



# March:

## A Destination Market Town

### Market Town Masterplan



## Contents

Contents.....	2
Introduction .....	3
March – an overview of the town.....	4
March – what residents are telling us .....	9
March – a destination market town .....	11
Key proposals for March.....	12
Next steps .....	26
Overall strategy for Fenland.....	27

## Introduction

What is Growing Fenland? This Combined Authority sponsored report is part of a series of reports that together provide a master plan approach for Fenland through 4 town based plans and an overarching strategy report.

A lot of strategy has historically focused on making cities work well, and assuming the rest will follow. But because the Fenland area economy is recognised as separate, and in some ways quite isolated with sub-standard transport links, this approach won't work for us. We need a strategy for each of our towns, which helps them prosper, and delivers the best quality of life for the people who live here. This must acknowledge where we have links to other towns or cities, while seeking to build strength in our places. The Combined Authority is committed to doubling economic output across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough by 2040 – to do this, all areas are going to have to succeed, not just the city based economies.

To make this happen, the Combined Authority has decided to support a process of creating market town plans for each town in our district – Chatteris, March, Whittlesey, and Wisbech. These plans will be used to bid for funding from the Combined Authority and other funding providers, based on the vision for each town.

To develop these plans, each town has established a town team, consisting of representatives from business, local government, schools, and others. The town team has looked at life in the town from every angle, and has developed a vision for each town.

***“Our vision is that March will be a destination market town where people want to live and work. We will be a destination for shoppers and visitors looking to enjoy the revitalised high street. We will be a destination for employers looking for ambitious and highly skilled employees. We will be a destination for households looking for affordable homes in friendly, safe, attractive neighbourhoods.***

***We will do this by making the centre of town a high-quality destination for people looking to work, shop, eat, drink and relax. Shoppers will have a choice of prestigious brands and niche, locally rooted offers. The strength of the retail offer will be matched by the night-time economy, offering a wide variety of food, drink and entertainment venues.”***

## March – an overview of the town

***March is a friendly town with many assets and strengths. To continue to prosper we know that we need to improve the town centre, build the right homes in the right places, make best use of empty business premises, help businesses develop and grow, and keep hold of learners and workers.***

### Local assets and a friendly community

March is an attractive and popular place to live. The town's population continues to grow strongly as people are attracted by the offer of good quality housing, new community facilities, including a modern library and recently developed Academy, along with a low crime rate.

Residents take pride in March's strong sense of community and friendliness, its many voluntary groups and societies, and a range of popular events throughout the year, such as St George's Fayre, the Summer Festival, Memorial Service and the Christmas Market all held in the centre of town.

March grew up as a very significant railway town and has retained large railway sidings and network rail operations. The town has the potential for improved connectivity through the existing links by rail, road, and river to other towns and cities.

***"It's friendly, lovely. An amazing place to live."***

We have an active Town Team that includes local businesses who are keen to make a further contribution to the success and vitality of the town.

While the population overall is set to grow, by about a third to 2036, it is also set to grow older. **The proportion of the working age population will decline from 62% to 56%.** This points to one of the most significant challenges facing March.

### Need to boost access to education and job opportunities

**Too many of March's talented and ambitious young people have to leave the town to access the educational and employment opportunities to which they aspire.** We have heard directly from young people about the struggles they face when trying to take opportunities to develop their skills and ready themselves for the world of work.

In recent years, school performance at primary and secondary stages has also trailed behind local and national averages. We have heard that one of the reasons that schools sometimes struggle to deliver on a consistent basis is that there are not enough affordable homes for teachers and other key workers and young professionals.

***"People have to leave March to get a job or an apprenticeship."***

Compounding this problem, **opportunities in the town for apprenticeships, work experience and training from age 16 are limited**, while the opportunities that do exist are not reaching potential candidates. There appears to be a

mismatch between local people looking for apprenticeships, and employers looking for apprentices but struggling to find local candidates.

At the same time, opportunities to learn, work and train outside the town are often made difficult by **transport connections that are too expensive, uncoordinated, or simply not running at the time of the day** when people need them. This applies to both bus and train routes.

## A mixed skilled picture

In terms of adult education and skills, the town retains **the core of an educated professional workforce**. This includes a concentration of public sector jobs, with Fenland District Council offices and HMP Whitemoor nearby. We have a small cluster of high-tech engineering businesses, such as PCML, Qualitetch, Liberate Engineering, and Mundell. As set out in Figure 1 below, a fifth of the local population is educated to NVQ4 or above. This is another of March's strengths.

However, our overall skill levels are lower than the Cambridgeshire and national averages. Like the rest of Fenland, **nearly a third of the population has no qualifications**.

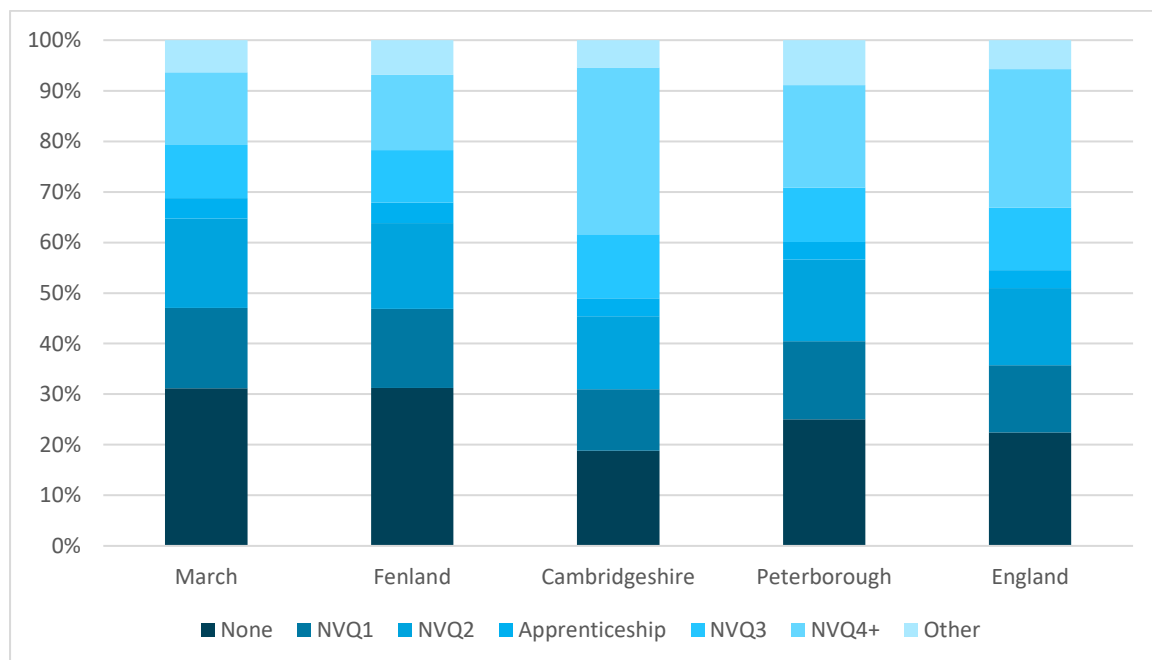


Fig 1: Highest level of academic qualifications

The new Academy, with its range of facilities, dynamic leadership and commitment to working with local partners is part of the answer to this challenge.

However, more effort and coordination are required to achieve three connected goals.

The first is the need to **better link up apprenticeships with potential candidates** within March and beyond. Together we will work closely with the Combined Authority on the implementation of the apprenticeship brokerage programme and bring forward local partners to pilot the scheme in March.

***"The challenge is to create a critical mass of hi-tech, high-value added companies."***

Second, we need to make it easier for people in March to **travel to places where they can further their education and career**.

Third, we need to nurture the **further development of a cluster of high-tech, high-skill jobs** that will retain more of the town's young people and attract new talent. The potential is there, but we need coordinated activity to build on what already exists.

## A high street with huge potential

**March's most under-utilised assets are the high street and the riverfront.**

The town's central shopping parade boasts some beautiful, historic architecture, the iconic war memorial and some popular, long-standing stores. However, **the retail offer as a whole is not as strong as it was – or could be in future**. When we spoke to local residents this was the biggest issue they raised, along with congestion, which we discuss below. Their words are borne out by available data. The retail vacancy rate for the area defined as March Town Centre is 3.3%, which has climbed steeply from 0.3% in 2015. This compares unfavourably to a UK rate of 2.3% and reflects a quite rapid decline. Relatedly, the "Months-on-the-Market" measure shows an average of 19.9 months for a retail property in March to be taken on – well above the UK average of 9.4 months.

**As much as the main thoroughfare needs revitalising, the river and Nene Parade in particular have huge but untapped potential.** Nene Parade is the iconic view of the town and already contains the oldest building in March (the Ship Inn pub) and a few restaurants. These look out over the bank down to the River Nene, and across the river to the historic Town Hall. The river attracts some narrowboaters, but there is much more we can do with this area.

While some of our local treasures are obscured from view, a few highly-visible derelict eyesores – such as the long-vacant Indoor Market, the dilapidated Collingwood's auction house at the top of Broad Street, and the long vacated Freezer Shop in Station Road – send a negative signal to residents and visitors alike.

Improving the appeal of the town centre could also **realise the potential of March's night-time economy**. The town's Pubwatch group attracts upwards of twenty landlords to its meetings. There appears to be an opportunity here to create more of an evening economy to bring additional expenditure and more of a buzz into the town.

In a bid to the government's Future High Street Fund, there is the aim to make a winning case for investment in an iconic new development that will breathe new life into the town. This could include improved leisure and retail opportunities as well as spaces for smaller businesses and start-ups to cluster and network on and around the high street and riverfront.

## Connected but congested

*"The car is King in March."*

*"It feels difficult and dangerous [to walk around]."*

**In some ways, March is a well-connected place.** We have a railway station, unlike other market towns. **However, traffic dominates the centre of town.** Overall, this can make shopping or simply strolling through town a stressful experience. Through initial engagement as part of this process, residents consistently identified traffic congestion as one of the main issues in the town.

The twelve-month average concentration of NO<sub>2</sub> on Broad Street for 2018 was 39.59µg/m<sup>3</sup>, pushing the European Union’s legal limit of 40µg/m<sup>3</sup> (though note, these figures can be subject to revision). This pollution is produced by idling vehicles on this congested stretch of road.

A Combined Authority sponsored Transport Study for March, which will be ready for public feedback early in 2020 is much anticipated. It is expected to provide some options around reduced congestion, an enhanced town centre and improved connectivity for the town. The town team look forward to supporting the outcomes of this study where they match the aims of this report.

The problem of congestion is also driven by the issue identified above. That too many people looking to work and learn have to travel out of town every day, putting great pressure on the road network. This is reflected in Fig 2 below, which shows how many workers currently travel to other parts of Fenland and beyond.

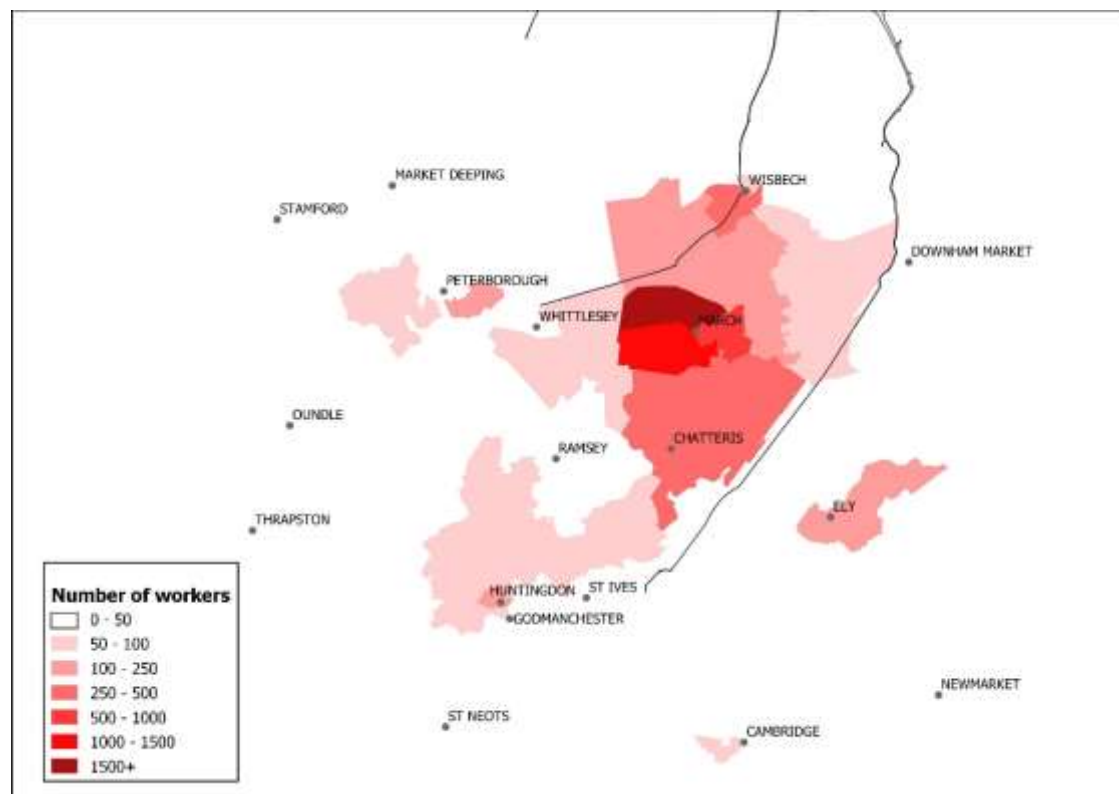


Fig 2: Where March residents work – commuting in all directions

*“The internet speed where we live is slower compared to where we used to live.”*

Whilst the majority of the town has good internet connectivity, a further brake on our connectivity, which also impacts on our ability to set the new skills agenda, is the **comparatively slow broadband speeds** in some parts of the town. This was an issue raised by residents in the early initial consultation for this work.

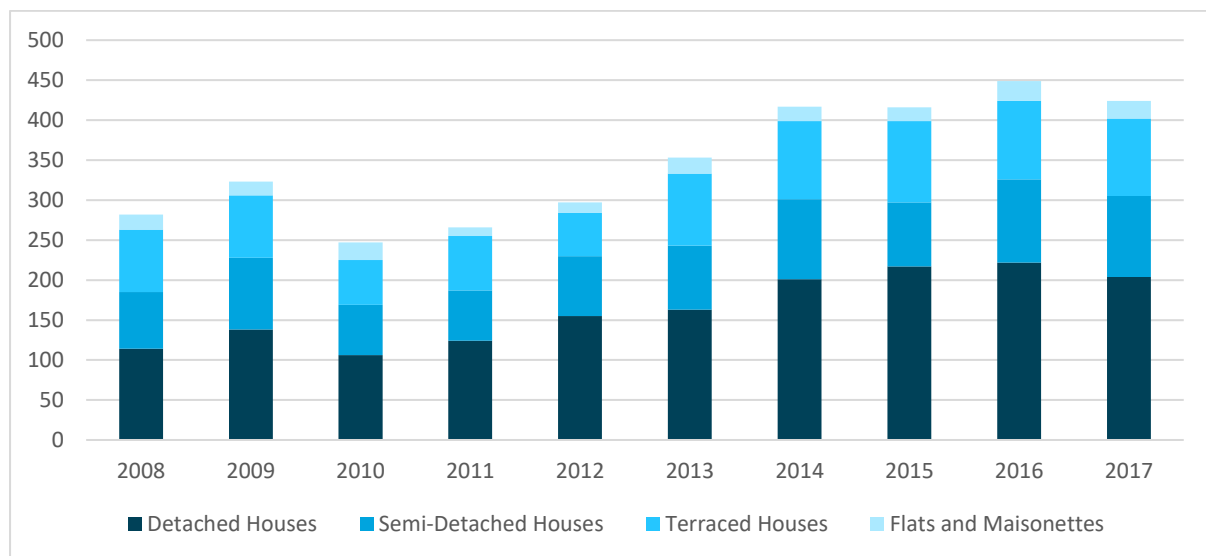
## An under-supply of new homes

While the quality of housing in March is high, **house sales have plateaued in recent years**, as illustrated in Fig. 3 below. Development sites have been identified, to the south east and south west

of the town, taking the western boundary of March closer to the A141. **However, progress through the planning process has been slow.**

**There is a growing risk that March's pipeline of affordable homes, especially for key workers such as teachers, will run dry.** This is particularly true of build types, especially flats and maisonettes, favoured by some young professionals – detached houses still dominate housing sales in the town.

Meanwhile, there are many areas in the vicinity that are building large numbers of homes and benefitting from wider investment as a result. For example, the North Ely development will deliver 3,000 homes alongside the development of a large new country park and the North Stowe new town development of 10,000 homes will include a range of transport and other opportunities



*Fig 3: Sales of housing types in March since 2008*

It is clear that March would benefit from a means of ensuring that the right properties are available for those who choose to live in March. It isn't clear where the barriers exist to releasing some of the areas already identified for development. For the town to continue to prosper, a range of options need to be considered and made available for decision makers, land owners and developers alongside the developing local plan process.



## March – what residents are telling us

Our work consulting the community on the initial ideas in the plan brought out the following key themes.

### *Likes*

The most common response to what people liked about the town was the ‘sense of community’, with respondents making reference to the friendliness of “good people”. Respondents also made reference to the smallness and quietness of the town, the rural setting / easy access to the countryside, and the pleasantness of having a river running through the centre of town. Events in the town, such as the Christmas Market and St George’s Fair, were also mentioned.

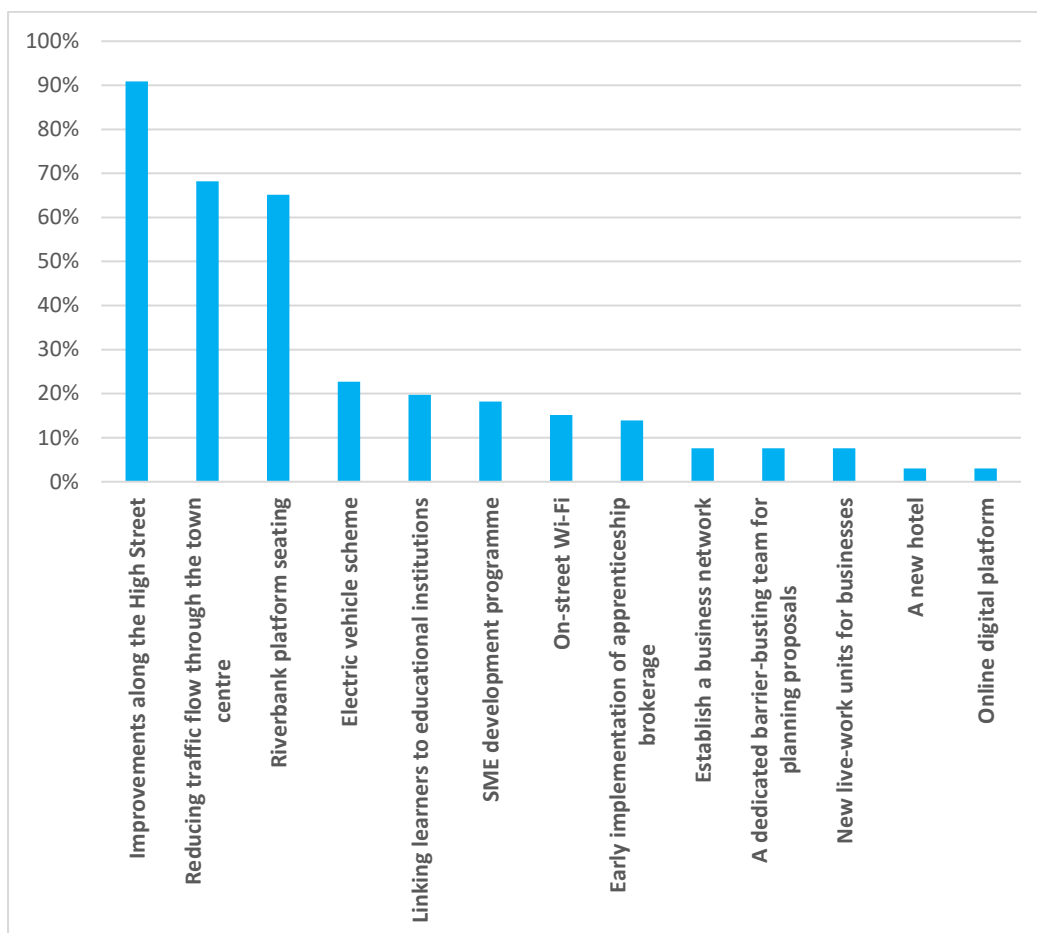
### *Dislikes*

Traffic emerged as the main dislike residents had. People felt there was “not enough room for pedestrians” and too much “traffic going through town centre”. As a result, these are the issues we aim to address in this document. The other issue often raised was the limited variety of local shops, with lots of the same type of shops and not enough known brands.

### *Improvements*

The main improvement people identified was the potential to do more with the high street and market square, generally improving the quality and appeal and tackling some of the derelict buildings identified in the profile.

### *Favourite ideas from the community consultation*



Source: Analysis of Fenland District Council data. Height of bars shows the proportion of residents who chose an idea in their top three.

**When asked to identify their favourite ideas, resident and visitors asked expressed some very clear preferences:**

- **Improvements along the High Street (91%)**
- **Reducing traffic flow through the centre of town (68%);**
- **Riverbank platform seating (65%).**

## March – A destination market town

**Our vision is that March will be a destination market town where people want to live and work.**

We will be a destination for shoppers and visitors looking to enjoy the revitalised high street. We will be a destination for employers looking for ambitious and highly skilled employees. We will be a destination for households looking for affordable homes in friendly, safe, attractive neighbourhoods.

We will do that by making the centre of town a high-quality destination for people looking to work, shop, eat, drink and relax. Shoppers will have a choice of prestigious brands and niche, locally rooted offers. The strength of the retail offer will be matched by the night-time economy, offering a wide variety of food, drink and entertainment venues. The 'star attraction' for March will be a redesign of the area around the River Nene to create a pleasant area to spend time and relax.

Unused buildings in the centre of town will be brought to life, for a range of uses, while street furniture and attractive shop frontages will give the centre a distinctive look and feel.

We will tackle congestion on Broad Street and make it easier and safer to walk and cycle in the centre of town. An in-depth transport study is under way at the moment, which will no doubt inform the final approach, but the ambition is to make the town centre feel less congested and as a result more attractive.

The strategy will support small and medium sized businesses to develop and grow in the town, through a programme of expert support, including access to funding, premises and networking.

Within our other proposals, a town website could promote all the ways that people can shop, have fun and relax in March. It could also be a place where local residents, community groups and enterprises can share and hear about what is going on in the town.

## Key proposals for March

We have identified a package of connected interventions that will make a lasting difference to March:

### 1. Improving the town centre

#### a. Appearance and appeal

Delivering a range of major changes that will remove or activate derelict or vacant buildings and improve the overall appearance and appeal of the high street.

#### b. Reducing traffic flow through the centre of town

We will support and inform the Combined Authority's Local Transport Strategy where it delivers an improved town centre that assists the development of the town centre economy, public transport improvements, and cycling and pedestrian access to the town.

#### c. Development of the riverbank asset

We will investigate the possibility to develop a tiered seating area and platform area on both sides of the town bridge to allow the asset of the river to be seen and enjoyed. The aim is to open access to the riverside and provide new areas for residents, workers and visitors to eat, relax and socialise.

#### d. On street Wi-Fi

To support the enhanced town centre we will install a zone of free to the user Wi-Fi access as a further addition to our high street offer.

#### e. Electric vehicle charging points

We will encourage the use of electric vehicles for those living, working or visiting the town centre by provide charging points within town centre car parks.

### 2. Small and medium sized enterprise development programme

We will invest in a new programme that will enable local small-to-medium sized enterprises to network, grow and develop new products and services, across different sectors.

### 3. Improving the availability of properties

To enable a coordinated solution to the broader development of the town, both minor and major developments, a Challenge Busting Team will bring together land owners, developers and the local councils to ensure that March can continue to deliver the range of properties that the town needs for future years, in line with local plans.

## **4. Other future options**

### **a. New town website**

We will develop a brand new website that will promote everything we have to offer to visitors, and provide a single reference point for all information about the town.

### **b. Develop a 'car club'**

We will trial a new car club that makes available a pool of rechargeable electric or hybrid vehicles to be rented or used by the hour by residents and local small and medium sized enterprises.

We unpack each of these in more detail below.

## 1a. Improving the appearance and appeal of the town centre

### Strategic Case

A programme of targeted improvements to the appearance and overall appeal of our high street. This intervention would work well in conjunction with the riverside platform seating. In tandem, these would bring more activity and vibrancy to the centre of town.

As set out in the profile section of this masterplan, our High Street contains some beautiful and historic architecture, as well as some highly-visible derelict eyesores, such as the long-vacant indoor market, the old auction house at the top of Broad Street, and the old freezer shop on Station Road. Such sites send a negative signal to residents and visitors alike.

There is also a high level of first floor vacancy, where above-shop accommodation lies empty. This results in a deteriorating condition for many buildings along the High Street, including blocked gutters, vegetation in roofs and walls, failing or poor-quality windows, and unattractive shop fronts.

The retail vacancy rate for the area defined as March Town Centre is 3.3%, which has climbed steeply from 0.3% in 2015. This compares unfavourably to a UK rate of 2.3% and reflects a quite rapid decline. Relatedly, the “Months-on-the-Market” measure shows an average of 19.9 months for a retail property in March to be taken on – well above the UK average of 9.4 months.

This decline is driven by wider changes in retail habits, but there is more we can do to improve our high street. As well as making physical improvements to the high street, as described below, a programme of investment would send a strong signal of belief and be used as a powerful hook to attract both a wider range of shops and other activities and amenities.

Our proposal is for a programme of coordinated investment in the high street that would include:

- Dealing with the acknowledged eyesores and vacant buildings as part of the development of the town centre in line with the Future High Street Fund bid outlined below. This could be done through significant re-development to re-purpose, or demolition to make way for a new development.
- Installing eye-catching street furniture. This could be a mixture of traditional features such as benches, bins, water fountains and less conventional features such a ‘hang out space’ as well as electric vehicle re-charging points in nearby car parks.
- Improved signage around the high street and beyond that makes consistent reference to key landmarks (such as the Town Hall and War Memorial) and directs and encourages people to explore the distinct parts of the high street and the areas around it.
- A shop frontage improvement schemes, offering access to experts and a small amount of capital funding to create attractive and modern-looking frontages.
- Ensure local In Bloom and other volunteers are able to continue to make the town look great.
- Work with landlords to arrange obvious improvement work like gutter clearance.
- Bringing currently vacant first-floor units back into use. This could be a mixture of residential use, office or maker space, and live-work units. These would need to be modern, attractive and well-managed and marketed by a qualified agency, as well as being affordable to local businesses. This is in line with our ambition to create a cluster of high-tech, high-skill jobs in March.

- To support the March Area Transport Study in the re-designing of traffic flow through the town centre to encourage walking, cycling and town centre activities and events.
- Create 'space to breath' in the town centre.

The introduction of free wi-fi to the centre of town is also designed to encourage greater activity and interaction.

Whether funded as part of a wider Future High Streets Fund package or as a stand-alone set of improvements, these measures should boost the look and feel of the high street. From a place that is dominated by cars and feels, as per feedback in the overview, "difficult and dangerous" for pedestrians, to a place that is much more attractive and welcoming to shoppers, visitors and workers alike.

## Financial Case

Fenland District Council has included an outline proposal in its initial Future High Streets Fund bid. Funding has now been allocated to work this up into a full business case to attract further funding from government. The return on investment from a successful programme of improvements would be significant.

## Management Case

This is multi-layered project; the extent of which depends on the precise mixture of ingredients. It ranges from immediate, practical changes such as clearing gutters; through to more creative changes that require some design, such as wayfinding and improving shop frontages; to somewhat longer-term shifts, such as bringing vacant first-floor units back into use.

This project would likely to need to engage specialist advice on issues like wayfinding, where expert input could lead to more innovative proposals.

Contractors would be required to deliver certain elements such as the frontage improvement schemes.

Local businesses and retailers on the high street would of course be a core partner. They would need to be engaged early on and throughout, so they benefit from and contribute to the project, and understand the impact of any potential inconvenience.

Another important set of partners are the residents and businesses, some of whom may not currently live in March, who could be attracted to occupy first-floor units.

## 1b. Reducing traffic flow through the centre of town

### Strategic Case

The problem with traffic in March town centre is clear. Traffic data collected as part of the March Area Transport Study revealed speeds of under 10mph both north and southbound through the centre of town.

This heavy traffic has a negative effect on local air quality. The twelve-month average concentration of NO<sub>2</sub> recorded on Broad Street for 2018 was 39.59µg/m<sup>3</sup>. Even allowing for variability, this is pushing the European Union's legal limit of 40µg/m<sup>3</sup>. This pollution is produced by idling vehicles on this frequently congested stretch of road.

Within our public consultation, reducing traffic flow through the centre of town received the second most priority preferences, with 68% of respondents identifying it as one of their three favourite proposals.

Such an unpleasant situation makes it difficult to attract visitors, shoppers and businesses to the town centre and works against the positive impacts of the other proposals in this masterplan. Similar public consultation elsewhere ([Smarter Cambridge Transport](#)) has argued that it is necessary to go beyond minor changes and that we must design urban roads and streets to be attractive and convenient places to walk, cycle and use public transport.<sup>1</sup>

In the above context, it is clear we need to reduce the feel of the overall amount of traffic on Broad Street and make it more attractive to pedestrians and cyclists.

Any changes to traffic in Broad Street could improve other current traffic situations in the town and make it easier to drive out of the market square and similar junctions within the town.

An in-depth transport study supported by the Combined Authority is currently under way and will include public consultation in early 2020. We will support this where it meets our aim to make the town centre more walkable and give a boost to the shops here.

## Funding

Alongside the transport study, Fenland District Council has included an outline proposal in its Future High Streets Fund bid. This is under development, and will result in a business case which looks to government for funding.

## Management

The transport study will inform the final approach, but the changes are likely to require:

- Engagement and communication with residents and stakeholders – including engagement with businesses on the short-term impact of changes to the road.
- Further assessments of likely impact on traffic flow and potential modal shift.
- Detailed assessment of required engineering works.
- Identification of additional changes and modification required to adjoining roads, including signage, and the scope for inbound flow control.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.smartertransport.uk/smarter-cambridge-transport-urban-congestion-enquiry/>



## 1c. Development of the riverside asset

### Strategic Case

New platform or tiered seating on the riverbank, located on either side of the town bridge, will create a new focal point for residents, workers and visitors to eat, relax and socialise. This is part of the bid being submitted to central government's 'Future High Streets Fund'.

As set out in the profile of the town, March faces many of the same challenges encountered by other market towns. The town centre is congested, retail patterns are changing, and there are some empty, derelict and abandoned premises in the heart of the town centre.

Looking ahead, the high street of the future will be less a place where individuals shop, and more of a location for groups of people to socialise, relax and enjoy their leisure time.

March has the potential to become such a 'destination location'. The River Nene runs through the centre of town. We have a range of pubs, with an active and committed group of local landlords. The town has some beautiful and historic architecture; including the Town Hall, Fountain and War Memorial on Broad Street.

To realise that potential we need to do more with the assets we have and address the reasons why March, as it is today, isn't attracting more people.

In the bid to the Future High Streets Fund, this has been focussed upon to deliver the town centre growth of leisure, retail and culture.

The improved riverside seating would be the 'star attraction' of the area along Nene Parade offering an iconic view of the town, including the oldest building in March (the Ship Inn pub) and restaurants. These restaurants look out over the bank down to the River Nene, and across to the historic Town Hall.

The river is currently not accessible to residents of the town, due to the busy roads, high fences and steep banks. The river represents the connection of March to the old trading and access routes within this historic Fenland landscape. By improving access to the river bank, and to leisure options such as day boats, we hope to open up a new appreciation of this valuable asset within the heart of our town.

The seating would offer:

- Spaciously-designed seating arrangements so people can relax and use the space.
- Much easier access to and from the riverside for residents wanting to access the water and visitors to the town e.g. narrow boaters.
- Access to the free wi-fi that is also proposed in this masterplan.
- Safety features such as railings.

The proposal is scalable, but the development would need to be of sufficient size to become a recognised 'feature' and make a meaningful difference to the look, feel and appeal of this central part of town.

### Funding

Estimates are based on experience of a smaller project elsewhere, the Porter Brook Pocket Park, where it is estimated that Sheffield City Council spent £1.35m. There is already evidence that the Porter Brook Pocket Park has revitalised part of the city centre and increased local spend. It is therefore anticipated that this large scale project will cost between £3 and £5 million.

## Management

This would be a significant, but deliverable. Working with Middle Level Commissioners, the project would require several inputs:

- Geotechnical assessment including any flood risk implication
- Detailed design
- Consultation with local residents and stakeholders on potential uses, features and appearance
- Installation

### CASE STUDY

Sheffield's Porter Brook Pocket Park won the 'Contribution to the Built Environment' award at the Living Waterways Awards ceremony in 2016. The purpose of the project was to open up and utilise an under-used part of a small scale riverside space. The project involved removal of a culvert and the development a tiered new terrace that enables residents to access the riverside.

Video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oexE1N4WwvU>

## 1d. On street Wi-Fi

### Strategic Case

The development of digital technologies has had an inescapable impact on our high streets. However, prophecies of the total demise of the high street overlook the fact that humans are, and always will be, physical creatures, benefiting from face to face interaction. People will also often want to look at and assess goods before buying them. The fact that Amazon, one of the dominant forces in e-commerce, is now trialling pop-up shops on the UK High Street testifies to the continued importance of the physical high street, and the opportunity which exists to combine the digital and the physical.

Successful high streets of the future will be those which manage to do this. The towns in Fenland enjoy good broadband – with superfast or ultrafast broadband in most of March. The next step to future proof the high street will be the installation of free on-street Wi-Fi – this is one of the basics in providing an integrated digital/physical experience for the future, and may well become a criteria for national chains when deciding where to set up. Bill Grimsey, Former Chief Executive of Iceland and one of Wickes' subsidiary businesses, set out as a key recommendation in his second review of the High Street to "provide free public Wi-Fi and well-connected workplaces that support flexible working patterns and attract freelancers to high streets and town centres."

Our proposal for the Wi-Fi is deliberately constrained to the town centre is to encourage people in to it. It would encompass Broad Street to market square and the proposed new seating area.

## Financial

The estimated total cost for installing the Wi-Fi in March is around £20,000, followed by an annual charge of £2,000 for a seven-year period. We can access Cambridgeshire County Council funding through the Connecting Cambridgeshire programme.

## Management

The installation of the points for the on-street Wi-Fi would be managed by Connecting Cambridgeshire – who already have experience of successfully installing on-street Wi-Fi in Cambridge and Ely. The network could be supported by Cambs Wi-Fi. The Town Team will work with Connecting Cambridgeshire to ensure the user interface is optimised for a visitor to the town.

## 1e. Electric vehicle charging points

### Strategic Case

We will encourage the use of electric vehicles for those living, working or visiting the town centre by provide charging points within town centre car parks. Electric vehicles are becoming increasingly commonplace as awareness grows of the impact of air pollution on the health of current and future generations and the need to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from transport.

There are environmental, economic and social reasons for supporting the shift to electric vehicles. We want to drive this change.

We therefore propose to install **new electric charging points at key locations** in and around the town.

### Financial

Funding will be sought to install charging points within town centre car parks owned by Fenland District Council.

The work is scalable, but to be viable is expected to cost in the region of £35,000.

### Management

The new charging points will be managed by Fenland District Council, subject to resources available. There are local authority powers available to ensure that the charging points remain accessible to electric car users with usual parking enforcement penalties applicable.

## 2. Small and medium sized enterprise development programme

### Strategic Case

Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are crucial to the long-term financial success of market towns and the UK economy as a whole. The programme would provide:

- Tailored packages for individual businesses;
- Generic, cross-business support such as sector networking; and
- Small-scale grant funding to help businesses access additional support.

The programme would be delivered with an experienced partner. It would be designed to become self-sustaining after an initial period of funding.

By their nature, most SMEs have limited access to funding and staff time to look ahead at future opportunities and threats to develop their businesses accordingly. They could, for example, invest in staff skills and develop new business projects if resources were available. Unlike larger companies, which can appoint staff or outside consultants to do this work, most SME are focused on getting by. We are also informed that business networking in Fenland is limited. In addition, nearby in Wisbech research shows that some SMEs that are operating profitably have limited interest or incentive to expand or do things differently.

The development of a project to address these gaps could include:

- Supporting SMEs to access public investment and private capital.
- Liaising between SMEs and educational providers to shape courses to match future skills needs.
- Increasing the amount and quality of networking between businesses.

We therefore propose a programme of work that would deliver:

- Tailored packages of support in individual SMEs across a range of support needs, including:
  - Business planning and financial management
  - Branding and management including online marketing e.g. how use LinkedIn effectively
  - New product / service development testing
  - Market analysis / horizon scanning
  - Applying for loans and other sources of finance
- A general programme of face-to-face and online networking opportunities, designed and facilitated to encourage SMEs to share information and identify opportunities.
- A transparent small grant programme to enable businesses to access further support outside the programme. Such support might be highly technical or sector-specific.

The following aspects would also need to be considered:

- Qualification criteria, such as company size and turnover.
- The amount of support available to companies and communicating that clearly from the beginning – with the option of SMEs purchasing further support as desired.
- Effective marketing and promotion and proactive engagement of businesses – this is a crucial element, given the current lack of networking and engagement from some SMEs.
- Arrangements for consulting on the detail of the programme with local SMEs.

- Which sectors are eligible and which, if any, should be a priority for support.
- Whether the programme should also look to engage SMEs outside of March with an eye to attracting them to locate to the town.
- The scale and assessment criteria for the small grant pot.
- Coordination of locally available premises in a portfolio format to allow growing businesses to relocate locally.

The programme should be coordinated with and signposted to other support opportunities. These should include the new Greater Cambridgeshire and Peterborough local Skills Support for the Workforce (SSW) contracts, which is aimed at SMEs.

## Financial

A three-year contract should give any delivery partners enough time to deliver the programme. The aim should be for the programme, or elements of it, to become self-sustaining after this period through:

- SMEs buying in tailored packages of support;
- Subscriptions to networking activities;
- SMEs undertaking some of the delivery themselves e.g. responsibility for organising network events.
- Link to any existing business groups, such as Chamber of Commerce.
- Coordination of empty premises to encourage use of empty and under used premises.

We would seek specific costings from suppliers, but could allocate £350,000 for a five-year package.

## Management

There are several providers of SME development programmes on the open market, including private companies and universities. The contract would need to be advertised and commissioned in line with Fenland District Council's procurement policies.

It would be advisable to build some element of local consultation with SMEs before the final detailed programme is agreed.

### **3. Improving the availability of properties**

#### **Strategic Case**

We recognise that there is a lack of coordinated solutions to the broader development of the town. With both minor and major developments stalling or being delayed, there is a risk that the right properties will not be in place to fulfil the needs of the growing town. The town needs to bring together land owners, developers and the local councils to ensure that March can continue to deliver the range of properties that the town needs for future years. This could involve both enabling improved communication and myth busting, but also utilising pump-prime funding and drawing together funding sources and opportunities in line with existing and developing local plans, planning approval/requirements and funding opportunities.

#### **Financial**

This type of arrangement requires appropriately skilled resource to facilitate the change outlined.

An estimate of costs of this resource is in the region of £350,000 over a 5 year period to enable the appropriate facilitator and support to be provided.

#### **Management**

Either through a third party or by direct employment through Fenland District Council, the required employees are recruited on suitable contracts and arrangements.

Any resulting network would be well placed to be involved in any developing local plans.

## Other Future Options

### 4a. New town website

#### Strategic Case

Successful market towns have a positive, friendly ‘brand’ that they communicate to the world. Towns such as Skipton and Ludlow have used this approach to great effect with a town website.

The new town website will:

- Promote the brand of March as a destination, especially to outsiders.
- Provide a central repository for local information, such as forthcoming events, business opening hours, and local discounts. While this information is available, it is usually spread across different sources, such as local magazines and Facebook groups, which local residents may not be aware of or subscribe to and outside visitors are very unlikely to know about.
- Link to local organisations to raise their profile and connect them to new members, customers and users.
- Provide information to residents about how to access services online.

We therefore propose to create a new website, clearly branded in line with the vision set out in this master plan, which will provide the information described above. This could be done with a local professional web designer.

While setting up a website is technologically straightforward, with the tools to do so widely available, several factors need to be high quality:

- High quality design, including appropriate and high-quality images, well-written and accurate copy, and ease of navigation – it is vital that the site looks professional and reflects well on the town.
- Importantly, the site needs to be kept up to date to be of value and to avoid disappointing visitors with inaccurate information. This information would need sourcing from liaison with local group and businesses.
- Active management of any discussion boards or discussions forums, including developing a set of rules, and responding to any queries directed to the site.
- Search engine optimisation (known as SEO) so that site appears prominently in response to search terms.

As above, while it is easy to set up a website, setting up and maintaining a good quality site of which the town can be proud requires effort and commitment.

#### Financial

A small amount of funding would be needed at the beginning to design, test and launch the site. This can be between £5k and 10k depending on functionality and design.

Ongoing resources would be needed to maintain the site and volunteer involvement has been used elsewhere to successfully reduce the costs of maintaining such a service.

## Management

There would be huge value in engaging a small group of local stakeholders in the development and testing process. This is useful to the technical process of designing, but also generates buy-in to the idea of the site and generates momentum behind local organisations putting their information on the platform.

Each town team could initially work with a local website designer(s) to develop, test and launch the site. Different skills are required at different points in this process e.g. designing the look and navigation of the site is different from ongoing management. It may be possible to find an organisation with all these skills that can enter into a single contract. Alternatively, different arrangements could be made e.g. one contract to design, test and build up to the point of launch, and another to maintain and promote on an ongoing basis.

As above, there would need to be clear and agreed arrangements for keeping the site regularly up to date. This could be done as part of a contract, or through a local volunteer group.

### CASE STUDY

The first result to searching for “Ludlow” on Google is the town’s website <https://www.ludlow.org.uk/>. This presents high quality and attractive images from the town, has a single strapline – “A bustling market towns”, lists for forthcoming events, and provides two short paragraphs summarising the town’s assets and appealing features. It then provides more detail on each of these aspects – where to stay, things to do, food and drink etc.

## 4b. Car Club

### Strategic Case

Pooled access to such vehicles also offers an affordable and flexible way for younger, older and lower-income people to get around without owning their own car. This is particularly beneficial to people who are looking to study and gain work experience out of town but are currently frustrated by bus and rail services that are inconvenient. We are aware that this is a problem across Fenland.

Car clubs also offer benefits to households who currently do have a car but, for whatever reason, rarely use them. According to [Comouk](#), car owners who drive fewer than 6-8,000 miles per year can save up to £3,500 each year.

Experience from elsewhere, as described below, suggests that once people are familiar with the idea of a car club, they tend to grow and become more popular. Our investment should therefore be seen as seed funding to germinate a long-term shift to a more accessible and sustainable form of transport for rural and semi-rural areas.

### Financial

Up front funding would cover the cost of purchasing a small fleet of suitable vehicles along with any garaging and charging requirements.

Members of the scheme pay a joining fee and a monthly or ad-hoc fee.

The cost of the scheme in the first year could be £100,000.



## Management

The scheme would need to be administered by an organisation with the requisite capacity and suitable rural, transport and community outreach experience.

An important option for the car club is to allow corporate membership for local businesses, so links to the formed SME network and similar are very important. Consideration could be given for small vans as well as cars should the need be established.

### CASE STUDY

In [Harbury, Warwickshire](#), a village of 3,000 people, they have managed to generate enough usage to support two electric vehicles. These are operated by a private company and come with insurance for drivers aged 19 and over. There is a one-off lifetime fee to begin with of £50, and then an hourly payment. This is used for community services, such as services to help the elderly get to appointments or the shops. The scheme was started with a grant from the Department for Transport worth £18k.

## Next steps

We have set out a vision for March and consulted upon the interventions that can make a real difference to the town.

We now look forward to working constructively with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA), and its Mayor, James Palmer, and other funders or partners to implement these ideas. This will require both direct support from the Combined Authority, and the resources needed to take these ideas to key government funds such as the Stronger Towns Fund as and when they come forward.

It is anticipated that this work will be overseen by Fenland District Council, working in conjunction with a continued team of representatives from the town and developed from those who put together this work.

## The Overall Strategy for Fenland

The recently published Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Review (CPIER) identified that within the Combined Authority there are three distinct sub-economies. There is the Greater Cambridge economy, which includes the many towns where people commute from into Cambridge. There is the Greater Peterborough economy, and its surroundings. But in an important classification, there is also the fen economy, which includes much of our district of Fenland, as well as parts of East Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire.

A lot of strategy has historically focused on making cities work well, and assuming the rest will follow. But because our economy is separate, and in some ways quite isolated with sub-standard transport links, this approach won't work for us. We need a strategy for each of our towns, which helps them prosper, and delivers best quality of life for people who live here. This must acknowledge where we have links to other towns or cities, while seeking to build strength in our places. The Combined Authority is committed to doubling economic output across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough by 2040 – to do this, all areas are going to have to succeed, not just the Cambridge economy.

To make this happen, following the CPIER analysis, the Combined Authority has decided to support a process of creating market town plans for each town in our district – Chatteris, March, Whittlesey, and Wisbech. These plans will be used to bid for funding from the Combined Authority and other funding providers, based on the vision for the town.

To develop these plans, each town has established a town team, consisting of representatives from business, local government, schools, and others. The town team has looked at life in the town from every angle, and has developed a vision for each town. They have also worked on ideas which could make a real difference.

The Growing Fenland project tries to capture a balance. On the one hand, each of these towns is unique, with its own particular opportunities, as well as challenges. On the other hand, there are some areas where by working together we can have more of an impact. Therefore, we are publishing a separate report for each of the towns under the same banner.

Because some of the challenges we face are common across all four towns, a Fenland-wide strategy has also been produced. This sets out interventions to tackle socio-economic challenges in our district through what could be real “game changers” for the local community and the local economy.

[Link to strategic document to be included].

## The process to produce this report

To produce this report, we have gone through several stages of information gathering to ensure our recommendations will work for March. These are:

- 1) Data collection, using a variety of sources
- 2) Meetings with the March town team, which has had representation from the town and district councils, businesses, and educational establishments.
- 3) Attending local events to allow residents to express views on the town, and ideas as they have developed
- 4) Interim reports, which set out a summary of key ideas for the town
- 5) Continued consultation and an online survey to refine and develop ideas, and production of final reports.