

MARKET TOWN INITIATIVE – INTERIM UPDATE

Summary: This report aims to bring Members of the Committee up to speed on the current status of the Market Town Initiative fund in the context of the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Options considered: Options considered included:

1. Maintain the current completion deadlines for MTI projects from rounds two and three with no extension of the timeframes for project completion.
2. Request a return of funds for projects no longer viable under the current circumstances.
3. Convene a meeting of the MTI Working Group to review the status of all active MTI projects in detail.
4. Offer a blanket extension of six months to allow applicants to fully implement projects from rounds two and three of MTI funding.

Conclusions: Applicants' projects have been significantly impacted by the circumstances of COVID-19, and as a result are unlikely to fully implement their projects within the given timeframes set out in their funding agreement. Where requested, applicants should be offered an extension to their completion deadline to account for these unprecedented circumstances.

Recommendations: **To offer a blanket extension of six months to the completion deadlines of MTI projects from rounds two and three, to account for the impact and delays caused by the Coronavirus Pandemic.**

Reasons for Recommendations: To allow successful applicants more time to implement projects in light of the delays caused by the Coronavirus Pandemic.

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS AS REQUIRED BY LAW

(Papers relied on to write the report, which do not contain exempt information and which are not published elsewhere)

Cabinet Member(s)	Ward(s) affected
Cllr R Kershaw	Holt, Lancaster North, Lancaster South, North Walsham East, North Walsham West, North Walsham Market Cross, and Stalham

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1. Current Status of the MTI Fund

- 1.1 Subsequent to the payment of grants from the third round of MTI funding, a total of £399,914.83 has now been awarded to eligible applicants from North Norfolk's four inland market towns from the available £400,000.
- 1.2 Whilst some projects may be expected to return funds due to reduced costs, changes in circumstances, or an inability to secure all relevant permissions to implement projects, at present remaining funds total £85.17. As a result, no further rounds of funding are planned to take place.
- 1.3 Any returned funds will be placed in the general reserve.
- 1.4 From a total of twenty-seven applications, eighteen were awarded funding, with nine in round one, five in round two, and four in round three.

2. Status of MTI Funding Rounds 1, 2, and 3

- 2.1 Grant payments for round one of MTI funding were made throughout the month of January 2019, with completion expected in January 2020. To date only two round one projects have not been completed due to unforeseen circumstances that have been closely monitored by officers. One project in the town of Holt is known to have experienced problems that are likely to affect its deliverability (in which case funds for that will be expected to be returned), and one project in Stalham was delayed due to issues with contractors and additional funding required for planning permission.
- 2.2 Grant payments for round two of the MTI were made throughout the month of September 2019, with completion originally expected in September 2020. Whilst feedback on progress has generally been positive, Covid-19 has caused several projects, though still likely to be viable, to be delayed. It is anticipated that most applicants will not have fully implemented round 2 projects by the September deadline, and may require an extension in most cases.
- 2.3 Grant payments for round three MTI projects were made throughout the month of December 2019. As a result, the anticipated date of completion for MTI round three projects is December 2020. It is expected that some round three projects may also require an extension to the completion deadline.
- 2.4 The outbreak of the Coronavirus Pandemic has caused a number of active MTI projects to stall, with most applicants focusing on the crisis at hand.
- 2.5 Officers are in the process of contacting all applicants with active projects and have been informed that several projects are behind schedule as a result of the crisis and may seek to extend the completion date of their projects.
- 2.6 It is therefore recommended that Members approve a blanket six-month extension to the completion date of all applicable projects (where required). This extension would allow applicants time to adjust and complete projects in a timely and safe manner, or to discuss with officers any matters that might affect their deliverability and the timescales involved. Some project applicants may wish to review unimplemented projects in the light of the impact of Covid-19 on town centres, and the temporary measures that have been taken to reopen the high streets safely.

3. Pending Overview & Scrutiny Process Review

- 3.1 Prior to the outbreak of the Coronavirus Pandemic, it was anticipated that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee would undertake a process review of the Market Town Initiative within the 2019/20 municipal year.
- 3.2 Taking into account the expected delays caused by Covid-19, a full process review is now likely to take place in early 2021, in order to allow all projects to achieve completion prior to review.
- 3.3 In light of this delay, it may be beneficial to convene a meeting of the MTI Working Group to allow Members involved in the initiative a chance to review the status of all active MTI projects.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1. The Market Towns Initiative represents a good opportunity for the Council to support its inland market towns during a period of change.
- 7.2. A total of £ £399,914.83 of funding has been awarded across the four market towns. A total of £85.17 remains from the original £400,000 available, and whilst some funds may be returned due to an inability to complete projects, it is not expected that any further funding will take place.

8. Implications and Risks

Reputational risk to the Council remains a possibility if funding is spent incorrectly, although agreed funding conditions allow for the return of funds should this be the case.

9. Financial Implications and Risks

The funding for the project was allocated within the budget for 2018/19. Financial information has been sought from applicants in order to ensure that the financial risk to the Council is as limited as possible, and so that funds can be returned if not used within the guidelines of the Market Towns Initiative.

10. Sustainability

The initiative focuses on the revitalization of market town centres, to assist in the maintenance of sustainable patterns of behavior. Project sustainability is a key consideration of the judging process and it has been made clear that any ongoing costs must be met by the applicants.

11. Equality and Diversity

The Equality and Diversity policies of applicants' relevant governing bodies has been sought where applicable in order to ensure compliance with NNDC policy.

12. Section 17 Crime and Disorder considerations

None.