

APPENDIX A – Strategic Review

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This section provides a review of the regional, sub-regional and local strategies of relevance to the March Future High Street Fund bid. This includes a summary of:

- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Industrial Strategy
- The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Review (CPIER)
- Fenland Local Plan (Adopted 2014)
- Fenland Economic Development Strategy 2012-2031
- Growing Fenland Strategy
- March Neighbourhood Plan

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Industrial Strategy

The Local Industrial Strategy identifies Cambridgeshire and Peterborough as “the UK’s fastest growing and most innovative outside London”. The economy of the region is situated within the context of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc – an important strategic position for the area going forward.

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority area experienced the largest five-year fall in productivity of any Combined Authority area between 2012 and 2017; with productivity per hour falling from 98.9% to 94.9%. The CPIER identified three distinct sub-economies within the area and thus the LIS plans to tailor strategy to the needs of each specific sub-economy. These three sub-economies identified are:

- a) Greater Cambridge
- b) Greater Peterborough
- c) The Fens

The Fens are a network of market towns including March and Wisbech which are characterised by favourable environmental conditions, including natural assets such as Wicked Fen and fertile soil. As a result, key industries within the local economy are agriculture, specialised manufacturing and tourism. The LIS plans to tap into these specialisms and resources to develop the agri-tech industry within The Fens, including supporting the growth of plant science R&D, precision agriculture and other specialisms. 38,000 people are employed in the agri-tech sector within the local economy, and its £4bn value per annum is expected to increase by 10 per cent over the next decade. The region is also important for its highly successful, niche manufacturing and service companies.

The LIS identifies key opportunities for economic development within The Fens, particularly with respect to establishing core centres and agglomerations for fostering industry development. The plan notes that The Fens produce “strong, cutting-edge research” but note that this often occurs in isolation. As a consequence, the strategy plans to develop Innovation Launchpad facilities for both agri-tech and advanced manufacturing to increase opportunities for collaboration and encourage cluster formation. An additional £4m funding for the expansion of the Eastern agri-tech Growth Fund and development of a Fens Business Growth Network will contribute to the agri-tech economy in the region.

The Fens also face socioeconomic and environmental challenges. Both East Cambridgeshire and Fenland have relatively low educational outcomes and have been declared Social Mobility Opportunity Areas. Meanwhile, the network of market towns are poorly connected to local cities, and are thus subject to issues such as an ageing population and economic isolation. Finally, environmental challenges include water management with respect to the agri-food business, and increased flood risks.

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Review (CPIER)

The economic geography of the region reveals that both Cambridge and Peterborough act as ‘magnets’ that pull commuters from the surrounding area, whereas commuting within The Fens is more diffused. The CPIER advises that it is “vital that each of the three areas considers the implications of this economic geography for their development plans”.

Market towns have long served as economic centres for local populations and hubs for commerce. For people in rural communities such as The Fens, market towns remain central destinations for work, retail and leisure.

The Fens are in some ways the most economically challenged sub-economy of the three key economic geographies identified (Greater Cambridge, Greater Peterborough and the Fens). Changing industries towards a knowledge economy and reductions in price of agricultural output is changing the demography of market towns. Low levels of education and skills particularly in the market towns of the Fens is a particular issue for the area going forward. The ageing population of the area and poor connectivity to surrounding town and cities (including Peterborough and Cambridge) is also a key issue for market towns.

Market towns have quality of life advantages, and if they can develop their own unique selling points they may develop 'clusters' of businesses. A 'jobs-first' approach to market towns which focuses on employment before housing is preferable and could solve commuting problems through dispersal of employment rather than these towns becoming 'dormitories'. But need a balance of strategies including transport corridors, densification and fringe growth.

The CPIER identifies that it is important to recognise distinct economic roles that different market towns play. This includes the roles they play as local centres (for employment/shopping), cultural centres, residential centres and leisure centres. To support their existing provision, there is a need to ensure that market towns host a diverse range of mixes to ensure their sustainability. The creation of flexible workspaces will be an important component of ensuring market town masterplans are complementary to the Local Industrial Strategy. Many market towns have small entrepreneurial businesses and commuters for whom these facilities could be attractive.

There is also a need to consider the provision of more houses in market towns, particularly those which can provide affordable houses for local residents and those that attract a younger population into the area.

Fenland Local Plan (Adopted 2014)

The Fenland Local Plan outlines policies and broad locations for the growth and regeneration of Fenland over next 20 years. Fenland District Council is currently preparing a New Local Plan that will supersede this current Local Plan. This was recently consulted upon, with an Issues and Options Consultation Document recently published.

The majority of the Fenlands' new housing, employment growth, retail growth and wider service provision is expected to take place in the Primary Market Towns of March and Wisbech, as well as the other market towns in Fenland - Chatteris and Whittlesey.

The Fenlands aim to build 11,000 new homes between now and 2031, which is largely expected to be delivered on the edge of Wisbech, March, Chatteris and Whittlesey. Housing targets for the region show that March is expected to host a larger proportion of the dwellings being planned for Fenland, with 4,200 new homes expected to be delivered.

The Fenland Retail Study Update 2009 identifies Wisbech and March as town centres and top of the retail hierarchy in the Fenland. The Council seeks to enhance the high street offer of both town centres as principal comparison goods centres within the district.

New retail development focus is "town centre first" by the Council. This is due to the study mentioned above finding that both Wisbech and March slipped significantly in national rankings in terms of performance, as well as town centre floor space loss.

There are aspirations to deliver a 7,200 net gain in jobs 2011-2031 for the region and 85ha new employment land for business, retail, industrial and distribution uses. As part of this, March will account for 30ha of target additional employment land.

March is a historic market town in the heart of the Fenland (population 20,000). The market town is well connected as it benefits from a railway station on the Stansted-Cambridge-Leicester-Birmingham line. Historic urban town centre and attractive riverside setting. March economic functions include as a centre of agricultural production, administrative centre and prison (public sector important). Supply and infrastructure depot for Network Rail. March supports jobs in rail and freight, logistics and recycling.

Need to refresh the range and scope of its offer to maintain its function as a service centre for wider hinterland. Potential to capitalise on the town's heritage and accessibility to strengthen the visitor economy. The accessibility of March provides opportunity to attract higher value sectors e.g. ICT and creative sectors. But dependent on ability to increase skills in the area.

Council seeks to preserve historic features of the town, such as archaeological features from Bronze Age.

Policy LP9 – MARCH

March is a focus for housing, employment and retail growth. Development is with the aim of maintaining and improving March as a strong market town. Provisions to provide a country park important.

New urban extensions to March:

- a) South-east March strategic allocation – predominantly residential at around 600 dwellings. Sports pitches for local Neale Wade Academy.
- b) South-west March broad location for growth – predominantly residential at around 500 dwellings. It will also include some business development.
- c) West March – predominantly residential at around 2,000 dwellings. Education provisions and local convenience shopping.
- d) March Trading Estate

There is a lack of open space in March, meaning that there are aspirations to improve the provision of parks locally. March also faces a range of socio-economic challenges, with particularly high levels of deprivation to the East of March. Addressing this is a key priority going forward.

Fenland Economic Development Strategy 2012-2031

This Strategy provides a competitive vision for Fenland focused on strengthening its economy, developing an educated and skilled workforce, supporting innovation within local enterprises and recognising the importance of strategic and sustainable areas of economic growth and investment.

There are four key areas identified for growth going forward ('The Model for Growth'):

- Enterprise – building a thriving enterprise culture
- Workforce development – education and skills
- Business retention and growth – targeting growth-oriented employers – access to finance, expert advice, suitable premises and locations
- Inward investment – to support local sectors working with the UK and other partners on trade

March's employment base includes Smurfit Kappa, Greenvale AP, G's Foods, PX Cables, March Foods, and Whitemoor Prison and is also the administrative centre for the district. In addition, there is potential to capitalise on the town's heritage and accessibility in order to strengthen the employment base through the visitor economy.

Well-established sector clusters of businesses in the Fenland include food and drink, manufacturing, storage and distribution and others. Manufacturing employment may decline but other niche food and engineering areas are strong. The Fenland can also take advantage of new and emerging clusters where there is potential for job growth. The Fenland's economy was traditionally based on agriculture, and this still provides many jobs in food processing, engineering, packaging, storage and logistics.

Growth of the Fenland economy requires growth of other sectors including retail, hospitality and leisure. This will also help create vibrancy in market towns to attract talent and investment.

Growing Fenland Strategy

CPIER significant in identifying the three distinct sub-economies of the Combined Authority.

Growing Fenland report acknowledges that strategy has historically focused on cities, but the separate and in some ways quite isolated nature of the Fenland economy means the report calls for each town to have its own strategy.

Combined Authority commitment to doubling economic output of the region by 2040.

Process and creation of market town plans for each district – Chatteris, March, Whittlesey and Wisbech. These plans will be used to bid for funding based on the vision for the town.

Each town has established a town team – representatives from business, local government, schools and others. Developed visions for each town.

March “a town with many assets and strengths”. Key goals include improving the town centre, retaining learners and workers, and provision of housing.

March’s Local assets:

- Attractive town and growing population. The town has recently gained new community facilities, including a modern library and Academy. There are many community groups within the town, and a popular Christmas Market and April St. George’s Fayre in the town centre.
- Good connectivity as heritage of March is rooted in railway.
- One of the most significant challenges is its ageing population, as the proportion of the working age population will decline from 62% to 56% by 2036.
- A second challenge is the retention of March’s young population. Educational and employment opportunities are limited, and educational institutions (primary and secondary schools) are falling behind local and national averages.
- Post-16 employment opportunities are limited, and those which are available there is a mismatch between local jobseekers and employers. Opportunities that do arise are also impeded by inadequate transport connections – especially for bus routes.
- March retains a core of an educated professional workforce, with a high concentration of public sector jobs such as Fenland District Council. Meanwhile, in terms of skills, nearly a third of the population has no qualifications.

Three goals with respect to employment:

1. Better linkage of apprenticeships with potential candidates
2. Easier travel to places where people can further their education or career
3. Further development of a cluster of high-tech, high-skill jobs

High street has “huge potential” and states “March’s most under-utilised assets are the high street and the riverfront. Historic architecture, war memorial and popular well-established stores mean that the central shopping parade has potential. Vacancy rate in town centre is 3.3% (up from 0.3% in 2015 and UK average is 2.3%). The river and Nene Parade have huge but untapped potential – the Nene Parade has oldest building in March (Ship Inn pub) and restaurants overlooking the riverbank.

Night-time economy potential – March has a Pubwatch group at which more than twenty landlords attend meetings.

Eyesores within March include some that are highly visible such as the long-vacant indoor market, old auction house at top of Broad Street and old freezer shop on Station Road.

Under-supply of new homes especially affordable homes.

Vision for March: A destination market town – a revitalised high street, resource of highly skilled employees, affordable homes.

Five ambitions for the town:

- Ambition 1: March will set the new skills agenda for market towns
- Ambition 2: A revitalised high street riverside
- Ambition 3: We will tackle traffic congestion
- Ambition 4: We will house more teachers and key workers
- Ambition 5: We will shout loud and proud about March!

Most relevant is Ambition 2, for which the centre of town will be a high-quality destination for shopping, and leisure including food and drink. A mixture of both prestigious brands and more niche local businesses. A night-time economy will offer food, drink and entertainment venues. Platform seating on the riverbank will be the 'star attraction'. This plan will also make use of unused buildings in the town and street furniture and frontages will give the centre an attractive feel.

Ideas include:

- Riverbank platform seating – boosting night-time economy. Creating the riverbank as a space to spend time, creating a café culture on the riverfront.
- High street improvements – investment in street features and attractiveness e.g. benches, grants to improve shop frontages etc.
- New live-work units for businesses – new spaces for SMEs and start-ups to develop, network and grow – conversion of vacant/semi-derelict buildings into residential units, office space and live-work units. Ultimate aim of creating a cluster of high-tech, high-skill jobs.
- New hotel – contributes to March as a destination. Ties in with high-skill jobs and demand for conference facilities.
- On-street Wi-Fi

March Neighbourhood Plan

March Town Plan by March Town People

Town-wide survey used to capture and highlight the key issues of March. Priorities include housing, employment, town centre & retail, traffic & transport, and the environment.

Vision: to include the quality of life for people who live and/or work in March, including those who visit and depend on its services and facilities. The aims for the Neighbourhood Plan seek to create the town centre as a shopping destination and improve the quality of the built and natural environment.

Policy TC1 – Primary Shopping Frontages

Restrictions on change of use from retail (A1) to other uses (such as A2, A3, A4 and A5). These limitations aim to ensure the majority of shopping frontages remain as retail and that the function of the town centre remains as primarily a shopping destination. Exceptions include the re-use of long-term vacant units and developments that contribute to improving the quality of the town centre.

Policy TC2 – Regeneration Sites

Three sites identified as opportunity areas for improving the physical appearance of the town centre:

- Land to the west of the High Street
- Land to the south of Station Road
- Land to the north of Centenary Church