

MARKET TOWNS PROGRAMME - WINTER UPDATE

8.0 Overview and Scrutiny Comments

8.2 The Panel discussed the Market Towns Programme – Winter Update report at its meeting on 4th December 2024.

8.3 The Panel engaged in considerable debate relating to the provision of a stage within St Neots Market Square. Councillor Chapman was of the opinion that St Neots Town Council had not been consulted about the proposed stage but noted that the responsibility for the stage would lie with them under the proposal within the report. Councillor Jennings expressed concern that the current proposal would require HDC funding and felt that the legitimacy of the stage project should be established before a financial commitment was made. The Panel also felt that support of the stage in general by residents of St Neots was debatable. It was noted that a current survey asked respondents to choose a preference between three stage designs however there was no option to choose no stage thus implying support for the scheme through completion of the survey which may not be the case. Councillor Jennings observed that an early consultation on the project in July appeared to have had 25 respondents and felt that due diligence was needed for this capital investment. The Panel were advised that the current survey was to ascertain a preferable option from the three available however further public consultation would be held in the future to establish whether residents would support a stage within the Market Square or not. It was also clarified that funding for the project, should it proceed would come from unspent legacy monies and CIL funding. It was noted that an alternative option for a performance area within the square would be a temporary stage, however this would need to be erected and dismantled and stored whilst not in use. It was assured that formal legal consultation would be undertaken as part of a planning application for a permanent stage should the proposal progress to that point. The Panel further heard that multiple options to generate footfall within the Market Square were being investigated and worked up so that an informed decision could be made on how to proceed with the best interests of residents and local businesses considered.

8.4 Councillor Chapman also observed that the revised plans for the Priory Centre would involve a space for performances and bands and noted that this would create competition with the proposed Market Square stage which is in close proximity to the Priory Centre. The Panel heard that the intention was to provide the town with multiple options and alternative uses for the spaces and was not intended to create conflict or competition. Councillor Chapman expressed

further concern that the renewed lease documents had taken 8 months to prepare and be presented to the St Neots Town Council, however the Town Council was being asked to make a swift decision on their acceptance of the terms. The Panel heard that the Town Council had been asked for their support and compliance in principle whilst the conversation surrounding the terms of their lease was ongoing. It was acknowledged that it was a risk to continue with the projects whilst awaiting their decision and would then adjust the course following the outcome of this decision.

- 8.5 It was confirmed to the Panel, following a question from Councillor Chapman, that the legacy money had been used for the Shop Front Grants Scheme in St Neots rather than having to be returned to the CPCA.
- 8.6 Councillor Pickering welcomed a positive vision and thinking for St Neots town centre but questioned whether the communications plan around the current and future works in the Market Square, including the Old Falcon property, were robust as it was noted that a recent Freedom of Information (FOI) request had been made relating to the Old Falcon and that this was being circulated around residents rather than HDC controlling the conversation. It was also noted that the completion date of the works had slipped to April 2025 and that communications on the end date had been confusing to the point of misleading. The Panel were concerned about reputational damage to the Council caused by ineffective communications throughout the project and would welcome clarification on the work planned to repair public trust. The Panel heard that positive stories on the shop fronts which had been improved via the grant scheme were being compiled and would be shared to the public. The communications plan was focused on an overview of the project as there was a degree of commerciality on projects therefore generalised finances suitable for a public session had been used. The Panel acknowledged that there was a need to maintain commercial sensitivity however given that the FOI relating to the Old Falcon was now in the public domain, communication should be done to clarify the benefits of the project and to maintain transparency. It was also advised that signage within the town centre advised of a 60 week project timescale and that some elements of the project had been completed ahead of time. Councillor Jennings further observed that works to the bridge had been scheduled for August and September but were yet to commence, the Panel heard that there had been a reprogramming of some activity due to the cast iron mane and that this would be picked up outside of the meeting space. The Panel heard that it was felt to be important to concentrate on delivering the project for the benefit of the town and its residents and that by doing so would help to restore the Council's reputation. It was also assured that the Council's communication team were constantly reviewing the communications plan to best manage the process. Councillor Jennings proposed that a further report

detailing the FOI request and response as well as the communications plan should be brought to the next meeting of the Panel.

- 8.7 Councillor Martin enquired whether the forthcoming mayoral elections in May 2025 posed a risk to current funding of projects in the event of a change to the elected mayor or administration. The Panel heard that dates and projects had been agreed for all funding secured to date and this would be protected via the legal contracts in place. It was agreed that further conversation on this would be picked up offline.
- 8.8 Councillor Corney observed that whilst in general progress in Ramsey had been positive, more succinct communications could have clarified the plans for the town and minimised the negative reaction from residents in relation to car parking re-provision. It was also noted that the new digital screen would be erected during the future planned works for the town, and that the issues with the existing screen will be resolved. The Panel heard that lessons had been learnt about the digital screens project and that future plans needed to include maintenance over the lifespan of the screens rather than concentrate on the install. It was confirmed that included within the next quarterly report would be a confirmation on how businesses in market towns but outside of the town centres could be supported.
- 8.9 Following the discussion, the Panel were informed that their comments would be added to the Cabinet report in order for an informed decision to be made on the report recommendations.