

Agenda Item 4

**FULL COUNCIL
20 MARCH 2019**

PUBLIC DOCUMENT

**TITLE OF REPORT: FUTURE HIGH STREETS FUND – CONSIDERATION OF
POTENTIAL BIDS**

Appendix C – Expression of Interest form – Hitchin

Future High Streets Fund

Call for Expressions of Interest

Application Form



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

Applicant Information

Bidding authority: North Hertfordshire District Council

Area within authority covered by bid: Hitchin Town Centre

Bid Manager Name and position: Anthony Roche, Deputy Chief Executive

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Additional evidence, such as letters of support, maps or plans should be included in an annex.

Applications to the Fund will be assessed against the criteria set out below. Further information on the scoring criteria and their weighting will be published by the department before the end of January 2019.

Submission of proposals:

Proposals must be received no later than 2359 on **Friday 22 March 2019**.

An electronic copy only of the bid including any supporting material should be submitted to highstreetsfund@communities.gov.uk.

Enquiries about the Fund may be directed to highstreetsfund@communities.gov.uk.

SECTION 1: Defining the place

This section will seek a definition of the high street or town centre to be covered within the bidding authority. Places should:

- Explain the high street/town centre geography
- Indicate the population of those living and travelling to this centre, how this links to the wider economic area and its role in the lives of those within the catchment area

1.1 Geographical area:

Include information setting out the extent of the high street/town centre area covered in the proposal and a description of this centre.

Please include maps and supporting evidence as annex documents if required.

Please limit your response to 500 words.

Hitchin is the most populated and principal retail centre of the four towns in the North Hertfordshire District. A well preserved historic market town founded in 792AD, whose character derives from its street market, chartered in 1268AD and still serves a large rural catchment (which will be highlighted in Section 3.2 by the wide support offered by the local village parish councils for this application to the fund).

The area comprises Bancroft, Brand Street, Bridge Street, Bucklersbury, Churchgate, Churchyard, Hermitage Road, High Street, Paynes Park, Queen Street, Sun Street, The Arcade, Tilehouse Street, West Alley as outlined on the attached map and is contiguous with the Business Improvement District which was established in 2009 and represents over 600 businesses.

The Town Centre is well defined by Hitchin BID's Town Centre Map¹ as well as the *NHDC Local Plan 2011-2031*² by the *Primary & Secondary Shopping Frontages*. The core area of the town centre is located primarily around Old Market Place, with the High-Street well-defined running along Bancroft Road.

The 'social focus' of the town centre is the High Street with substantial shops and five banks, the old Market Place (now used for community events) and the run of restaurants in Sun Street - all three areas were 'traffic calmed' and cobbled/paved in 1994. However, the greatest footfall is in the southern section of Bancroft, connected to High Street, but still a wide two-way road rather than a 'town centre space'.

Community facilities and tourist attractions include:

- **Hitchin Market – an open-air market with permanent lock-ups and day stalls open as a general market on Tuesdays, for bric-a-brac on Fridays, general market on Saturdays and boot market on Sundays;**

¹ Annex 1 - Hitchin Town Centre Map – Hitchin Bid/ Hitchin Initiative

² Annex 2 – NHDC Local Plan 2011-2031- Hitchin Town Insert Map

- **Market Place cafes and West Alley Shopping Area;**
- **Grade 1 St Mary's Church and Churchyard;**
- **Newly refurbished former Town Hall and District Wide Museum;**
- **British Schools Museum**
- **Physic Garden beside Charnwood, the former Hitchin museum (now awaiting conversion to a central community centre);**
- **Bancroft Rec – Restored Victorian recreation ground with bandstand and children's play area;**
- **Public Library**

The Hitchin Conversation Area Character Statement³, provides a further brief outline on additional features of town and wider town centre.

The Churchgate & Market area in Hitchin Town Centre as defined in Annex 3⁴ is one of two land allocations identified in the NHDC Local Plan Proposed Submission (October 2017) for mixed use development and is an area available for redevelopment. This is the consensus of the Local Authority and Community Groups (evidence provided in following sections), who believe it to be offering the best opportunity to revitalise Hitchin, creating a sustainable 21st century Market Town, “future - proofing” the Hitchin economy for the years to come.

The wider town centre does offer additional opportunities for development such as Paynes Park, which sits at the West of the Town Centre, behind the West Alley Shopping Area.

³ Hitchin Conservation Area Character Statement (2011) – Page 2 *Summary*. Available to view on NHDC website: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/planning/conservation-and-heritage/conservation-areas/hitchin-conservation-area>

⁴ Annex 3 - Defined Outline of Churchgate

1.2 Population and links to wider economic area:

Information on the population living and working in the town centre area, how the area acts as a centre of social and economic activity and its links to the wider economic catchment area.

With supporting evidence to include:

Resident and workplace population, travel to work catchment area, town centre footfall, commercial space, retail activity, cultural activities, diversity of uses and social/ historical importance of the centre

Please limit your response to 750 words.

Hitchin has a population of 33,601 according to the 2011 census and is predicted to rise to 35,566 by the 2021 census according to population projections. The NHDC Annual Monitoring Report 2016-2017 highlighted through the ONS Population Estimates Analysis states that 19% of the district's population are aged 65 over and 24% are aged 19 or under⁵.

Over the last decade Hitchin has increasingly seen a rise in commuters to London bringing significant demographic change. This change is explained by an increase of people moving out of London into the town and an increase of local people working in London, rather than working more locally. This is supported by the increased usage of Hitchin train station. The Office of Rail & Road estimated station usage from 2010-2018 highlights there has been an increase of 24.82% in usage of Hitchin Train Station from 2,594,012⁶ in 2010-2011 to 3,237,946⁷ between 2017-2018

The Employment Annual Monitoring Report 2013-2014⁸ highlighted that 49% of residents that live in the NHDC district, work outside of the district. Nathaniel & Litchfield Partners *Functional Market Area Study* (2015) highlighted the district as an exporter of labour as self-containment levels were in decline.⁹

The Town Centre is the focal point for social & cultural activities; the area includes two museums, two theatres, live music venues, meeting rooms, an extensive range of restaurants, cafes and bars. Nathaniel & Litchfield Partners 2016 Retail Study

⁵ North Hertfordshire District Council – Annual Monitoring Report 2016-2017 – Page 18 -19. Available to view on NHDC website: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/planning/conservation-and-heritage/conservation-areas/hitchin-conservation-area>

⁶ Office of Rail & Road – Estimated Train Usage 2010-2011- Available to view on: <https://orr.gov.uk/statistics/published-stats/station-usage-estimates>

⁷ Office of Rail & Road - Estimated Train Usage 2017-2018: Available to view on: <https://orr.gov.uk/statistics/published-stats/station-usage-estimates>

⁸ NHDC Employment Annual Monitoring Report (2014)– Page 24. Available to view on NHDC Website: https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/files/final_report_1.pdf

⁹ FEMA study – Stevenage, North Herts and Central Beds – Nathaniel Lichfield June 2015 – available to view on NHDC website as Ref: E3 <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination/examination-library>

indicated that Comparison and Convenience Retail makes up 50.1% of Hitchin Town Centre with services comprising 24.2% and restaurants, cafes, pubs 20.1%¹⁰

An Arts Festival that takes place throughout the town during the month of July as well as summer festivals in the different areas of the town. Hitchin's Market Place and the Old Corn Exchange have long acted as a nucleus for farm trading up until the modern day. Hitchin is one of the oldest continually inhabited towns in Hertfordshire and arguably the historic agricultural, market and service centre of North Hertfordshire.

The town's main commercial area is approximately one mile from the town centre although the Business Improvement District includes 650 SME's.

Hitchin acts as service centre for an extensive rural hinterland of surrounding villages as well as serving the wider District and adjacent local authority areas of Central Bedfordshire & Stevenage. The 2018 *On Street Users Survey*¹¹ highlights that 54% visitors came from local SG Postcodes. The remaining 46% come from further afield, 15% of which from noticeably further such as Cambridge, Milton Keynes & St Albans.

The same study highlights that 28% walk to the town centre, 61% drive and 11% use public transport. Hitchin has always been well served by public transportation with all villages surrounding it in North Hertfordshire being served by regular bus services, albeit there is little or no Sunday Service.

Town Centre footfall has declined over the past decade. The 2018 Pedestrian Market Research Services *Pedestrian Footfall Standard Report*¹² reveals that the average weekly footfall in Hitchin Town Centre is 25,460 which has decreased by 9.1% from 2010 (28,100).

Hitchin Town Centre has maintained a vacancy rate averaging 7% which currently equates to 6132 sq. m of retail vacant space. This has been a relatively consistent

¹⁰ Nathaniel & Litchfield Partners Retail Study (2016) – Appendix 5 *Town Centre Health Check*- Table A1 – *Hitchin Centre Use Class A Mix by Unit*. Available to view on NHDC website: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/E1%20North%20Herts%20Retail%20Study%20Update%202016.pdf>

¹¹ Annex 4- Hitchin Town Centre Comparison Report (2018)

¹² Annex 5 - Pedestrian Market Research Services Pedestrian Footfall Standard Report (2018)

figure over the past 10 years with a vacancy rate of 8.4% in 2009/2010. The Market has an occupancy rate of c.30-40%.

Hitchin is well served in terms of road infrastructure, with the A505 connecting it to Luton & Luton Airport and Hitchin being one mile away from the A1M. It is highlighted in Hertfordshire County Council's Local Transport Plan under Corridor 3 and 6 as part of a key multimodal movement corridor.¹³

¹³ The HCC LTP4 can be viewed at: <https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/recycling-waste-and-environment/planning-in-hertfordshire/transport-planning/local-transport-plan.aspx>

SECTION 2: Setting out the challenges

Clear description of the issues and challenges facing this area.

This section will seek a description of the issues and structural challenges facing the high street or town centre area to be covered within the bidding. Places should:

- Describe the key challenges facing the area
- Provide evidence to support this argument (additional sources can be included in annexes). Set out why this place would benefit more from moving forward to co-development than other places within the area

We will not accept bids covering town centre areas that are not facing significant challenges.

2.1: Challenges

We recognise that each place will see different challenges. Supporting evidence on the challenges facing areas could cover the following:

- *Proportion and/or number of vacant properties*
- *Openings/closures of commercial units*
- *Diversity of uses in the town centre area*
- *Resident/customer surveys*
- *Pedestrian flows and footfall trends*
- *Evidence of congestion and air quality*
- *Perception of safety and occurrence of crime*
- *State of town centre environmental quality including provision of green spaces*
- *Accessibility*
- *Housing demands*

Hitchin as a market town faces numerous and significant challenges. These challenges include the unsuitability of much of the retail space in the town centre, the lack of engagement with and entertainment for the under 30s, declining footfall and the severe decline of Hitchin Market. Furthermore, the central location of the 1970's Churchgate shopping centre lends a critical instability to the health of the town centre.

Put simply, significant intervention is needed NOW to stop the decline of Hitchin town centre, reverse the negative trends that we are seeing, and finally deal with the significant challenges that Hitchin faces. Furthermore, the type of intervention sought could serve as a catalyst for regeneration across the town, district and surrounding area by future proofing the economy of Hitchin through future proofing the future customer base. These challenges are set out in further detail below:

Core Retail Offer

Despite the trend towards more food/drink and service businesses, the core retail offer of Hitchin town centre has remained remarkably similar to what it was 10 years ago and is becoming less and less attractive as a result; such is the rapidly shifting environment for town centres in the UK. The interest in Hitchin as a place to experience desperately needs to be revitalised. This is evidenced in the North Hertfordshire Retail Study: North

Hertfordshire Retail Study Update 2016 (undertaken by Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners) where they have indicated there is generally a limited choice of outlets within many categories¹⁴. Whilst Hitchin Town Centre has seen a rise in coffee shops in recent years, this has enhanced the status quo and not diversified the retail offer.

Lack of Options for Under 30's

The options and experience that Hitchin town centre offers to under-30s is minimal. The demographic of visitors in the day-time in Hitchin highlights an older population typically shopping and enjoying the high street. Whilst the range of coffee shops and bars are appreciated by the younger generation, shops and Hitchin Market are entirely focused around the older generation. Creating a more balanced experience for all is extremely important. The Javelin Group's finding in the North Hertfordshire Retail study identified that Hitchin's retail offer was considered 'old' and the fashion position was that of 'traditional'. The Nathaniel and Litchfield 2016 NHDC Retail Study¹⁵ evidenced that over 50% of shoppers in Hitchin are over 45 and as little as 15% were 35 and under. The challenge is to ensure that the younger generation do not just enjoy the night life economy but also the day-time through improving and diversifying the core retail offer. This in turn will increase footfall and expenditure. A key challenge at this moment is this - if we do not engage with the younger demographic now what will be the future consequences? If Hitchin High Street does not future proof the next generation customer base now, these consequences will show for years if not generations to come. We must entice younger high street users to the area so that they become accustomed to the habitat and town centre experience.

Deteriorating Footfall

Annual pedestrian footfall counts are carried out and attached revealing that the average weekly footfall in Hitchin Town Centre is 25,460 which has decreased by 9.1% from 2010 (28,100). The average yearly decline of 1% remains consistent throughout (2015- 26,490). Online shopping is obviously a factor in this but without a considerable change in town centre experience and a change in the retail offer this footfall is expected to decline further and faster.

The Market

The Market has become a deteriorating asset over the last decade, now having an occupancy rate of c.30 - 40%. Given that Hitchin became a chartered Market Town in

¹⁴ Nathaniel & Litchfield Partners Retail Study (2016) – Page 26 (3.113). Available to view on NHDC website: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/E1%20North%20Herts%20Retail%20Study%20Update%202016.pdf>

¹⁵ Nathaniel & Litchfield Partners Retail Study (2016) – Appendix 5 *Town Centre Health Check*- Table A5 – *Age Profile of Visitors in Each Centre*. Available to view on NHDC website: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/E1%20North%20Herts%20Retail%20Study%20Update%202016.pdf>

1268AD, having a thriving market is of real importance to local residents and the heritage of North Hertfordshire. However, given its lack of change over several years and inability to adjust to shifting market conditions, the Market is operating at nowhere close to its full potential. Visitors in the NEMS In-Street Survey produced in the 2016 Retail Study¹⁶ gave the Market a negative rating compared to fairly positive reviews for other sections of the town. The market typically caters for a small portion of the older demographic with consistently the same customer base arriving weekly and monthly. Whilst this no doubt fills some need, it relates to the very limited offer for the under-30s; a redeveloped mixed offer market would provide substantially increased footfall and diversification of customers. For over 10 years North Hertfordshire District Council and local organisations have highlighted a clear need to rejuvenate the market; but with the Market's connection to the wider Churchgate Development, it has been long agreed by local stakeholders that the redevelopment should be done as part of a phased plan with the Churchgate Development. All this is why District Council wants to create a 21st Century Market Town based on the premise by providing an environment and experience for all generations.

Churchgate

The Churchgate Centre is part of the challenge in the town that can provide a solution to the challenges being outlined. It remains the major obstacle to progress in the town and has been the subject of various plans schemes over the last 35 years, none of which have successfully delivered a solution. It is a small shopping centre, in the centre of the town, with its infrastructure in severe decline with little to commend it in today's market. It acts as a barrier between the main community space (Market Place) and the riverside, blights Hitchin Market, is poorly designed even by 1970's standards and will continue to have a significantly negative impact on the area until such time as a redevelopment occurs. Bim Afolami, MP for Hitchin, states that "When I speak to local residents about the town centre, they all mention Churchgate as the biggest thing that needs to be redeveloped in order to bring Hitchin town centre into the 21st century". Opinion surveys, undertaken by a local community action group *Churchgate Resurgence PB*¹⁷, backs this up and they clearly highlight that local residents wish to see Churchgate redeveloped. In Question 11 of this survey; '*Do you think that Churchgate should be refurbished using the existing buildings or redeveloped with built-in flexibility to adapt to future retail trends?*' over 80% out of 731 people answered with '*Redevelop it with built-in flexibility to adapt to future retail trends.* Supporting this finding is the NHDC Hitchin Churchgate Survey (2018)¹⁸ which also highlights widespread support for a scheme both to improve the Churchgate Centre and the

¹⁶ Nathaniel & Litchfield Partners Retail Study (2016) – Page 123. Available to view on NHDC website: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/E1%20North%20Herts%20Retail%20Study%20Update%202016.pdf>

¹⁷ Annex 6 - Churchgate Resurgence Survey PB Public Survey (2018)

¹⁸ NHDC Hitchin Churchgate Survey (2018)- Available to view on NHDC website: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-data-and-performance/land-and-property/hitchin-churchgate-regeneration>

Market when surveying 578 visitors to Hitchin. Both surveys clearly evidence the amount of public consultation undertaken and support that the visitors to Hitchin Town Centre wish to see change and redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre and Market. The Heritage Assessment of Churchgate¹⁹ recognised that this the area lacked amenity value and is a negative contribution to the Hitchin Conservation Area.

Vacancy Rates

Recently Hitchin has struggled with larger units becoming vacant as national chains regroup and concentrate on city and out-of-town outlets. These larger units can remain empty for a considerable time (particularly if owned by remote institutional landlords) before new uses are considered or the site is split into smaller units. For example, Hawkins of Hitchin, a department store (a staple of the Hitchin High Street for 150 years) took 18 months to be sold and still waits redevelopment as a mixed-use site. Whilst vacancy rates have remained steady at 7% it is calculated by the Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID) that there remains 6132 sqm or 65000 sqft approx, currently available. This relates to around 20 units. 7 of these are larger units with some smaller secondary. Hitchin BID has witnessed significant difficulties in filling these units and many have stood empty for several months and remain to be so for the near future.

Whilst this challenge is not unique to Hitchin and compared to regional and national statistics on vacancy rates it is by no means terrible, that is no reason for complacency and inaction. Hitchin must diversify its core retail offer and experience to drive down the vacancy rate or at least maintain it at this level in the face of growing challenges. Through potential development schemes, this enables the future proofing of a continually low vacancy rate.

Accessibility

Accessibility needs to be improved and we need to make better use of the Riverside walkway through the town and improve the quality of the routes from car parks to the town centre. Bancroft Recreation Ground, Windmill Hill, The Cloisters are all valuable green assets, but the aspect of Hermitage Road and Bancroft needs to be improved. The quality of paving throughout the town is poor, and this leads to accessibility issues. Those with limited mobility, wheelchairs, pushchairs and visual impairment are disadvantaged by the lack of maintenance of the public realm. The majority of town centre users travel in by car, which poses significant dangers to the environmental quality of the area and more works need to be undertaken to alleviate this trend. The Hitchin Transport Evidence Pack²⁰ supports this by highlighting that 61% travel by car. It is also highlights the lack of cycle routes (Fig 4.4) and pedestrian links to the town centre (Fig 4.6) . Sustainable transport as

¹⁹ North Herts District Council - Heritage Assessment of Churchgate (2016)

²⁰ Annex 7 - Hitchin Transport Evidence Pack

outlined in Hertfordshire County Councils LTP4²¹ and North Hertfordshire Transport Strategy²² can provide a much-needed change towards uses of public transport to bring potential users of the town centre to the town without the current level of environmental impact.

Low Cost Rental & Starter Homes

There is considerable demand for low cost rental or starter homes for key workers and young people, with second generation Hitchin residents having left home or returned from college often finding themselves priced out of their town. The influx of individuals relocating from London has kept house prices high, so significant intervention is needed to provide for many people, often young, who wish to live/work in Hitchin but are unable to do so. Placing these homes in the town centre would help relieve road congestion and parking issues. With the North Hertfordshire District Council Local Plan in its final stages, the redevelopment of part of the town centre can, if the right financial viability can be achieved, ease this pressure and provide more viable options for rental properties and starter homes. In turn, this would significantly increase footfall and the vibrancy of the town centre, and provide greater commercial incentives to improve the opportunities available to the under 30s.

Start-up Businesses

Hitchin Town Centre lacks a varied degree of rental office-space/workshop options for start-up business. The Town Centre has high rent which has discouraged promising entrepreneurs from moving into the Town Centre. A redeveloped 21st Century office space working environment to include shared office spaces would encourage, local enterprises to move into the town centre. Hitchin Town Centre needs flexible, adaptable spaces with sensible leases or available as short-term lets to encourage entrepreneurs to trial their business ideas without fear of penalties if not successful. North Hertfordshire District Council has been identified as a net exporter of labour, with potential cheaper start-up costs for entrepreneurs, there is an opportunity to reduce this net loss and attract workers back into Hitchin Town Centre.

²¹ The HCC LTP4 can be viewed at: <https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/recycling-waste-and-environment/planning-in-hertfordshire/transport-planning/local-transport-plan.aspx>

²² Fig 5-4 p.62 and Table 5-2 p.63 of North Hertfordshire Transport Strategy sets out the Strategy elements for Hitchin and can be viewed on the NHD website as Ref ED14 <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination/examination-documents>

2.2: Rationale for selecting town centre area

Set out your rationale for choosing this town centre area as opposed to other centres within your local authority, and why this area is most in need.

Please limit your response to 500 words.

The rationale for choosing Hitchin town centre is threefold. Firstly, historic investment has occurred in the other towns in the district. Secondly, potential threats to the vitality of the town centre. Thirdly, using this bid to identify a model that could be replicated elsewhere in other historic market towns.

North Hertfordshire has four historic towns and a large number of villages and rural communities. For the purposes of this bid only the four towns were assessed to be of sufficient size for consideration. Approximately ten years ago town centres were one of the Council's priorities. At this time town centre enhancement works were carried out in three of the four towns - Baldock High Street (completed 2009) and Royston Fish Hill Square (completed 2011) by NHDC and Letchworth town centre (completed 2010) by the Heritage Foundation. The most recent public sector led enhancement within Hitchin town centre was the Market Place improvements of the 1990s, due to the failure of the appointed developer to find a viable solution for the town centre Churchgate scheme of 2010-2013. This bid provides an opportunity to improve Hitchin town centre after it "missed out" in the various improvement works a decade ago.

It should be noted that whilst Hitchin town centre continues to trade reasonably well compared to other similar town centres, there are potential threats on the horizon. The development of the A1 retail park at Biggleswade has had an effect on tenant demand, particularly from the retailers located at that retail park. Stevenage Council continues to try to progress their plans for the regeneration of Stevenage town centre. Additionally, Luton Borough Council has recently approved plans for an out of town mixed use scheme park at junction 10 of the M1 including retail, leisure, office and hotel uses. In the light of these potential threats to the vitality of Hitchin Town Centre the case for potential investment, if viable, is only strengthened in order to maintain the health of the town centre economy for the benefit of the wider community it serves.

Hitchin Market dates back hundreds of years in various forms and over the years has included a livestock market, perishable goods including wheat and latterly a general purposes market. The challenge is to identify what comes next to ensure that market towns still have a function. The vision for this bid for Hitchin town centre is to create a sustainable twenty first century market town. The solution identified could potentially then be replicated (or amended as appropriate) and applied to other historic market towns in the district and beyond.

SECTION 3: Strategic ambition

This section will seek evidence of the level of ambition from the local authority, support from stakeholders and evidence that the local authority is well-placed to use the Future High Street Fund to tackle these challenges in a way that will fit with wider existing plans. Local authorities should:

- Set out a high-level vision for improving their area and how this links with need expressed in Section 2
- Demonstrate how this ambition will align with other funding streams (public or private)
- Cover how investment from government will support the area and help overcome these challenges
- Demonstrate engagement with and support from local stakeholders including other tiers of local government, if applicable (supporting evidence of this support such as letters should be attached as an annex)
- Show how this will link to wider strategic plans, including the Local Plan and Local Industrial Strategies e.g. around housing and local growth
- Provide an estimate of how much revenue funding they would need to support the development of their strategic vision and business case for a specific proposal

This phase relates to defining places and challenges and we therefore are not asking for specific project proposals at this stage.

However, if a local authority has been working on a specific project that they feel is deliverable in the short term if they were to receive capital funding at an early stage, we invite them to make that clear here. While the details of the project will not be considered in our decision-making at this stage, we may consider fast-tracking these projects during co-development.

We will not accept bids that do not provide sufficient evidence of support from local stakeholders.

3.1 Town centre vision and ambition for change

Set out your vision for regenerating your high street and how this links with the challenges outlined in section 2.

Please limit your response to 750 words.

The vision for Hitchin is to create a sustainable 21st Century Market Town, which will future proof the Hitchin economy and become an example to other Market Towns throughout the country. Like many towns Hitchin town centre needs to change to survive. It is possible to future proof the Hitchin economy through engaging with a younger demographic whilst retaining the older. By diversifying the core retail offer, improving the Market and redeveloping part of the town centre. Hitchin Town Centre can attract a wide audience and reverse the negative trends currently established. Through future proofing the market, the retail offer and the next customer base you will in turn future proof the rest of the town centre. This will allow Hitchin to remodel itself for the 21st century, offering a more experience-based, flexible and adaptable development not solely based on retail.

The vision is of a mixed-use town centre with adaptable-sized retail on the ground floor and diversified use on the upper floors (office/retail).

A new Market in a purpose-built Market Hall with integral Street Food Hall, has the potential to create a destination hub in the centre of Hitchin bringing in footfall and creating a ripple effect such as maintaining low vacancy rates.

Street food markets are highly successful attractions if well curated. They can be affordable and attractive to young people and provide a first step for young entrepreneurs. By having its own vibrant 'homegrown' market, Hitchin can offer a competitive alternative to London's markets to attract its resident commuters.

Much thought has been given to routing and channelling pedestrian flow to maximise footfall through the new development both from carparks and the high street. It is our vision to reverse the consistent decline in footfall and instead increase footfall within the town centre as well as dwell time and expenditure. By diversifying the offer, one provides a sustainable platform by attracting new town centre users and ensuring they experience the town centre for a longer time.

Introducing attractions and increasing the range of attractions that are not retail - such as an art centre, cinema, business start-up hub or a health user hub - would benefit the town and its community and add to the footfall at different times of day. Facilities targeted at young people would also be provided addressing a core challenge of future proofing the next customer base for Hitchin Town Centre.

There is an opportunity to create a mix of different income streams. Some (such as housing) would release cash back into the scheme at an early stage. Others such as an arts centre or cinema, would give sustainable income streams over a much longer period. In addition, there is an opportunity for a mixture of much needed residential accommodation (some targeted at low income renters) and 21st century business space in the upper storeys. The purpose would be to specifically target a mixed use of tenants (across the range of retail, leisure, work, health and residential), providing a focused solution and different offer, becoming a model for Market Towns across the country.

The main elements are:

- A mixture of retail tenants – long-term income stream**
- Commercial development for sale or long lease – Leisure, Entertainment – long-term income stream**
- Housing development for sale – releasing cash back into the scheme**
- Rental apartments –Mixture of market and social rent giving long-term income stream**

Uses such as live-work units, serviced business space and shared studio space, or health uses, could be factored into the scheme as public consultation sharpens the identification of need.

This vision will actively encourage the modal shift to sustainable transport modes by increasing the capacity and ease for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport to visit and experience the town centre.

For North Hertfordshire to thrive, each town needs to have a strong, differentiated and complementary offer. The new ideas for the redevelopment of the town centre offer opportunities for addressing retail decline in North Hertfordshire in a way that does not undermine other towns but could offer a sustainable example of best practice in the region. The key vision is to address our key challenge of an ageing customer base and core retail offer. The vision proposed modernises the town centre to reverse negative trends that have emerged over the last decade, providing a diversified offer to attract new town centre customer users. Hitchin has long been an important commercial hub for North Hertfordshire District Council and with the assistance of this fund, this can be protected and enhanced.

3.2 Engagement and alignment of vision

Set out how your town centre vision aligns with other funding streams, both public and private, including details of partnership working with the private sector in this area. Show how your vision fits with wider strategic plans such as housing, transport and Local Industrial Strategies.

Please limit your response to 750 words.

The Council has long held aspirations to improve Hitchin town centre and has recently indicated its support to investing in potential schemes that could generate a return on its investment, agreeing at meetings of Full Council in February 2018 and November 2018 to fund a regeneration subject to a successful bid for funding from the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership to make the proposed scheme viable. The proposal within this Expression of Interest is for a broader concept and a greater remit than the scheme the Council had agreed in principle to invest in, however if a financially viable investment was put forward the Council would give it serious consideration given their land holdings in the area and their long-term aspirations as a local authority and their need to generate income from new sources. Alternatively, if a suitably viable scheme was developed it could attract private sector investment.

The vision as set out in Section 3.2 of the Bid aligns with following strategic policies in the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031 Proposed Submission (October 2017)²³:

Environmentally, the vision proposed looks to develop a sustainable 21st Century Market Town, enhancing the historic character of the town centre and by mitigating the effects of climate change through sustainable transport methods. Economically it looks to support and further a vibrant, diverse and competitive local economy by enabling new job opportunities whilst retaining existing. It aims to increase an adequate office accommodation and support facilities, enhancing local businesses in the town centre and outlying rural areas. Socially it aims to increase the types and tenures of home to meet identified needs whilst encouraging safe and vibrant mixed communities. It will improve access to make provision for new leisure and entertainment facilities that once again meet the needs of residents of Hitchin and North Hertfordshire District Council. The vision supports the potential for growth and diversification in the town centre. HT11, *Churchgate and its Surrounding Area* & HT12, *Paynes Park* identify the potential for redevelopment in the town centre and provision of residential accommodation on upper floors.

The private sector's support is well recognised through local private sector groups represented by Hitchin Initiative and Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID) who have provided support for the Expression of Interest. Hitchin Initiative outline their main aim as maintaining and enhancing the economic, cultural and social vitality of the town which the vision intends to do. It supports Hitchin Bid's mandate given by local businesses by aiming to ensure more customers stay longer and spend more as well ensuring businesses remain profitable.

The vision put forward aligns with Hertfordshire County Council's Strategic Economic Plan 2017-2030²⁴ and Hertfordshire Local Economic Partnership's main priorities. Transforming Hitchin Town Centre into a diversified vibrant hub founded on a new sustainable 21st Century Market town model for living and working aligns with Priority 3, *Re-invigorating our Places for the 21st Century*. With focusing on increasing the diversification of the core retail offer, residential environment, office space and attraction for a younger generation, the vision aligns with Priority 4, *Foundations for Growth*. Our vision clearly outlines its intention to diversify the High Street and its core retail offer, office space and housing.

²³ North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031 Proposed Submission Draft (October 2017) - *Section 2: Spatial Strategy and Strategic Policies* (Annex 8) on the NHDC website as Ref: LP1 <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination/examination-library>

²⁴ Hertfordshire County Council Strategic Economic Plan 2017-2030. Executive Summary Available on: <https://www.hertfordshirelep.com/media/4345/Strategic%20Economic%20Plan%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>

The Hertfordshire Local Transport Plan (LTP4)²⁵ clearly identifies the need to address housing growth and economic development which this vision aims to do through reinvigorating the town as well as focusing growth around key infrastructure routes such as the A1(M) whilst also retaining Hertfordshire Character and enhancing its environment. The vision supports its objectives of enhancing the quality and vitality of town centres; making journeys and their impact safer and healthier; and adoption of a transport user hierarchy, which gives priority to other sustainable modes of transport over the car. All of which strongly supports the LTP4 plan of encouraging a modal shift towards sustainable transport modes.

This also links with the following aims and objectives of the NHDC Transport Strategy²⁶ which seeks to: enable increased prosperity; contribute to vibrant, attractive and sustainable places; support people to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives; by improving access opportunities, reducing carbon emissions and reducing demand for travel by encouraging sustainable travel as an alternative to the car.

3.3 Support for town centre vision

Provide details, including letters of support, for your vision from (where applicable):

- *Other tiers of local government including Mayoral and non-Mayoral Combined Authorities and county councils where applicable*

Other local stakeholders including:

- *Local Enterprise Partnerships*
- *Business Improvement Districts*
- *Private sector*
- *Community groups*

Please limit your response to 500 words and include evidence of this support as an annex where appropriate.

This application has received wide spread support across the commercial, civic and private sectors for redeveloping Hitchin Town Centre into a sustainable 21st Century Market Town.

The following organisations have offered their support for the vision and proposal:

- **Hertfordshire Business Improvement District (BID) – Representing 630 Town Centre Businesses (Annex 9)**
- **Hitchin Initiative – Representing Other Businesses, Individual Residents & Community Groups (Annex 10)**

²⁵ The HCC LTP4 can be viewed at: <https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/recycling-waste-and-environment/planning-in-hertfordshire/transport-planning/local-transport-plan.aspx>

²⁶ North Hertfordshire Transport Strategy can be viewed on the NHD website as Ref ED14 <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination/examination-documents>

- Hitchin Forum- Umbrella Organisation for Town Voluntary & Interest Groups (Annex 11)
- The Hitchin Society- Town's Civic Society (Annex 12)
- Churchgate Resurgence PB- Pro Bono Group Architects, Landscape Architects, Management Consultants and Property Lawyers (Annex 13)
- Group of Major Landlords in the Hitchin Town Centre (Annex 14)
- Bim Afolami MP, Member of Parliament for Hitchin & Harpenden (Annex 15)
- Hertfordshire LEP (Annex 16) – *Once confirmed in writing*
- Hertfordshire County Council (Annex 17) - *Once confirmed in writing*
- NHDC Hitchin Committee (Annex 18) *Once received from NHDC*

Local Parish Councils:

- Kimpton Parish Council (Annex 19)
- Ickleford Parish Council (Annex 20)
- St Ippolyts Parish Council (Annex 21)
- Wymondley Parish Council (Annex 22)
- Codicote Parish Council (Annex 23)

3.4 Estimate of revenue funding needed

Provide details of how much revenue funding you need to develop project plans for capital funding (including detailed business cases).

Include estimated breakdowns of how you would spend this revenue funding

Please limit your response to 500 words.

This Council estimates that it would require £150,000 to develop project plans and the business case for capital funding. This money would be spent on the following consultancy support:

- Planning
- Transport
- Lettings advice
- Development Modelling
- Quantity Surveyor (or someone else to calculate the costs)
- Communications (delivering a consultation strategy)
- Project facilitator (someone to bring the various stakeholders together and try to find agreed solutions, to then inform the above)