferable skills that will help them to support other community projects and shape programme priorities going forward. The Board is exploring new ways to engage local people in communications, potentially training citizens, students and job seekers in media and supporting the programme as community reporters. This methodology focuses on communication and engagement staying anchored in local capability, sustainability, and being rooted in local community.

Community research – a celebration!

The engagement period culminated in a Celebration Event in October 2025, where community researchers and board members came together to share findings, stories, issues and opportunities emerging from the community research activities. Tables, each facilitated by a member of the board gave space for community researchers to share and discuss the feedback from their communities around the vision, funding priorities, and issues they are facing. This event helped to reinforce the sense of shared ownership and community pride. Furthermore, the event enabled shared conversations about how the community researchers would like to continue to be involved in the programme. We were also able to thank them and explain that the community researcher data alongside the survey data, other engagement and statistics, to support the Board's decisions and crafting of the Regeneration Plan. The event was hugely successful and well received and there is now enthusiasm to make it a regular fixture!

Learning and Legacy

Throughout this engagement, we tracked who we heard from and identified where voices were missing particularly in some demographic or geographic areas. These insights will shape our next phase, ensuring our engagement continues to grow in depth and reach.

Our ambition is that this first phase marks the beginning of a lasting relationship between the Board and the communities it serves one where listening, learning, and co-creation remain central to every decision.

3. How we have developed the indicative spend forecast

Through the extensive community engagement and review of data profiles we have agreed a set of priorities based on the information available. Unsurprisingly, there are some differences and priorities aren't always unanimous, so we've looked at all the information in the round. We've also looked at what other activity and investment is planned and underway to maximise the opportunity of the programme.

Using that information we have identified our top priorities for investment in this first investment period, through to our lowest priorities also taking into account where interventions are likely to be fully capital or revenue, and where there are cross-linkages across themes so an activity or project may contribute, and be funded by more than one 'theme'.

We have then applied a pro rata allocation of capital and revenue for each theme, taking all of the above into account. As we don't yet have a list of projects to be funded, we felt this was the best way to approach it at this stage and will refine the forecast, as the programme goes live. Our indicative spend forecast in relation to priorities and the interventions we think that best respond to the needs identified can be found on the next page.

We have identified a set of activities which we wish to continue in relation to community capacity building, such as continuing to invest in our Community Researchers, continued communication and marketing, and supporting groups to secure funding and deliver great projects.

| Investment period 1: Years 1-4 | | | | | | | |
|---|---|------------|---------------------------|----------------------|----------|-------------------------------|-----------|
| Safety and Security | Regeneration, High Streets and Heritage | Cohesion | Education and Opportunity | Health and Wellbeing | Housing | Work, Productivity and Skills | Transport |
| £1,226,907 | £1,235,481 | £1,049,911 | £951,181 | £615,454 | £609,454 | £166,425 | £304,726 |
| Management Costs and Capacity Building £791,484 | | | | | | | |

4. How we think the activity will contribute towards the 3 goals of the programme

The programme has three goals: thriving places, stronger communities and taking back control.

Places, spaces and faces became something of a strapline for us after it was used by one of the Community Researchers when describing the feedback they'd heard through the engagement period. This also broadly corresponds with the three programme goals.

Thriving Places

Places firstly connected to the pride in the heritage of the place. The historic engineroom of the nation and its role in glass, steel, canals and more. The story of a place matters. It is felt deeply by people; it is present in their memories and daily routines and a source of great pride that they want to be shared and celebrated to shape the future. As communities change, not everyone will have the same familial or historic ties to the area, but this creates a powerful opportunity to welcome people in and share the stories that make our neighbourhoods special, building a shared identity by celebrating local heritage as a source of collective pride and forming a strong sense of belonging while learning about others. A shared cultural identity is formed through everyday life; routines, values, experiences and behaviours that form the heartbeat of a place. By investing in, improving, conserving and finding new uses for our heritage assets local history and daily experience can continue to come together to create a community people are proud to be a part of.

It also related to the places people value, such as parks and green spaces, and the places they want to feel proud of again. The town centres of Dudley and Netherton are both places that people connect with but also feel that they are neglected and left behind and would benefit from investment in not only revitalising the heritage features and facades, but through enhanced cleaning and greening, infrastructure maintenance, and activation with more reasons for people to visit and spend time there. Many of our high streets, towns and local neighbourhoods no longer reflect the needs, habits or aspirations of their communities. They have an appetite for them too to feel better maintained and loved. Every community deserves lively streets, accessible amenities that bring people together and meet everyday needs and we want to give local people the opportunity to shape them.

Safety and security is an overarching concern for places based on the surveys and engagement conversations. There are some nuanced differences between the data and the engagement results, but it is consistently identified as something that people would like to address. And that is in relation to places. They want to feel safe to go into town and spend time there during the day and of an evening. They want their children to feel safe playing in the parks, enjoying these much-valued assets. They want to enjoy a relaxing walk along the canal paths and through the green spaces without worrying about their personal safety. So, addressing safety is fundamental to unlocking the potential of places.

Therefore, in this investment period we will be investing in activity such as:

Place maintenance

- Town centre cleaning and greening which impact on pride in place and the sense of safety
- Investment in parks and green spaces – maintaining what's there and growing the opportunities for them to be enjoyed by more people

Place activation

- activity in parks and towns – creating more reasons to visit and positive activity to engage with, reducing idle time leading to less desirable behaviours.

Place management

- Measures to address both the perception and reality of crime including lighting, diversionary activity, and working with the police to complement the additional neighbourhood policing being delivered

Stronger Communities

Residents have told us that they want more opportunities to come together and that **spaces** which enable that and where they feel safe to do so, are currently a barrier. This is in part due to the closures of community facilities in recent years leaving gaps, and in part due to the need for maintenance, repair or modernisation of those which are in existence. There is a strong sense of investing in spaces which are already there in some shape or form, rather than building new. People feel strongly about the need for youth provision and places where that can happen – as a positive activity to be involved with, an alternative to destructive activity, and to provide a positive, meaningful route to skills, employment and being engaged citizens. We have also heard how important spaces are for our older generation too. Spaces where they feel known and safe. Spaces where they can mix with others of all ages and backgrounds. Spaces which are accessible and where their basic needs can be met. The need for spaces where community happens and people meet, engage and build relationships is key.

The visibility of **faces** in the spaces is also something that we've heard. These are both the faces of those committed community workers and volunteers who bring spaces to life and make people feel known and connected, but who also need sustainable financial models to continue to operate; and the faces of those statutory, official institutions in the area, such as police, Council staff and other support services so that people feel heard, considered and that the system cares about them. Our engagement showed us that people usually, though not universally, have a sense of trust with their neighbours and those in their local area but that trust diminishes across a wider area and in relation to systems. Physical spaces alone won't make the difference. They need to go hand in glove with the people who facilitate the activities, connect and empower, fostering a lasting social infrastructure that supports wellbeing and resilience.

Therefore, in this investment period we will be investing in activity such as:

- Making funding available to support improvements to community facilities
- Supported by investment in activities, events and activation which bring people together
- Youth provision

Taking Back Control

We believe we have started positively in relation to this goal through the investment in our community researchers who have significantly helped the shaping of this plan through the community conversations had this summer. At our celebration event with the researchers, we all recognised the opportunity and appetite for their continued involvement, and to continue to invest in and grow the network. We also plan to keep our Board structure and working arrangements under constant review to ensure we're set up in the right way for the programme. This will include consideration of subgroups in the near future and these might present opportunities for a wider group of people to be directly involved.

People feel very passionately about those who serve the community in both paid and volunteer roles. Some of our survey responses named specific individuals, noting the contribution and difference they make. Therefore, enabling those who already connect and empower the community is something we want to pay attention to. We know that there are strains on funding in the third sector which we want to support directly and through identifying co-investment and leverage opportunities. Enabling those who are known and trusted community leaders to support and enable community ownership.

Data and engagement responses also speak to the inequality across our programme area and the desire for that to be rebalanced, improving life outcomes and enabling people to better take hold of their futures individually and collectively. This was particularly highlighted through the engagement responses in relation to family learning and giving children the best start in life, while also recognising that it needs to be whole family learning and activity, extending into older generations. All with a view to enabling people to fulfil their potential and be active citizens now and in the future. Poor safety – and perceptions of poor safety – drive feelings of a loss of control. This is therefore a high priority in our proposed intervention mix, including both physical safety measures and community activities to reduce the causes of antisocial behaviour and crime.

To that end, during this investment period we will invest in activities such as:

- Youth provision
- Family learning and support
- Strengthening the links between business growth, employability and skills
- Measures to reduce crime and the perception of it
- Capacity building
- Supporting networks and partnership development (social infrastructure)

5. How we have, and will continue to spend capacity funding and meet management costs

The programme provided some upfront capacity funding to meet the costs such as setting up the Board and programme, undertaking public engagement activity and developing the plans to be submitted to MHCLG.

To date the capacity funding received to date has been spent on seven main areas:

- Programme team costs (DMBC staff time and related costs)
- Board leadership support programme
- Participatory engagement training for community researchers – this included ongoing support throughout the engagement period and results analysis and thank you payments to the researchers' respective organisations
- Delivery of the engagement activity – publication and delivery of surveys, communication and PR to promote the opportunity, equipment and incentives to engage people at events
- Qualitative data analysis
- Targeted support on preparation of sections of the Regeneration Plan
- Production of a video to help explain about the programme and community engagement

We haven't spent all the capacity funding so far so will roll it forward, as we are allowed to do, until it has all been spent. Thereafter we will use as small an amount as possible of programme funding to meet the costs while ensuring the programme is compliant and deliverable. Recognising that the programme has more capital than revenue, we will look to capitalise these costs where possible.

The Board is currently taking advice as to whether establishing as a charity, CIC, or other constituted group would be advantageous and budget provision has been made to support the respective costs of that. When a decision is taken either way future budgets will be adjusted accordingly. The current budget is based on continuation of the existing model so capacity funding is profiled for:

- Programme team costs
- Continuation of community researchers
- Continued engagement activity
- Comms & PR
- Project development capacity building
- Updates to the Regeneration and Investment Plans
- Subsidy control advice
- Establishing Board as a CIC/Charity etc

The Board has expressed a desire to undertake an annual budget setting exercise with a particular regard to the management and capacity costs so as not to disproportionately draw on the limited revenue grant available to support these.

6. Programme

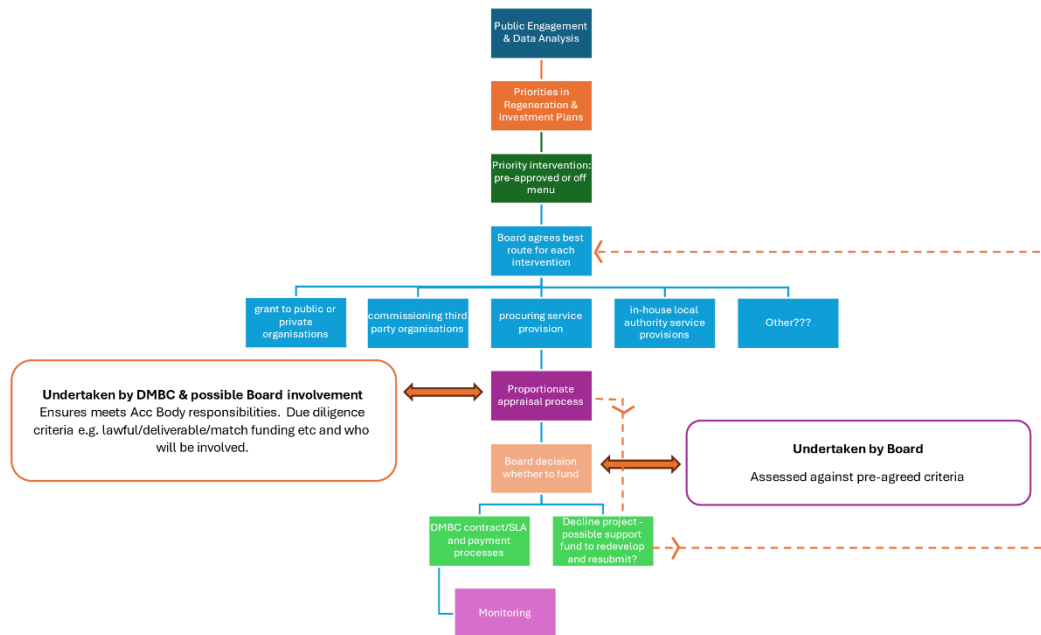
We know that we want to continue the conversation with the community and expect to do so through the years but likely with a window of targeted engagement each year which we currently think will be in September. We also hope to be in a position where we can start mobilisation for delivery early 2026 with a view to delivery funding becoming available in April 2026.

We haven't started generating a list of potential projects but are working to develop a more detailed programme at the moment

7. How projects will be selected for investment

While we have a long-term vision, we are mindful of not only delivering long term outputs and outcomes. We are keen to swiftly respond to the priorities which have been identified and for the community to both be involved in the delivery and to see the impact of it. This will generate confidence and momentum behind the programme, as well as helping to continue the conversation and reinforcing our work as the Board. Therefore, the first investment period will be a combination of quick wins, and groundwork to help deliver longer term projects.

We have set out a decision-making process where we will work hand in glove with the Council with its roles as the accountable body and programme team. This is set out in the diagram below.



As the Neighbourhood Board, we are committed to starting, and continuing, a conversation locally about priorities and opportunities for the programme. We intend for these, alongside relevant data, to shape and inform our investment priorities. We will assess whether the agreed interventions are on or off menu, seeking advice from the programme team and/or MHCLG as required, though we’re confident that in the first investment period our priorities will sit within the list of pre-approved activity.

We will then agree the preferred route to market – be that a call for projects to be funded by grants, procured activity, a direct award to a specific agency where only they can respond – such as the Council - or commissioning. We will agree then agree a brief and criteria, working with the programme team to ensure compliance with public procurement regulations, managing public fund principles etc. At this stage, it is envisaged that projects will be identified through one of four routes.

1. Grants
2. Commissioning
3. Procuring service provision
4. Direct award

We are committed to being transparent in our processes and decision making and will always try to achieve a high assurance-low bureaucracy environment for the programme while adhering to the relevant requirements.

At this point the programme team will take the opportunity to market using the agreed brief and criteria. When the responses are returned, they will undertake an initial due diligence check to ensure that they are lawful, deliverable, meet the core criteria etc. As we develop, we may involve members of the Board or subgroups, once established, in this stage subject to training and support. The programme team will then share the submissions with the Board with a list of those which meet the initial assessment for the Board to decide from, and a second list of those who don’t as we are keen to understand the spread of submissions and the reasons why they haven’t been successful as this may be an opportunity for further capacity building, offering training and support to strengthen future bids – be they to this programme or other sources. There may be instances where we include a further round of assessment and ask bidders to

present to the Board or a subgroup before a decision is made. This will be established upfront and communicated to potential bidders.

At any point, should there be a direct connection between a member of the Board and an individual or organisation bringing forward a proposal, the Board member will not be involved in the decision-making process. We have a register of interests in place and ask for declarations of interest at the start of every meeting. By continuing to do this we will manage any conflicts of interest and adhere to the policy which we've all signed up to. If there are any queries where the position is unclear, we will seek the advice of the Council's Monitoring Officer and Democratic Services team.

The programme team will then put the relevant contracts, grants agreements or SLAs in place and initiate the payment processes. They will also then undertake proportionate monitoring of the delivery and report this back to the Board accordingly. We will draw on their knowledge, experience and expertise in running similar programmes, and will seek their advice, and potentially external advice in more complex cases, as and when needed.

8. Keeping the programme safe and compliant

The Council is the Accountable Body for the programme and has provided assurance statements in relation to the environment, procurement, risk management fraud, subsidy control and equality. It will be incumbent on both the Board and Council to ensure they are upheld and financial provision has been made in some instances to ensure that technical advice can be procured if needed.

The Council, as the Accountable Body, will carry out programme oversight functions. It has extensive experience relating to managing and monitoring use of external funding. Through its Programme Management Team it will:

- a) Put the relevant agreement in place with the team or organisation receiving funding. These will reflect the programme requirements and training will be available to support.
- b) Undertake regular monitoring with all delivery partners through structured meetings to review progress and provide support where challenges are being faced.
- c) Implement and audit and compliance process which will be proportionate to the size and nature of each project. This will bring together relevant evidence to substantiate the claim to ensure only eligible costs are included.
- d) Submit claims and evidence to MHCLG as required. This will go through a two stage process ensuring separation of duties.
- e) Lead on risk management, with risk registers to be put in place for each project and reported through the Board and within the Council.

9. Resources and skills to support delivery

We are seeking to operate in an open and inclusive way and are keen to make use of the broad range of skills and experience available to us. We have initially identified seven groups who will be well placed to support delivery in the first investment period.

1. The Board
2. The Council

3. Community Researchers
4. Procured support
5. Partner organisations
6. The wider business, education and voluntary communities
7. MHCLG and the programme network

Each of these brings different strengths, experience and learning opportunities which we will continue to review and make use of.