



Blackpool Task Force Report:
An Action Plan for Sustainable Growth.
The Government's Response.



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Introduction

The Blackpool Task Force (BTF) was set-up in response to Blackpool not being recommended as the location of the regional casino in 2007, and was tasked to review "the totality of economic, social and environmental development plans in the Blackpool area." (Statement by Tessa Jowell MP, 28 March 2007). The Blackpool Task Force members were the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA), Blackpool Council, ReBlackpool, English Partnerships and the Government Office for the North West (GONW). The report was published in July 2007 and is available here: <http://www.nwda.co.uk/news--events/press-releases/200701/task-force-report-proposes-a-n.aspx>

The Government and various national and regional agencies have been working with Blackpool for six months to develop responses to its recommendations. Given the urgency of needs, some recommendations have already been taken forward, and an important announcement about tram funding was made on 1 February 2008 as the centrepiece of our response. Whilst this document is the culmination of our work, it is not the end of it. Through the Regional Director of GONW, we want to carry on this work with Blackpool over the coming months in taking forward the various strands of work. And, where new opportunities or challenges arise, we are ready to talk and think afresh about how best Government can support Blackpool recover its economic and social vitality.

Our Response

Prior to the decision that Blackpool would not host a regional casino, much local planning had been premised on the opposite being the case, and hence it was necessary for Blackpool to re-think how to regenerate the town.

Driven locally, with regional and national backing, the BTF report demonstrates why we can be optimistic about the future for Blackpool. It shows that there is local unity of purpose, allied with a pragmatic approach to finding new ways of tackling longstanding problems. It demonstrates the collaborative and constructive spirit that is essential if regeneration is to take root – reaching out to the private sector, involving the community, and working co-operatively with its neighbouring authorities as well as regional and national agencies.

All involved in regenerating Blackpool accept that we cannot rewrite history or change the long-term patterns in leisure and tourism that have so eroded its economic base. Government cannot at a stroke rebuild any town or transform its economy – there are not enough public funds and even if there were, it would arguably not be effective. What we have done, and will continue to do, is to

work closely with Blackpool – and indeed any town or place – to make the best of what Government and the rest of the public sector can achieve when we unite to support a common vision.

Our response to this report is therefore based on this overarching principle: we will work constructively with Blackpool and its local partners to seize and maximise the opportunities that are available. Investment from Government is in some cases direct, for example through Department for Environment and Rural Affairs, but more often it is indirect, through such bodies as the NWDA, English Partnerships, the Housing Corporation, Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Each individual investment rightly needs to be consistent with sectoral and geographic priorities, and be capable of adding value to the overall response and the investment that the private sector can bring forward. Public investment proposals must also, naturally, comply with the relevant appraisal criteria and be able to demonstrate value for money.

The Government welcomes the approach of the Blackpool Task Force in combining larger and smaller actions to achieve a greater overall effect. The biggest benefits of regeneration flow where the different elements – physical, social, economic – are pulling in the same direction.

The plan calls for:

- Improving the environment and visitor offer so Blackpool appeals to more visitors throughout the year;
- Identifying and serving a niche in the conference market, recognising the intensified competition from other centres;
- Building Blackpool's role as a sub-regional centre, with the shops, facilities and services befitting a major English town;
- Transforming the connectivity of the town with the rest of the region and wider world, with 21st century transport facilities and linkages;
- Improving the quality and mix of housing to build stronger communities and reduce the overhang of obsolete housing and guest house accommodation; and
- Significant investment in education facilities and services at all levels – primary, secondary, tertiary, further and higher education.

Our response is structured to broadly reflect headings in the Task Force report, although due to the inter-connectedness of regeneration issues it is not written as a literal read-across.

Resort regeneration

Summary: £82m already committed with the promise of more subject to satisfactory appraisal of costed proposals. This investment will make a significant contribution to stabilising Blackpool's role as an important destination for visitors, and provide a platform upon which future initiatives by the public and private sectors can be taken forward.

BTF called for major investment in seafront defences and investment in an improved beach environment through the "Peoples Playground" initiative.

The Government is investing £78m in seafront defences, through Defra, and already it is possible to see a dramatic improvement in the attractiveness of the seafront. The NWDA are considering further investment of up to £7m to complement this activity, subject to appraisal.

A bid to the Big Lottery Fund for the Peoples Playground did not succeed, but the NWDA is working with ReBlackpool on a revised proposal. We are optimistic that some of the best features of the Peoples Playground concept can be taken forward, subject to a fundable business case from ReBlackpool to the NWDA. It will be important that the private sector can contribute and that others with a potential interest can remain involved.

To many people, the Blackpool Illuminations embody the town and its spirit. The NWDA will give as much support as possible within its means to ensure that these are further improved, responding constructively to funding bids from Blackpool Council. The NWDA will also provide around £4m to support the "Blackpool 365" and associated initiatives which aim to draw more visitors year-round and to complement private sector investment.

Environmental sustainability must be a part of regeneration plans and the BTF has ambitions for Blackpool to become an exemplar of sustainable tourism and in sustainable energy. ReBlackpool is developing a plan and Government stands ready to respond constructively to this, within the context of support outlined earlier.

We are pleased to note that Blackpool have engaged with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Seaside Resorts initiative. Without pre-empting any funding decisions for that Fund, we believe that Blackpool like other coastal towns has distinct regeneration needs and are pleased to be working with them on that agenda drawing on its strengths, including its reputation as the world capital of ballroom dancing.

Conference, cultural and leisure activity

Summary: Investment will be made in improved conference, cultural and leisure facilities for Blackpool, subject to appraisal of costed bids to the NWDA. We believe that some public investment in conference facilities now may provide a basis for securing further public and private sector funds in the longer-term.

Blackpool has experienced intensified competition in the conference and convention market, and the BTF recommends public investment in improved facilities to help Blackpool serve a "niche" in the conference market.

The NWDA will respond constructively to a costed business plan from ReBlackpool for investment in improved conference facilities. The plan will need to be realistic and persuasive given competing demands for the limited resources of the NWDA. It seems sensible that any improved conference facilities that are taken forward are capable of further enhancement in the future (whether by public or private funding or both) as and when the town finds a new niche in this tough and changing market.

The report also recommends that Blackpool hosts a new Victoria and Albert National Theatre Museum. Government (through DCMS) is contributing £50,000 towards a feasibility study into this idea, which could potentially make a valuable contribution to the regeneration of Blackpool. Once the feasibility study has reported, and assuming it finds that the project is viable, the next stage would be for the Victoria and Albert Museum's Board to consider whether to proceed. This would be followed by discussions between Blackpool Council, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the NWDA to identify and agree funding contributions.

Blackpool was the world's first mass tourism seaside resort and retains iconic architecture and built environment that reflects this unique heritage. The BTF suggests that World Heritage Site (WHS) designation would be an appropriate means of preserving and exploiting this heritage. Blackpool is not on the UK's current World Heritage Tentative List, which is a pre-requisite for nomination for WHS status. However, the UK is presently undertaking a World Heritage Policy Review and as part of this will determine if the Tentative List needs to be updated. If so, Blackpool could be invited to submit an application. The review will not conclude until the end of 2008. It should be noted that the UK has already announced future nominations up to 2010. DCMS will provide advice to Blackpool as and when requested.

Transport and connectivity

Summary: £100m boost to local transport with a modernised tram system, an improved airport, and studies to examine how to improve rail and road connections and ensure that these serve the regeneration needs identified by the Task Force.

High quality transport and connections are essential ingredients of regeneration, and the BTF makes a number of recommendations about how these can be improved.

The Task Force described improvements to the trams as “essential”, and argued that such investment will “support economic growth and serve both visitors and local residents”. Against this recommendation, Department for Transport (DfT), worked with Blackpool Council and Lancashire County Council to ensure that a robust and well-prepared business case was submitted. Once the business case was found to meet funding criteria, we were pleased to announce a £85m investment in the trams, with a central Government contribution of £60m matched by £25m from Blackpool Council and Lancashire County Council. This complements nearly £12m of funds from DfT for emergency works to ensure the trams keep running whilst the bigger investment is in preparation.

Blackpool Airport has been a success story for Blackpool, providing choice for local people and visitors and enhancing Blackpool's role as an important centre for Lancashire and Cumbria. The 2003 *Future of Air Transport White Paper* concluded that Blackpool Airport should be capable of developing the additional capacity needed in order to handle anticipated higher traffic levels – including terminal and apron capacity, and possibly a short runway extension – within its existing boundaries and land ownership. Any proposals for future expansion should be determined locally. The Airport published a Master Plan setting out options for future development, in July 2007.

The BTF recommended £2.5m of public investment (from the NWDA), and the NWDA have agreed this sum, subject to appraisal, as a match to investment by the airport's private sector owners, MAR Properties Ltd.

The BTF identifies the A585 as a bottleneck to further regeneration and a potential artery bringing new jobs and growth. The DfT stands ready to work with Blackpool, Wyre and Fylde Borough Councils, and with Lancashire County Council on how best to improve road access to the Fylde coast and a solution to congestion on the A585. Further research and then investment appraisals will be necessary and the NWDA has agreed to work with partners on how best to enhance the A585. Any research will have important implications for work that NWDA will undertake with sub-regional partners in relation to development of new investment locations that will attract new and high quality employment.

Blackpool North Station is identified within the BTF as requiring improvement. Network Rail is in discussions with ReBlackpool and potential private sector developers about how to improve the station, and this should be seen in conjunction with work outlined elsewhere in this response about plans to invest in Blackpool as a sub-regional centre. Network Rail are additionally considering Blackpool's rail services as part of its Route Utilisation Strategy for Lancashire and Cumbria. The Government wishes to see Blackpool both contribute to and benefit from the increased popularity of train travel.

Blackpool as a sub-regional centre

Summary: NWDA will invest in strategic sites to help Blackpool build its sub-regional role, encouraging private sector investment particularly in retail. Environmental improvements will enhance the attractiveness of Blackpool to visitors and residents.

The Talbot Gateway development is highlighted by the BTF as one that will help re-position Blackpool as a sub-regional centre, together with improvements at Houndshell and Second Gate. An improved shopping offer will be of importance to residents and visitors alike, and this development will link with improved transport and be complemented by enhanced public realm. BTF proposed a programme of environmental improvements primarily funded by the public sector and including resources obtained through Section 106 agreements.

The NWDA have funded some predevelopment work on this, and now awaits a costed bid from ReBlackpool to move this initiative forward.

The NWDA and ReBlackpool are working through specific proposals on public realm, ensuring congruence with the Lancashire sub-Regional Action Plan and NWDA Strategic Investment Plan. Additionally, £2m of public funds have been committed through DCMS and the Lottery to support the Townscape Heritage Initiative. The Second Gate initiative is intrinsically linked with the planned relocation of Blackpool and Fylde College, covered elsewhere in this response.

Joining-up

Summary: The Government congratulates Blackpool and neighbouring local authorities on their collaboration, notably in entering into negotiations to agree a Multi-Area Agreement. We will provide all possible support to Blackpool and its neighbours to help them succeed in this new venture. The well functioning Local Strategic Partnership in Blackpool is an asset that will be important in regenerating the town.

The history of regeneration in England shows the value of effective local partnership working that can align local plans, agree shared priorities, and enable towns and areas to speak with a united voice to regional and national agencies.

Private sector investors in particular sometimes express a preference to invest in places where local politicians and agencies co-operate on a long-term vision of growth and development. Blackpool has a well functioning Local Strategic Partnership and is well placed to move forward in a way that involves the public, voluntary, community and private sectors.

The Review of Economic Development and Regeneration (SNR) outlined how markets cut across administrative boundaries, and demonstrated the importance of cross-boundary work to achieve regeneration and economic development. In coming together in a Multi Area Agreement partnership, Blackpool and its Fylde Coast neighbours have recognised the mutual dependencies and benefits of joint working on such issues as business development, skills, housing and transport. The Government looks forward to agreeing a Multi Area Agreement with the Fylde Coast authorities.

Housing and accommodation

Summary: English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation will invest in key sites to tackle inter-locked problems identified by the Task Force concerning the quality of housing and operation of the local housing market. The aim is that there will be fewer houses of multiple occupation, fewer guest houses and more mixed and stable communities. All this investment will take place within a regeneration strategy, and needs to work alongside improved hotels, better shops and a more attractive and sustainable physical environment. Longer-term investment plans will be agreed once initial investments announced here are underway, in recognition of the scale of needs and the commitment of Government to tackling these.

The BTF describes housing as both a cause of decline as well as a symptom of economic decline. Blackpool's housing market has been heavily influenced by the very large number of non-viable guest houses that have been converted to houses of multiple occupation.

We support the aims of the BTF to ensure that housing-led regeneration makes the maximum possible contribution to the wider regeneration of Blackpool. Key partners have and will continue to co-operate to maximise the regeneration benefits of housing investment, seeking to create more mixed communities and to help reduce the over-hang of failing small guest houses and poor quality houses of multiple occupation.

We are increasing provision for affordable housing nationally for the years 2008/9 – 2010/11. Following consultation on the regional allocations drawn from the Regional Housing Pot covering both affordable housing and decent homes and regeneration activity, we have allocated a total of £831m to the North West for

this three year period. This includes £526m for affordable housing and £292m for private sector renewal and represents an increase of 12% in comparison with the previous 3 years (2005-08). The affordable housing element, to be delivered through the Housing Corporation, will be decided shortly and will be based on national and regional priorities.

English Partnerships are responding to the report by committing to work within an overall Housing Intervention Strategy. This strategy will be agreed using the Area Action Planning Process, and will be delivered through a co-ordinating body involving Blackpool Council and the URC, (Re Blackpool). English Partnerships will work with the Housing Corporation to improve the overall quality and mix of housing in line with the economic development needs of Blackpool. The strategy will need to demonstrate how significant levels of private sector investment will be leveraged.

Within the Housing Intervention Strategy, English Partnerships will invest up to £35m over three years, subject to individual schemes being positively appraised and demonstrating good levels of private sector input. The investment will focus on three main areas:

- *South Beach area* – housing investment to complement the improved seafront environment, regenerating a rundown area of guest houses and creating a mixed-use area that includes modern hotels, a range of residential accommodation and associated leisure and retail development
- *North Beach area* – housing investment to regenerate this area, including land assembly to create opportunities for owner occupiers including first time buyers
- *Blackpool and Fylde College site* – potential acquisition so land can be used for high quality residential developments including family housing.

Further investment is envisaged beyond this initial three-year plan, to be agreed between the key partners including English Partnerships.

An expression of interest was received in October 2007 from Blackpool Council as part of the wider Central Lancashire Growth point. This expression of interest is subject to a cross-department Government review and successful candidates will be announced shortly.

Education, training, skills and enterprise

Summary: Blackpool will receive a complete overhaul of its educational facilities, worth significantly over £100m, in the form of new schools, a new college campus in the town centre and significantly improved higher education offer. Skills training and enterprise support are also being boosted,

to ensure that the local labour market has the skills required to grow the economy and reduce reliance on tourism. Blackpool will also be at the forefront of new methods to match local unemployed people with the jobs local employers are trying to fill. Over £14m of Working Neighbourhoods Fund and over £11m of Local Enterprise Growth Initiative Funds are being provided over the 2008/09-10/11 period to help reduce worklessness and boost enterprise.

The BTF report recognises the importance of Blackpool developing the qualifications and skills of its workforce. Competitive towns not only meet the immediate needs of existing employers, but attract new investors who seek out the skills of the local workforce. A comprehensive package of improvements is called for – not just investment in new infrastructure but in improving the way those who are inactive in the labour market are helped find the skills and opportunities to work. Enterprise, including social enterprises, will be an important route out of inactivity for some, and BTF called for continued Local Enterprise Growth Initiative Funding support for Blackpool.

All relevant parts of Government and its agencies have sought to ensure that Blackpool gets the best possible response within the rules about funding and the need to appraise investments and secure value for money. There is now a package of improvements coming together that will help transform the competitiveness of the Blackpool workforce. This is a major investment, and many of the benefits to the local and wider economy will not become evident for a number of years, but it is important to invest not just for immediate and highly visible returns but for the long-term regeneration of Blackpool.

Schools

The BTF recommended an additional £80m public sector funding over 10 years for improved schools, particularly linking to investment in better housing and regeneration in deprived parts of the town.

As part of its Building Schools for the Future programme, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), has announced funding to rebuild and update all 8 schools in Blackpool. The value of this will exceed the Task Force recommendation by some 50%, with schools opening in 2011-2012.

Further and Higher Education

The BTF recommends investment in both higher and further education, including relocation of the college to a town centre site. The Government agrees that further and higher education will be a vital part of the town's regeneration, and that new investment should be carefully deployed to maximise the physical regeneration of the town centre.

The NWDA, through ReBlackpool, has assisted in site identification and with site assembly. The Board of Blackpool and Fylde College have agreed on a move to a more central site. In addition to the input and funding of the Learning and Skills Council, there are ongoing discussions with HEFCE and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), to integrate an expanded and improved Higher Education offer as part of this new town-centre campus. Around £10m is earmarked from the funding partners (HEFCE, NWDA and Blackpool and Fylde College) for the delivery of Higher Education opportunities in central Blackpool, in conjunction with the University of Lancaster. This investment will double the current number of higher education places available in the town.

Once the funding packages are in place for the new campus, the funding partners will wish to consider further potential developments, for example the BTF recommends a University Enterprise Centre that could act as an incubator for new businesses. The NWDA will consider any future funding bid for this as part of overall regional and sub-regional strategy.

Vocational skills and employability

The welfare reform green paper 'In work: better off' set out plans for Local Employment Partnerships (LEPs). LEPs help people get ready for a return to work, and encourage employers to consider and recruit those they might otherwise overlook.

Jobcentre Plus is currently working with large employers to secure opportunities for the unemployed, and works to ensure that pre-employment training, worktrials and other support is in place. LEPs will take this further, aiming for the closest possible match between local people and local employers, by making sure people have the right skills and competencies for the jobs employers are trying to fill.

LEPs are going to be particularly relevant in towns with relatively higher levels of economically inactive and unemployed people, such as Blackpool. Sign-up amongst employers is very strong in the hospitality sector, which is an important one in Blackpool. We therefore expect this initiative to be one that works well in and for Blackpool. To ensure this, we are working to ensure that Blackpool is a LEP focal point, and work is underway between the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Jobcentre Plus and the LSC to ensure that:

- Local people who are nearly at the level required by employers can quickly access the pre-recruitment training and support they need; and
- LSC funding helps to boost basic skills training across Blackpool, to raise the overall skills platform from which LEP-tailored provision can then build.

We believe this will be better than a Basic Skills Academy and, critically, that this approach will provide better linkage between skills development of individuals and the real needs and opportunities presented by Blackpool employers.

DIUS will work with Blackpool to make links with the Aviation Academy and with the relevant sector skills council.

Enterprise support and growth

Blackpool is one of 29 local authorities in England that receives the Local Enterprise Growth Initiative, an initiative that aims to improve levels of enterprise and growth in some of the most deprived areas of the country. The BTF called for funding to be committed on a long term basis. We confirm funding of this initiative at the point of each Comprehensive Spending Assessment or Review, and have now announced a full three years funding for Blackpool for the years 2008/09 – 10/11, amounting to over £11m.

Blackpool was eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, because it contained pockets of multiple deprivation. It remains eligible for the successor fund, the Working Neighbourhoods Fund, which seeks in particular to tackle the barriers to economic exclusion and worklessness in deprived areas. Over £14m is earmarked for Blackpool in the period 2008/09 – 10/11.