



Whittlesey – A Market Town Fit for the Future

Interim Report of the Growing Fenland project



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Introduction

What do we want Whittlesey to be like in five, ten, twenty years' time?

What will our high street look and feel like? What will people do there?

What courses will be on offer to people looking to learn a hyper-connected and digital by default world?

What jobs will be available to people looking to live and work in Whittlesey?

This document is an attempt to grapple with these questions and start to provide an answer to them.

It sets out three things:

- An overview of Whittlesey today, including the challenges it faces;
- A vision and set of ambitions for the future of the town; and
- Ideas for making the vision a reality.

The document is the product of an ongoing piece of work called 'Growing Fenland', which is described in more detail below.

The project is led by the Whittlesey Town Team, which brings together businesses, community groups, and local councillors to unite around a vision for the town.

Over the next few months, the Team want your input and ideas on the work they have done so far on the future of our town.

Have your say

This document is not the final word. We are continuing to refine these ideas and generate new ones. There are details at the end of this report on how you can have your say.

There is no promise that everything in this document will be delivered, at least not immediately. We know that resources are finite, that more spending is not the answer to everything, and that lasting change takes time and sustained effort.

Nonetheless, to make Whittlesey – which has many strengths and assets – even better, we need a shared vision for what we want the place to look like in future.



What is Growing Fenland?

The recently published Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Review (CPIER) identified that within the Combined Authority there are three distinct sub-economies. There is the Greater Cambridge economy, which includes the many towns where people commute from into Cambridge. There is the Greater Peterborough economy, and its surroundings. But in an important classification, there is also the fen economy, which includes much of our district of Fenland, as well as parts of East Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire.

A lot of strategy has historically focused on making cities work well, and assuming the rest will follow. But because our economy is separate, and in some ways quite isolated with sub-standard transport links, this approach won't work for us. We need a strategy for each of our towns, which helps them prosper, and delivers best quality of life for people who live here. This must acknowledge where we have links to other towns or cities, while seeking to build strength in our places. The Combined Authority is committed to doubling economic output across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough by 2040 – to do this, all areas are going to have to succeed, not just the Cambridge economy.

To make this happen, following the CPIER analysis, the Combined Authority has decided to support a process of creating market town plans for each town in our district – Chatteris, March, Whittlesey, and Wisbech. These plans will be used to bid for funding from the Combined Authority and other funding providers, based on the vision for the town.

To develop these plans, each town has established a **town team**, consisting of representatives from business, local government, schools, and others. The town team has looked at life in the town from every angle, and has developed a vision for each town. They have also worked on ideas which could make a real difference.

The Growing Fenland project tries to capture a balance. On the one hand, each of these towns is unique, with its own particular opportunities, as well as challenges. On the other hand, there are some areas where by working together we can have more of an impact. Therefore, we are publishing four separate reports for each of the towns, but under the same banner – and if you read all four, you will see some crossover.

Because some of the challenges we face are common across all four towns, we will also be publishing, alongside the final reports, a Fenland-wide strategy to set out what some of the real “game changers” will be for our district.

Whittlesey – An overview

Whittlesey is a great place to live and learn. We want to build on these strengths to make Whittlesey a market town that thrives on its heritage and is fit for the future.

Whittlesey is a town with many strengths. It is a popular and attractive place to live, with a strong community spirit. We have good and continuously improving schools. Our programme of annual events, including the Straw Bear festival, attracts people from far and wide. We have some excellent restaurants and shops that draw people into the town.

As a place we are always looking to improve and make necessary changes to thrive. Most recently, for example, the relocation of the bus station has brought new life to the centre of town and creates the opportunity to do even more with the square.

We also benefit from our proximity to Peterborough, which creates opportunities for residents to work, study, and shop, while we maintain a proudly independent and distinct local identity and culture. We can offer the best of both to current and future residents: the sense of community, the calm and proximity to nature offered by a market town, alongside the benefits of proximity to a city, with everything that has to offer.

A High Street in need of regeneration

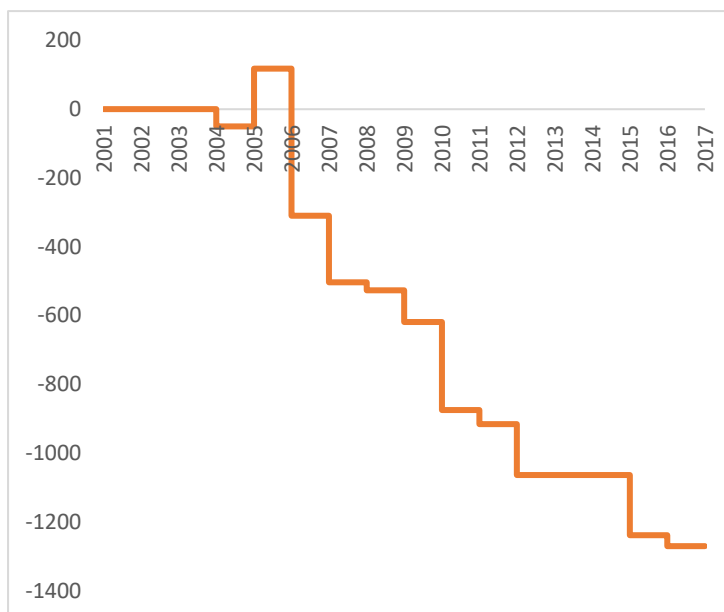


Fig. 1: A1 space (shops) in Whittlesey (m2) – change since 2001

We have some high-quality shops in Whittlesey which are popular with locals and visitors alike. However, as shown in the graph to the left, the amount of retail floorspace in the town has declined.

Our current retail offer is not diverse or distinctive enough to compete with the wider range of shops available elsewhere, particularly Peterborough.

The decline of the traditional high street is very much a national trend. However, as a historic market town, such changes force us to think radically about what our high street and town centre is for. In particular, we need to think about how we move with the shift from buying things to having experiences on the high street.

Rich heritage and culture

An aspect of the town which is attracting more and more people is our rich heritage and culture. Whittlesey is mentioned in Anglo-Saxon charters that precede the Domesday Book. At the centre of town is the 17th Century Buttercross. On our doorstep is an excavation site describe by the BBC as

“Britain’s Pompei” containing the “best-preserved Bronze Age dwellings ever found”.¹ Flag Fen Archaeology Park houses a perfectly preserved wooden causeway that is over 3,000 years old.

That rich history inspires a vibrant local culture, as reflected in a full calendar of events including the music and dance like Straw Bear, food and drink events, and cycling meets.

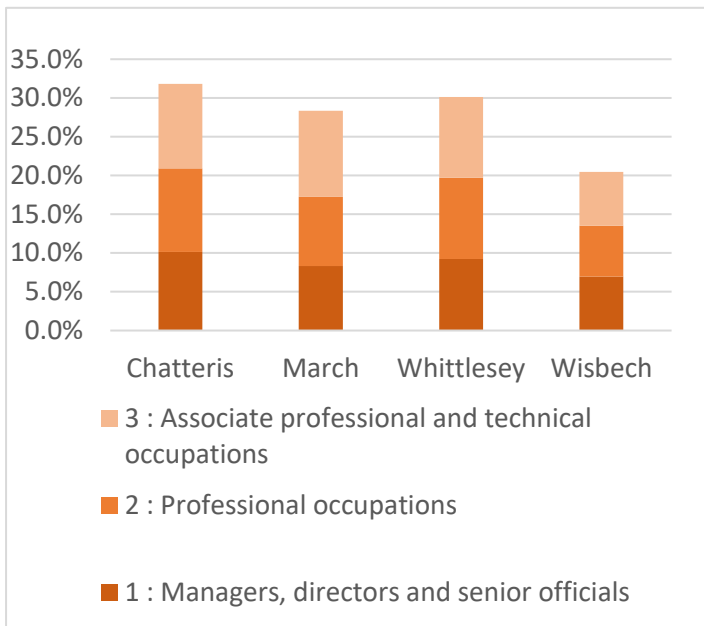
We want to share these assets with the world.

A well-educated population – but not enough jobs in the town

Our schools perform well. At primary level, each school has improved further in recent years, while pupils at Sir Harry Smith perform above the national average in terms of GCSE results, the Ebacc average points score and A Level completion.

Our schools’ performances have helped develop a population that is better educated than other parts of Fenland. As show in Fig. 2 below, just under one in three people in Whittlesey is in a professional, managerial or director-level job. This is a major asset for our ambition to lead the way as the market town of the future.

“Schools in Whittlesey are regarded as among the best locally.”



It is true that many of our residents live here and work in Peterborough (45.3% of workers, at the time of the last census). And, according to a 2017 survey, conducted in support of the Neighbourhood Plan, 78% of Whittlesey residents acknowledged that younger people tend to leave the Parish to find work.

Nonetheless, we have several important local employers such as Hanson Brick Co and McCain Food.

Furthermore, recent data also reveals a large increase in the number of professional, scientific and technical jobs in recent years.

In future, we want even more of our young people to live and work in Whittlesey. We will do this by exploring with local partners, including

new businesses, what specific, targeted measures might further spur the growth of SMEs.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-36778820>

Good quality homes – a mixed picture of connectivity

As well as good schools, another reason that people move to Whittlesey is that we build a range of good quality homes. This includes family homes and affordable homes for teachers and other young professionals. The past five years have seen a strong increase in both house prices and completions; and in the past two years alone we built more homes than any other part of Fenland.

“Whittlesey is a boom town in building terms.”

Fig 3: Whittlesey housing sales since 2008

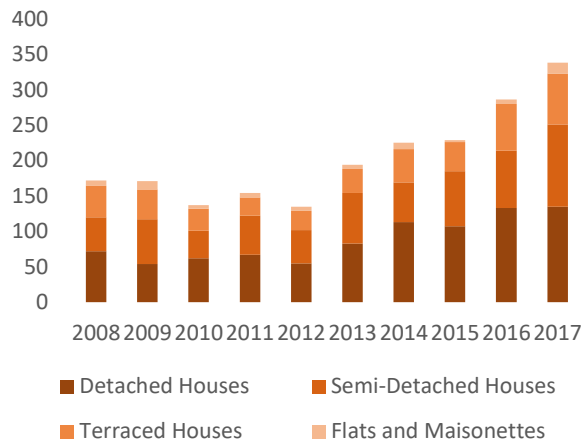
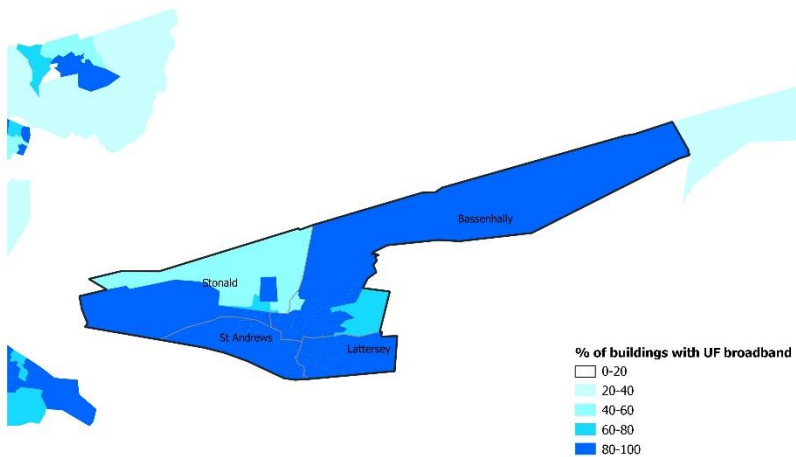


Fig. 4: Access to Ultra-Fast Broadband



People living in these homes also have access to ultra-fast broadband, as reflected in the map to the left. In a world of digital by default, households need broadband to access services and companies need it to research, trade and promote themselves. The blanket access to broadband is a powerful competitive advantage.

In contrast to our online connectivity, we face some transport challenges. While this is true of many parts of

Fenland, three quarters of people here rely on the car to get to work; this is higher than the Cambridgeshire and England averages.

There is a train station at Whittlesey, but it is on the far edge of the town and is felt by some residents to be poorly lit and potentially unsafe at night. In the past, people using the trains have complained that services did not stop at Whittlesey and the overall services was unreliable. Improvements to the station are currently being implemented but, overall, most people in Whittlesey still opt for to drive above all other options.



Perhaps linked to poor transport options, people in Whittlesey experience somewhat worse health outcomes than the rest of the country. Incidences of cancer, emergency hospital admissions and rates of self-harm are all above the national and Cambridgeshire averages. Healthy eating amongst adults is below national levels, while deliveries to teenage mothers are above the national averages.

83% of respondents say they would make journeys by public transport, walking and cycling if services are improved. (Neighbourhood Plan Scoping Report)

It also important to note that **we have a close relationship with Peterborough**, in terms of connectivity, community patterns, the housing and job markets, retail options etc. This is unlikely to change, and in fact brings us many benefits; have a city so close by creates opportunities for our residents. The question is how we can further benefit from that connection while also offering something distinct as a place to visit and spend time.



Whittlesey – A market town fit for the future

Whittlesey has so many assets that inspire local pride. We want to build on these and draw on our rich heritage to make Whittlesey a **market town fit for the future**.

To achieve this, we will focus on the following five areas.

Ambition 1: Attracting and retaining high-skilled jobs.

There are signs that Whittlesey is attracting more highly-skilled professional and senior-level jobs. We want to further accelerate this trend. We want to become an acknowledged hub for niche, high-skilled sectors such as agri-tech. This will create more opportunities for people of all ages to work in Whittlesey instead of commuting out.

We will do this by:

- Exploring the idea of a Skills Task Force.
- Testing the demand for an enterprise incubator space.
- Improving transport access to educational opportunities.
- Continuing to build a range of high-quality homes including executive houses and affordable provision for young professionals.

Ambition 2: Revitalising the centre of town

Across the UK, the demand for the old high street offer is in permanent decline; instead of shops, people want excitement and experiences. We want to move now to ensure our town centre offers a fantastic experience to locals and visitors. We will do this by:

- Changing the permitted use of the square to generate more activity and create a 'piazza' feel.
- Enhancing the market.
- Attracting a new hotel in or around Whittlesey.
- Exploring the scope for pedestrianising Market Street.
- Installing smart totem signage.
- Trialling free on-street wi-fi.
- Using empty spaces for public consultation.

Ambition 3: Modernising transport in and around Whittlesey

In line with our overall vision of being a market town fit for the future, we need to make sure our transport connections reflect changing patterns of how people get around. We will do this by exploring the introduction of the following measures:

- Electric vehicle car club.
- New cycling pathways and infrastructure.

We will also encourage more walking through promotion of the Heritage Trail which we describe below under Ambition 4.

Ambition 4: Developing our heritage offer



Future-facing market towns have a unique and distinctive reputation and ‘offer’ to the rest of the world. That might be connected to food, music or a famous son or daughter of the town.

Whittlesey’s offer is our heritage. Whittlesey is mentioned in the *Cartularium Saxonicum* of 973 A.D. and the Domesday Book. On our doorstep is Must Farm, “Britain's Pompeii”, where six bronze age boats have been discovered. Our long history has inspired a rich culture, as reflected in the Straw Bear and other festivals.

There is local scope for doing more with our heritage. According to the 2017 Neighbourhood Plan scoping report, a majority of people felt that Bronze Age heritage should be promoted as a tourist attraction.

We will further enhance our heritage offer by:

- Developing a new heritage visitor centre.
- Developing a Heritage Footpath.
- Exploring new uses for the pits.

Ambition 5: Promoting Whittlesey to the world

We will develop a high-quality one hub that will detail all the fascinating and exciting cultural and historic assets and sights in and around Whittlesey.

A Market Town fit for the future – the ideas

Ambition 1 – Attracting and retaining high-skilled jobs

Economically, we will be a hub for niche, high-skilled sectors such as agri-tech where we already have a competitive advantage due our location and agricultural history.

Idea 1.1 – Skills Task Force

We will explore with local partners the scope for developing a Skills Task Force. The group would provide a liaison point between local businesses and educational providers, which currently does not exist. The group will be responsible for stimulating and coordinating action on:

- Horizon-scanning future skills demand.
- Facilitating conversations with providers about the suitability of current provision in light of future demand.
- Identifying work experience / placement / apprenticeship opportunities at local businesses – this element of the work would be coordinated with the Combined Authority’s apprenticeship brokerage programme.
- Re-training and up-skilling adult workers – as part of this, the Task Force would explore the scope for greater provision of adult education at Sir Harry Smith.

Idea 1.2: Developing an incubator space

In line with the commitment of Combined Authority partners to support business innovation, networking and growth, we want to pilot an incubator space for market towns.

We are well-placed to try this as recent data and local feedback suggest that highly-skilled professionals and entrepreneurs are increasingly moving to Whittlesey. We also have excellent access to ultra-fast broadband. However, business support in the town is currently limited.

Taking these factors into account, we are keen to explore how an incubator space can be delivered most effectively in the market town context. The incubator could offer some combination of:

- Affordable space.
- Networking opportunities within Whittlesey and across the other three towns.
- Access to investment in various forms.
- Links to strategic partners across the CA.
- Business development and commercialisation support.

We would consult with local SMEs, including recently created businesses, to scope the precise mixture of needs they have. We would also look at successful models from elsewhere to see how these needs might be met. And we would be delighted to share what we learn with partners across the Combined Authority and beyond.

Idea 1.3 – Improving access to education opportunities

We know that people living in Whittlesey who want to learn outside of the town often struggle to do so. As a result, people are denied opportunities to further their education and develop their skills.



We will work with and influence transport providers to improve the regularity and reliability of routes to education providers such as new University of Peterborough and the iMET centre in Alconbury Weald. We will also press for routes that start earlier and finish later in the day.

Idea 1.4 – Continuing to build high-quality homes

We will continue to build a range of high-quality homes including executive houses and affordable provision for young professionals. We will ensure that these are built outside of flood zones and at the most affordable specifications. We will also guide development in such a way that maintains open undeveloped open spaces between us and Peterborough. This will maintain our distinct identity and avoid the risk of creating a contiguous ribbon of development.

Ambition 2: Revitalising the centre of town

We have already made some successful changes to the town centre, such as the relocation of the bus station. This has breathed some new life into the town square, which is also home to well-regarded and, in some cases, award-winning venues. We think a few further changes to the centre of town could better serve residents and attract more people.

Idea 2.1 – New uses for the square

We propose to change the permitted use of the square, as necessary, to allow local bars and restaurants to serve food and drink outside with applying for a licence (or by simplifying and speeding up the process for obtaining one).

We will then work with those businesses and others to develop a programme of events across the year. The overall purpose is to create a ‘piazza’ feel in the square, attracting locals and visitors alike, to eat, drink, mingle and relax, especially in the spring and summer months.

Idea 2.2 – Enhancing the market

We will discuss with the market traders, and others who may be affected, ways to enhance the market. This could include the potential benefits, and any possible negatives, of re-locating it to the High Causeway. This has the potential of revitalising and refreshing the market by bringing it to the attention of more shoppers. If relocation is not a viable option, we would explore other ways to enhance the market. Different options could be matched by a marketing campaign.

Idea 2.3 – Attracting a new hotel

As Whittlesey and the other market towns in Fenland continue to grow, as we work together to make better tourist use of the waterways that connect us, and as we in Whittlesey develop our heritage offer – see Ambition 3 – more and more people will visit Fenland.

As our population grows and become homes to more start-ups and people in professional occupations, there will greater demand for high-end meeting and conference facilities.

We think there is potential to attract a high-end chain to open a new hotel in or around Whittlesey. If there is support for this idea, we would discuss with potentially interested hotel chains what level of demand that would make a new hotel feasible. We would when take steps with partners to deliver that demand.

While we are looking to attract a hotel in or around Whittlesey, we believe this would bring benefits to Fenland as a whole.

Idea 2.4 – Exploring the scope for pedestrianising Market Street

We have already shown that we are willing to take bold action to bring new life into the centre of town. As well introducing new use to the square, we want to explore the scope for pedestrianising Market Street. This could significantly boost retail and leisure by creating a large and welcoming space where visitors and shoppers can stroll and relax. It would also reduce emissions and generally change the look and feel of the centre of town.

Idea 2.5 – Installing smart totem signage

An important part of strengthening our high street is making it feel like more of a ‘destination’. Totem signage is used very effectively in Cambridge and Peterborough to direct people around the town to key sites of interest. Totem signs are visible and attractive, and can also contain details of local historical interest, to highlight the cultural history of the town. They very clearly convey the message that the town is a place people would want to visit.



Idea 2.6 – Trialling free on-street Wi-Fi

The integration of the digital and the physical is a key technological trend of the moment. This can be seen most clearly in augmented reality and the Internet of Things. In order to support our physical high street to thrive, we will ensure it is digitally connected, through the provision of on-street Wi-Fi. This currently exists in Cambridge and has recently been launched in Ely. As well as giving people a reason to be on the high street, it also increases digital inclusion, by supporting those who would be unable to afford a data-heavy phone contract.

Idea 2.7 - Using empty shops for public consultation

We want Growing Fenland to be the start of an ongoing dialogue with residents and local partners about the future of Whittlesey. To be a market town fit for the future, we will need to keep crowd-sourcing ideas and proposals. At the time of writing, there are some empty shop spaces on Market Street. We will explore the possibility of using these empty shops for public consultations on what more local people would like to see happen in Whittlesey.

Ambition 3: Modernising transport

We need to tackle congestion in Whittlesey and reduce our reliance on the car as the primary means for getting around, even for short journeys. According to the 2017 scoping consultation report for the Whittlesey Neighbourhood Plan, 83% of respondents to a survey conducted for the scoping research said that they would make journeys by public transport, walking and cycling if services were improved.

Idea 3.1 – EV Community Car Club

Electric vehicles are becoming increasingly commonplace, and as concerns about air quality intensify there are pressing health reasons for making this change. We want to be on the front foot here, by installing new electric vehicle charging infrastructure. As has worked in some other, more rural areas,



we will establish a community car club using electric vehicles, starting with a few vehicles, then increasing as there is demand. This will help people access opportunities outside the bus running hours.

In Harbury, Warwickshire, a village of 3,000 people, they have managed to generate enough usage to support two electric vehicles. These are operated by a private company and come with insurance for drivers 19 and over. There is a one-off lifetime fee to begin with of £50, and then an hourly payment. This could also be used for community services, such as services to help the elderly get to appointments or the shops.

Idea 3.2 - New cycling infrastructure and pathways

Based on travel to work patterns, we are the most car-dependent town in Fenland. We want to become a much more cycle-friendly place. This could mean:

- Developing new cycle pathways in the town centre and out to nearby attractions such as Great Fen.
- Create new cycling parking facilities in and around the town to encourage people to use to get to work and get around to town. These would be well located, secure facilities, to make sure this is a viable alternative to the car.

Ambition 4: Developing our heritage offer

We want to share our rich heritage with the world. We already have a local museum, a local history society and, as set out above, historical buildings and other assets.

We want to develop this further. As well as attracting people and investment into the town, it will give Whittlesey the kind of distinctive identity and offer that is crucial to future-facing market towns.

There is already support for this kind of idea. The scoping report for the neighbourhood plan concluded that: “Most people feel that it is easy to access countryside within the Parish and that the countryside should be promoted to tourists.”²

Idea 4.1 – Developing a new Heritage Visitor Centre

The discovery of six bronze age boats at Must Farm has been hailed as “the most incredible find” in archaeological terms.³ The vessels are currently being restored and conserved outside of the town.

A new visitor centre, linked to or perhaps expanding upon the existing local museum, would breathe life into the town, telling the story of Whittlesey and Fenland as a whole from the Bronze Age to today.

The discovery and history of the boats could form the centrepiece of the story we want to tell at the centre. However, we would also want to use the visitor centre to bring attention to other aspects of the heritage. The original pumps that were used to drain the fens are currently out of public view. We want to bring these into the heritage centre alongside other local antiquities.

² <http://www.whittleseytc.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ATT00098.pdf>

³ <https://www.opportunitypeterborough.co.uk/exploring-the-lost-world-of-must-farm/>



Idea 4.2 - Developing the Heritage Footpath

We also want residents and visitors alike to explore everything else Whittlesey has to offer. This includes St Andrew's and St Mary's churches, the 17th Century Buttercross in the town square, and the local museum. On the outskirts of the town there is the Great Fen, King's Dyke Nature Reserve and, of course, Must Farm. However, existing wayfinding does not direct local people or visitors to these assets.

We will look for investment in a Heritage Footpath that guides people to these remarkable assets. This will bring together the Whittlesey heritage experience in a coherent way, tell our town story effectively, and encourage people to spend more time and money in the town.

We would also ensure that the footpath is integrated with any new and developed cycle pathways.

Idea 4.3 - Exploring new uses for the pits

On the edge of Whittlesey are series of pits, former quarries, which are currently home to an astonishing array of biodiversity and archaeological digs. There is already growing interest in the pits due to the recent and remarkable historical finds there.

We want to build on this and encourage further leisure and recreational use in and around the pits as part of the heritage trail. This could include nature trails, archaeological showcases and heritage features.

Ambition 5: Promoting Whittlesey to the world

Idea 5.1 – Developing an online platform

An online digital platform will clearly present these opportunities to residents, would-be residents and visitors. This will be smartly designed and showcase the very best the town has to offer. It will also be the central repository of information for the town's residents.

This is an idea already in use in some of the most successful market towns in the UK. Towns such as Skipton and Ludlow have used this approach to great effect. For example, if you search "Ludlow" on google, the first link takes you to the town's page. This portrays the town as very attractive, and provides information about what is on in the town, and where the best places to visit are.

By contrast, a google search for "Whittlesey" takes you first to the Wikipedia page for the town. The second result is a list of things to do in Whittlesey which includes more things to do in Peterborough.

We need to change the narrative; we could promote Whittlesey as a market town with city opportunities. Offering all the great things about being a market town – the sense of community, the heritage, the closeness to the countryside – while being a short trip away to the facilities and amenities of Peterborough. This is similar to the way some towns around London promote their proximity to the capital as offering the best of both town and city life. See, for examples, Ashford's 'Closer than you think' campaign: http://www.ashfordbestplaced.co.uk/ashford_closer_than_you_think/



Example: The Ludlow website

