

A meeting of the **CABINET** will be held in **CIVIC SUITE (LANCASTER/STIRLING ROOMS), PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON, PE29 3TN** on **TUESDAY, 17 OCTOBER 2023** at **7:00 PM** and you are requested to attend for the transaction of the following business:-

## **AGENDA**

### **1. MINUTES (Pages 5 - 8)**

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the meeting held on 19th September 2023.

**Contact Officer: Democratic Services - (01480) 388169**

### **2. MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

To receive from Members declarations as to disclosable pecuniary, other registerable and non-registerable interests in relation to any Agenda item. See Notes below.

**Contact Officer: Democratic Services - (01480) 388169**

### **3. PLANNING SERVICES - UPDATE (Pages 9 - 26)**

To receive a report on Planning Services and an update on progress of the Local Plan.

Executive Councillor: T D Sanderson

**Contact Officer: C Kerr (01480) 388430**

### **4. MARKET TOWNS PROGRAMME AUTUMN UPDATE - 2023-2024 (Pages 27 - 42)**

To receive an update on the Market Towns Programme.

Executive Councillor: S Wakeford

**Contact Officer: P Scott (01480) 388486**

## 5. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

To resolve:-

that the public be excluded from the meeting because the business to be transacted contains exempt information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

## 6. MARKET TOWNS PROGRAMME AUTUMN UPDATE - 2023-2024 (PART 2) (Pages 43 - 54)

To receive an update on the St Neots Market Town Programme.

Executive Councillor: S Wakeford.

**Contact Officer: P Scott (01480) 388486**

9 day of October 2023

***Michelle Sacks***

Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service

**Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and other Registerable and Non-Registerable Interests.**

Further information on [Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and other Registerable and Non-Registerable Interests is available in the Council's Constitution](#)

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**Please contact Democratic Services, Tel No: (01480) 388169 / e-mail: [Democratic.Services@huntingdonshire.gov.uk](mailto:Democratic.Services@huntingdonshire.gov.uk) if you have a general query on any Agenda Item, wish to tender your apologies for absence from the meeting, or would like information on any decision taken by the Committee/Panel.**

Specific enquiries with regard to items on the Agenda should be directed towards the Contact Officer.

Members of the public are welcome to attend this meeting as observers except during consideration of confidential or exempt items of business.

Agenda and enclosures can be viewed on the [District Council's website](#).

### **Emergency Procedure**

In the event of the fire alarm being sounded and on the instruction of the Meeting Administrator, all attendees are requested to vacate the building via the closest emergency exit.

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## HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the CABINET held in CIVIC SUITE (LANCASTER/STIRLING ROOMS), PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON, PE29 3TN on Tuesday, 19 September 2023.

PRESENT: Councillor S J Conboy – Chair.

Councillors L Davenport-Ray, S W Ferguson, M A Hassall, B A Mickelburgh, B M Pitt, T D Sanderson and S Wakeford.

APOLOGY: An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor S L Taylor.

### **30. MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meetings held on 18th July and 24th August 2023 were approved as correct records and signed by the Chair.

### **31. MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

No declarations were received.

### **32. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT, QUARTER 1 2023/24**

With the aid of a report prepared by the Business Intelligence and Performance Manager and Performance and Data Analyst (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Cabinet reviewed updates on corporate project delivery, progress against Corporate Plan actions and results and forecasts of operational performance April to June 2023.

By way of background, the Executive Councillor for Customer Services introduced the report as having undergone a refresh – it now included time histories and a narrative from the Senior Leadership Team. Continued improvements would be made following suggestions from the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth).

With regard to Appendix B, the Executive Councillor highlighted that PL5, 6, 12, 13, 14, 15 now had green ratings. PL3 and 4 had been resolved after high level intervention and would continue to be monitored. He reported that the Executive Councillor for Leisure, Waste and Street Scene would respond to a request for information with regard to PL2 from the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth).

Councillors Conboy, Davenport-Ray and Pitt, the Executive

Leader and Executive Councillors for Climate and Environment and Community and Health, thanked staff for their efforts both in producing the report and in improving ratings. In particular, the Facilities Team were thanked for the anticipated 30% reduction in electricity and 22% reduction in gas against the baseline.

With regard to the status of PL3 and properties in Warboys, Councillor Davenport-Ray, the Executive Councillor for Climate and Environment, was informed by the Corporate Director that the Council was committed to delivering on housing needs. The application for Warboys was under review with constructive engagement with Longhurst and the community which the officer believed would be reflected in an updated planning application.

The Executive Leader, Councillor Conboy, commented that this report offered transparency and was an aid to staff as well as Councillors. Whereupon, it was

### **RESOLVED**

That the Cabinet note the progress and performance during Quarter 1, as summarised in the Corporate Performance Report submitted and detailed in Appendices A, B and C.

### **33. SAWTRY NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN**

With the aid of a report prepared by the Chief Planning Officer (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Cabinet considered whether to act upon the examiner's report and accept the modifications proposed for the Sawtry Neighbourhood Plan and consequently progress to referendum.

By way of background, Councillor Sanderson, the Executive Councillor for Planning, reiterated and echoed compliments from the Ward Councillor regarding the work completed by Sawtry Parish Council. The Conservation Statement had not been produced but neighbourhood policies used landscape and townscape supplementary planning documents to guide proposals. Confirmation from landowners was still required for some development sites.

Councillor Ferguson, the Executive Councillor for Customer Services, promoted neighbourhood plans as a way for residents to influence their community.

The Executive Leader, Councillor Conboy, acknowledged that she had spoken to Sawtry Parish Council at the start of the neighbourhood planning process and was pleased to see the progression. Whereupon, it was

## **RESOLVED**

that the Cabinet agree that the District Council should act upon the Examiner's report and progress the Sawtry Neighbourhood Plan to referendum.

### **34. FINANCE PERFORMANCE REPORT 2023/24, QUARTER 1**

With the aid of a newly formatted report prepared by the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Cabinet reviewed the expenditure forecast and factors affecting expenditure and income known by the end of June 2023. The Director of Finance and Corporate Resources established that the new formatting had improved clarity of remaining resources and showed income as well as net expenditure. She recognised the increase in capital expenditure and the significant capital and revenue underspend which would be inputted into the reserve and distributed or spent prior to grant expiry.

The shortfall in commercial investment income had been driven by refurbishments at Fareham Offices, which aimed to reflect changes to demand and improve the building's energy efficiency. There was already interest in this site, which was scheduled for completion by January 2024.

The Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources, Councillor Mickelburgh, explained that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth) had complimented the improved transparency in the new formatting and, following input, it had been determined that some reference numbers would remain within the report, such as for the Public Work Loans Boards. The Panel had also learned the timing of the second bin charge had reduced income as it had been for a shorter period.

Councillors Davenport-Ray, Pitt and Hassall - Executive Councillors for Climate and Environment, Community and Health and Corporate and Shared Services - complimented the work of the Facilities Team in making savings on electricity and gas.

The Executive Councillor for Corporate and Shared Services, Councillor Hassall, was informed that the commercial estate in St Neots that was formerly Frankie and Benny's was open for tenants and a lease was being surrendered for the former Prezzo site. The Executive Councillor hoped this news would alleviate residents' anxiety. Whereupon, it was

## **RESOLVED**

that the Cabinet considered and noted the financial

performance to the end of June 2023, as detailed in the report now submitted.

**35. HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK**

The Cabinet received and noted the minutes of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group held on 21st July 2023.

Following its income increase, Councillor Davenport-Ray, the Executive Councillor for Climate and Environment, was optimistic for the future of the café. She also highlighted that satellite sites were common in Huntingdonshire and the park was a site for jobseeker Green Skills Projects.

The Executive Leader, Councillor Conboy, also promoted the Santa Paws event and praised the progress made at the Park.

The Executive Leader concluded the meeting, welcoming the new Chief Executive to her new role.

Chair

**Public**  
**Key Decision - No**

## HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Title/Subject Matter:** Planning Services - Update

**Meeting/Date:** Overview & Scrutiny (Performance & Growth) – 4  
October 2023  
Cabinet – 17 October 2023

**Executive Portfolio:** Executive Councillor for Planning

**Report by:** Chief Planning Officer

**Wards affected:** All Wards

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### **Executive Summary:**

On the 1st April 2022 Strategic Growth and Development Management were merged back under one Planning Service, with a new Chief Planning Officer in post. This report presents an update on activity within planning services over the past sixteen months, until the end of August 2023. The primary focus of this report will be Development Management and the determination of planning applications, alongside an update on the Local Plan

A new Corporate Plan has been adopted and this report will identify the strategic role Planning plays across the three pillars of 'Do, Enable, Influence'

Prior to April 2022 it was recognised that Development Management was experiencing a high turnover of staff, placing an increasing reliance on external contractors. An outcome of that was increased budget pressures for the service, alongside an increasing backlog of planning applications and cessation of our pre-application service while existing staff were experiencing unsustainable workloads. The report aims to provide an update on the journey to date to reduce the backlog and establish a sustainable planning service through a programme of planning improvements and reduced reliance on external contractors. This journey is not complete but it is timely to share an up to date position statement of activity. In addition, this report will take the opportunity to provide an update across the services that make up Planning Services and provide an update on the progression of the update to the Local Plan 2036.

On the commencement of a new Planning Service, it was evident that the focus was on decision making, and time was required to formally identify the backlog of planning applications and establish a monitor and manage approach to older applications. Alongside a need to address a number of vacancies, placing undue pressures on budgets due to a reliance on agency staff.

On the 24th October 2022 it was established that 329 planning applications and 271 tree related applications were over 26 weeks old. On the 28th August 2023 this was reduced to 157 planning applications, and 45 tree-related applications respectively. Alongside a clear focus to reduce the backlog, we have established a programme of planning improvements. The purpose of the programme is to ensure we establish an agile, deliverable and financially sustainable service for the residents and business of Huntingdonshire, reviewing procedures and processes to ensure an equitable service for all service users, with decisions being issued in a timely manner for all users. This will include exploring the role of digital opportunities to streamline processes.

On the 24th January 2023, Cabinet agreed to the preparation of a full update to the adopted Local Plan which will set out a plan for how the district will grow over future decades. A range of consultations took place between February -May 2023 and a 'Call for Sites' between March and June. Engagement events were undertaken with Members and Town and Parish Councils in May and June. On the 21st March Cabinet formally endorsed the Local Development Scheme, which sets out the key milestones in the preparation of the plan.

The Cabinet is:

#### **RECOMMENDED**

- a) to agree on the progress of improvements to the planning service to date.**
- b) to note and agree the position on the progress of the update to the Local Plan.**

## 1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the work to date to erode a legacy backlog, minimise staff turnover and embed new ways of working to deliver a sustainable service across Planning services. It will set out the changes made to date, and progress as an outcome of those changes.
- 1.2 This report will also provide a broad overview across the wider Planning service, including and update on the progress of the Local Plan.

## 2. BACKGROUND & CURRENT POSITION

- 2.1 Prior to April 2022, planning matters were delivered under two separate approaches, Strategic Growth and Development Management. Strategic Growth reported to the Corporate Director (Place) and Development Management reported to the Chief Operating Officer. As of the 1st April 2022 the two teams were formally merged under one umbrella of Planning Services, reporting direct to the newly established role of Chief Planning Officer. The Chief Planning Officer reports directly to the Managing Director, while the post of Corporate Director (Place) remains vacant.
- 2.2 Strategic Growth comprises the following teams:
- Planning Policy (Plan-making; Neighbourhood Plans)
  - Implementation (S106 monitoring; CIL; NSIP project management)
  - Strategic Development in urban design (large-scale planning applications/ 200 + homes)

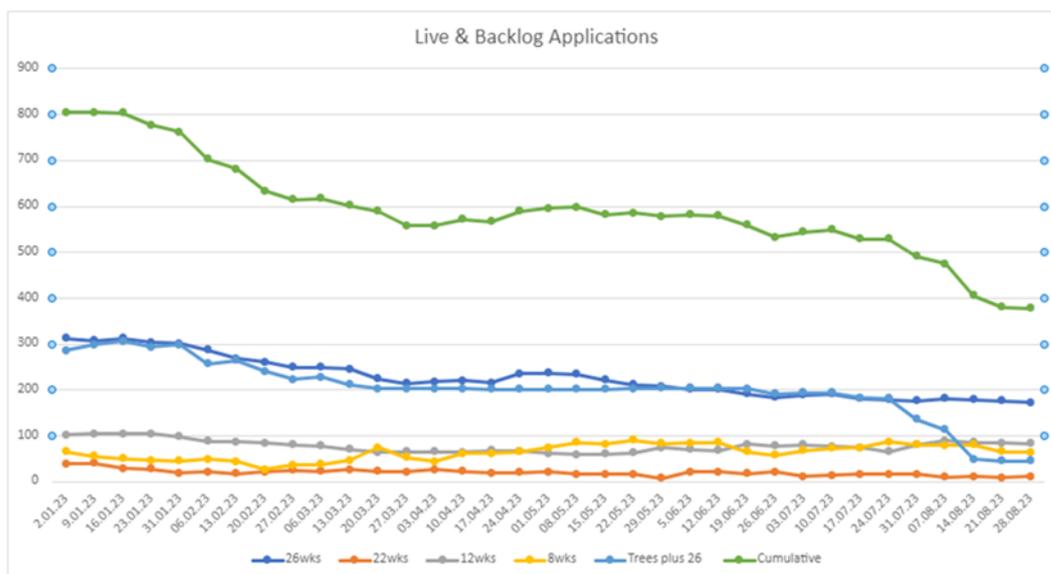
Development Management comprises the following teams:

- 2 x Area DM teams ( extensions/ minors/major applications/up to 199 units)
  - Planning Enforcement
  - Planning Validation
  - Environment Team ( Heritage/Landscape/Trees)
- 2.3 Under the newly established service it was evident that Development Management had been experiencing challenges of a period of high staff turnover, which placed a reliance on external contractors. For the avoidance of doubt, high staff turnover and the theme of reliance on contractors is not unique to Huntingdonshire District Council, it is a recognised industry-wide problem. An outcome of this period was a significant increase in budget pressures alongside increased workloads for existing staff. The focus had on decision making to ensure Huntingdonshire District Council met government targets and avoided becoming a 'Designated Authority' ([Improving planning performance: criteria for designation \(updated 2022\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-planning-performance-criteria-for-designation-updated-2022) - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))) and as a result establishing a proper record of legacy backlog applications was could not be accommodated within business as usual. In February 2022, our new Planning Service Manager (Development Management) was recruited, following a period of interim arrangements. In May 2022 our Development Management Area Team Leader (south) joined the service. In December

2022 our Development Management Team Leader (North) joined the service. By December 2022 all managers in planning services were permanent members of staff.

### Development Management/Planning Applications

2.4 Through Q1 and Q2 of 22/23 a systematic review of all planning applications in the system was undertaken, and risk profiled into categories according to age. The primary focus was applications over 26 weeks old, and establish those without an extension of time presenting a risk of fee-payback to the Council. Under the Planning Guarantee, the planning application fee must be refunded to applicants where no decision has been made within 26 weeks (unless a longer period has been agreed in writing between the applicant and the local planning authority). This only applies to applications submitted after 1 October 2013. Alongside that, all applications (backlog and live) have been categorised.



2.5 On the 24th October 2022, 329 planning applications were over 26 weeks. On the 1st of April 2023, 218 were over 26 weeks old, a reduction of 34%. The ambition set is to have approximately 100 by year end. As of the end of August that has been reduced to 157, a reduction of 48%.

2.6 Alongside a significant erosion of the backlog of planning improvements the service has consistently maintained a high performance on decision making as demonstrated as part of wider Corporate Performance Monitoring reported to Cabinet on the 19th September 2023.

2.5 While the primary focus is the backlog, it is equally important to embed sustainable new working practices. Working collaboratively with the Council's Transformation team a programme of planning improvements has been established. This will be formal programme that will examine our processes, procedures and ways of working to maximise efficiencies and minimise a risk of a further backlog. As part of that it is understanding the role of digital in that process. To date additional digital work has focussed

on unlocking further potential from existing IT systems. It was agreed that a programme of planning improvements would be formally set out and documented, and a programme manager has been engaged for one year to oversee that programme. They commenced with the authority in June 2023. A further update on the programme of planning improvements will be reported to a later committee.

- 2.6 As part of delivering a sustainable, self-sufficient planning service, the option for applicants to engage in pre-application discussions was re-established in October 2022. As part of a review of backlog applications, it was evident that the cause for a backlog was largely due to poor quality applications, that were required to be amended, and amendments not forthcoming. Amendments not only place undue pressures on officers, but increase financial cost to the authority. On the 4th October 2022, the Portfolio Holder for Planning issued a letter to all members confirming that the department would no longer accept amendments (with the exception of large-scale major applications) and the forum for discussion with officers was through our new established pre-application service (Appendix 1). While not to the satisfaction of all, this has led to improved quality of submissions, and more timely decision making. In accordance with the NPPF we will work proactively with applicants and that is through our pre-application system.
- 2.7 Between April 2022 – March 2023, 2004 applications were received. 2002 were validated and 2223 were determined. These are applications of all types.
- 2.8 Between April 2022 – March 2023 37 complaints were submitted across planning services, with 10 proceeding to stage 2. (April 21-March 22 – 58 complaints submitted; 15 stage 2). Complaints represent 2.6% of the overall number of applications determined in the financial year 22-23.
- 2.9 Between April 2022 – 2023 – 3 complaints investigated by the Local Government Ombudsman
- 2.10 in September 2023 one development management officer is commencing their planning apprenticeship to gain a planning qualification.

#### **Arboriculture/Trees:**

- 2.11 For works to be carried out to trees in a conservation area, or works to trees subject of a tree preservation order, an application must be submitted to the Local Planning Authority. In July 2022 our trees officer left the authority. The post was successfully recruited to, with the current officer starting with the authority in November 2021.
- 2.12 As of the 24th October 2022 329 tree related applications were outstanding. As of the 28th of August 2023 this was reduced to 45 cases. This represents an 87% reduction in tree related applications.

### **Planning Enforcement:**

- 2.13 At the end of 2019 1467 planning enforcement cases were open. This has now been reduced to 652. Of that figure, 218 are deemed backlog. The remainder being cases on hand, and actioned in a priority approach based on level of harm, and wider public interest.
- 2.14 Planning enforcement have carried out training on the principles of planning enforcement with the Council's Development Management Committee. In addition, a presentation on the same theme was given to Parish Councils at the virtual engagement session on the 14th April 2022. That presentation was also given in person at the annual Parish Forum, at Burgess Hall on the 14th June 2023.

### **Programme of Planning Improvements:**

- 2.15 Since the commencement of the Programme Manager, the development of project management products has created key mechanisms to plan, manage and monitor the delivery of a portfolio of existing projects across Phase 2 and 3.
- 2.16 This combined with the establishment of a change authority has ensured that any risks or issues identified within the service and consequently, the programme has been mitigated, so change requests escalated, approved so corrective action can be taken.
- 2.17 At the same, Business Analysts have begun process mapping the development management part of the service to identify possible areas for improvement, not only process but line of business applications, skills and knowledge of the workforce and management of time.
- 2.18 These findings will develop a new improvement plan for the next 12 – 18 months, with several options and recommendations that consider constraints observed in the service to date.

### **Local Plan Update:**

- 2.19 A Local Plan sets out a plan for future sustainable development in the district. It performs two specific roles:
- It identifies key areas of land for development to deliver the homes, jobs and services needed in the district, and
  - Includes policies against which all planning applications are considered.

The Local Plan is the document by which all development in the district is judged, it provides the basis for what can happen, where it can happen and when it can happen. It forms part of the Development Plan and all planning decisions must be made in accordance with the Development Plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

- 2.20 Cabinet formally agreed to the commencement of an update to the Huntingdonshire Local Plan on the 24th of January 2023.
- 2.21 The following consultations were undertaken:
- Consultation on a Statement of Community Involvement ran 1st February- 15th March 2023
  - Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report ran from 1st February to 15th March 2023.
  - Land Availability Assessment Methodology ran from 29th March to 10th May 2023
  - Settlement Hierarchy Methodology ran from 29th March to 10th May
  - The Call for Sites ran from 29th March to 7th June 2023.
  - The Issues Engagement Papers consultations ran from 26th April to 5th July 2023.
- 2.22 The first phase of engagement on the Local Plan Update finished on 5th July. The Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report has been amended in the light of consultation responses and is available at [Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report](#). Consultation responses on the draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology have resulted in substantial amendments to reduce and simplify the approach taken. The purpose of the document is also clarified through its revised title of Sustainability of Settlements Assessments. The Call for Sites generated over 350 submissions; these are now being assessed through the Land Availability Assessment Methodology which has benefitted from minor amendments arising from consultation responses received on this. The sites submitted include 12 in excess of 250ha each for new settlement or major employment proposals. The majority, however, are of 1 to 25 ha in size. Details of all sites received can be found at [Call for Sites - Huntingdonshire.gov.uk](#) and includes an interactive map. Sites that meet the initial filters in the Land Availability Assessment will proceed to more detailed Sustainability Appraisal.
- 2.23 The Issues Papers were published for engagement in three formats. The Easy Read version received 267 responses of which 66% were from people under the age of 19. The summary version only attracted 50 responses including three Parish Councils. Both included responses from registered consultees who took up these simpler options rather than responding to the full Issues Paper. As a result, responses to the full Issues Paper were dominated by professionals, interest groups and landowners with nearly 2,200 responses submitted.
- 2.24 A Local Plan briefing was held for all Members on the 10<sup>th</sup> May 2023.
- 2.25 Town and Parish Council engagement included two hybrid meetings to explain the Issues engagements and respond to questions on this. These were held on 24th May and 5th June 2023. They were attended by 80 Councillors representing 34 Town and Parish Councils. However, these only resulted in responses being submitted by the following:

- Full Issues Paper – 11 Towns/Parishes
- Summary Issues Paper – 4 Towns/Parishes
- Easy Read Issues Survey - 1

2.26 Work is now ongoing to assess sites and prepare further issues and options for engagement in spring/ early summer 2024. This will include engagement with statutory duty to cooperate partners and site promoters and preparation of technical evidence to support the development of the Local Plan Update.

2.27 Updates to the Local Plan can be found on a dedicated web page [Local Plan Update - Huntingdonshire.gov.uk](https://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/Local-Plan-Update)

2.28 The Local Development Scheme was approved by Cabinet on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2023. Table 2 sets out the broad timetable for the update to the Local Plan [Local Development Scheme \(huntingdonshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/Local-Development-Scheme)

### **Neighbourhood Planning:**

2.29 The current adopted Development Plan includes a number of made neighbourhood Plans (NP) for the following towns/parishes:

- Buckden
- Bury
- Godmanchester
- Grafham and Ellington
- Great Gransden
- Houghton and Wyton
- Huntingdon
- St. Neots
- The Stukeleys

2.30 Activity underway includes:

- Sawtry – Cabinet accepted the recommended modifications to the plan. A referendum is expected in October and expected to be made at Full Council in December 2023
- St Ives – Reg 14 final draft consultation scheduled for September with Submission expected in December 2023
- Great Staughton – Reg 14 draft consultation scheduled for September/ October
- Others in preparation: Joint NP for Great and Little Gidding, Hamerton and Steeple Gidding and Winwick; Stilton, Glatton, Hemingford Abbots, Brington and Molesworth, Old Weston and Catworth.
- SEA screening complete for Great Staughton NP.

### **Implementation:**

2.31 This element of the report will focus on the Community Infrastructure. On the 18th April 2023 a spend allocation was presented to Cabinet for consideration. It was agreed that it is timely to review CIL governance in light of ambitions published under the Levelling Up Agenda. As part of that

it is noted that the Community Infrastructure Levy is proposed to be replaced by an Infrastructure Levy. It was anticipated that further advice would emerge from government but that has not been published within anticipated timescales. However, recognising the Council's recently adopted Corporate Plan to 2028, and the three pillars of 'Do, Enable, Influence' it is timely to review governance to support the ambitions of the Corporate Plan.

- 2.32 A project plan is being developed and a further update will be presented to a later meeting.

**Other activities within Planning:**

- 2.33 The purpose of this report is to primarily give an update on the improvements undertaken to date within Development Management, and to provide an update on the progress to the update to the Local Plan. In addition to the matters discussed above the department continues to work collaboratively with partners in strategic transport matters including East West Rail, bus matters, A141 outline business case and A428 matters, alongside the CPCAs Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, and the Huntingdonshire Transport strategy (CCC).

- 2.34 The team actively engage on strategic matters relating to (but not limited to) the Great Fen, Fens reservoir project liaison, Huntingdonshire Place Strategy; Natural Cambridgeshire Liaison, Biodiversity Net Gain and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

- 2.35 The Local Planning Authority has an obligation to maintain a five year housing land supply and a statutory duty to publish an Annual Monitoring report

- Part 1 (housing) is anticipated to be published in October 2023
- Part 2 is expected to be published in December 2023

- 2.36 The Local Planning Authority has a statutory requirement to publish and Infrastructure Funding Statement annually. That will be published in December 2023.

**Agency Staff position:**

Strategic Growth:

- 2.37 In the previous two years there has been no spend on agency staff; No spend to date on agency staff for 23/24

Development Management:

- 2.38 In 21-22 – agency staff cost to the department £486K  
In 22-23 – agency staff cost to the department £243K  
In 23-24 (to date) – agency staff have cost the department £41K

2.39 This is a fluid scenario alongside managing vacancies and the need to deliver an efficient service. It should be noted the use of agency staff is carefully considered, and where possible we look to find longer term solutions.

### **3. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY**

3.1 The Panel discussed the Planning Services Update Report at its meeting on 4th October 2023.

3.2 Following a question from Councillor Corney, the Panel heard that the Amendment programme serves a purpose to ensure we provide an equitable service. Amendments are accepted on large-scale major applications and pre-application submissions are the forum for discussion of planning applications. The team were happy to listen to feedback from members in moving forward.

3.3 In response to a further question from Councillor Corney, the Panel heard that work was being undertaken on CIL governance with an ambition to have another CIL round in Spring 2024. Details likely to be brought back to the Panel. Applications would be invited after this.

3.4 The Panel heard that the Annual Infrastructure Funding Statement would be brought through the democratic cycle in December 2023 and would provide updates on projects.

3.5 Following a question on the reduction in agency fees from Councillor Slade, the Panel heard that following successful recruitment campaigns, many positions had been filled permanently but the team continue to monitor contractor costs.

3.6 In response to a question from Councillor Wells, the Panel heard that Town and Parish Councils were encouraged to engage with the team in regards to the work on the Local Plan, and that the team were open to suggestions from Members on the best way to effectively achieve this.

3.7 Councillor Gardener expressed concern that the Call for Sites had created confusion in some Parishes. In response, the Panel heard that a frequently asked questions section was being developed for the website to help alleviate these concerns.

3.8 Councillors Pickering and Gleadow praised the work done by the team in the progress made thus far, a sentiment which was shared by the Panel.

3.9 Following the discussion, the Panel were informed that their comments would be added to the Cabinet report in order for Cabinet to make a decision on the recommendations.

#### **4. KEY IMPACTS / RISKS**

4.1 The key risks to the performance of the planning department can be summarised as:

- Upturn in staff turnover
- Inability to recruit in challenging times (industry wide)
- Reversal of 'no amendments' policy
- Low update of pre-application advice/ Planning performance agreements.
- Significant changes in national approach to plan-making without suitable transition arrangements (planning policy)
- Significant changes in approach to decision making without suitable transition arrangements.
- Delays to expected government announcements (CIL/IL)
- De-prioritisation of programme of planning improvements.
- Outcomes of appeal/court decisions that place extra procedural requirements on LPAs

#### **5. WHAT ACTIONS WILL BE TAKEN/TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

5.1 The timetable for the Local Plan has been published, as per the Local Development Scheme (Paragraph 2.20)

5.2 The programme of planning improvements has been formally stood up, with details set out at paragraphs 2.11 -2.14 of this report.

#### **6. LINK TO THE CORPORATE PLAN, (SEE CORPORATE PLAN)**

6.1 Improved Housing (24) – First Homes position statement

Forward Thinking Economic Growth (35) -Commence update to the Local Plan

Forward Thinking Economic Growth (39)- Influence delivery of strategic transport infrastructure inc. East West Rail, A428, A141 strategic outline business case.

Lowering our Carbon Emissions (44) – Review of the Local Plan.

Lowering our Carbon Emissions (51) – Contribute to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Delivering good quality, high value-for-money services with good control and compliance with statutory obligations (58) - Undertake the Development Management Improvement programme to improve the performance of the planning service.

## **7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 As identified in this report resources to maintain and deliver an efficient planning service remain carefully monitored and form part of the consideration of for the programme of planning improvements, and future bids to the MTFS. Where possible officer will attempt to access government funding when it becomes available such as the planning skills delivery fund announced in July 2023 to support ongoing skills development of staff.

## **8. ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 The Local Plan update provides the opportunity to make significant changes to the Council's response to the climate crisis and ecological emergency. The Local Plan is in the early stages in identifying the priorities of local residents, businesses and organisations towards these in terms of how planning can help to shape our approaches and require changes to how development impacts on both the built and natural environments. This is not only reflected in the standalone chapters of 'Responding to the climate crisis' and 'Protecting and enhancing the natural environment' but is woven throughout the document in issues such as 'the green economy' and 'water efficiency standards'.
- 8.2 Planning applications must be determined in accordance with the Development Plan, which includes the HLP2036 unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Full regard must be had to ministerial statements and any emerging statutory requirements including the Environment Act 2021, which come into force in November 2023.

## **9. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS**

- 9.1 The planning department has been through significant change since April 2022 but, importantly, continues to do so to ensure a sustainable, agile and deliverable service for the residents and businesses of Huntingdonshire.
- 9.2 The programme of planning improvements meets the required key action under 'Undertake the Development Management Improvement programme to improve the performance of the planning service'.
- 9.3 The Huntingdonshire Local Plan will meet many of the Council's objectives. In particular it meets the required key action under 'improving housing provision' of 'commencing an update of the local plan'.

## **10. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- [HDC Cabinet - Tuesday, 24th January 2023](#)
- [HDC Cabinet - Tuesday 21st March 2023](#)
- [HDC Cabinet - Tuesday, 18th April 2023](#)
- [Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004](#)
- [National Planning Practice Guidance](#)

- [Corporate Plan and Performance - Huntingdonshire.gov.uk](https://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/corporate-plan-and-performance)
- [Local Plan Update - Huntingdonshire.gov.uk](https://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/local-plan-update)
- [Improving planning performance: criteria for designation \(updated 2022\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-planning-performance-criteria-for-designation)

## **CONTACT OFFICER**

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4 October 2022

Huntingdonshire District Council  
For the Attention of: All Members

(By email: [members@huntingdonshire.gov.uk](mailto:members@huntingdonshire.gov.uk))

Dear Members

**HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL  
PRE-APPLICATION PLANNING SERVICE**

Dear Members,

In late 2021 we had to pause our pre-application planning service to enable the team to focus on our statutory duty of determining applications across a variety of matters, including planning permission, matters relating to trees, listed buildings and discharge of conditions. In the year 21/22 the team issued over 3080 planning decisions, despite several staffing challenges resulting from healthy competition from neighbouring authorities. The purpose of this note is, I am pleased to say, that we are looking to re-starting the service and the anticipated start date is the 12<sup>th</sup> October.

We are very mindful that all Councils have budget challenges, and it is to be commercially minded, and explore opportunities to drive additional income where possible. Restarting our pre-application service provides such an opportunity. This will ensure we can invest in an agile, skilled, and flexible planning workforce, able to respond effectively to the needs of our residents and businesses through ensuring that planning applications are determined on time.

To ensure successful delivery of a pre-application service we need to make several changes. These changes will not only streamline our ways of working but allow us to set clear external expectations with the development industry, which in turn will give certainty as part of their project planning, particularly in these uncertain times.

As many of you will be aware, the challenge from the development industry is timely decision making. In the past, and while aiming to be helpful we have accepted amendments to planning applications which take applications beyond their statutory time frames, but the reality is that amendments are a significant contributor to delayed decision making. A key long- term change in our approach to planning applications is to no longer accept amendments to planning applications (with the exception of large-scale major schemes). Our statutory function is to determine planning applications as they are submitted, and with that in mind, and to drive efficiency we need to ensure that applicants and agents submit high quality applications. This approach gives certainty to applicants, stakeholders, and residents that applications will be determined in a timely manner. In addition, this will allow all interested parties to monitor applications online, without the need to approach officers, effectively freeing officer time to focus on determining planning applications. The route to discuss amendments and changes will be our pre-application service.

Our new pre-application service is route through which applicants and agents can seek an informal officer opinion their scheme. It can be as simple as exploring the principle of their scheme, through to detailed design and masterplanning. It is available for all types of application, from householder applications through to masterplanning of large-scale major sites, renewables etc. We will also offer specialist advice. This will be a paid for service, with costs and timescales clearly available on our website, and now include the ability for services to be paid for online.

In preparation for the restart of this service, one of the first steps we are taking is to push even harder to resolve and determine outstanding applications. To make this happen quickly, between today, Tuesday, 4<sup>th</sup> October and Friday, 14<sup>th</sup> October inclusive we are putting in place temporary measures on how we respond to enquiries from customers, and we are calling this a 'Planning Blitz'. We will continue to respond to urgent and essential matters, however, general contact with planning officers in the Development Management Area Teams, will be prioritised to enable the team to focus on processing and determining applications which may mean there will be a delay in responding or that a response will not be provided until after the close of this period.

This temporary change does not relate to Planning Enforcement. They continue to operate as normal, and any breaches of planning control should be reported to the Planning Enforcement Team. Customers will also receive normal service from the Strategic Team who deal with large scale major applications.

In the short term you may experience lobbying from agents/applicants with a view to amending applications, but the good news is that we would implement this alongside the new pre-application service. In the event you are lobbied your support would be welcomed to encourage people to seek officer advice through the appropriate channel, namely our new -pre-application service. In addition, your support for our Blitz week would be welcomed, namely managing external expectation in the event other look for a communication route through you.

For the avoidance of doubt the changes proposed will also be clearly communicated all, including Parish Councils as we will need them to ensure they respond to planning consultations within their 21-day consultation period. In addition, a notification will be attached to our website.

If you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact Clara Kerr, our Chief Planning Officer, or Julie Ayre, our Planning Service Manager (Development Management)

Yours sincerely



**Councillor Tom Sanderson  
Deputy Executive Leader, and  
Executive Councillor for Planning**



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**Email: [tom.sanderson@huntingdonshire.gov.uk](mailto:tom.sanderson@huntingdonshire.gov.uk)**

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**Public - Yes**  
**Key Decision - Yes**

## HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Title/Subject Matter:** Market Towns Programme – Autumn Update 2023/2024

**Meeting/Date:** Overview & Scrutiny (Performance & Growth)  
Wednesday 4th October 2023

Cabinet  
Tuesday 17th October 2023

**Executive Portfolio:** Executive Councillor for Jobs, Economy & Housing

**Report by:** Regeneration and Housing Delivery Manager

**Ward(s) affected:** All wards.

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report provides the 2023/2024 Q2 update on the Market Towns Programme (MTP).

The MTP is funded through a combination of external funding from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC), Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA), Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and National Highways.

### RECOMMENDATION UPDATED

Cabinet is asked to:

Note progress on all the projects within the Market Towns Programme and specifically the following:

- (a) The appointment of a contractor to deliver the St Neots Town Centre Improvements (Market Square and adjacent highways/junctions) and commencement of works in October 2023.
- (b) Progression of the Priory Centre improvement project including the appointment of a multi-disciplinary team to develop proposals and support delivery.
- (c) Commencement of delivery of the Huntingdon & St Ives works, including roll out of the Shop Front Improvement Grant scheme.
- (d) Delivery of the Digital Information Screens project in Huntingdon, St Neots, St Ives, and Ramsey.

### 1. PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

1.1 To provide an update on activity across the strands of the Market Town Programme, with specific regard to the progress of projects highlighted above.

## **2. UPDATE ON MARKET TOWNS PROGRAMME**

### **ST NEOTS PROGRAMME:**

#### **Town Centre Improvements (Transport Projects)**

2.1 The Town Centre Improvements project is scheduled to begin delivery during October 2023. This follows the successful completion of the contractor procurement process carried out, utilising the Eastern Highways Framework, in partnership with Cambridgeshire County Council. The successful tender was submitted by the contractor Eurovia, and we are now in the process of finalising contracts to enable the works to begin in October.

2.2 The most significant risk to this project was the impact of high levels of inflation on the construction cost and, consequently, the ability of the Council to deliver the scheme within our current resources. Considerable work was undertaken in developing the detailed designs and specifications with scheme partners and contractors to mitigate this risk.

2.3 This work, which included consulting with contractors during the design process, helped to ensure that the value of both tenders received were broadly in line with cost expectations, and resources available. At a time when construction inflation is having a significant impact on the delivery of major infrastructure projects across the country, this is a considerable achievement.

2.4 Now that the procurement process is complete, work is turning towards the contractors starting on site, preparation and phasing of works in the Market Square and adjacent highways or junctions, which are due to be improved. The start of the main works within the Market Square itself is scheduled for January. This will help to ensure that there will be minimal impact on Christmas celebrations, including the Christmas lights switch on, which is a very popular event in the town.

2.5 As part of this initiation stage, the implementation of the Project Communication Plan will be of critical importance. The Communication Plan will be used to inform and guide messaging to residents and businesses. This includes ensuring accurate and up to date information concerning the works is always available. For example, on a topic discussed in these quarterly reports previously, where trees are due to be replaced in the Market Square for safety reasons due to being incorrectly planted (and as Cambridgeshire County Council would have been obliged to do anyway, regardless of the improvements works). This will ensure that residents and others can be fully aware that the scheme will in fact result in the planting of a greater number and wider variety of trees (already at semi-mature stage) than are currently positioned in the Market Square, combined with biodiverse ground level planters that incorporate the square's distinctive monastic statues, to help address what would otherwise be entirely natural and reasonable concerns.

2.6 Of critical importance to the success of this project, the Council continues to work with Wendy Fair Markets Ltd and the Market traders to support uninterrupted operation of the Market during the scheme works. Notably, this

has included installing new power points during July, which can be used by the traders (and St Neots Town Council when managing their own events/activities), for the duration of the construction period.

- 2.7 Discussions are also underway with Wendy Fair Ltd regarding the Council potentially taking over management of the Charter Market and integrating its operation into the Council's wider Market management, which also includes St Ives and Huntingdon. Subject to a successful conclusion of these discussions, the Council may take a direct role in managing St Neots Charter Market, beyond the completion of the town centre improvements.

### **3. Priory Centre Improvement**

- 3.1 The Priory Centre serves as a hub for community groups and cultural events. However, its facilities are dated, layout is inefficient, and the building orientation does not engage with its prime riverside setting. This project is focused on developing proposals and a delivery plan to reconfigure and improve the layout of the Priory Centre, investing in its facilities, creating a stronger link to the town centre, and establishing a connection to the riverfront.
- 3.2 Towards this end, the Council has recently contracted with Agents of Change (AOC), a specialist in community and cultural facilities, to develop designs and proposals for the Priory Centre and to co-ordinate refurbishment works.
- 3.3 The work being undertaken by AOC is being carried out and organised utilising the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) plan of work, which organises the process of briefing, designing, and delivering a new or improved building. AOC have been commissioned to take the project from initial designs (RIBA stages 0 to 2), up to construction (stage 5). The project is currently at the concept design stage (stage 2).
- 3.4 The Council and AOC are working very closely with the sitting tenant for the Priory Centre, St Neots Town Council, on developing an improved facility which enhances the cultural activities provided in the town and improves the financial sustainability of the Priory Centre as a whole. This has included establishing a Building Delivery Group comprised of members from both organisations. We are also seeking to engage with Centre users and St Neots residents in the project's development and delivery as part of the communication plan for the project.
- 3.5 The project is funded from both Future High Street (FHSF) grant funding and the Community Infrastructure Levy. FHSF grant funding is conditional on all expenditure of this element being completed by March 2024. Consequently, the Council is seeking to deliver some initial improvements by this point. This may include both internal, for example, energy efficient measures and, subject to planning permission, external improvements. The full extent of the improvement works, however, will be phased over 2023/24 and 2024/25 with the detailed schedule of works to be confirmed.
- 3.6 It is not possible to undertake works of this scale without impacting on the Centre's operation. This may result in a significant period of closure to allow works to proceed as efficiently as possible. We will work with the Town Council to develop a mitigation plan to minimise the impact of these works and to provide

support to those with existing or regular facilities bookings to assist with identifying alternative facilities during the works period.

#### **4. St Neots CPCA Legacy funding (masterplan phase 1)**

- 4.1 Delivery of this sub programme includes several small to medium scale projects. This includes the development of a stage in the redeveloped Market Square, and a public art initiative for the town centre, both of which are being delivered in partnership with St Neots Town Council.
- 4.2 The Market Square Stage is intended to provide a focal point for town centre events, including future Christmas lights switch-ons, in addition to providing a facility for other events throughout the year, which may include music and other cultural celebrations. The design of the stage is being developed through a separate commission to the main Market Square scheme, however, the Market Square technical designs have specifically considered and incorporated the necessary infrastructure for a new stage. This includes the positioning of the stage within the Square and access to electrical and other infrastructure.
- 4.3 A procurement process to appoint designers for this scheme is scheduled to commence in early October. We are aiming to finalise the designs and seek planning consent for the proposals by early Spring. The construction of the stage would be incorporated into the main Market Square improvement works and delivered by the contractor Eurovia.
- 4.4 The purpose of the public art project is to deliver one or more public art installations throughout the town centre.
- 4.5 The project will be delivered through a single tender process, managed by St Neots Town Council, to be commenced during the Autumn 2023. The timetable for delivery will be confirmed as part of this process. The resulting commission will be divided into three key deliverables, including:
- Research, engagement and development of themes and vision (including proposed medium of work)
  - Design work
  - Creation and installation

The Co-Retail Project also forms part of this smaller programme of activity funded by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA). This scheme is being delivered in partnership with a local Community Interest Company, which is designed to support social enterprises and the public good in the local area.

- 4.6 The Co-Retail Scheme will enable space within a local retail unit to be provided to start up retailers and independent traders so that their goods and produce can be brought in front of shoppers and help to support new and local entrepreneurs. The project is scheduled to begin in the Autumn 2023. The investment which is being provided will enable space within an existing retail unit to be redesigned to accommodate this unique use. This project will deliver tangible benefits in terms of supporting local entrepreneurs and driving economic growth.

4.7 The final project within this programme is the Digital Information Screen initiative. This is being delivered as part of wider program including Huntingdon, St Ives and Ramsey. Further information about this project is included under paragraph 4.1.

## **5. Huntingdon and St Ives funding allocation**

5.1 The Huntingdon and St Ives programme is funded from a CPCA funding allocation which was provided as part of the original Market Town Programme, but which was only recently allocated to projects in March 2023. Just over £800,000 is provided to projects which will deliver Shop Front Improvement Grants in both town centres, a new Community bandstand in St Ives, an expansion of Cromwell Museum and a Visitor Information Centre in Huntingdon and a highways improvement scheme at The Broadway in St Ives.

5.2 The Shop Front Grant Scheme was launched during July 2023, generating a great deal of interest. By August, we have already approved four shop front grants across both St Ives and Huntingdon town centres. A further seven grant applications are currently under consideration. The value of grants approved varies from £2,000 to £10,000. We expect that the scheme will deliver between 20 to 30 shop front grants in total. The grants and the improvements they encourage are an effective way in which to promote and enable physical improvements to both Huntingdon and St Ives town centres.

5.3 The Shop Front Grant Scheme is being delivered in partnership with Huntingdon BID, who are supporting applications in both St Ives and Huntingdon. We are also working with the BID on delivering a Visitor Information Centre (focused on the town centre and shopping). The Centre is being provided with the Huntingdon Commemoration Hall. Work is currently underway, and the Centre is scheduled to be completed during the early Autumn.

5.4 As reported previously we have also provided financial support to the community driven project to provide a new bandstand within St Ives. This project was successfully completed during July.

5.5 We are also working with the Cromwell Museum and Huntingdon Town Council to deliver a major expansion of the Museum. This project may involve the acquisition of a currently disused building within Huntingdon town centre, a short distance from the existing Museum. Should this acquisition proceed, it would present an exciting opportunity to provide more exhibition and display space in addition to enhanced customer facilities. The new building, if acquired, would not replace the existing Museum, but would be treated as an extension of the Museum's offering.

5.6 Another project being delivered in partnership is the highway improvements scheme proposed for The Broadway in St Ives. This is a County Council driven project and will provide for improved pedestrian/cycle links and other highway enhancements in and around the shopping units at this location. Whilst an initial scheme design was developed for this project, further improvements are being made and once confirmed, the scheme construction is provisionally expected to commence in April 2024.

## **6. Digital Wayfinding**

- 6.1 Following consideration previously reported in these quarterly updates, the Digital Information Screen programme was reinitiated and is being delivered across all four main market towns in Huntingdon, St Ives, St Neots and Ramsey. The objective of this scheme is to provide up to eight digital screens in high footfall locations for the purpose of providing local information based on tourism, retail, culture, and heritage as well as practical information concerning events, facilities, and transport links.
- 6.2 The Council is working closely with local partners including Town Councils in all four areas, local community organisations and Huntingdon BID. This includes identifying the most appropriate locations for the screens and how best to link to and incorporate local branding and other initiatives including local town apps which have been developed in several locations. The Digital Information Screens will be updated and managed by local partners.
- 6.3 All development costs, including maintenance of the screens for a period of five years, will be funded wholly from the wider Market Towns Programme. At the end of this period, local partners can continue to operate the Digital Screens or alternatively opt for the removal of the screens should technology have advanced or for any other reason. The Council is undertaking a procurement exercise to confirm a contractor, responsible for delivering all aspects of this project. Following this appointment, expected during October 2023, work will begin on designing the systems to be used and planning project delivery, which we expect will take up to 12 months for full completion.

## **7. Smarter Towns**

- 7.1 The purpose of the Smarter Towns project is to develop a network of smart technology which can provide up-to-the-minute data on local conditions. This can include air quality or the capacity of local car parks for example. This project is being delivered in partnership with Connecting Cambridgeshire.
- 7.2 Communication routers, which local sensors (potentially owned and managed by a wide range of public organisations) have been installed in our larger Market towns and a network of sensors has been deployed, for example in relation to monitoring river levels, for the purpose of providing flood warnings. This project is due to conclude shortly, and we are in the process of installing the final initial sensors before the network is opened and promoted more widely to other public organisations.
- 7.3 As part of this final stage, the Council is focusing on deploying sensors to monitor air quality in typically high pollution areas, for example, close to major road networks. This data can then be utilised in several ways by both the Council and partners, in planning appropriate mitigation activities.
- 7.4 As part of a pilot scheme, we are also working with local Housing Associations to provide sensors which are capable of monitoring environmental conditions in local housing stock. This can be used as an early warning system concerning damp and fuel poverty, for example, where accommodation is not reaching appropriate levels of heat during Winter. Should these activities be considered successful, partners will be able to directly invest in low-cost sensors and continue to expand and access the smarter towns network.

## **8. Ramsey Produce Hub**

- 8.1 The Ramsey Market Produce Hub project has an allocation of £1.1 million of funding from the Local Growth Fund, in addition to a parallel project focused on public realm improvements of £300,000. The purpose of the Hub is to provide space within the Great Whyte area for new retail start-ups and independents to provide products and produce which can also generate footfall and business for existing shop keepers. We are working closely with the town council to ensure this objective can be realised as effectively as possible.
- 8.2 The proposed location for this facility would require the loss of up to 8 on street parking bays. To better understand car parking capacity, not only relating to this project but also the wider Vision for Ramsey, the Council has undertaken a car parking capacity study. A key excerpt of the conclusions set out in the report is included below:
- There is available spare capacity within the town centre but if some spaces are removed from the Town Square and the parking demand increases in line with expectations, people may have to park slightly further from the heart of the town centre than they currently do. Spaces could be retained in the centre for disabled parking or EV charging, but standard vehicles may have to relocate by a small distance. The available space is further to the north along Great Whyte or greater use of the spare capacity in the Mews Close short stay car park.*
- 8.3 Whilst the overall impact on parking according to this report is relatively low scale, it is important that we do consider this issue in the design and deliver of the Market Produce Hub and other projects in Ramsey town centre. This will be of particular importance in accommodating or adding to disabled parking and EV (Electrical Vehicle) charging for example.
- 8.4 As noted in previous quarterly reports, a critical challenge to the Produce Hub scheme and the proposed location is the presence of the river culvert underneath. We have undertaken technical and engineering assessments which have confirmed that whilst the original concept is technically deliverable it would require significant civil engineering works which would impact on cost.
- 8.5 Consequently, we are considering alternative options for effectively delivering the original benefit in footfall, jobs and diversifying the shopping offer available in Ramsey town centre. Different approaches may include smaller more flexible spaces which could provide a 'shop in a box' concept, utilising structures which can be more easily relocated around town centre needs and activities.
- 8.6 A good example of this concept can be found at 'The Courtyard' in St Ives which provides a small space for startup and independent traders, some of whom are predominantly online, e.g., Etsy traders. This relatively new concept has been very successful and provides a great variety of retail and cultural choice. Whilst the setting is very different to Ramsey, we consider there are positive lessons to be learnt from 'The Courtyard' in how we plan and develop the Ramsey Produce Hub. An options appraisal has been commissioned and we will be working closely with local partners to review this and consider how to progress this project.
- 8.7 In terms of the public realm improvements, we are liaising closely with the County Council Highways Department and Ramsey Town Council to develop

proposals for this project. Any improvements delivered will be required to integrate and add value to the resulting 'Hub' in whichever form this is delivered.

8.8 Several improvements have been identified as part of this process, which we consider will not conflict with the 'Hub' scheme. This includes decluttering of the highways, and the creation of additional disabled parking bays to compensate for any loss due to the 'Hub' building itself.

8.9 We are also investigating partial pedestrianisation of the area proposed for the Hub, to support town centre activities such as the Saturday market, whilst ensuring access for deliveries to local shops where required as a priority. To simplify and streamline delivery of this scheme, we will be seeking to deliver this fully in partnership with the County Council and their current Highways contractor. A timetable for delivery has not yet been developed as this is subject to the development of an acceptable design, which can be consulted on, however, we are targeting early Summer 2024 for completion.

## 9. FINANCE UPDATE:

9.1 The overall sources of confirmed funding for the MTP are shown below in Table 1. All funding identified below has been secured and is subject to contractual obligations and must be spent within the agreed guidelines and allocations only.

**Table 1: Overall MTP funding sources and status**

<b>Market Towns Regeneration</b>				
<b>Funding sources</b>	<b>£ Grant secured</b>	<b>£ Spend to date</b>	<b>£ Grant balance</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<b>St Neots Regeneration</b>				
Future High Street Funds (MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government) (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government) now DLUHC)	£3,748,815	£1,388,463.29	£2,360,351.71	Progress on spending commitment and activity is reported to DLUHC quarterly.
HDC Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)	£4,829,943	£0	£4,829,943	As per HDC cabinet decision. Schemes which have a mixture of funding sources inc. CiL (Community Infrastructure Levy), will utilise time limited funds before CiL.

CPCA	£3,100,000	£0	£3,100,000	Funding has been reprofiled for spend during 2024/25 financial year.
National Highways	£3,493,218	£0	£3,493,218	Funding agreement finalised January 2023. Drawdown of funding from NH (National Highways) will be in three tranches, scheduled for December 2023, May 2024, and November 2024.
CPCA Masterplan phase 1 St Neots (post change control)	£260,000	0	£260,000	CPCA Board approval has been provided to carry forward remaining funds and allocated to revised project activities.
<b>St Neots Regeneration Sub-total</b>	£15,431,976	£1,388,463,29	£14,043,512.70	
<b>Huntingdon &amp; St Ives</b>				

CPCA Masterplans & Accelerated Funding (*post change control March 2023)	£802,150	£50,000	£752,150	<p>The funding programme was originally due to conclude by March 2022.</p> <p>CPCA Board have confirmed approval to rollover of previously unallocated funding of £802,150 from these funds into 2023/24 and 2024/25.</p> <p>The original total funding allocation was £3,000,000. This has been deducted from the 'total grant secured' as the majority of the original allocation has been completed or closed.</p> <p>However, £295,000 of the original £3M allocation, is still active, and reserved to public realm improvements in Ramsey and is listed below*.</p>
<b>Sub-total</b>	£802,150	£50,000	£752,150	
<b>Ramsey Great Whyte Revenue funding (supporting Market Produce / Retail Hub &amp; staffing costs)</b>				
UK Shared Prosperity Fund	£221,000	£8,498.46	£212,501.54	Funding confirmed. Expenditure profiled for spend into 2024/25.
<b>Sub-total</b>	£221,000	£8,498.46	£212,501.54	
<b>Ramsey Market Produce / Retail Hub</b>				
Local Growth Fund (CPCA)	£1,153,525	£7,843.50	£1,145,681.50	Funding awarded December 2022.

CPCA Masterplans & Accelerated Funding – original allocation (Ramsey Public Realm*)	£295,000*	£0	£295,000*	Expenditure profiled for completion by June 2024.
<b>Sub total</b>	£1,448,525	£7,843.53	£1,440,681.47	
<b>PROGRAMME TOTAL</b>	<b>£17,903,651</b>	<b>£1,454,805.28</b>	<b>£16,448,845.70</b>	

## 10. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

- 10.1 The Panel discussed the Market Towns Programme Autumn Update 2023-2024 Report at its meeting on 4th October 2023.
- 10.2 The Panel heard, following a question from Councillor Jennings, that feedback from other Local Authorities on their experience with the wayfinding project had been sought and an update would be brought in the next quarterly report to the Panel.
- 10.3 Councillor Pickering expressed concerns on funding deadlines from the Future High Street Fund in relation to the Priory Centre project, however the Panel were reassured that although the project was working to tight deadlines, it was felt that these remained achievable. In addition, the team were working closely alongside the funding provider who had indicated that a commitment to spent the funding would be sufficient to secure the funding if the project timescales did slip.
- 10.4 Following a question from Councillor Corney, the Panel heard that the results of the Ramsey Parking Survey had been shared with the local Town Council, however these can also be shared with ward members if it has not yet filtered through.
- 10.5 Councillors Slade and Gardner expressed the importance of ensuring that communication with local residents is underway prior to the commencement of the project. The Panel were assured that the project would be project managed by Cambridgeshire County Council in partnership with Huntingdonshire District Council, an agile Communications Plan was in place, with any feedback or input from local Councillors welcomed.
- 10.6 Councillor Slade further enquired whether there was a conflict of interest with the appointment of CIC as they were also leading on the Inclusive Steering Group under the Place Strategy. The Panel heard that the Executive Councillor had no concerns over this but would follow up with Councillors outside of the meeting.
- 10.7 Councillor Gleadow raised a concern over the risk of inflation affecting the budget for the programme of works in St Neots market Square, following which, the Panel were assured that a detailed costing procedure had been undertaken to ensure a deliverable scheme could be achieved and that risk factors had been accommodated for within the budget.

- 10.8 Councillor Pickering observed that 7.4 related to sensors for Housing Association properties and enquired how these would be funded. The Panel heard that these sensors would be useful for the Environmental Health team in monitoring properties rented by Private Landlords and opportunities to co-ordinate with Local Housing Associations were being investigated.
- 10.9 It was observed by Councillor Slade that there had been negative press in St Neots relating to the Shopfront Scheme only being available to businesses in Huntingdon and St Ives. The Panel heard that the available funding had been solely for those two towns, however following several successful applications some funding remained available and it was believed that the funders may be open to negotiations to expand the scheme subject to a review of spend at the end of the next quarter, into the other market towns. Councillor Gardener further enquired whether this could in turn be opened up for Key Service Areas across the district, whereupon the Panel were advised that this funding pot was specifically for the market towns however, other funding opportunities would be investigated as they came to light.
- 10.10 Councillor Corney requested to record his appreciation for the hard work done by the team and noted that feedback received from colleagues across district and town councils is positive, a sentiment echoed by the Panel. Further to this, the Panel heard that regular engagement events were being built into the diary to provide further updates for Councillors and local Councils.
- 10.11 Following the discussion, the Panel were informed that their comments would be added to the Cabinet report in order for Cabinet to make a decision on the recommendations.

## **11. KEY IMPACTS/RISKS**

- 11.1 There are several risks associated with delivering an ambitious programme of this size and complexity, the notable risks are:

### **Budget management risk**

- 11.2 The projects that sit within the MTP are at various stages and therefore, as work progresses to detailed level, cost reliability and accuracy increases, the level of risk is more certain. We will continue to review the individual projects' viability and programme impacts, identifying any areas of risk, as the scheme progresses. The construction industry has seen materials and labour costs significantly increase in cost over the past 18 months. Inflation continues to be high.
- 11.3 Therefore, as we move from design into delivery any decisions on proposed options will require agreement that they can be funded within the approved Market Towns programme budget.

Mitigation: We will continue monitoring the programme funding profile and anticipated spending against budgets, updating to Cabinet quarterly. We will also seek to engage Contractors as part of an early-stage pre-procurement process to assess 'buildability' and a sense check of construction costs based on current market activity. The MTP team continue to provide regular updates

to funding bodies, briefing them on estimated costings, risks, issues, and inter-dependencies.

### **Programme Timescales risk**

- 11.4 This is an ambitious programme of delivery, with the funding for St Neots of £3.748m from the FHSF required to be spent by March 2024. In order to ensure this is achieved we are seeking to reallocate funds within the programme to those projects most capable of meeting this deadline. Any FHSF reallocated will be replaced by CiL allocation, for expenditure beyond the current financial year.
- 11.5 The CPCA funding of £3.1m also has a deadline of March 2024, however, a change control request to move these funds into the 2024/25 financial year, has been submitted to the CPCA and will be considered by the CPCA Board during September. CPCA recognise the strategic importance of this programme, and we do not anticipate any issues in CPCA accepting this request.
- 11.6 The MTP team continue to provide regular updates to funding bodies, briefing them on progress, risks, issues, and inter-dependencies.

### **Programme Resources risk**

- 11.7 The MTP requires different skills, expertise, and external technical support at various stages of project delivery. The programme itself has multiple projects which must be managed simultaneously identifying all interdependences across the programme. There is significant internal and external stakeholder management and detailed consultation with partners and resident/ business groups.
- 11.8 This could result in competing priorities across organisations that will require careful consideration. Mitigation: As part of the project, a detailed resources plan and communications strategy with stakeholders has been developed to ensure the management of expectations and information being shared promptly. The HDC's website is regularly updated with the progress across the core programme sites, more time is being invested in engaging stakeholders, a greater presence on social media and revamping of the newsletter.

### **Reputational Risk**

- 11.9 The MTP is a high priority for the Council, so monthly reporting, governance and timely decision-making are critical to ensure the programme is successfully delivered. Mitigation: The programme governance and reporting lines will be continually monitored to ensure that the key programme milestones are managed and achieved. A full MTP programme risk register is in place along with individual project risk registers. Given the size and complexity of the MTP it features on the Council's Strategic Risk register, along with the mitigating actions.

## **12. LINK TO CORPORATE PLAN 2022-2026**

- 12.1 The delivery of the MTP is aligned with the principles and key objectives of the HDC Corporate Plan which sets out the Council's objectives.

### **13. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1 The Council, based on previously successful funding bids and Cabinet decisions, has entered into several grant agreements with associated delivery and outputs frameworks.
- 13.2 All funding agreements and contracts are subject to review by the HDC legal team and senior officers and members as appropriate. In the most recent quarter, a contract with National Highways was entered into concerning funding provision for the Market Square (transport projects) scheme. Over the next quarter it is anticipated that further Funding Agreements / Contracts may require legal review. This includes the Ramsey Market Produce Hall, for which we expect to receive a draft funding agreement before the end of the fiscal year.
- 13.3 There will be a requirement for ongoing legal input to support the further development of project options, this will include the Ramsey Market Produce Hall, Old Falcon Inn, and Priory Centre. Other areas include future land and property advice relating for example to leasehold acquisitions and may be required should there be any contractual disputes. Noting there are none currently within the programme.

### **14. EQUALITIES**

- 14.1 The Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
- 14.2 Good planning and effective regeneration can improve environments and opportunities for communities experiencing disadvantage. Planning which does not engage with or consider the needs of local communities is unlikely to improve their life chances and may further entrench area-based disadvantage.

### **15. ENVIRONMENTAL**

- 15.1 The Council has a duty to ensure we continue to promote an environmentally positive recovery in Huntingdonshire following the impacts of COVID 19. We also have a duty to deliver sustainable place making. In December 2021, the Council adopted a core set of environmental principles. In October 2022, the Council passed a Cost of Living and Climate Change motion that recognises that the current cost of living and climate crises require joint attention to support the wellbeing of residents and businesses. In February 2023 Council formally recognised the Climate Crisis and Ecological Emergency, adopted the Council's Climate Strategy underlining the organisations commitment to:

- setting a positive example through its actions to be a net carbon zero Council by 2040;

- an enabler supporting action within our communities and across our partners;
- an encourager to those that live, work, and visit Huntingdonshire to take climate action and reduce carbon emissions.

15.2 The Council has direct control of only a tiny proportion of all the carbon emissions within Huntingdonshire, but we can adopt a key role to influence the district, demonstrating good practice whilst setting policies and strategies to influence businesses and communities to tackle climate change whilst enabling sustainable living and growth. These principles are embedded within the MTP.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Report to Cabinet (FHSF (Future High Street Fund)) 13th February 2020 can be found [here](#)

Report to Cabinet (FHSF) 28th July 2020 - EXEMPT

Report to Cabinet (Market Towns Accelerated Programme) 18th March 2020 can be found [here](#)

Report to Cabinet (FHSF) 23<sup>rd</sup>. February 2021 can be found [here](#)

Market Towns Programme Spring 2022 Update to Cabinet, 17th March 2022 can be found [here](#)

Market Towns Programme Summer 2022 Update to Cabinet June 2022 can be found [here](#)

Market Towns Programme Autumn 2022 Update to Cabinet September 2022 can be found [here](#)

Market Towns Programme Winter 2022 Update to Cabinet December 2022 can be found [here](#)

Market Towns Programme Spring 2023 Update to Cabinet March 2023 can be found [here](#)

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