

BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of: Paul Claussen: Executive Member for Economic Development & Growth

To: Cabinet: 20th September 2021

Author: Rob Walker, Executive Director

Subject: Thetford Town Centre Thriving Places Programme and the Maharajah Ranjit & Duleep Singh Park

Purpose: To update Cabinet on progress with the Thetford Town Centre activity programme, and seek approval to progress the name change of “Butten Island” in Thetford to “Maharajah Ranjit & Duleep Singh Park”

Recommendation(s):

- 1) To note the recent progress in supporting the ongoing regeneration and growth in Thetford Town centre under the Council’s Thriving Places programme, and future plans to support the Town.
- 2) To approve the renaming of Butten Island in Thetford to “Maharajah Ranjit & Duleep Singh Park” in recognition of the important cultural and historical connections to Thetford

1.0 BACKGROUND

“Thriving Places” in Thetford Town Centre, recent programme highlights

- 1.1 Thetford is one of Norfolk’s most important centres, the fourth largest settlement in the county, the biggest single economy in Breckland, and home to a range of nationally significant industries and specialisms. With significant housing growth already underway, it also represents one of the strongest growth potential sites in the region and is of key strategic importance to the district. Under the Council’s ‘Thriving Places’ agenda we are working with partners to bring forward a programme of complimentary activity to continue to enhance the Town and support its positive, inclusive, economic growth. Key highlights in the recent success of the Town Centre include:
- 1.2 *Riverside Complex* – an £8m asset, constructed in 2015 via Breckland Bridge, which has shown remarkable resilience despite tough trading conditions nationally. As of September 2021 the complex is 100% let, and home to a mix of vibrant regional businesses.
- 1.3 *Private Sector Investment* – The Town Centre is currently benefitting from over substantial investment from the private sector, with significant new activity including the renovation and reimagining of the Former M&Co site into 5 new river-facing units and workshops facing a redeveloped customer car park. which is due for completion early 2022. At a time of wider disinvestment from high streets nationally this is an incredibly positive sign for confidence in Thetford and the future opportunities it will generate.
- 1.4 *Market Towns Initiative Investment & Public Realm Enhancements* – The Council uses the Market Town’s Initiative to unlock local opportunities and provide impactful locally directed investment. Under the current programme, since 2021, MTI has invested almost £70k in important new public facilities in and around the Town Centre Including new heritage-style footway lighting columns on Spring Walk, soon to be extended with a further

9x columns on Butten Island, as well as new recreational street furniture providing chess and table tennis tables for public use

- 1.5 *River Clean Up Programme* – Recognising the important role of the river in the vibrancy of the Town Centre, the Council has invested over £40k in activity to clean up and improve public realm along the river corridor. This includes the removal of the disused river boat café which had fallen into disrepair and become an eyesore on the river, enhanced public realm and an intensive programme of weeding, painting, planting and street cleaning.
- 1.6 *Thetford Place Branding Project* – Securing the services of the nationally renowned Hemingway Design agency, who have delivered exceptional place branding projects in York, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Crewe, Andover and many others, and delivered bold, large-scale events in Redcar, Lowestoft, Liverpool, Blackburn and London’s Southbank Centre. They are currently working on new place branding vision for Thetford due for winter 2021.

Proposed Maharajah Ranjit & Duleep Singh Park

- 1.7 Thetford has a close and highly significant connection with Duleep Singh, the last Maharajah of the Punjab, and the first Sikh to settle in Britain in Norfolk in 1854. Duleep Singh’s second son, Frederick, was one of Thetford’s most prominent benefactors, giving the town Ancient House as well as his personal collections. This connection continues today, with Thetford remaining a prominent cultural site for the British-Punjabi community, and for Punjabi visitors from overseas.
- 1.8 Situated by the Little Ouse River, Butten Island is the largest of the river islands within Thetford Town centre and offers an accessible and useable leisure and recreational area for local communities and visitors. It is also home to a life-size bronze statue of Maharajah Duleep Singh which was commissioned by the Maharajah Duleep Singh Centenary Trust and unveiled by the Prince of Wales in 1999. This was the first major piece of Sikh public art outside India, the statue is seen to symbolise bringing together history and culture.
- 1.9 Butten Island is owned by Breckland District Council, and as owner the Council can formally apply any name suitable to the site. Its current moniker is believed to link to several local family connections and is variously referred to as both Butten and Button Island locally and in print.

Future Programme highlights and proposals

- 1.10 Whilst there are significant reasons to be positive, and celebrate the activity underway and delivered in Thetford, there remains both significant opportunity and challenge. The Town is home to some of the most deprived neighbourhoods nationally, and there are several challenges relating to skills, access to employment opportunity, and social mobility. There are also identified significant investment needs to help unlock opportunity and enable the Town to achieve its full potential. As a result, the Council is committed to a continued, and enhanced, set of activity to help meet the challenges and unlock the potential of the Town. Current plans and activity include (although are not limited to):
- 1.11 *Future Breckland and Thetford* – The year-long Future Breckland programme is helping define, at a detailed spatial level, the evidence base and game-changing projects which will help unlock future potential. The expert team leading this commission are due to commence the Thetford activity end 2021 and conclude March 22. This work will be critical in helping shape investment opportunities for the future.
- 1.12 *Thetford Investment Programme* – Linked to the Future Breckland Project, the Council is already seeking support for a nationally funded programme of investments worth almost

£20m in the centre of Thetford. These would include projects around urban transformation, connectivity, public realm and transport. If approaches are successful, a full report will be brought to Council for approval.

- 1.13 *Thetford Events* – Working with partners to help generate a substantial event or series of events following the success of the Hemmingway Design Project. This would seek to capitalise on some of Thetford's unique assets and strengths and help provide compelling activity for both residents and visitors alike which helps anchor Thetford's rightful place in the regions cultural map.

2.0 **OPTIONS**

- 2.1 Note the report, and progress the proposed renaming of Butten Island (Recommended)
- 2.2 Note the report, and do nothing, keeping the current name of Butten Island

3.0 **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 3.1 The Council's "Thriving Places" agenda prioritises innovations at a local level which help enhance local areas, increase public and visitor engagement, and increases investment in local areas. It is believed this change, whilst modest in scale, could have significant positive impacts in regard to all these elements.
- 3.2 The renaming of the island will enhance the Punjab history and culture and the significance to the town of Thetford, encouraging visitors. It will also provide a further national-level point of interest to highlight the strength and diversity of Thetford's culture, and significance within historic and modern UK.

4.0 **EXPECTED BENEFITS**

- 4.1 The cultural legacy of Duleep Singh is a significant for the Thetford/Elveden area, so the renaming of Butten Island provides a unique opportunity to recognise and engage people in the cultural heritage.
- 4.2 The Maharajah Duleep Singh Family have left important and valuable legacies, embedded in the people, buildings and landscape of the area. A number of trails and festivals have been recognised over the years taking you across Thetford, Norfolk and beyond, to follow in the footsteps of these significant historical figures, highlighting influences and bringing their stories to life.

5.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 **Corporate Priorities**

- 5.1.1 This proposal clearly supports our Corporate Plan's Thriving Places objective of developing our local economy to be vibrant with continued growth.

5.2 **Financial**

- 5.2.1 There are no identified costs because of this proposal. The name change will not generate any direct costs and all printed references to the island within the Council will be replaced naturally through their own lifecycle requirements following implementation.

5.3 Stakeholders / Consultation / Timescales

- 5.3.1 Key stakeholders and leaders have been involved in the development and concept behind the renaming, including all local Ward Members.
- 5.3.2 Following Council approval a celebratory renaming event will be scheduled to help promote the new name and work with community members to celebrate and recognise its new title.

6.0 WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED

- 6.1 This specific proposal should directly impact all Thetford wards through increased footfall within local communities and visitors.

7.0 ACRONYMS

- 7.1 None

Background papers:- None

Lead Contact Officer

Name and Post: Andrew Holdsworth, Assistant Director Economy & Growth
Telephone Number: 07500856675
Email: andrew.holdsworth@breckland.gov.uk

Key Decision: No

Exempt Decision: No

This report refers to a Discretionary Service