

Public
Key Decision – Yes

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: Market Town's Programme Update (MTPU)

Meeting/Date: Overview & Scrutiny (Performance & Growth)
3rd April 2024

Cabinet – 16th April 2024

Executive Portfolio: Executive Councillor for Jobs, Economy & Housing

Report by: Regeneration & Housing Delivery Manager

Ward(s) affected: All

Executive Summary:

This report provides the 2023/2024 Q4 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:

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet is asked to:

- Note the contents of the report updating on progress within the Market Towns Programme.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To provide an update on activity across all strands of the Market Town Programme.

2. ST NEOTS PROGRAMME

Town Centre Improvements

- 2.1. Main work on the town centre improvements commenced in January with moveable site hoarding being installed on the Market Square. This was in advance of work beginning to remove the existing surface blocks in preparation for the new materials to be installed.
- 2.2. Almost all the surface area of the Market Square has been worked on with blocks removed, exposing the sub surface. The south side of the square has been laid in temporary tarmac to provide sufficient space for the Thursday and Saturday markets to continue. The hoarding has moved to surround areas of work as required, while blocking off as small a part of the square at any one time as is practicable while work continues. Works also commenced at the Huntingdon Street crossroads, with new kerbs, tactile paving and preparatory works for the new crossing points taking place.
- 2.3. The Contractor (Taylor Woodrow) and the Council's Market Operations team have worked closely with the Market Traders to ensure the Market continues to successfully operate during the works; this also enables the smooth running of the St Neots Town Council Market which takes place twice a month on a Saturday. The location of Market traders will be adjusted at agreed points throughout the works to allow the contractor to access all parts of the Market Square.
- 2.4. Whilst there were some issues reported at the outset of works commencing regarding signage for businesses located and the provision of delivery loading bays on the north side of the Market Square, work has been undertaken to address these. Signage promoting the businesses in this part of the Square has been added to the Market Square hoarding. These arrived later than intended due to a supply issue from a third-party.
- 2.5. Regarding the contractor compound, which is required for the storage of plant and facilities for site workers, from January this was temporarily located at the Riverside Car Park. During February, the location for a larger compound was identified at the site of the proposed Splash Park. The Trust responsible for the Splash Park has agreed a lease with the contractor which will provide income to the scheme as well as improvements to the access of the site. Works have commenced at the Splash Park site and the compound will be fully operational imminently.
- 2.6. The programme for delivery of all works is scheduled to last for up to 60 weeks. No delays have been reported as yet, however with a project of this scale we are anticipating inevitable issues to arise. The new

compound will allow the contractor to take delivery of new materials, therefore the pace of work in the Market Square will increase in the coming weeks and months.

Old Falcon Inn

- 2.7. The Council and the owner of the Old Falcon have now entered into a legal agreement to continue to work in partnership towards enabling this building and site being brought back into active use.
- 2.8. This agreement has enabled the Council to support the owner towards the development and submission of a policy compliant planning application. A specialist team including architects and conservation experts has been appointed by the Council. This team will work with the Council and the owner to develop commercially viable plans for the site that nevertheless respect the heritage value and special setting of the building, which will form the basis of the intended planning application.
- 2.9. Due to the listed nature of the building and the site-specific challenges faced, such as being located within the flood plain, the existing owner has not previously been able to secure a planning consent for redevelopment work.
- 2.10. Consequently, the building and site has been dormant for several years, an issue that has exacerbated the challenge of bringing the building back into use, as parts of the building have deteriorated significantly.
- 2.11. Progress is now being made developing the planning application and this is expected to be submitted by May. Subject to the award of planning consent, the existing owner will then seek to enable the redevelopment of the building according to that application.

Priory Centre refurbishment

- 2.12. The Priory Centre project is based on a major refurbishment and reimagining of the purpose of the building, its function and use to residents of St Neots. The project was fully initiated in July last year with the procurement of a design team, AOC.
- 2.13. Following several stages of concept development and liaison with the building tenant, St Neots Town Council, concept proposals produced by AOC were consulted upon during December 2023.
- 2.14. Several exhibitions and events were held which were attended by over 500 residents, business, and centre users. The response to the proposals were positive with a great deal of support being provided for the preferred scheme, which set out a new vision for an enhanced Great Hall, new Foyer, meeting and community spaces and improved access to the riverside. Full details of this engagement can be viewed in [appendix A](#).
- 2.15. This engagement and the feedback received has helped the Council, working with AOC and St Neots Town Council, to refine and improve the

designs. A planning application for the scheme was subsequently submitted in March.

- 2.16. Subject to the planning application being approved, we will be launching a contractor procurement process during June and July. Works are then proposed to commence in September and will last for a period of 12 months.
- 2.17. In terms of the expected cost of the proposed works, this will only be confirmed once the contractor procurement process has been completed. Therefore, we are currently working based on estimated costs only. Consequently, adjustments to the scheme may be required via value engineering and other measures to reduce cost should it be considered necessary; we continue to liaise with the Town Council who are the tenants of the building.
- 2.18. In parallel, Council Officers are also investigating if the public spaces outside of the Priory Centre could be improved as a separate project. This potential project would re-use up to 1000 sqm of existing surface blocks from the Market Square, which are not required for the town centre improvements. This could be a highly sustainable and carbon efficient re-use of materials.
- 2.19. The Council has engaged the town centre improvement works contractor to provide estimated costs as part of a potential contractual extension. Once costs are established, we will seek to identify external funding options. Discussions to this end have been held with the Combined Authority, who are interested in the project subject to resources being available. If funds are identified and the project is activated, we would aim to deliver the works before the end of 2024 alongside the timescale of the existing town centre works.

Legacy projects (St Neots masterplan phase 1)

Public Art Community project

- 2.20. The Council is working with St Neots Town Council to deliver a public art project. The Town Council is the lead for this project and has, following a tender process, confirmed an artist/supplier to deliver the project to conclusion.
- 2.21. Work to date has included the scoping of potential locations for the public art installation alongside research on the type of installation to be produced. The number and exact nature of the installations is to be confirmed. It is expected that several events will be held over the Summer to encourage community participation and engagement.

Entertainment and staging area (Market Square)

- 2.22. This project will provide for a new performance stage area within the new Market Square. Provision has been made for the stage within the Market Square designs, being located on the western end of the Square. We are

very keen that the stage is multi-use and will investigate options for it to provide other amenities such as café or seating areas when not in use for events.

- 2.23. A designer has been appointed to develop proposals up to RIBA stage 2 (concept). Subject to public engagement a preferred concept design will be selected and developed to detailed stage which will form the basis for a planning application.
- 2.24. We are currently anticipating works on the stage being delivered in parallel to the town centre improvement works during the current calendar year.

Shop front grant scheme / Digital Information Screens

- 2.25. These projects are being delivered as part of an all Market Towns sub programme and are reported on separately in sections 4 and 5, respectively.

3. HUNTINGDON AND ST IVES PROGRAMME

The Broadway, St Ives

- 3.1. This is a highway improvement scheme, which is being delivered by Cambridgeshire County Council. HDC's role with the scheme has been limited and is only providing funding via CPCA.
- 3.2. The County Council has undertaken a Traffic Regulation Order consultation to remove 14 car parking spaces and extending double yellow lines as part of the proposed scheme works. This consultation ended on the 31st of January. Some of the feedback received related to the cost of car parking in the vicinity of the works during construction, which is being investigated by the Council.
- 3.3. During February, several meetings with residents and businesses have also been held. There has been some opposition from businesses/residents in the immediate area recorded as part of the early engagement process. Eight respondents were supportive of the scheme, one neutral whilst seven were opposed.
- 3.4. Further site investigation, following development of the initial scheme designs, was undertaken during March. This work will help to indicate if the final design is deliverable within the allocated budget or if any adjustments are required.
- 3.5. Subject to the outcome of both the consultations and site investigations, work on the scheme is expected to be completed late July 2024.

Cromwell Museum expansion

- 3.6. As reported previously the Council has awarded significant funds towards an expansion of the Cromwell Museum in Huntingdon. The existing premises are too small and constrained to display the full range of

historical material available and the expansion is necessary to truly maximise the benefits of such a prominent and historically important individual.

- 3.7. In partnership with Huntingdon Town Council, the Museum has identified a property located within a reasonable distance of the existing Museum premises that is ideal for their purposes. The Museum is seeking to acquire these premises to provide an expanded Museum offering, whilst retaining the existing Museum as an educational facility. Subject to due diligence, surveys and completion of the negotiation process, the Museum is seeking to complete the acquisition during 2024.
- 3.8. Whilst the purpose of this stage of the project is the acquisition of premises for expansion, it will enable a further stage that will be the basis of a funding application by the Cromwell Museum to the Heritage Lottery Fund, for the purpose of developing the new space to suitably high standard for Museum visitors, from 2026 onwards.

4. SHOP FRONT GRANT SCHEME – ALL MARKET TOWNS

- 4.1. The Shop front grant scheme is now available to businesses within the town centres of St Neots, St Ives, Huntingdon, and Ramsey. The Programme has been received well to date, albeit we are seeking to increase promotion in Ramsey to generate more interest and applications from businesses in this location.
- 4.2. In the brief time that St Neots has been included in the scheme, nine applications have been received, which is a significant achievement and will make a demonstrable impact to the town centre, should these applications proceed to delivery. A full summary of grant position and awards is included below:

	Huntingdon	St Ives	St Neots	Ramsey	Total
Applications	11	11	9	1	32
Award numbers	8	8	0	0	16
Reject numbers	1	0	1	1	3
To be reviewed	2	3	8	0	13
Grant award	£40,188	£19,962	N/A*	N/A	£60,150
Total cost of works	£51,174	£29,497	N/A	N/A	£80,671
Completions	2 (plus 1 to stage 1)	6	N/A	N/A	8 (plus 1 part)
Paid Grants	£14,769	£13,962	N/A	N/A	£28,731

***To note:** applications not yet reviewed, decision due end March 2024.

5. DIGITAL INFORMATION SCREENS – ALL MARKET TOWNS

- 5.1. As with Shop front grants, the Digital Information Screen project has now been extended to all Market Towns (Ramsey, St Ives, St Neots and Huntingdon).
- 5.2. The Council has completed a procurement process and awarded a contract for delivery to the supplier Trueform. We are now working closely with Town Council partners and others including Huntingdon BID to plan the deployment of the Digital screens. This work will include confirming the information with partners that will be provided via the screens alongside the overall branding and messaging specific to each location.
- 5.3. The digital screens are adaptable and can be used for several purposes, from promoting local events, heritage, tourism, and businesses, as well as locational information and public announcements or safety advice.
- 5.4. Deployment of the screens will begin this year with completion of the project by March 2025. The screens will be in place for a period of three years at which point a review and evaluation will be held with Partners as to continuation of the service beyond this point.

6. SMARTER TOWNS – ALL MARKET TOWNS

- 6.1. The original aim of the Smarter towns project was to provide a network of routers and sensor infrastructure which could be used to support local services, information provision and an overarching 'Internet of Things.'
- 6.2. This infrastructure has been successfully delivered and is now providing real time information, for example, on flood levels in St Neots. There are opportunities for other public agencies or service providers to link to and make use of this network and we will continue to investigate opportunities for this with our scheme partner Connecting Cambridgeshire.
- 6.3. Whilst this stage of the project is closed, we are investigating with Connecting Cambridgeshire and the Combined Authority further opportunities to expand and improve the Smarter Town network on a Cambridgeshire wide basis.

7. RAMSEY (GREAT WHYTE PROJECTS)

- 7.1. The Ramsey Great Whyte sub programme consists of two significant projects which are designed to support and enhance the town centre. The first of these is a public realm project which is focused on the design and delivery of improvements to the local town centre environment, within the Great Whyte area and secondly, the 'Shop in a box' scheme, which will potentially provide low cost and flexible space for startup traders or independent traders moving from online only to a physical presence.
- 7.2. The Council has commissioned concept designs which identify how both projects could be delivered. A feasibility study has been produced which was presented to Ramsey Town Council in March 24. The Town Council

is an important partner for the scheme, and we will continue working with them in its delivery.

- 7.3. The focus of the public realm project is on local environmental improvements and the potential pedestrianisation of parts of the Great Whyte. This could provide an improved area for pedestrians, but also an expanded area for the Town Market. In combination with the ‘Shop in a box’ concept, units of which may be in the pedestrianised area, this will provide a new focal point for the town centre which is vibrant and attractive to visitors.
- 7.4. Should parts of the pedestrianisation proceed, this would reduce some of the off-street parking spaces. Consequently, we are also reviewing the potential for resurfacing of the Mew Close off street car park and maximising the available space to increase the number of parking bays provided.
- 7.5. The next stages of the project will involve engagement with the wider community to ascertain local opinions and aspirations, with specific attention being provided to businesses, residents and others located within the Great Whyte itself.

8. BUDGET UPDATE

Funding source	Grant secured	Spend to date	Balance
1. St Neots Regeneration			
Future High Street Fund	£3,748,815	£2,123,459	£1,625,355
Community Infrastructure Levy	£4,830,000	£0	£4,830,000
CPCA	£3,100,000	£0	£3,100,000
National Highways	£3,493,218	£1,491,579	£2,001,639
CPCA Masterplan phase 1 (legacy)	£260,000	£50,000	£210,000
Funding totals	£15,432,033	£3,665,038	£11,766,995

Funding source	Grant secured	Spend to date	Balance
2. Huntingdon & St Ives			
CPCA Masterplans & Accelerated Funding (*post change control March 2023)	£802,150	£229,764	£567,385
Funding totals	£802,150	£229,764	£567,385

Funding source	Grant secured	Spend to date	Balance
3. Ramsey			
Local Growth Fund	£1,153,525	£0	£1,153,525
UKSP (revenue)	£221,000	£24,265	£196,735
CPCA Accelerated Funding (legacy)	£295,000	£31,185	£267,728
Funding totals	£1,669,525	£55,450	£1,617,988

Funding source	Grant secured	Spend to date	Balance
4. Programme total			
All funding sources	£17,903,708	£3,950,252	£13,953,456

Note: All Capital funds unless otherwise stated.

9. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

- 9.1. The Panel discussed the Market Towns Spring Update Report at its meeting on 3rd April 2024.
- 9.2. In response to an enquiry from Councillor Pickering, the Panel heard that the planning application for the Priory Centre was primarily the same as the application presented during the public engagement events but had some amendments to reflect comments received during the engagement events. The Panel heard that the application had been submitted and a link to the application on the portal would be circulated once the application became live. It was also confirmed that the application allowed for a scope of budget scenarios depending on the funding available once the project was underway.
- 9.3. The Panel were assured, in response to questions from Councillor Corney and Councillor Jennings, that deadlines for funding from both the CPCA and the FHSF had been extended and would allow projects allocated those funding streams to be completed. The Panel were further assured that the team continued to maximise multiple funding sources to allow the fullest flexibility for projects, with timescales for projects being adjusted to reflect this. It was also confirmed that project dates would be included within the next report to allow for transparency and clarity.

- 9.4. Following a request from Councillor Slade for a location plan of the digital screens, the Panel heard that procurement had been completed on the project and the team were working with partners to implement the plans. It was advised that a location plan would be sought and provided as an update to the Panel. In response to a further question on the matter from Councillor Corney, the Panel heard that sessions would be held by the contractors for District Councillors to be fully appraised on the project and that there was an aim for the project to be fully implemented by March 2025.
- 9.5. Councillor Pickering expressed his delight that the Old Falcon development was moving forward, and the Panel heard that it would be a long term project for the final development but that any potential for a short term cosmetic improvement would be updated to the Panel as it was developed.
- 9.6. In response to a further question from Councillor Slade, the Panel heard that a robust communications plan was in place with the County Councillor who are managing the project, the team would assess this plan and liaise with Members directly should it prove necessary.
- 9.7. Following a question from Councillor Cawley, the Panel were advised that funding granted to Huntingdon Town Council would assist them in their purchase for additional space for the Cromwell Museum and that the Town Council would then be looking at further funding opportunities to facilitate refurbishment of the space to be incorporated within the museum's portfolio.
- 9.8. The Panel were advised, in response to a further question from Councillor Cawley, that the Shop Fronts Grant Scheme was currently only available to shops within the four market towns due to restrictions within the funding streams, however alternatives were being investigated to allow a similar scheme to be developed for Key Service Areas within the district. Following a further question from Councillor Corney, the Panel were advised that applications to the scheme thus far had not experienced significant delays where planning permission had been required.
- 9.9. Following the discussion, the Panel were informed that their comments would be added to the Cabinet report in order for an informed decision to be made on the report recommendations.

10. KEY IMPACTS / RISKS

BUDGET MANAGEMENT RISK

- 10.1. 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.
- 10.2. One of the most significant elements of the MTP was 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 has lowered the risk for this project and the programme overall significantly.
- 10.3. The Priory Centre project does present an elevated risk level in cost terms currently. As another construction-based scheme it is likely to be affected

by the significant inflation this sector has experienced in the two years. Whilst inflation has reduced, we will continue to review the state of the market and develop measures to reduce costs should it be necessary such as value engineering.

PROGRAMME RESOURCE RISKS

- 10.4. 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.
- 10.5. 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

- 10.6. 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.
- 10.7. 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.

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

- 11.1. The delivery of the MTP is aligned with the principles and key objectives of the HDC Corporate Plan, specifically it links to:
- Priority 2: Creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations, through Forward Thinking Economic Growth

12. CONSULTATION

- 12.1. Within the reporting period, a non-statutory consultation has been undertaken concerning the Priory Centre refurbishment project, the details of which are included in paragraph 2.11 and in the report linked here: [appendix A](#).

13. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1. This programme contains multiple projects where legal advice and guidance is required as part of project delivery. Project Staff will liaise with the Legal Services Manager as required to ensure appropriate legal oversight and advice if provided when relevant.

14. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1. The MTP Project team is currently fully resourced in staffing and budget terms to deliver the MTP programme as set out.

15. EQUALITIES

- 15.1. 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.
- 15.2. 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.

16. ENVIRONMENTAL

- 16.1. 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.

16.2. 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.

LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED

[Appendix A: statement of engagement](#) – Priory Centre

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](#)
- Market Towns Programme Winter 2023 Update to Cabinet December 2023 can be found [here](#)

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