

MARKET TOWN INITIATIVE - PROCESS REVIEW & UPDATE

Summary: The MTI Project has been active for approximately three years. Most projects from rounds one, two and three of funding are now complete, and it is therefore appropriate to review the process in order to consider any learning opportunities for the future, celebrate the successes and review what could have been improved. It is also necessary to continue to monitor any projects still active, that have been significantly impeded in their progress by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Options considered: N/a.

Conclusions: The Market Town Initiative has successfully helped the District's four inland market towns to fund and implement numerous improvements, host events and encourage more residents and visitors into town centres. Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the outputs of various projects and has delayed the overall completion of the initiative, however it is hoped that the delays caused can be overcome in the near future.

Recommendations: **To note the overall success of the MTI Grant Fund, review the process and continue to monitor ongoing projects.**

Reasons for Recommendations: To review the MTI process as a whole and take note of the outcomes.

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. Aim & Purpose of the Market Town Initiative

1.1 As outlined in the MTI Grant Fund prospectus, the aim of the initiative was to help North Norfolk's inland market towns to thrive by facilitating improvements in the town centres and supporting events that would help to enhance them as places to live, work and visit.

1.2 The fund was originally established as a result of concerns that investment (from Council resources and external grants) had historically been focused on coastal towns, where tourism and high visitor numbers had necessitated greater spending on facilities and services.

1.3 Rather than take a top down approach, it was agreed that each of the four inland market towns would be allocated a budget of up to £100,000, that they could apply for to spend on locally owned and managed projects. In taking this approach and seeking applications from within the towns themselves, the following types of organisations were considered eligible to apply:

- Constituted local voluntary organisations, charities and community groups
- Parish and Town Councils within North Norfolk District
- Community businesses, social enterprises and other not-for profit organisations

1.4 Individual businesses were not considered eligible, however businesses were encouraged to collaborate and engage in projects, to help improve trading conditions and enhance the local economy more generally.

1.5 The type of projects, activities and initiatives that were encouraged included:

- Improved signage
- Public WiFi schemes
- Events or festivals which are hosted in the town, promoting local products and/or community interests
- Loyalty schemes that encourage people to spend in the town centre
- Projects that generate and/or increase enterprise activity, to help create or sustain local jobs
- Trails or activities that encourage visitors to the town
- Environmental schemes that make town centres more appealing and attractive
- Heritage schemes that help interpret and enhance the historical appeal of the town

1.6 The outcomes i.e. physical benefits or impacts that could be evidenced as a result of investment from this fund were expected to include:

- Local groups or organisations working together to achieve benefits that evidenced tangible positive impacts on the town and its centre
- Engagement with residents and visitors to improve the town centre, making it a more attractive place to visit
- An increased number of people visiting the towns, improving footfall and spend in the town centres

2. The MTI Process

- 2.1 The MTI Grant Fund project was agreed by Cabinet in April 2018 with authority delegated to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to develop, implement and monitor the initiative on an ongoing basis. A politically balanced MTI Working Group of five Members was then established by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, with the necessary officer support provided to develop and oversee the project.
- 2.2 A launch event was delivered to offer guidance and advice to potential applicants in early July 2018 with applications open from the 9th and the initial deadline for round one applications due on 16th November.
- 2.3 Applications for all rounds were reviewed under delegation by the MTI Working Group, in cooperation with officers to ensure that projects would be legally compliant. The Working Group then made funding recommendations to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to maintain oversight, and to Cabinet for spending approval.
- 2.4 Grant payments for round one of MTI funding were made throughout the month of January 2019, with completion expected in January 2020. With significant funds remaining a second round of applications was opened with grant payments made throughout the month of September 2019, with completion originally expected in September 2020. Round three of MTI funding was opened soon after, with the remaining funds made available to all applicants regardless of the original £100k allocation for each town. The anticipated date of completion for MTI round three projects was December 2020.
- 2.5 All Projects were monitored on a regular basis by officers with updates provided to the MTI Working Group, followed by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.
- 2.6 The outbreak of the Coronavirus Pandemic caused a number of active MTI projects to stall, with most applicants focusing on the crisis at hand, finding difficulties in progressing due to the impacts of the pandemic on suppliers etc., or merely the timing of the project becoming unsuitable/illogical. When it became evident that the implementation of projects would be significantly delayed, it was recommended that Members approve a blanket six-month extension to the completion date of all applicable projects (where required). This extension was intended to 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. As the Covid-19 situation continued well beyond this initial extension, it was deemed necessary to allow ongoing flexibility for applicants to implement their projects as and when restrictions were eased or deliverability became more suitable.
- 2.7 Upon completion of projects, all applicants were required to complete an end of project form, which would include details of the funds spent and any returned, an outline of the project completed, any positive or negative aspects of implementation and any issues encountered during the process.

3. Outcomes and Achievements

- 3.1 Subsequent to the payment of grants from the third round of MTI funding, a total of £399,914.83 was awarded to eligible applicants from North Norfolk's four inland market towns from the available £400,000. 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. Each application can be further broken down into numerous projects with widely varying objectives.

3.2 Whilst the measures of success for the MTI could be seen as subjective, taken as a whole, feedback on the project has been largely positive from the general public, with good media coverage providing evidence of increased footfall and use of the town centres (Pre-Covid).

3.3 A range of positive outcomes from the scheme have been seen across all four of the District's inland market towns, and whilst the details of all schemes are too numerous to list, some of the most notable successes include:

- The re-establishment and rebranding of the Chambers of Commerce in Holt and Stalham which helped to support businesses and residents with loyalty schemes and offer support to businesses during an extremely difficult period of trading. In Holt's case this also led to the development and implementation of a scheme that works with commercial landlords to offer vacant retail premises to new local businesses. In both towns heritage trails and walks were supported that highlight the unique history of the towns and offer visitors a new way to see the town centres and surrounding areas.
- North Walsham brought together both the Town Council and a community organisation known as Regenerate North Walsham to implement substantial public realm improvements to the precinct area. This work has since been quoted as being instrumental in helping to achieve success in the High Streets and Heritage Action Zone Grant Fund Scheme.
- Fakenham was host to a wide range of public and commercial events hosted by Active Fakenham that generated significant public and media interest in the town, which brought thousands of residents and visitors into the town centre (pre-pandemic) to join in the festivities. In addition, the Town Council were able to make numerous public realm improvements that reinvigorated unused areas and made the town a more attractive place to visit.

4. Issues Encountered

4.1 Whilst the MTI project has been largely successful in supporting and encouraging the District's four inland market towns to implement improvements, events and initiatives that have encourage both residents and visitors into town centres, there have been several issues encountered throughout the process.

4.2 The most significant impact on the implementation of projects, specifically those from rounds two and three of funding which commenced after September 2019, has been the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Physical limitations placed on public gatherings, the requirement for many to work from home or be furloughed, materials shortages, and commercial delays, caused the implementation of many projects to be significantly delayed. Perhaps the most obvious of these delays has been on events that were originally due to take place during periods of high infections when the Country was effectively placed in lockdown. The less obvious though equally frustrating impact, has been the delays caused to implementation of physical or environmental projects by materials or labour shortages and delays. Ultimately, Covid-19 was an unforeseen event of such magnitude that it has caused years of delays and disruption on a global scale. As a result, a substantial amount of flexibility has had to be granted to applicants in the process of implementation, that in some cases has taken applicants well beyond their original completion deadlines. This has also had the unfortunate impact of not being able to fully publicise the success of many projects that deserved considerable praise. The pandemic, however, did not diminish the need for the initiative (or the individual projects) and in some ways might have exacerbated the issues town centres were already facing.

4.3 Resourcing of the MTI Grant Fund was a known constraint from the outset of the project and whilst this has not caused significant detriment to the project, the availability of officer

resource has placed limitations on the time available to dedicate to the project. If similar projects were to take place again in the future, it would prudent to have dedicated resource to provide the full level of support required. One of the key issues caused by the lack of resources has been the inability to objectively measure the *outcomes* and achievements of projects, and the difference they have made. Whilst evidence of *outputs* and completion has been requested and received on completed projects, their success in most cases remains subjective, from the point of view of the applicant.

4.4 Whilst in most cases encouraging cooperation in towns with the aim of bringing various organisations together to submit joint bids worked well, there were instances in which this caused an element of rivalry and competition between groups. In some cases, these instances were contrary to the aims of the MTI project, and disruptive for the applicants involved. In addition, the self-management of projects required a significant level of trust to be placed in applicants to seek the necessary permissions required to implement projects, to ensure that implementation was undertaken in the manner described within their application, and to self-report on that implementation. In some cases this led to projects being determined as undeliverable after a grant payment had been made, with funds having to be returned. There was no evidence of any attempts at collaboration between towns.

5. Current Status of Remaining Active Projects

5.1. At present, active projects remain in the towns of Stalham and Holt as they have been significantly delayed as a result of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Projects in Stalham are expected to be complete within the coming months, whilst the major public realm improvement scheme in Holt is not expected to be completed until July 2022.

5.2. Whilst the delay to these projects has been substantial, it is largely determined to be beyond the control of applicants. For this reason it is felt that a request to return the funds for incomplete projects would be unfair and unduly punitive, and it is therefore preferable that officers continue to work with and support the applicants to ensure that these projects are completed as soon as possible. Their outcomes are still expected to be worthwhile.

5.3. As with previous projects, any unspent funds will be returned and placed in the general reserve.

6. Risks

6.1 Completion of the few projects that remain outstanding represent a limited risk to the Council, in that some towns could fail to implement a proportion of their projects that could lead to criticism from the local population. Financial risk also remains limited due to the contractual requirement for applicants to return any unspent funds to the Council – although actually reclaiming that money may in practice prove tortuous. In the case of the outstanding projects, officers will continue to monitor the remaining outputs to ensure that they are fully implemented. Withdrawing funding granted at this stage in the project, taking into account the delays in implementation, would be likely to cause considerable reputational damage to the Council, due to the nature of delays being beyond the control of applicants.

7. Conclusions

7.1 The Market Town Initiative has successfully helped the District's four inland market towns to fund and implement numerous improvements, host events and encourage more residents and visitors into town centres. Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the

outputs of various projects and has delayed the overall completion of the initiative, however it is hoped that the delays caused can be overcome in the near future.