Commercial heart of Carrickfergus to be restored

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The funding package has been earmarked through HLF's Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) programme and includes a development grant of £49,500 to support the drawing up of more detailed proposals to secure the full award.

The THI programme helped to regenerate conservation areas that have suffered serious social and economic decline. The programme encouraged partnerships of local organisations to carry out repairs and other works to a number of historic buildings, structures or spaces within these defined areas, aiding social and economic regeneration and helping to improve the quality of life for all those who live, work or visit there.

In Northern Ireland HLF has invested £19.7m in 24 THI schemes in villages, towns and cities across the country from Omagh to Carnlough and Portaferry to Derry~Londonderry. More than 100 underused, dilapidated and derelict buildings have been brought back into sustainable use to provide 27,000sq metres of much needed community space and business units.

The programme also acts as a catalyst for further regeneration by attracting addition investment from the public and private sector. Every £1m of HLF funding in Northern Ireland attracts £1.5m from partner organisations, making a huge impact on the local economy and the conservation of our heritage.

Commenting on the announcement, Head of HLF Northern Ireland, Paul Mullan, said: "We are delighted to award this financial package in support of these ambitious plans which will breathe new life into the commercial centre of Carrickfergus. The proposals will provide the town with a much needed boost by conserving its unique character through the restoration of numerous historic properties and by helping to attract businesses and shoppers to the area. It will stimulate the local economy and contribute greatly to the ongoing efforts to regenerate the town."

Carrickfergus is one of the oldest and most historic towns in Northern Ireland. It was established in 1170 by the Anglo-Normans and became the powerbase of their occupation of Ulster. Led by the famous knight John de Courcy construction on the first castle began on the Rock of Fergus to which the town owes it name. The town's medieval street pattern which dates from 1608 survives along with the 12th century church of St Nicholas, one of Ireland's few remaining examples of a medieval church that remains in use.

The scheme will help to re-establish the town as a vibrant, attractive and prosperous place in which to live, work and visit through the regeneration the town's commercial core. Led by Carrickfergus Borough Council in partnership with Carrickfergus Regeneration Partnership, the THI will focus on four clusters within the conservation area which contribute to the town's special architectural and historic character. The areas of Market Place, West Street, High Street and North Street have a number of vacant and underused buildings which will be repaired and refurbished to bring them back into use, improving the visual appearance of the townscape and aiding the sustainable regeneration of the wider area.

A broad programme of activities will be used to encourage the local community to get involved in the project including education initiatives, talks, demonstrations and the production of promotional and information materials. It is also hoped a number of apprenticeships will be made available for construction and traditional building skills students.

Welcoming the announcement, Alderman Billy Ashe, Mayor of Carrickfergus Borough, commented: “This is fantastic news for Carrickfergus and I could not be more delighted. We were one of 22 projects across the UK competing for funding for our Townscape Heritage Initiative and we were one of only 12 projects that secured the resources allowing us to move onto the next round of the application process. This will enable us to appoint a consultant to drive the second round application forward and I hope that ultimately we will be successful in securing the total funding amount of £1.7m to sustain our historic town centre for future generations.”

While HLF will continue to support local authorities like Carrickfergus Borough Council to restore multiple buildings within conservation areas through its updated Townscape Heritage (TH) programme; a new grant programme, Heritage Enterprise, opens to applications this month (April 2013), offering grants of between £100,000 and £5m. The grant programme is considered to be a pioneering new funding opportunity, designed to stimulate local economic growth by unlocking the commercial potential of new and unused historic buildings.