

**Public
Key Decision – No**

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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

Meeting/Date: Overview & Scrutiny (Performance & Growth)
5 March 2025

Cabinet – 18 March 2025

Executive Portfolio: Executive Councillor for Economy, Regeneration
& Housing

Report by: Regeneration & Housing Delivery Manager

Ward(s) affected: All

Executive Summary:

This report provides the Spring 2025 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, it therefore supports the Huntingdonshire Futures Journey of Pride in Place and the Corporate Plan by creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations.

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(s):

The Cabinet is asked to:

- Note contents of report and delivery progress concerning the Market Town's Programme and related activities.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

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

2. RAMSEY TOWN CENTRE ENHANCEMENT

- 2.1. The Ramsey sub programme comprises of three linked activities, which include:

- The pedestrianisation of a focused area within the Great Whyte area of Ramsey town centre.
- The development of up to six 'shop in a box' small retail units in this pedestrianised location.
- Improvements to the Mews Close car park to mitigate street parking loss and improve the visitor experience.

- 2.2. Following consultation with local businesses, residents and town centre users in September last year, the project team has developed a number of improvements to the scheme. Changes made to the initial design options include further mitigation for the reduction in on-street parking spaces, and general layout improvements.

- 2.3. These design updates will form the basis for pre-application discussions with the Planning Authority during February. Subject to the outcome of these discussions, further adjustments may be required.

- 2.4. Upon completion of the pre-application process, HDC will provide an update to residents, business and other consultees informing them of change made and how these relate to the consultation feedback. A formal planning application will then be submitted in respect of the 'shop in a box' scheme elements. Statutory approval concerning changes to highway management, as and where required, will be undertaken via the relevant highway processes overseen by Cambridgeshire County Council.

- 2.5. A delivery programme for this scheme will be determined once the scheme is confirmed and a contractor has been procured.

- 2.6. In parallel to finalising the design of the main Great Whyte project, HDC is also reviewing options to improve off-street car parking in liaison with Ramsey Town Council. This includes considering a partnership to improve and manage the Mews Close Car park and investigating the potential to expand parking provision in nearby locations. The delivery of any proposals to be developed will be subject to the final scheme agreed for the Great Whyte area.

3. HUNTINGDON AND ST IVES PROGRAMME

Cromwell Museum expansion, Huntingdon

- 3.1. HDC has worked very closely with the Cromwell Museum, Huntingdon Town Council and the CPCA to support the acquisition of new premises. The purpose of which is to provide a new building which the Museum can expand its significant and internationally recognised collection into.
- 3.2. This work has now culminated in the successful acquisition of 6 to 7 Market Square, Huntingdon, which was completed on the 14th of February. This building will provide an opportunity to expand the Museum's offering to far more than currently available space. It will also provide space for an improve customer experience, an outlet for food and drink refreshments and a hireable venue for town centre events and activities.
- 3.3. Work is now turning to supporting the Cromwell Museum in carrying out immediate and necessary remedial works to safeguard the property in the short to medium term. This includes repairs to the roof, which will be made using funding secured by HDC from the Combined Authority.
- 3.4. Discussions have already begun with potential funders, including the Heritage Lottery Fund and National Highways, to ensure the wider refurbishment and construction works can be taken forward. The scheme to develop the Museum and all the necessary supporting facilities is significant and will require up to £4 million in investment. The Cromwell Museum is aiming to begin these works by 2027.
- 3.5. The existing Museum building will continue to be an essential element of the Museum's offering, providing a dedicated space for educational activities, in what was once Oliver Cromwell's school.

4. SHOP FRONT GRANT SCHEME – ALL MARKET TOWNS

- 4.1. The Shop Front Grant scheme has been a highly successful initiative which has delivered investment and improvements to businesses and shop premises within our town and neighborhood centres across the district.
- 4.2. The scheme has now concluded. Since the project began, 18 months ago, HDC received 80 grant applications, 53 of which were approved, totaling just over £200,000. At the time of writing, 34 of the schemes have been completed, two have recently been abandoned, however the remainder are on course for completion by the end of March 2025. A summary of the scheme applications and awards is included below:

Fig 1: Shop Front Grant Summary (figures correct as at 13/02/25)

	Huntingdon	St Ives	St Neots	Ramsey	District	Total
Applications	18	21	22	10	9	80
Award numbers	16	15	9	6	7	53
Reject numbers	2	6	13	4	2	27
To be reviewed	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grant award	£76,845	£39,711	£50,936	£11,350	£21,843	£200,685
Total cost of works	£91,605	£55,846	£108,165	£17,143	£25,785	£298,544
Abandoned Projects	0	0	2	0	0	2
Completions	13	10	5	3	3	34
Paid Grants	£49,543	£28,155	£31,579	£9,650	£11,367	£130,294

5. DIGITAL INFORMATION SCREENS – ALL MARKET TOWNS

- 5.1. HDC continues to work towards delivery of the Digital Information Screens with our delivery partner Trueform. There will be 8 screens delivered across the market towns of St Neots, St Ives, Huntingdon, and Ramsey, with two screens in each town.
- 5.2. The Digital Screens will provide a resource for Town Councils and other local organisations to promote tourism, heritage, and local businesses. Residents, visitors, and shoppers will benefit from an up-to-date source of information in the town centre as well as having the ability to link into Cambridgeshire wide activities concerning the Visitor Economy and real time information concerning transport links and bus services.
- 5.3. The screens have presented a challenge in terms of the wide range of screen locations, each with their own unique characteristics in terms of planning, permits and connection to utilities such as energy and Wi-Fi. The screens will, however, provide a valuable local asset which can help to foster partnership not only between the Town Council and HDC, but also with local traders and community groups.
- 5.4. The screens will be managed and updated by Town Councils for three years, after which they will be reviewed for continuation. Training has been provided to Town Council staff and the screens will be launched with a full complement of town specific business and event information. Those using the screens will also have the chance to look at content for other Huntingdonshire network towns, for day or shopping visits.
- 5.5. The Screens are being installed on a phased basis during this Spring. Details on exactly which screens will go live and when will be provided soon.

6. ST NEOTS

Priory Centre

- 6.1. Refurbishment and expansion of the Priory Centre is one of the most significant projects within the Market Town programme. It will deliver major improvements to the Priory Centre, which will enable it to offer a much broader range of services, cultural activities, and facilities in a vastly improved setting.
- 6.2. Following the grant of planning permission in the Autumn, HDC and St Neot has worked closely with our architects (AOC) and our preferred Contractor (SEH French Ltd) to finalise the development scheme, so it can proceed to delivery. At the outset of this project both HDC, the owner of the Priory Centre, and St Neots Town Council, the tenant, have sought to deliver the best possible facility. This has meant challenging both organisations to ensure the maximum possible investment possible.
- 6.3. The Centre has been closed since late 2024, which has enabled intrusive investigating surveys to be undertaken as part of the design and construction planning. Whilst the Centre has been closed, the Town Council has rented alternative facilities in the town centre, which are being used for Town Council activities as well as providing hireable space for community groups, to minimise the impact of the Priory Centre being closed.
- 6.4. HDC has confirmed it will be investing just under £7 million in the facility, utilising direct funding as well as grant funding from the Future High Street's Fund and the Community Infrastructure Levy.
- 6.5. St Neots Town Council Finance & Governance Committee met on the 18th of February to consider a contribution towards construction and refurbishment costs. The Committee unanimously resolved to recommend the Town Council commit funding of up to £1,950,000.00 from CIL reserves towards this purpose. The project will now proceed to the full Town Council meeting on the 25th of February for a final decision.
- 6.6. Subject to the recommendation of the Finance & Governance committee being accepted, the only other outstanding item to be resolved is the issuing of a permit from the Environmental Agency. This permit is necessary to allow work to be undertaken close to the river. Whilst it is possible to commence mobilisation, construction work will be limited until this permit has been granted. Subject to this, HDC is targeting a start date towards the end of March or beginning of April.

Old Falcon

- 6.7. A planning application in respect of the Old Falcon was considered and approved by the Development Management Committee at its meeting on Monday, 17th February 2025.

- 6.8. This Grade II Listed former hotel, has remained vacant for over 20 years, and has declined significantly in recent years. In collaboration with the building's owner, HDC's Market Towns team has developed proposals to transform the site into a mix of commercial and residential units, ensuring its long-term sustainability while preserving its historic character. This has resulted in the planning application being considered by the Development Management committee.
- 6.9. This granting of planning consent will enable this important local landmark building to be restored and repurposed as part of broader efforts to revitalise St Neots town centre.
- 6.10. Whilst the full restoration works will not commence immediately, HDC, working again closely with the property owner, will be undertaking improvements to the building façade. This will include repainting, improvements to the appearance of the windows, entrances, and clearance of vegetation. These works will be completed during the Spring and will be coordinated with the completion of the main town centre improvement works within the Market Square and surround areas.

Town Centre Improvements

- 6.11. This project is being delivered by Taylor Woodrow and HDC Officers are being supported by Cambridgeshire County Council in a project management capacity as the Highways Authority.
- 6.12. The works are progressing well and are on track for completion in April 2025. The northern half of the Market Square is largely complete with street furniture due to be installed imminently. The construction of the south side rain gardens is proceeding at pace, and electrical installation works have commenced.
- 6.13. The remaining areas of work include the completion of the paving works on Market Square south, bridge footway repaving, spot repairs to the footways at South Street/New Street junction, and installation, testing and commissioning of the new electrical systems.

Performance Stage

- 6.25. HDC continues to work with AOC (our appointed architect) to investigate the feasibility of a permanent performance stage in St Neots Market Square and develop proposals for such a structure.
- 6.26. AOC have now completed the RIBA Stages 0-2 (Feasibility and Concept Design) phase and submitted a report to HDC which includes three tested and costed design directions. The cost of a permanent stage (regardless of chosen design) has been found to exceed the available budget, and during this phase several risks have been identified which would need to be addressed if the project is to proceed. AOC's report, with an accompanying report from the HDC Project Manager detailing their

recommendation, will shortly be provided to HDC members and St Neots Town Council for review.

- 6.27. It will be necessary in any scenario to seek an extension for use of the CPCA funds allocated to this project from 2024/25 to 2025/2026. To this end, a change control request has been submitted which will be considered by CPCA's Investment Panel on the 11th of March 2025.

7. FINANCE UPDATE

Funding source	Grant secured	Spend to date	Balance
1. St Neots Regeneration			
Future High Street Fund	£3,748,815	£2,256,314 <small>Note: this figure is reduced versus December report due to internal reallocation of expenditure from FHSF to CPCA grant.</small>	£1,492,501
CiL	£4,830,000	£0	£4,830,000
CPCA	£3,100,000	£2,782,281	£317,718
National Highways	£3,493,218	£3,493,218	£0
CPCA Masterplan phase 1 (legacy)	£260,000	£260,000	£0
Funding totals	£15,432,033	£8,791,814	£6,641,219

Funding source	Grant secured	Spend to date	Balance
2. Huntingdon & St Ives			
CPCA Accelerated Funding	£802,150	£802,150	£0
Funding totals	£802,150	£802,150	£0

Funding source	Grant secured	Spend to date	Balance
3. Ramsey			
Local Growth Fund	£1,153,525	£0	£1,153,525
UKSP (revenue)*	£160,835	£127,169	£33,665
CPCA Accelerated Funding (legacy)	£295,000	£58,652	£236,347
Funding totals	£1,609,360	£185,821	£1,423,539

Funding source	Grant secured	Spend to date	Balance
4. Programme total			
All funding sources	£17,843,543	£9,779,786	£8,063,757

* Note: UKSPF funding was restructured in December 2024 with the CPCA to ensure maximum delivery and reduce the likelihood of funds remaining unspent at the end of March 2025. As a result, several UKSPF project budgets have been revised to meet this objective. Total UKSF programme funding is unchanged.

8. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

- 8.1. The Overview and Scrutiny (Performance & Growth) Panel discussed the report at its meeting on 5th March 2025.
- 8.2 Councillor Pickering expressed concern that the Priory Centre had been closed for six months to date and that the project was yet to get underway. The Panel were assured that the project was progressing and that the closure of the building had allowed for more intensive pre project work and surveys to be undertaken, it was further noted that the building work project would take a year to complete once underway.
- 8.3 It was noted, following a question from Councillor Pickering, that project progress would first be shared with St Neots Town Council and local ward members as local stakeholders prior to being shared via the democratic meeting cycle.
- 8.4 The Panel heard, following comments from Councillor Chapman, that the installation of an electrical box on the St Neots Market Square had been necessary to update the electrics for the Square and to maximise it's potential within the development, it was noted that the box would be landscaped in order to blend with the street scene as the project neared completion. It was also noted that the scheme did not involve excessive bollards to prevent car parking in order to maintain accessibility and maximise opportunities within the development. Illegal car parking in the square was not anticipated to be an issue due to the anticipated implementation of parking enforcement. It was observed that both of these designs were included within the plans for the development.
- 8.5 In response to a question from Councillor Corney, the Panel heard that Cambridgeshire County Council would be consulted as part of the planning process for the Ramsey project and that this approach had provided a collaborative result in previous projects.
- 8.6 In response to a question from Councillor Pitt, the Panel heard that discussions were ongoing with Ramsey Town Council over the management of the shop in a box units. The Panel also heard, following questions from Councillor Gleadow and Councillor Pit that an exit strategy was built into the digital screen project from the beginning and that funding for this was built into the project, there would also be opportunities to transfer the maintenance and ownership of the screens to town Councils should they wish to and that relevant costs would be provided should they be interested further down the line. Full details on the cost of the current maintenance and operation of the screens would be relayed to the Panel in due course.
- 8.7 The Panel heard, following questions from Councillor Pitt, that a communication plan was in place for the Old Falcon project but that it would be flexible to react to the project as it got underway, the Panel was assured that key elements had been, and would continue to be shared

with ward members. It was also noted that briefings with ward members could be reinstated if needed.

- 8.8 It was observed by Councillor Pitt and Councillor Chapman that funding for the Priory Centre project had only recently been approved by St Neots Town Council and that they were concerned that the success of the scheme was reliant on this contribution, the Panel heard that the project could have been adjusted to ensure it fell within budget.
- 8.9 The Panel were assured, following a question from Councillor Pickering, that money for the Shopfront Grants scheme would only be paid upon the completion of a project.
- 8.10 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.

9. KEY IMPACTS / RISKS

BUDGET MANAGEMENT RISK

- 9.1. 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.
- 9.2. One of the most significant elements of the MTP was the St Neots Town Centre Improvements. The tender process for this resulted in costs being confirmed at a significant cost saving compared to previous estimates. This lowered the risk for this project and the programme overall significantly.
- 9.3. The Priory Centre project is another hugely significant scheme with an elevated level of risk in terms of construction cost inflation. A competitive process has been undertaken, and a contractor (SHE French Ltd) has been selected to deliver the works. The contract value has also now been confirmed alongside funding sources. The level of risk has therefore been reduced to an acceptable level.

PROGRAMME RESOURCE RISKS

- 9.4. 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.
- 9.5. 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. 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

9.6. 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.

9.7. 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.

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

10.1. 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

11. CONSULTATION

11.1. Within the reporting period, a statutory planning consultation was undertaken about the Old Falcon planning application. No other informal or formal consultations have been completed during this time.

12. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

12.1. 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.

13. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

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

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.

15.8. 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

Not applicable.

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](#)
- Market Towns Programme Spring 2024 Update to Cabinet April 2024 can be found [here](#)
- Market Towns Programme Summer 2024 Update to Cabinet July 2024 can be found [here](#)
- Market Towns Programme Winter 2024 Update to Cabinet December 2024 can be found [here](#)

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