

May 2021

St Neots Future High Streets Fund

Summary





Significant investment coming to St Neots

Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) recently secured the final funding required for an ambitious £12.8m investment programme St Neots Town Centre. The funding will deliver six projects that will create transformational change for the market town.

HDC will work in collaboration with delivery partners and key stakeholders Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC), Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA), the UK Government, and St Neots Town Council (SNTC). Here we summarise the exciting changes that you will see over the coming months and years.

“The transformative proposals under the Future High Street Fund application and the funding request will provide the best chance to deliver such improvements in St Neots. St Neots is a large and growing town and through this significant investment HDC will help to deliver a town centre that is fit for the future by making better use of properties and public spaces to make them more vibrant and usable by the community.”

- Cllr Ryan Fuller

Executive Leader and Executive Councillor for Housing and Economic Development






Slipway
Boats using this waterway
must be registered with the
Environment Agency and
display a registration number
and a valid registration disc.
Please observe the
speed limits.

1 Introduction to the Future High Streets Fund

The Future High Streets Fund (FHSF) is a £1 billion UK Government fund that was unveiled in the 2018 Budget as part of the 'Our Plan for the high street', a strategic roadmap outlining the Government's vision for the regeneration of high streets as the drivers of local economic growth. The Fund is administered by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

The purpose of the FHSF is to respond to changes in the role of high streets over the past two decades. The key trends that have negatively affected high streets are the rise of online and out-of-town retailing. To attract customers to the high street, it has become necessary to create an overall shopping 'experience'. This is determined by convenience, especially in competition with online retailers and next day delivery, as well as by a sense of community and other social aspects of visiting the high street which cannot be found online.

Partnership funding was an expectation for securing funding from the FHSF. The FHSF grant needs to be spent by March 2024, however projects can be delivered beyond this date with co-funding. Around 100 towns made grant funding submissions and St Neots was one of 72 to be awarded funding.





2 Developing proposals for the future of St Neots Town Centre

The St Neots FHSF programme will address key issues in the town centre which will help St Neots to reach its potential.

2.1 St Neots - Our town today

St Neots is a popular, fast-growing market town in Huntingdonshire, yet it has a town centre that underperforms the town's potential:

- St Neots is the fastest-growing town in Cambridgeshire.
- St Neots has excellent intercity transport connections to both London and Cambridge and is located on the beautiful River Great Ouse, making it an attractive place to live.
- Despite its built heritage and setting, due to inadequate urban design in places, parts of the town centre lack appeal to visitors and residents, while heavy traffic reduces the quality of experience.
- As a result, businesses are unable to take advantage of the town's growth and advantageous location as the centre is not currently sufficiently attractive to support destination retail and other leisure activities.
- Despite a growing population, footfall in the town centre has fallen over time.
- The town centre lacks vibrancy and is not seen as an attractive destination in terms of its cultural and leisure offer. This means the town struggles to compete with the challenge from online shopping. St Neots Town Centre retail employment, the largest town centre employment sector has declined.

The St Neots high street needs urgent and transformational intervention to allow businesses to make use of the advantageous trends in the wider town and region.

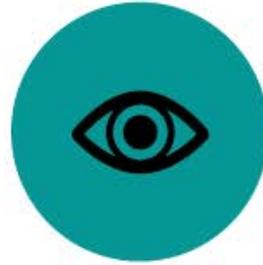
2.2 St Neots FHSF objectives

Four overarching themes were identified for the proposed FHSF investment into St Neots as shown below. These four overarching themes led to the creation of specific objectives that would guide the proposed areas of investment via the FHSF.

Theme



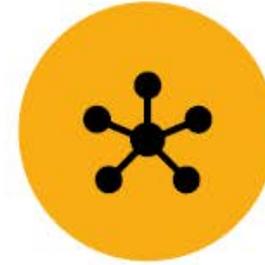
Strengthen



Attract



Retain



Connect

Objective



Increase demand for services by realising development opportunities, to increase the population living and working in close proximity to the town centre



Expand the amenity offer to residents and visitors utilising the town centre



Increase footfall and dwell time in St Neots town centre by improving the physical environment



Improve access to the town centre for active travel and public transport, and rationalise parking to improve the flow of vehicles in the town centre

Result



Grow the population living and working in the town centre to increase demand for the High Street and night time economy



Uplift economic performance of the town centre by giving more reasons for users to visit and dwell in the town centre



Uplift economic performance of the town centre by increasing the amount of time spent there by users



Making it easier for residents and visitors to access the High Street's offer

2.3 Selecting and developing the projects

In March 2019, HDC submitted an Expression of Interest (Eoi) to MHCLG for funding from the FHSF for St Neots. The Eoi defined the place, the challenges, and the strategic ambition for the town, and drew on the existing development framework established in previous documents such as the St Neots Masterplan for Growth.

Following the successful EOI submission, St Neots was invited to submit a Full Business Case (FBC) to MHCLG and awarded a small initial grant to help fund development of the projects and the FBC. Building on the St Neots Masterplan for Growth and working closely with the St Neots Masterplan Steering Group and other stakeholders, Mott MacDonald, an engineering and development consultancy, produced a FBC submission to MHCLG to obtain funding from the FHSF on behalf of HDC.

A large number of project ideas and suggestions were assessed and refined down into a smaller number of proposals. Proposals needed to fit the strategic direction of the town, align to the funding priorities and criteria of the FHSF, maximise value for money for the public sector (costs relative to benefits), and be deliverable within the timeframe with acceptable risks. A longlist of proposals was created through engagement with various stakeholders.

Proposals were refined through engagement with stakeholders, urban design studies and cost estimation, as well as a best practice approach to options appraisal (which considered strategic fit and deliverability).

Six projects were selected for funding which are set out in the next section.





Figure 3.1 Scheme Summary

Source: Mott MacDonald

3 What we will deliver

This section summarises the final projects that will be delivered. The six projects are:

- Pedestrian and cycling improvements to St Neots Road Bridge.
- St Neots High Street improvements.
- Market Square improvements, including removal of car parking, improved public realm and connectivity enhancements.
- Redeveloping the Priory Quarter to provide a high-quality event and cultural space and act as anchor for the redevelopment of the northern parts of the town centre.
- Regeneration of the Old Falcon Inn to bring it back into productive use and protect its heritage status.
- A new Waterfront Route, including a riverside promenade to create a new attraction in the town centre which utilises the riverfront of the Great Ouse for leisure and recreation. The proposed route ends at the Priory Centre, with potential for future extension southwards.

These projects are presented in Figure 3.1. Together, they will improve the high street's accessibility, increase its attractiveness to pedestrians and cyclists, and ensure strong connectivity between High Street and the western bank of the River Great Ouse.



3.1 St Neots Road Bridge – pedestrian and cycling improvements

This project will improve the pedestrian and cyclist experience across St Neots Road Bridge, supporting sustainable and active modes of travel between western St Neots and the town centre. The proposal helps unlock land currently used for car parking in the town centre for development by making Riverside Carpark more accessible.

As illustrated indicatively in Figure 3.2, this project will:

- Create new access steps from the south which create a more direct route from the Riverside Car Park.
- Narrow the carriageway to reduce car speeds and allow for an increased footway width. This will also discourage vehicles overtaking cyclists. Current carriageway widths are not safe for vehicles to overtake cyclists and narrower lane width will discourage overtaking.
- Widen the southern footway to provide more space for pedestrians.

- Offer a gateway treatment on the western approach, indicating the commencement of the town centre.
- Introduce artistic treatment along the bridge to soften appearance, making it more appealing for pedestrians.
- Provide seating along the footway to provide rest areas for people with reduced mobility. Benches have been located against railings to provide maximum footway width¹.
- Extend paving into Jubilee Gardens to strengthen the link to underutilised public space.
- Potentially provide a second entrance into Jubilee Gardens (dependent on further investigation into the level changes and bridge structure).

¹ Benches could make it easier for people to climb over the bridge railings and so a full safety audit will be undertaken as part of the detailed design.

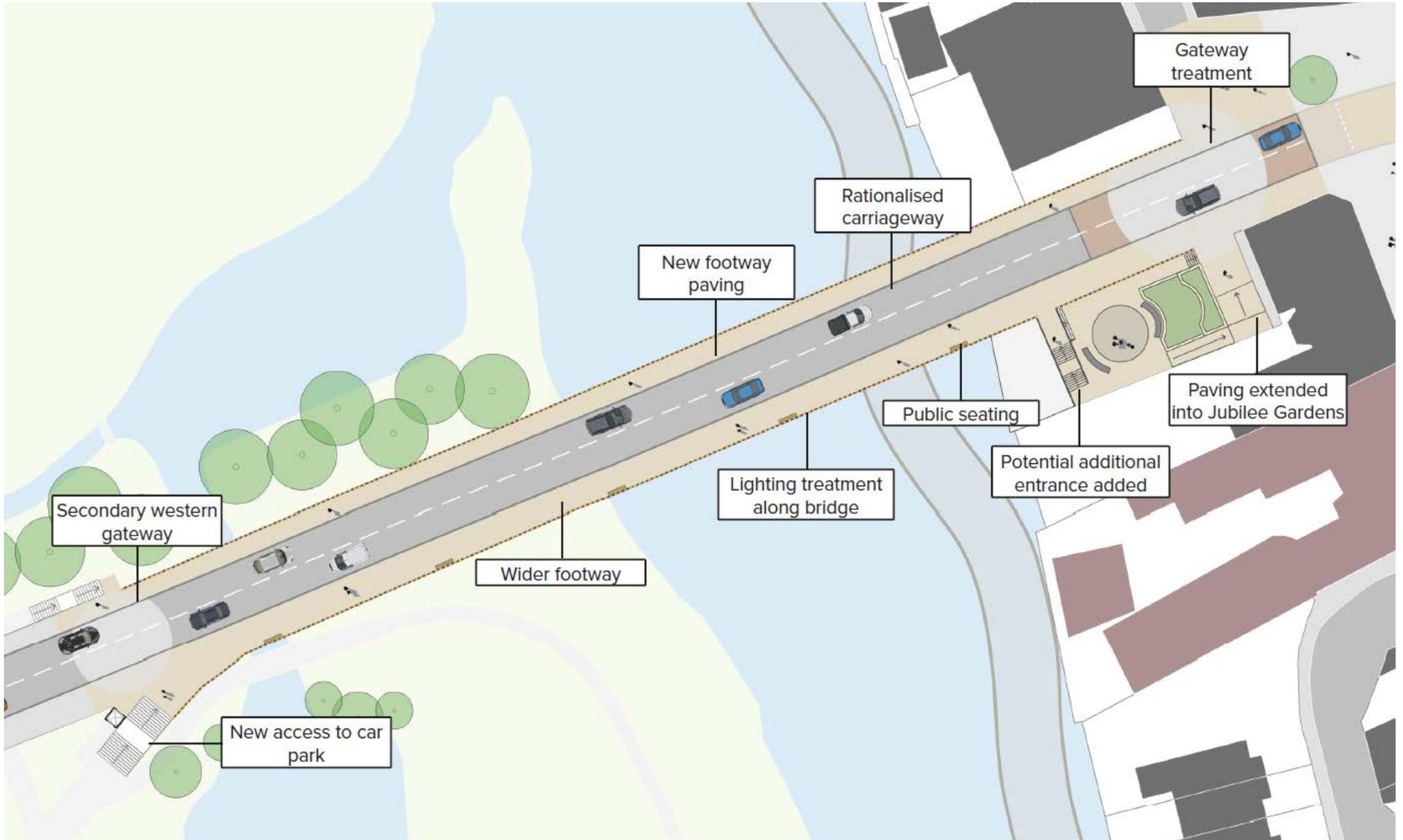


Figure 3.2 St Neots Road Bridge

3.2 High Street Improvements

This project will deliver a series of High Street improvements which aim to maximise space for pedestrians, uplifting the environment so that visitors want to stay and shop for longer.

Improving the pavement layout along High Street would also help shoppers to visit the town with greater confidence during a future health emergency by helping social distancing from strangers.

The scheme would complement proposals being developed through the St Neots Transport Study which has been developed alongside with the FHSF programme to ensure compatibility.

The high-level plan presented in Figure 3.3 shows that the project would:

- Introduce gateway treatments at the entrance to inform drivers that they are entering a 'special' place where they should drive slower.
- Raise the disabled parking and loading bays to footway level to integrate them with the footway, allowing an extension of the footway when parking spaces are unoccupied.
- Introduce a new signalised junction adjacent to St Neots United Reformed Church, making it easier for pedestrians to cross High Street safely.



Figure 3.3 High Street Improvements

3.3 Market Square Improvements

Currently, most of the historic Market Square in St Neots is utilised for parking on all days except for market days. The presence of car parking and the resultant vehicular traffic around the square prevents it from being fully used and stops the surrounding buildings from interacting with the square.

This project will transform the space into a larger and more flexible market square. All the surrounding buildings would then be able to better use the space. The square will serve as the central public space within the town where events can be held, people can gather, relax, and socialise.

This would help to boost the St Neots evening economy, which is currently underdeveloped. Additionally, the possibility of al fresco dining in an improved Market Square will help to alleviate the impact of an extended period of social distancing restrictions on restaurants and cafes while the flexibility of the space will allow event organisers to hold events that are sensitive to emerging guidelines.

As indicatively shown in Figure 3.4, the key elements of the project are:

- Removing car parking from Market Square.
- Shifting the bus loop from Market Place.
- Installing unified paving across the square.
- Extending the square outwards, connecting the high street and the shops on the southern and eastern sides of the square, enabling shops to spill over and use the space.
- Making Market Place access and taxi only, widening the pavement along the west and south side of Market Square, reducing vehicle dominance around the square.
- Placing moveable furniture in Market Square for people to sit, relax and enjoy the space.
- Raising the loading bays along Market Square to provide a larger space.
- Introducing service connections at either end of Market Square to support events and market days.



Figure 3.4 Market Square Improvements

3.4 Redeveloping the Priory Quarter

The Priory Quarter, north of High Street, is an underdeveloped area of St Neots, with multiple surface car parks that make the area unattractive to visitors. The Priory Centre serves as a hub for community groups and cultural events. However, its facilities are dated, and the building's eastwards orientation does not take advantage of its scenic riverside setting.

Proposals would redevelop the centre to meet current and future needs; create a high quality, flexible event space; improve connections to the town centre; strengthen links to the riverside; re-provide as many existing functions as possible; and be accessible to all users.

3.4.1 Priory Centre

The proposals dramatically change the layout of the Priory Centre, creating a stronger link to the town centre, establishing a connection to the riverfront and creating a series of flexible spaces for a range of functions. By replacing the extension to the north with a new structure that increases the building's footprint and completely rationalises the older building's layout, a functional, vibrant and contemporary cultural centre is formed.

The existing layout of the building is flipped with the entrance area placed on the southern side of the building closer to the town centre. This shift along with the introduction of large glass openings will increase the centre's prominence and strengthen links to the town centre.

An indicative layout is shown in the following pages. Detailed proposals will be developed in collaboration with key stakeholders.

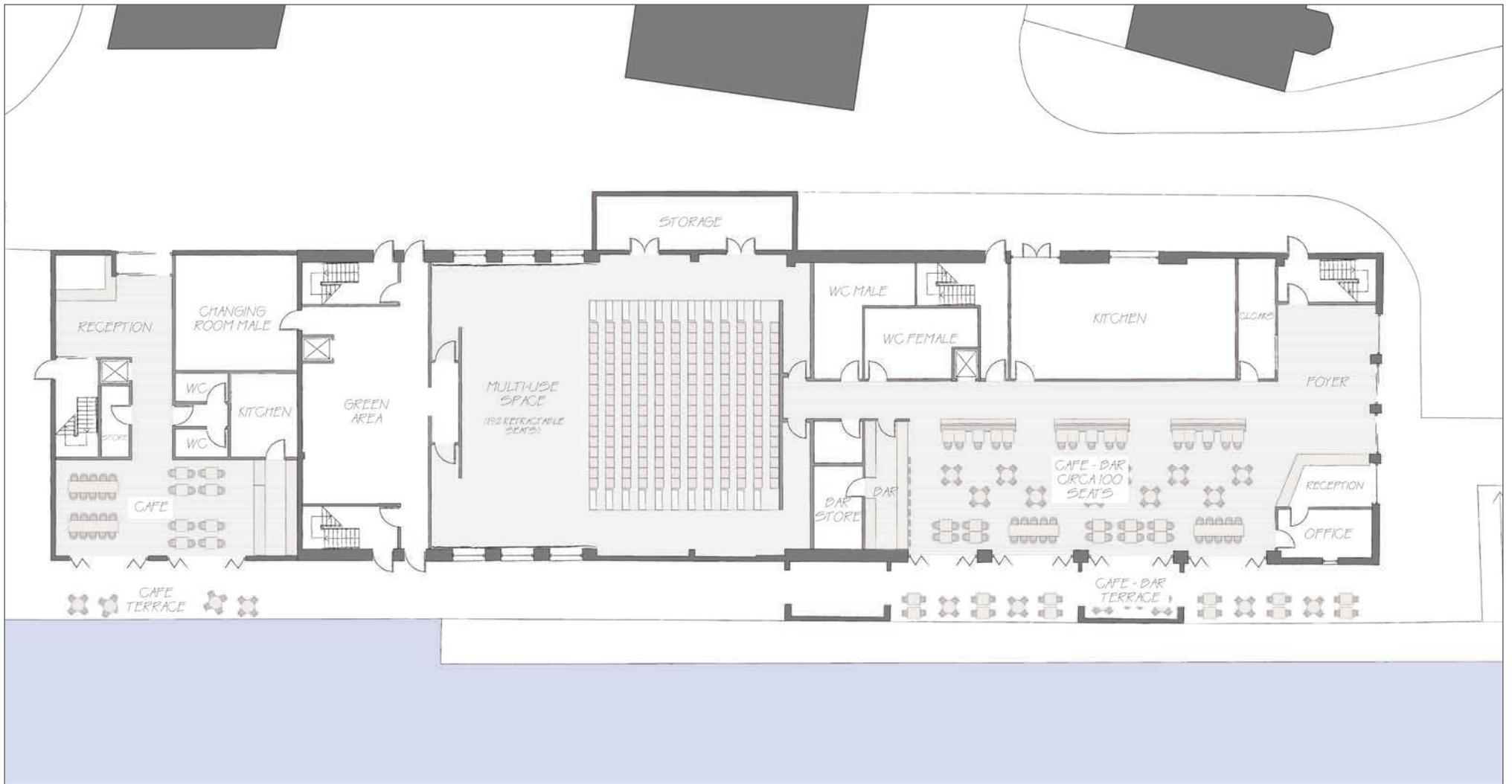


Figure 3.5 Priory Centre Indicative Layout
 (Ground Floor) Source: Mott MacDonald

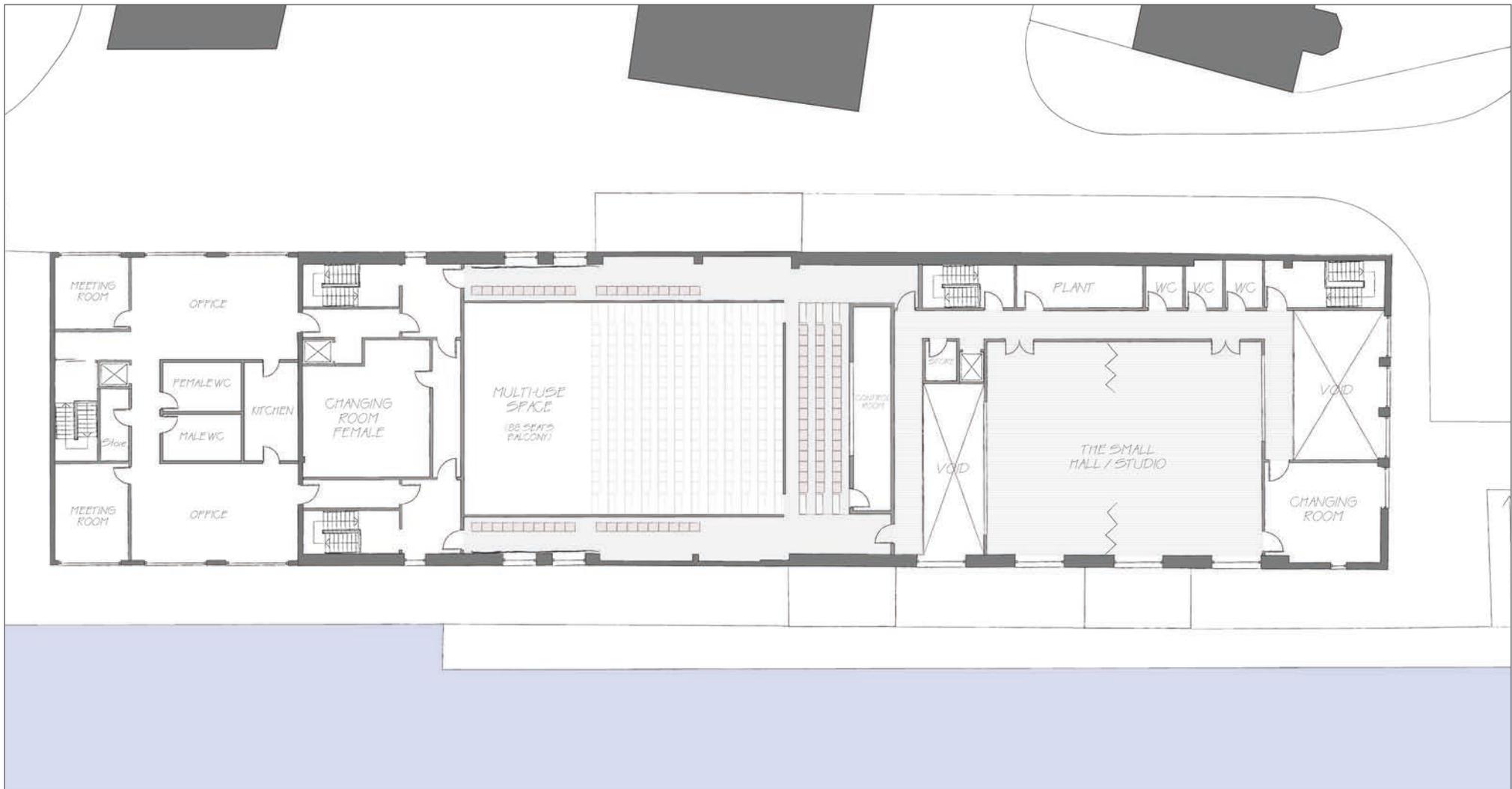


Figure 3.6 Priory Centre Indicative Layout

(First Floor) Source: Mott MacDonald

3.4.2 Wider development within the Priory Quarter

In addition to the Priory Centre, three other HDC owned sites in the area are identified for redevelopment within the timeframes of the FHSF. These are:

- Site 1: Meadowland – Residential development
- Site 2: Rowing club / Priory Centre Car Park – Mixed use retail / residential development
- Site 3: Existing Priory Centre / St Neots Town Council Offices – Theatre / community space
- Site 5: Tan Yard Car Park – Residential development

Site 4, the library, also has the potential to become a residential development in the future however is not part of current proposals. These sites are mapped in Figure 3.7.



Figure 3.7 Redeveloping the Priory Quarter

3.5 Regeneration of the Old Falcon Inn

With its prominent location, successful regeneration of the Old Falcon Inn could act as a key anchor for the rejuvenation of Market Square. Renovating the Grade II listed building to incorporate a mix of retail and leisure facilities or office and restaurant usage would significantly improve the environment at the head of Market Square and encourage footfall in this part of the town centre.

Phase 1 of this project will enable compulsory purchase of this site, which has been held in private hands for an extended period without development. The site will then be redeveloped as office/restaurant space, a hotel, or a community hub, dependent upon more detailed commercial viability analysis and consultation.



3.6 Waterfront Route

Despite being next to the town centre, the River Great Ouse is an under-utilised asset. This project will help open up the eastern bank of the River Great Ouse for residents of St Neots and visitors.

The redevelopment of the Priory Quarter would allow the area to actively engage with the river. A riverside promenade would enable expansion of the restaurants, bars and cafe offer that spills out into the urban space, and create an attraction for visitors and shoppers to enjoy in the town centre. Figure 3.8 shows the location of the route and a potential extension of the route in future which is not currently part of this project.

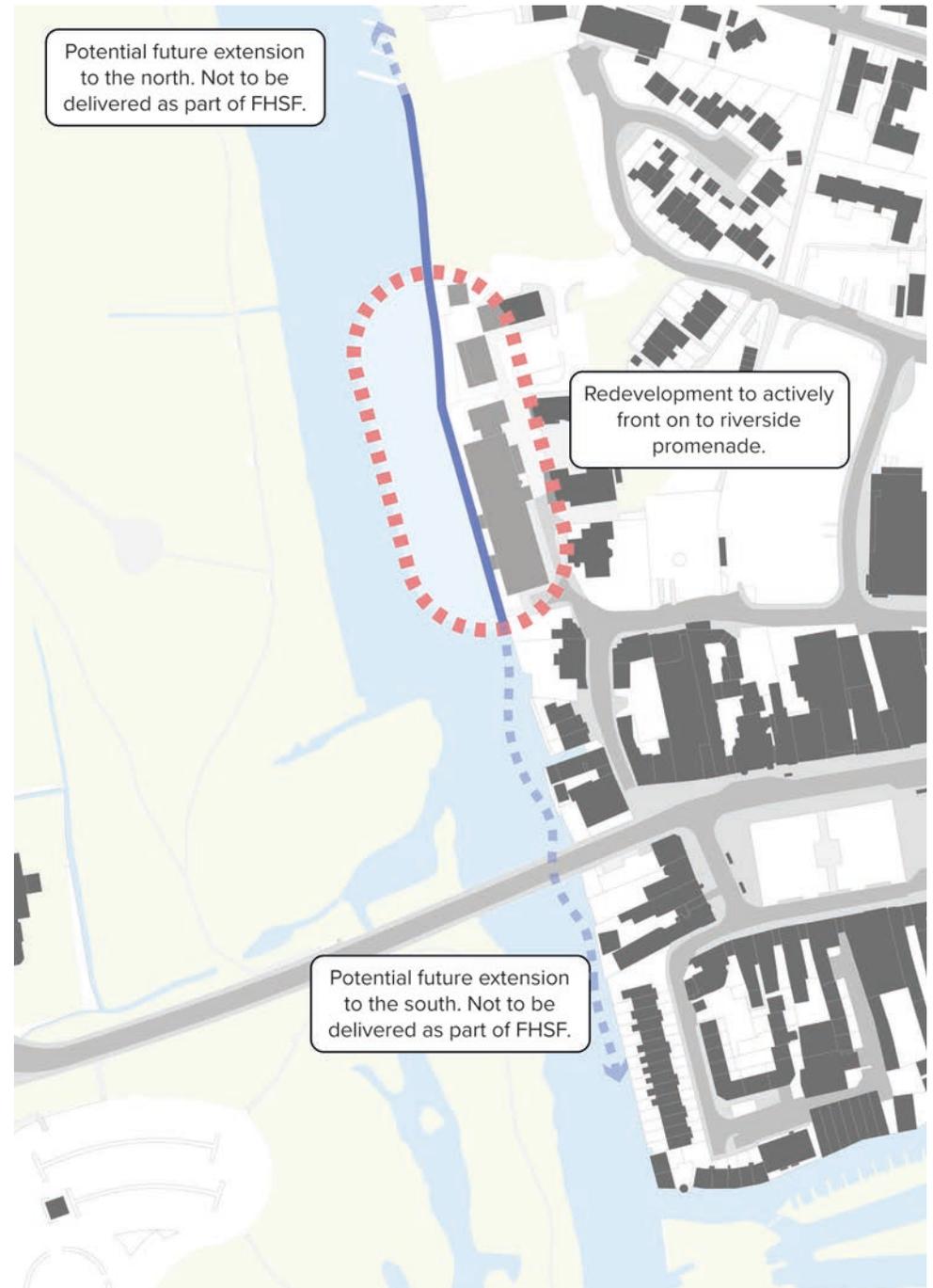


Figure 3.8 Waterfront Route



4 Project funding

In total, the overall amount of funding secured for this scheme is £12.8m. This comprises £9.0m of committed local funding from HDC, CPCA and CCC (71% of the programme total) and £3.7m in additional funding to be provided by MHCLG through the FHSF.

The funding breakdown is summarised in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 - Funding streams

Funding Streams	Total (£)
Local Funding	9,009,933
Future High Streets Fund	3,748,815
Total	12,758,748

The local funding has been provided by the following sources:

- £5.9m from HDC sources (Community Infrastructure Levy fund and development revenues from the developments within the Priory Quarter) to be spent according to the applicable spending guidance.
- £3.1m from the CPCA from the Market Towns Programme to be spent by March 2022. It is envisaged that this will be discussed with CPCA with a view to being re-profiled and aligned with MHCLG requirements.

The private sector will be involved in the re-development of Priory Quarter and the Old Falcon Inn, working in partnership with HDC.



5 Next steps

In May 2021, MHCLG confirmed award of £3.7m of grant funding. This means the St Neots programme is now fully funded and all six projects can proceed.

Working in collaboration with key delivery partners, HDC officers are now finalising the project delivery arrangements. Consultation will continue and due process will be followed in obtaining all required planning consents. Views of local stakeholders will be sought as these projects progress through their development process.

A detailed delivery programme is currently being developed with delivery partners and the Council is preparing a Communication and Stakeholder Engagement Plan which will provide more detail on how we will engage with local interest groups and the wider community.

“It is my view that a vibrant and attractive High Street is good for the economy and environment of St Neots and of Cambridgeshire. Therefore I am pleased to offer our support to your bid.”

*- Cllr Steve Count
Leader of Cambridgeshire County Council*

“I strongly believe that these plans will make St Neots fit for the future and I am delighted to support the bid”

*- Jonathan Djanogly MP
Member of Parliament for Huntingdon*

“You have my utmost support for your bid, and I wish you the best of luck in the process.”

*- James Palmer
Mayor, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority*

“If successful, the bid will significantly improve the lives of local residents and visitors alike.”

*- Cllr Keith Prentice
Chair of the Masterplan Steering Committee*

“With two fine, large parks, and historic and large market square, and a beautiful river adjacent to the centre, St Neots has incredible potential”

*- Gordon Round
Chair, St Neots Town Centre Initiative*

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