

**Public
Key Decision - Yes**

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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

Meeting/Date: Cabinet – 12th December 2023

Executive Portfolio: Executive Councillor for Jobs, Economy & Housing

Report by: Regeneration and Housing Delivery Manager

Ward(s) affected: All wards.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report provides the 2023/2024 Q3 update on the Market Towns Programme (MTP).

The MTP is an ambitious programme of economic led interventions to renew and reshape our town centres and high streets in a way that promotes growth, improves experiences, and ensures sustainability in the future.

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. This update particularly highlights:

- Commencement of work on the Town Centre Improvements (St Neots).
- Progress towards the refurbishment of the Priory Centre (St Neots) and selection of a preferred option.
- Updates concerning delivery of the wider Market Town Programme focusing on activities across Huntingdon, St Neots, St Ives and Ramsey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Cabinet is asked to:

- Note progress regarding the projects (part of the Market Towns Programme) as highlighted above.
- Note and provide feedback concerning the potential extension of the Shop Front Grant scheme to St Neots and Ramsey town centres.

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

- To provide an update on activity across the strands of the Market Town Programme and associated areas of Council activity.

UPDATE ON MARKET TOWNS PROGRAMME

1. ST NEOTS PROGRAMME:

Town Centre Improvements (Transport Projects)

- 1.1 The contractor for the town centre improvement works has been appointed. The contractor is Taylor Woodrow (previously called Eurovia, a division of Taylor Woodrow). Cambridgeshire County Council will be responsible for managing the Contractor and works completion.
- 1.2 Contractor mobilisation commenced in early November. Initial site preparation and work will focus on the High Street and Huntingdon Street junction improvements. The main works in the Market Square will not commence until January 2024. This will ensure that Christmas events and activities will not be affected. A high-level programme showing the order of works is included below:

Fig 1:



- 1.3 As reported previously, the Council is working actively to support the operation of the Town Market which is held weekly on Thursdays and the Craft Market held twice a month by St Neots Town Council. Whilst there will be adjustments to the layout of both Markets during the works, they will both be able to continue without interruption within the Market Square.
- 1.4 It is the responsibility of Cambridge County Council, for the designation and maintenance of disabled parking spaces in public areas. The twelve official blue badge parking bays (plus two spaces still marked for disabled use from the former square layout) within the Market Square were introduced as part of measures designed to support the town centre during Covid restrictions. These spaces will not be available during the scheme construction.
- 1.5 On the High Street, three blue badge bays, located outside of the Post Office, will be improved, and brought up to modern legal standards. The County Council has advised us however that the two bays marked for disabled use opposite this location, will have to be removed. This is because they are not deemed to meet modern standards in accessibility and, furthermore, impact on pedestrian visibility of the nearby junction.
- 1.6 As a temporary measure, HDC will replace all sixteen blue badge spaces in an alternative location close to the town centre amenities and facilities whilst works are ongoing. Upon completion of the Town Centre Improvements, eight new permanent disabled bays will be

provided around the Market Square. A further eight additional permanent spaces, at least, will be retained in an alternative central location, ensuring the current disabled parking provision is retained as a minimum.

- 1.7 The Market Square currently has nine trees lining the edge of the Square and High Street. Cambridgeshire County Council, as the Highway Authority, assessed that these trees were planted incorrectly and require replacement. This was due to the tree trunk and roots damaging the pavements surrounding the trees, which has created a safety hazard for pedestrians. Whilst these works are a separate project, funded directly by the County Council, they have been incorporated into the Market Square scheme delivery.
- 1.8 The existing trees will be removed and replaced by sixteen semi mature trees, thereby ensuring the Market Square remains a green location with increased tree coverage. The trees which are removed will be retained for use in support of wildlife habitats at Hinchbrooke Country Park.

The Old Falcon Inn

- 1.9 The Council is continuing to work constructively with the owner of the Old Falcon towards bringing this important local building back into productive use. This work is for the purpose of enabling a submission of a policy compliant planning application to be submitted, which will in turn enable the necessary capital investment required from the private sector.
- 1.10 Over the next few months, it should be noted that there will be considerable activity at the building. This will include site clearance works and measures to ensure the core structure of the building is maintained and safe. We are also investigating with the owner small scale repairs and works to the building facade to improve its appearance ahead of any more significant redevelopment or refurbishment.

Priory Centre

- 1.11 The Priory Centre is an important community and cultural facility. It is, however, a dated facility, which is highly inefficient in terms of its operational capacity and energy efficiency. Work has progressed quickly to identify design options for the refurbishment and improvement of the Priory Centre.
- 1.12 Both the Council and St Neots Town Council has worked very closely on developing deliverable options which will meet both organisations' objectives in improving the building and its performance. The combined measures which have been developed will ensure the building is future proofed to meet the needs of residents and others who use the building for events, meetings and other community-based activities.
- 1.13 We are now at a point where a preferred concept scheme design has been developed. During December 2023 and January 2024, we will be providing opportunities for centre users and members of the public to view the proposed scheme.
- 1.14 Work will then turn towards developing the detailed technical plans, which will form the basis of a planning application (and statutory consultation) in early 2024. Subject to securing this consent, we anticipate that construction and refurbishment work will commence at the beginning of August 2024. This will require the closure of the Centre for a period of 12 months.
- 1.15 St Neots Town Council, with the support of HDC, is working on a plan to support users of the Centre at alternative facilities in the town during this period. This may include utilising the Eaton Community Centre, also operated by the Town Council, in addition to working with private venue facilities elsewhere within the town.

St Neots CPCA Legacy funding (masterplan phase 1)

1.16 This sub-programme consists of several smaller scale projects and initiatives, including:

- Public Art community project
- Co-retail scheme
- Entertainment/Staging area within the new Market Square
- Digital Displays Screens

Public Art community project

1.17 The Public Art community project will be delivered by St Neots Town Council with the support of the Council. The Town Council is seeking to partner with a single artist/service provider who will deliver all activities. A procurement competition was held by the Town Council, through which six tenders for the project were received by the deadline of 27th October 2023. Following an assessment of the tenders received, which will include a representative of the District Council, an appointment is expected to be made by December with work commencing immediately.

1.18 The focus of the project will be to provide one or more public art installations throughout the town centre. These installations will draw on the town's history and heritage and will involve the participation of members of the public, community organisations, and local school children. Work on this scheme is provisionally scheduled to conclude in early Summer 2024, however, this schedule may be adjusted should renewal works in the Market Square necessitate this, in terms of the preferred location for art installations.

Co-retail

1.19 Co-retail is an initiative being developed in partnership with a local Community Interest Company. The objective of this project was to provide space within existing retail units for start-up or online traders wishing to sell their produce from a physical store. This scheme has, however, been delayed to Spring 2024, due to extended and complex negotiations with local property owners.

1.20 Consequently, we have reviewed the status of this project with the funder, CPCA, and have agreed to pause work on this project, with a view to revisiting it at a later stage. This may include utilising alternative sources of funding and potentially adapting the approach to consider best practice from other Market Town Programme projects with a similar objective, such as the 'Shop in a Box' concept described from 3.4.

1.21 The funding that was reserved to Co-Retail is available for potential reallocation to an extension of the successful Shop Front Grant scheme to St Neots. Furthermore, we are also proposing that funding from efficiency savings derived from an earlier legacy (Accelerated Projects) programme, are allocated to Ramsey town centre. Therefore, all four main Market Towns could be included in the Shop Front Grant scheme.

Entertainment / Staging area

1.22 The Entertainment/Stage area for the new Market Square is an initiative which was first proposed by St Neots Town Council. The purpose of the Stage will be to provide a focal point and space within the western section of the Market Square to host events and activities. The Council is currently seeking to procure a designer for this scheme. The procurement process will be completed by the end of November 2023, allowing for a contractor's appointment in December. We will be seeking to submit a planning application for this scheme in early Spring.

1.23 Whilst the Stage has not formed part of the main Market Square design commission, space and the provision of utilities (e.g. electricity supply) has been planned for and allocated to it. The construction of the Stage will be delivered by Taylor Woodrow as part of the main Market Square works during 2024.

Digital Displays

1.24 The Digital Displays project is being delivered across all four main Market Towns and is summarised from para 4.1.

2. HUNTINGDON & ST IVES

2.1. The Huntingdon and St Ives combined sub programme consists of the following projects:

- The Broadway (public realm and highway improvements)
- St Ives Community Bandstand
- Cromwell Museum expansion
- Shop Front Grants

The Broadway, St Ives

2.2. This scheme is being delivered by Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) and utilises a combination of funds from the County Council and the District Council. The project will provide a much-improved area in the vicinity of the Broadway shopping parade. Pavement areas and parking provision will be improved to make the area more attractive to pedestrians..

2.3. The County Council are currently working on finalising the detailed design for the scheme. Subject to the final scheme designs being approved, construction will begin in March 2024 for a period of up to 12 weeks.

St Ives Community Bandstand

2.4. The St Ives Community Bandstand, as reported previously, is a scheme part funded through the Market Town programme. The Bandstand was installed during the Summer and this project is complete.

Cromwell Museum (Huntingdon) expansion

2.5. The Council is working closely with Huntingdon Town Council and the Cromwell Museum to develop proposals to support the expansion and improvement of the Museum and its offer to visitors and residents.

2.6. The Cromwell Museum premises are in the old schoolhouse (attended by Oliver Cromwell) in the Market Square. The driver for this project is that the Museum is severely constrained in space and in planning terms as a grade 1 listed building. The Museum wishes to expand its facilities to provide a greater space to display its extensive collections, many of which must remain in storage. It cannot do this within the footprint of its existing premises.

2.7. As part of the Market Town Programme, funded by CPCA, the Council has allocated funds towards the acquisition of property, which could be repurposed to provide a new main facility for the Museum. The Museum and Huntingdon Town Council have identified several properties which may meet their objectives in this regard.

2.8. Huntingdon Town Council and the Museum are working towards acquiring a property by early Spring 2024. The acquisition costs can be met with the funding provided through the

Market Towns programme. Huntingdon Town Council is also considering the allocation of further towards the repurposing of these premises.

2.9. An important point to note, however, is that to fully realise the vision for the Cromwell Museum, significant additional funds will be required. To this end, Cromwell Museum is developing an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund. If this bid is successful, these funds would be available from 2026. The funds would be used to not only improve the new Cromwell Museum premises, but also the existing Museum, which will continue to be used for educational purposes as part of the overall Museum function.

Shop Front Grants, Huntingdon and St Ives

2.10. The Shop Front grant scheme was launched in July 2023. Since this time, we have approved 12 grant applications, six in each town of Huntingdon and St Ives. Four of the schemes have been completed so far, with payments made to grant recipients amounting to £17,000. The total value of grants in process is £39,663, out of a total grant fund of £200,000. The feedback from applicants and claimants has been positive, and our project partner, Huntingdon BID (Business Improvement District), continues to work with businesses to progress their applications and projects.

2.11. Communications work and promotion is ongoing via social media and press releases have been issued to highlight the first completed grant at the Snug in St Ives. We are preparing a boost to publicity and comms in the new year to ensure that any drop-off in grants from launch is minimised. Information about the scheme and how businesses can apply can be viewed here: [Shop Front Improvements Grant - Huntingdonshire.gov.uk](https://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/Shop-Front-Improvements-Grant). Local press information can be viewed here: [Funding to improve shop fronts in Huntingdon and St Ives | The Hunts Post](https://www.thehuntspost.co.uk/news/2023/11/22/funding-to-improve-shop-fronts-in-huntingdon-and-st-ives/)

2.12. The Shop Front Grants initiative to date has been successful and well received. Whilst the grants up to this point have been reserved to Huntingdon and St Ives (as the CPCA funds being used are specific to these locations), as referenced in para 1.19, we are proposing that the Shop Front Grant scheme be extended to also cover St Neots and Ramsey town centres, utilising existing programme budgets and cost savings from earlier legacy programmes including 'Accelerated Projects'.

3. RAMSEY

2.13. In Ramsey we are seeking to deliver two significant projects which are designed to support and enhance the town centre.

2.14. Project 1 (Public Realm) is focused on the design and delivery of improvements to the local town centre environment, in a central area called the Great Whyte. Project 2 ('Shop in a box'), previously titled as 'Market Produce Hub' is a scheme which will provide low cost and flexible space for startup traders or independent traders moving from online only to a physical presence.

2.15. Both projects are intrinsically linked. The Public Realm project will enable space for 'Shop in a Box', whilst combined, the projects will deliver an improved town centre offer and greater footfall in support of existing businesses.

2.16. As reported previously, the original concept of the Market Produce Hub was not considered feasible due to weight restrictions in the proposed location. This was due to the river Culvert directly underneath. Through the 'Shop in a Box concept' we are seeking to deliver the same effect, i.e. space for new traders and retail, via smaller and more flexible units. These units would be designed in such a way as to add to the attractiveness of the town centre, taking into account the history and heritage of Ramsey, whilst having a smaller footprint and impact on the visibility of existing shop units.

- 2.17. Both projects are subject to feasibility studies which will include the preparation of outline designs and in the case of 'Shop in a Box', a proof-of-concept assessment. This assessment will be critical to determining deliverability of the scheme as envisaged. Procurement of a contractor to undertake this work is underway. Subject to a deliverability assessment, we will utilise these concept plans to engage with Ramsey Town Council, local businesses and residents toward developing detailed final proposals.
- 2.18. In terms of delivery, we are anticipating the public realm improvements to begin delivery in Summer 2024, with a stage 2 (based on the small retail units) commencing after this point.

4. HUNTINGDON, ST IVES, ST NEOTS AND RAMSEY

Digital Screens

- 2.19. This project will provide digital screens in all the four main market towns. The screens will provide important information and marketing resources which will be used to promote local businesses in addition to tourism, heritage and history which is specific to each town location. The screens will be managed in partnership with the respective Town Councils and other local organisations in each area.
- 2.20. Work is progressing well towards delivery of the screens during 2024. A contractor is being procured. We will seek to award the contract for the design and installation of the screen by early December. Whilst it has not been possible to present imagery from the confirmed contractor alongside comparisons with neighbouring similar schemes in time for this update, we do propose to offer panel members an informal presentation prior to the next quarterly update report.
- 2.21. Regular engagement with partner Town Councils and Huntingdon BID is ongoing, and all scheme partners are engaged with the project. We are also continuing to hold regular meetings with Connecting Cambridgeshire as an important partner for the initiative.

Smarter Towns

- 2.22. The Smarter towns project is designed to provide supporting infrastructure for digital connectivity, including the 'internet of things'. The system works via a wide range of sensors which link to a central router. Routers have been installed in all our main market towns, utilising District Council property including Pathfinder House and Leisure Centres.
- 2.23. Sensors which have been deployed include, for example, flood water sensors in St Neots. These sensors are designed to provide an early warning system, communicating via the router with end users, including Cambridgeshire County Council and potentially the Environment Agency.
- 2.24. The Huntingdonshire 'smarter towns' routers and sensors link into a wider network of sensors which have been deployed by Connecting Cambridgeshire. Other public bodies and organisations can utilise this combined network to support service delivery and monitoring. Cambridgeshire Police Service, for instance, is seeking to utilise the network to monitor and manage Police property.
- 2.25. The identification and roll out of sensors by the Council is due to close by the end of March 2024, we are currently in the process of identifying a suite of additional sensors to be deployed by this point. This includes sensors to assess air quality, as well as sensors which can monitor damp and moisture in housing association owned and managed accommodation. Whilst we will not be actively rolling out sensors as part of the Market Town programme after this point, we will continue to promote the system within the Council and to external partners.

3. FINANCE UPDATE:

Table 1: Overall MTP funding sources and status

Market Towns Regeneration				
Funding sources	£ Grant secured	£ Spend to date	£ Grant balance	Comment
St Neots Regeneration				
Future High Street Funds	£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.
St Neots Regeneration Sub-total	£15,431,976	£1,388,463,29	£14,043,512.70	
Huntingdon & St Ives				
CPCA Masterplans & Accelerated Funding (*post change control March 2023)	£802,150	£200,000	£602,150	<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 much 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>
Sub-total	£802,150	£50,000	£752,150	
Ramsey Great Whyte Revenue funding (supporting Market Produce / Retail Hub & staffing costs)				

UK Shared Prosperity Fund	£221,000	£8,498.46	£212,501.54	Funding confirmed. Expenditure profiled for spend into 2024/25.
Sub-total	£221,000	£8,498.46	£212,501.54	
Ramsey Market Produce / Retail Hub				
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.
Sub total	£1,448,525	£7,843.53	£1,440,681.47	
PROGRAMME TOTAL	£17,903,651	£1,454,805.28	£16,448,845.70	

COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

6. The comments of the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panel will be published as a supplement to the Cabinet agenda.

KEY IMPACTS/RISKS

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

BUDGET MANAGEMENT RISK

7.1 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.

7.2 One of the most significant elements of the MTP is the St Neots Town Centre Improvements. The tender process has been completed for this scheme with the tender costs at a significant cost saving compared to previous cost estimates. This lowers the risk for this project and reduces the risk for the programme.

7.3 We will continue to review the individual projects' viability and programme impacts, identifying any areas of risk, as the overall programme progresses towards delivery.

PROGRAMME RESOURCE RISKS

- 7.4 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.
- 7.5 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 RISKS

- 7.6 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. A further key element is having in place a well-planned Communications Plan. This is monitored weekly and designed to be proactive, looking ahead several months for potential issues for which communications and publicity are important tools for resolving.
- 7.7 Further to this, 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.

1. CORPORATE PLAN 2022-2026

- 8.1 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.

2. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The Council, based on previously successful funding bids and Cabinet decisions, has entered into several grant agreements with associated delivery and outputs frameworks.
- 9.2 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.
- 9.3 There will be ongoing legal input to support further development of project options, including 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.

3. EQUALITIES

- 10.1 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.

10.2 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.

11. ENVIRONMENTAL

11.1 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.

11.2 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.

12. 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) 23rd. February 2021 can be found [here](#)

Market Towns Programme Spring 2022 Update to Cabinet, 17 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](#)

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

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