

# Town Centre Strategy



**Report to:** Special Council

**Date:** 15 May 2025

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor Dan Swords, Leader of the Council

**Lead Officer:** Giles Clarke, Executive Director (01279) 446517

**Contributing Officer:** Jacqueline Van Mellaerts, Assistant Director – Finance and Section 151 Officer (01279) 446251

## Executive Summary

**A** This report recommends an amendment to the council's Capital Programme to enable continued progress towards the council's missions to 'rebuild our town' and 'transform Harlow's housing'. The council has successfully negotiated a position to complete the purchase of Market House, and so implement a decision already made by Cabinet. The recommendation below will ensure this can be achieved without delay, that essential maintenance can be undertaken immediately, and plans put in place for its future development in line with the council's vision set out in the Town Centre Masterplan Framework.

## Recommended that:

**A** For the reasons set out in the Cabinet Paper dated 16 June 2022, titled 'Market House Site Acquisition', Full Council amend the council's 2025/26 Capital Programme to include a sum of £8 million to enable the acquisition of Market House, and to provide an allowance for immediate essential maintenance and health and safety works, SDLT, and associated professional fees.

## Reason for decision

**A** The proposals, as detailed in the report and its confidential appendices, will allow the council to deliver on its corporate mission to 'rebuild our town' and to deliver the regeneration of the town centre.

**B** The property forms one side of Market Square and represents an important part of the future regeneration of the town centre. The council has recently purchased Adams House, which forms another side of the Market Square, and therefore this will allow a holistic delivery of regeneration of that area.

## Other Options

- A** Not to update the Capital Programme in which case the purchase of Market House and implementation of the existing Cabinet decision would not take place.

## Background

1. The council has a corporate plan that covers the four-year period from 2024-2028. The council has six missions which are as follows:
  - a) Transform Harlow's housing;
  - b) Renew our neighbourhoods;
  - c) Rebuild our town;
  - d) Secure investment for Harlow's future;
  - e) Protect our communities; and
  - f) Deliver high-performing council services.
2. The mission to 'rebuild our town' is clarified in part as 'delivering all regeneration projects already commissioned as well as bringing forward further schemes and investment to entirely transform the town centre in line with the masterplan framework'.
3. The mission to 'transform Harlow's housing' is clarified in part as 'delivering new high quality council housing'.
4. In March 2022, the council adopted the Harlow Town Centre Masterplan Framework (HTCMF). The HTCMF provides guidance to inform the future planning and design of Harlow town centre.
5. The HTCMF provides a concise portrait of Harlow town centre and includes a historic overview and mapping of contextual elements alongside spatial objectives and desired outcomes.
6. The HTCMF also identifies key guidance across a series of headings including overarching principles, movement, urban design, public realm and land use and defines guidance around building heights.
7. Additionally, the HTCMF provides guidance for Opportunity Areas within the HTCMF boundary and summarises recommendations to support the delivery.
8. The council has already made significant progress in the regeneration of the town centre, in line with the HTCMF, including with key strategic acquisitions and commencement of

transformational regeneration schemes. Market House is an important element of the council's mission.

## **Issues/Proposals**

9. Cabinet approved the purchase and refurbishment of Market House as a Key Decision on 16 June 2022. The decision (Decision Number I013955) was:
  - a) Cabinet agrees (subject to formal contract) that Harlow Council completes the purchase of a property in the Town Centre, as set out in the report, on an unconditional basis for a sum set out in the report.
  - b) Authority is delegated to the Director of Strategic Growth and Regeneration and Director of Finance, in consultation with the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, to finalise the detailed terms of the purchase of the site with the Vendor.
10. Capital was allocated within the Capital Programme to meet these costs.
11. After lengthy discussions and negotiations, the council has agreed a purchase price and other terms to acquire Market House in accordance with the Cabinet Decision. These are set out in the Appendix A and valuation assurance has been received from the Council's external advisers in an RICS Red Book valuation report. This is set out in Appendix B.
12. The business case and rationale for purchasing the property have not changed since Cabinet approved the transaction.

## **Implications**

### **Equalities and Diversity**

None directly arising from the content of this report however full regard will be given to Harlow's public sector duty in the design of any future redevelopment.

### **Climate Change**

Any such redevelopment works would be carried out in line with the environmental considerations the council has agreed to.

### **Finance**

The acquisition of Market House was funded, in part, through the use of the £5 million set aside within the Capital Programme as the council's contribution to the Harlow Investment Fund. The 16 June 2022 reported stated any further longer term capital requirement from the council would be subject to a further report to Cabinet. There is now a requirement to amend the council's 2025/26 Capital Programme to include a sum of £8 million to enable the acquisition of Market House, and to provide an allowance for immediate essential maintenance and health and safety works, SDLT, and associated professional fees.

The capital financing of the acquisition will be managed through daily cash flow management and longer-term financing will be considered as part of the council's wider treasury management strategy.

Author: Jacqueline Van Mellaerts, Assistant Director – Finance and Section 151 Officer

## **Governance**

Harlow has several powers to acquire land in connection with the delivery of specific functions (like housing and planning/regeneration) but also more generally for the benefit, improvement or development of their area. The usual prudential considerations apply in terms of the affordability of the acquisition both in terms of acquisition and any re-development costs, but also in terms of any ongoing revenue implications for Harlow. These considerations are dealt with in the finance implications section and the appendices to this report.

Author: Daniel Dickinson, Assistant Director – Legal and Democratic Services (Interim) and Monitoring Officer

## **Appendices**

Appendix A (Exempt) – Commercial Terms

Appendix B (Exempt) – RICS Red Book Valuation

Appendix C (Exempt) - Report to Cabinet dated 16 June 2022

## **Background Papers**

None.

## **Glossary of terms/abbreviations used**

HTCMF - Harlow Town Centre Masterplan Framework

RICS – Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors