

Public
Key Decision - Yes

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: Future High Street Fund

Meeting/Date: Cabinet – 13th February 2020
Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth – 4th March 2020)

Executive Portfolio: Executive Councillor for Housing and Economic Development

Report by: Service Manager - Growth

Wards affected: St Neots and surrounding wards

Executive Summary:

The government previously set out its commitment to helping local high streets evolve and adapt to how we, as consumers, use them. Supporting the transformation of the high street is being led through the £675 million Future High Streets Fund (FHSF) to help local areas make their high streets and town centres fit for the future.

In recognising the opportunities within St. Neots a bid was submitted by the Council for St Neots in the second wave of funding in early 2019 and it was announced that the bid was successful in August 19 awarding up to a maximum of £150,000 as capacity funding to develop a business case and plans for St Neots High Street. The fund will contribute up to a maximum of £25million to each successful town, although it is expected that most bids will be in the region of £5 - £10 million per town centre. The final Business Plan submitted will then be considered by MHCLG for funding to deliver some or all of the proposed options. The decision on the final Business Plan submitted is likely to be announced by MHCLG in the late summer/early autumn 2020.

Consultants Mott MacDonald Ltd were appointed by the Council in October 2019 to assist in developing the business case, which has included engagement with the St Neots Master Plan Steering Group. The draft Business Plan is due for submission to MHCLG by 15th March 2020 with the final document being submitted by 30 June 2020.

Given the pace at which the Council work to in order to submit the draft Business Plan it has been necessary to present this report to Cabinet before Overview and Scrutiny and seek the relevant delegation to achieve the 1st deadline as set out above.

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet is recommended to provide comments on work to date and delegate authority to the Service Manager - Growth, after consultation with the Executive Leader and Deputy Executive Leader and Corporate Director - Place, to finalise the preparation of and submit the draft FHSF Business Plan for St Neots to MHCLG on behalf of the Council.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide an understanding of the proposed direction of the draft Business Plan and the options being put forward for consideration by MHCLG for future funding in relation to the Future High Street Fund (FHSF).

2. WHY IS THIS REPORT NECESSARY/BACKGROUND

- 2.1 St Neots is the largest market town in the district and is strategically placed in terms of planned investment in relation to:
- the A428 realignment and dualling
 - Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor promoting infrastructure, housing and economic growth, and
 - East West rail proposals, which recently announced the preferred route option taking the route south of St Neots and north of Sandy.
- 2.2 The town will continue to grow with the development of St Neots East as outlined in the Huntingdonshire Local Plan 2036 (HLP2036). This will provide nearly 4,000 new homes, employment, local service centre and supporting community infrastructure including schools.
- 2.3 Future High Street Fund (FHSF) is a major opportunity to help respond and adapt to these changes and those affecting the high street and follows St Neots being chosen by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) as the first market town to go through the master planning approach (now referred to as Prospectuses for Growth).
- 2.4 Following the adoption of the St Neots Masterplan by the CPCA, a Strategic Business Case for Phase 1 was approved to bring forward £5.8m investments: initiatives which will pave the way for accelerated growth in the town. This includes (inter alia), the delivery of a new town centre foot and cycle bridge across the river, the development of a Business Improvement District, investments to save town centre bus services, support for Knowledge Intensive and Business Support (KIBS) sector, a comprehensive town centre transport study and action towards interventions to unlock prime sites.
- 2.5 As part of Phase 1, the St Neots Masterplan Steering Group also agreed the scope for the redevelopment of the Priory Quarter. This helped to aid the wider Expression of Interest (EoI) then submitted to MHCLG to the FHSF early in 2019. The EoI bid was announced to be successful in August 2019. The project has now progressed into the business plan development phase.
- 2.6 Mott MacDonald Ltd were appointed to support the Council in the preparation of the Business Plan, recognising the potential of the redevelopment of the Priory Quarter. Opportunities to enhance the attractiveness of the town, including it's river setting and architecture, as a place for people to live, work and visit and providing more adaptable community spaces and retail opportunities were all to be considered as part of the proposal, within the remit of the FHSF. The St Neots

Masterplan Steering Group has continued to be used as the platform to impart information and to engage with local stakeholders on this Huntingdonshire District Council led project.

2.7 The project team is also collaborating with colleagues on a number of the projects being taken forward within Phase 1 work of the St Neots Masterplan, and with specific reference to the St Neots Transport Study to ensure the two projects support and enhance each other.

2.8 The final Business Plan for St Neots will be assessed by MHCLG against 5 key principles outlined by HM treasury business case guidance known as the “Green Book”, namely:

- **TO BE SUPPORTED BY A ROBUST CASE FOR CHANGE THAT FITS WITH WIDER PUBLIC POLICY OBJECTIVES – THE ‘STRATEGIC CASE’;**
- **TO DEMONSTRATE VALUE FOR MONEY – THE ‘ECONOMIC CASE’;**
- **TO BE COMMERCIALY VIABLE – THE ‘COMMERCIAL CASE’;**
- **TO BE FINANCIALLY AFFORDABLE – THE ‘FINANCIAL CASE’;**
- **AND**
- **TO BE ACHIEVABLE – THE ‘MANAGEMENT CASE’**

2.9 Opportunities for the other market towns in Huntingdonshire to learn from this work should also be captured. Work has now been undertaken to develop the now named Prospectuses for Growth for each of the other three market towns– namely Huntingdon, Ramsey and St Ives. There may be the chance in the future for these towns to bid any future announced rounds within the Towns Fund, including the Future High Streets Fund (subject to the prevailing criteria at that time)

3. OPTIONS CONSIDERED/ANALYSIS

3.1 At the time of drafting this report analysis is being undertaken to support the work to meet the needs set out by MHCLG. The only information required to be collected as part of the development of the draft business case is footfall data. Additional data is also being collected to strengthen the final submission.

3.2 The draft Business Plan and options are considered against the agreed objectives of the project around:

- Strengthen – to increase demand for services in St Neots by realising development opportunities to increase the population living and working in close proximity to the town centre
- Attract – to expand the amenity offer to residents and visitors utilising the town centre
- Retain – to increase footfall and dwell time in St Neots Town Centre by improving the physical environment
- Connect – to improve access to the town centre for people walking and cycling and using public transport, and rationalise parking to improve the flow of vehicles in the town centre

- 3.3 As part of the initial work including views expressed via the St Neots MPSPG, a long list of options was considered. This has been reviewed with specialist officers and amended to the following nine options. The current options, as outlined below, will now be considered further alongside the ongoing analysis, design options and financial viability work to reach a final programme of project/s to be submitted in Business Plan.

Redeveloping the Priory Quarter

- 3.4 Redevelopment of the Priory Quarter would unlock opportunities to provide fit for purpose civic facilities, improve permeability, readdress the riverfront to actively engage the River Great Ouse and enhance its role as a community hub, whilst maintaining and potentially strengthening viewing corridors to the Grade II listed Oust House. In addition, it could also see the introduction of a new wave of services, such as KIBS (Knowledge and Intensive Business Services) spaces or other office environments, which combined with residential provisions would bring significant additional activity to the town centre supporting the town centre economy. Increasing the residential offering in the town centre can particularly help support night-time economy offerings. The design would also open up the waterfront providing further enhancements and opportunities to the town.

Market Square Improvements

- 3.5 Building on the work previously undertaken by the St Neots Conservation Area Partnership, reinstating the historic Market Square as the central public space within the town centre, enabling events to be held and people to gather, relax and socialise would rejuvenate this underutilised area. This area could become a flexible space supporting a range of uses for the benefit of residents, businesses and visitors. The improvements could also encourage regeneration of surrounding properties to fully engage with the space.

High Street Improvements

- 3.6 Reviewing the layout of the High Street, which currently feels to be dominated by vehicles, could improve the pedestrian movement in the area and increase the likelihood of dwelling on the High Street and spending on local businesses. This option would also look to consider the state and layout of the footpaths and layout of amenities such as seating, cycle parking and landscaping. The work would be undertaken in conjunction with any matters identified through the St Neots Transport Study.

Rationalising Parking Assets

- 3.7 This option looks to consolidate the multiple number of car parks, which have a negative impact on traffic generation and the structure of the town, into a multi-storey car park. This would enable land to be released

for other development and support the proposed transformation of the Priory Quarter and the Market Square.

Regeneration of the Old Falcon

- 3.8 The regeneration of the Old Falcon would utilise a landmark and vacant property, increasing activity on the market square and potentially creating a community asset. The Market Square Improvements are considered to be more of a priority than the Old Falcon for the FHSF funding as the regeneration of the Old Falcon alone would not be enough to provide a strong case to meet the MHCLG strategic objectives.

Waterfront Route

- 3.9 The opening-up the eastern bank of the River Great Ouse as an asset for residents of St Neots and visitors to create an active riverside promenade lined with such uses as restaurants, bars and cafes, linked to the Priory Quarter proposal. This would work alongside the Regatta Meadow on the western bank which is a recognised highly valuable green space. Both this option and the Priory Quarter one would also support and add value to the St Neots Footbridge development. Whilst this project could be separately provided if the Priory Quarter is not developed, its benefits would be more limited without commercial units facing onto the route.

Shop Front Improvements

- 3.10 The quality of the shopfronts in St Neots town centre contribute to the overall character, community identity and vitality of the area. There is a number of shop fronts that do not enhance the High Street environment or are sympathetic to the character of the building. A Shop Front Improvement Scheme was undertaken in St Neots some years ago and this would look to build upon this work to help to reinvigorate the High Street. MHCLG has advised that shop front improvements are unlikely to be supported via this fund.

High Street Bridge – Pedestrian Improvements

- 3.11 As the only existing crossing point across the River Great Ouse within the town centre, this is key to multiple modes of transport. The potential for investigating ways in which the bridge could be developed to particularly support pedestrians and cyclists and to take advantage of the vistas along the river could be considered. The proposal would strengthen the connection to the Riverside Car Park creating a more direct link to increase usage. The level of improvement possible on the bridge is not deemed to have the same transformational impact as that of improvements to the Priory Quarter, Market Square and High Street. This option should be considered further working with the St Neots Transport Study.
- 3.12 The above options are now being considered and developed further to feed into the draft Business Plan which has to cover:

- Project proposal summary, aligning with FHSF strategic objectives
- Benefit Cost Ratios for project including Present Value costs
- Key Milestones
- Strategic case for what is proposed and why, including stakeholder support and key risks
- Financial case
- Economic case outlining options and how they provide value for money
- Commercial case considering market analysis and delivery confidence
- Management case stating how delivery will be planned, monitored and overseen to evaluation and ensure success

4. NEXT STEPS

4.1 The next stages for the work are:

- Ongoing engagement through the St Neots Master Plan Steering Group
- Draft Business Plan to be submitted to MHCLG for review 15 March 2020
- MHCLG response received end April/early May 2020
- Short listing and prioritisation of proposals considering the financial analysis and strategic objectives of the fund in accordance with timescales permitted.
- Final draft Business Plan submitted to Cabinet for consideration
- Final Business Plan to be submitted to MHCLG by 30 June 2020
- Outcome of bid announced by MHCLG late summer/early autumn 2020

5. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

5.1 Due to timing of matters with MHCLG, this report will be taken to Overview and Scrutiny Panel following its consideration by the Cabinet.

6. LINK TO THE CORPORATE PLAN, STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND/OR CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

6.1 The delivery of this work links to the following Corporate objectives:

- Support delivery of sustainable community / leisure activities / facilities
- Continue to work with partners and influence the Combined Authority to secure resources to facilitate delivery of new housing, drive economic growth and to provide any critical infrastructure
- Support the Combined Authority's preparation and delivery of Masterplans for the Market Towns
- Supporting economic growth in market towns and rural areas
- Improving the quality of the environment, by including infrastructure that supports people to walk and cycle

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The project work has been supported through the St Neots Master Plan Steering Group to impart information and to engage with local stakeholders.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The development of the Business Case is being met by the funding received from the successful Expression of Interest submitted to the MHCLG.
- 8.2 If the Business Plan is successful, further officer commitment will be required to support any associated funding arrangements and the project delivery.

9. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS

- 9.1 The FHSF is a major opportunity to address the future needs of St Neots High Street, linking in with other work ongoing in the town from the Masterplan for Growth
- 9.2 Cabinet is recommended to provide comments on work to date as outlined above and delegate authority to the Service Manager - Growth, after consultation with the Executive Leader and Deputy Executive Leader and Corporate Director - Place, to finalise the preparation of and submit the draft FHSF Business Plan for St Neots to MHCLG on behalf of the Council

10. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED

Appendix 1 – FHSF proposals – long list

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

MHCLG Future High Street Fund Full Business Case Template
[MHCLG Appraisal Guide](#)

Future High Street Fund Business Plan Template

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