



# The Priory Centre, St Neots

## Statement of Community Engagement

February 2024

# Statement of Community Engagement

## COLLABORATIVE DESIGN APPROACH

Throughout the design process, regular workshops have been run with the client stakeholders and the general public. This has enabled a responsive process where many aspects of the proposed designs have been tested and adapted to ensure they are engaging and relevant for the contemporary users.

This collaborative design process is broken down into the following categories:

### Workshops

Regular sessions on site with the client exploring designs with drawings, models and in-situ mock-ups.

### Public Engagement

Consultation events on site, allowing the public to see the proposals through drawings and models in the space itself. This is supported by online sharing of the display boards and questionnaires to capture feedback which are shared at the next public event and online.

### Stakeholder Consultation

Public consultation is supported by early and continual engagement with statutory and advisory bodies, community groups and key user groups.

### Building Development Group

A selected group of volunteers, the group meeting throughout the design and delivery of the project to ensure the needs of end users contribute meaningfully to the design.

## SUMMARY OF EVENTS

### Stakeholder Interviews

*14th-19th September 2023*

Individual interviews with Priory Centre staff, HDC and SNTC councillors undertaken to discuss outcomes of the priorities event, a review of the initial GA plans, as well as retrieve feedback on individual priorities for the development, how the building and amenities are currently used and how each individual saw their future use.

### Building Development Group Priorities Event

*19th October 2023*

An initial engagement event with Priory Centre staff, HDC and SNTC councillors to define the role of the Building Development Group, a summary of the brief and a workshop to agree on project priorities.

### Building Development Group Workshop

*15th November 2023*

Discussion of approach towards low to high level intervention in response to developing business plan. Physical model and drawings reviewed alongside MEA costing.

In person feedback was received. With a decision to proceed with high level interventions to maximise budget.

### Public Engagement Event

*13th-16th December 2023*

Invited stakeholders, councillors, building users and members of public.

Presentation boards shared the proposed designs with closer detail on each of the key areas of development; the Great Hall, Guest Hall, Foyer and North End.

Feedback received via online survey, paper questionnaire and written comment cards.



BDG Group Workshop, 15th November 2023

**VIABLE BUSINESS PLAN**  
More often busy, with capacity to flex, supporting a range of businesses and services and covering costs

**CHANGE PERCEPTIONS**  
Just off the market square, enjoying the river, for special occasions and everyday

**ENHANCING EXISTING PERFORMANCE**  
Making better halls for better quality events

**EXPANDING THEATRE CAPACITY**  
A step change in cultural and community events delivery

**BECOME SUSTAINABLE**  
Enhance building performance to reduce operational energy demands through smart operation and prioritise the use of 'low carbon' materials

**BECOME INCLUSIVE**  
Supporting generous use for all

BDG Group Priorities Event, 19th October 2023



Public Engagement Event, 13th-16th December 2023

**PUBLIC CONSULTATION: BRIEFING**

**Collaborative Design Development**

AOC share the belief that the participation of local people in the briefing process is critical to deliver an inclusive and viable building. The Priory Centre held consultation events to explore the needs of the local community.

The consultation boards, overleaf, were positioned around the foyer inviting attendees to explore the building and complete questionnaires to provide further input on local needs and ambitions.

**Stakeholder Outreach (including harder to reach groups)**

Further engagement with building users (Am Dram theatre groups, theatre technicians, U3A etc) achieved via public engagement and email.

The questionnaire/survey shared via Priory Centre social media platforms, Instagram and Facebook, to engage with those unable to attend the in-person events.

**Attendance and Quantum of Feedback**

Public Engagement events saw the attendance of over 500 people, held over the weekend of a pantomime as well as regular community bookings ensuring a wide spread of opinion.

Stakeholders shared consultation materials across social networks that spread outreach further. We received approximately 50 responses across paper and digital submissions.

Feedback from user groups has been useful for developing the design of the three key venue

spaces; the manner in which events take place and visitors use the building in the intervals, as well as staff and technician requirements for running the events and the shortfalls of the current centre.

Individual interviews proved useful in understanding how members of the public use the foyer and terrace area day-to-day, as well as what could be done to improve the marketing of the Priory Centre as a cultural venue.



The Priory Centre - Public Engagement Questionnaire

1. Have you visited The Priory Centre before

Yes

No

2. How long have you known about The Priory Centre and our activities?

Under 1 year

1-4 years

5-10 years

10+ years

3. Are you an artist or performer yourself, or do you work in the arts?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

4. The proposal considers the key priorities agreed with the Building Development Group (refer to boards 2 & 3). How would you prioritise these key aims?

|  | Very important        | Important             | Neutral               | Quite                 |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Viable Business Plan                    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 2. Changing Perceptions                    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 3. Making Flexible Public Rooms            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 4. Bigger and Better Range of Performances | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 5. Enhancing the Existing Look and Feel    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 6. Sustainable and Inclusive Refurbishment | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

5. Have we missed any key priorities in your opinion? If so, please state below

Enter your answer

6. Which of the following planned improvements (refer to board 3), are you keen to see implemented? Drag to reorder high to low priority (top to bottom)

- A New Great Hall
- Improved Guest Hall
- Generous Foyer
- New Town Council Spaces
- Connection to Riverside
- Changing Perceptions
- A Sustainable Building

7. Improved Great Hall (refer to Board 4)

Both the accessibility of the auditorium and the sightlines to the stage will be improved by updating the rake and layout of the seating. A new balcony will provide additional capacity for various events and performances.

Have you visited the existing Great Hall?

Yes

No

8. Would the proposals improve your experience of the Great Hall?

Yes, it would improve my experience

No, it would not affect my experience

It would adversely impact my experience

9. Please tell us why?

Enter your answer

10. Improved Guest Hall (refer to Board 5)

Capacity of the venue will be increased through enabling flexible access directly to the existing Moot room adjacent. New technical equipment will improve the venue for performance and events with mechanical ventilation. Visibility to the Riverside will be improved through new doors onto an external terrace balcony.

Would the proposed changes to the Guest Hall improve your experience of The Priory Centre?

# Analysis of Feedback

## Feedback from the online survey noted:

- All respondents had visited the centre before.
- 61% have known about The Priory Centre and its activities for over 10 years
- 70% felt that enhancing the existing look and feel of the building was very important. The most important out of the six key aims presented.
- 66% prioritised the proposal as a sustainable and inclusive refurbishment.
- The majority of respondents were keen to see the proposals for the new Great Hall implemented.
- The majority of respondents felt that a key proposal for the foyer was improving access to the Riverside.
- The majority of respondents felt neutrally towards the Priory Centre fulfilling a broader civic role and providing council office space.
- The majority of respondents felt that proposed changes to the key areas for change (Great Hall, Guest Hall, Foyer and North End) would improve their experience of the centre.
- 80% of respondents felt that when visiting community venues, that the café and WCs were the most important facilities.
- Majority of respondents travel to The Priory Centre via car or on foot.

Public Consultation Presentation Boards, 13th-16th December 2023

## Main Conclusions

The public engagement event and Building Development Group workshops were held concurrent to the design process throughout RIBA Stages 1, 2 and 3.

This process has enabled the design to respond to feedback as received, noting a desire to enhance external look and feel of the building, with changes focused on changing perceptions of the centre via the key approaches from Priory Lane and St Anselm Car Park. Proposed improvements to the building exterior respond to the existing built context.

Proposed interventions work with the developed business plan to support social and financial sustainability, whilst the introduction of new materials look to be chosen for their low-carbon and environmental value.

Improvements throughout the building look to improve the access and inclusivity for example proposals to provide level access into the Great Hall auditorium from street level.

As 80% of respondents felt that the café and WC were the most important facilities of the community venue, the WCs have been rearranged to better suit proposed capacities for the venue and the café reorganised to support the business case.



Illustration of the new Priory Centre from St Anselm Car Park



Illustration of the new Priory Centre Great Hall

## Impact upon the Design

Internally, the most significant changes are to the public foyer. The provision of a new reception and improved café bar have been driven through public and BDG engagement.

Feedback has driven the change with the relocation and refurbishment of the existing WCs to allow for a better visual connection to the Riverside from the Foyer.

These two key changes provide an improved connection to the auditorium, highlighting a direct route from the building entrance.

Direct access onto the riverside terrace is provided and made clear from the building entrance.



Illustration of The Priory Centre from Regatta Meadow



Illustration of the new Priory Centre Foyer and Cafe Bistro

## Next Steps

Engagement with the wider community and Building Development Group (BDG) will continue in order to ensure that proposals are still reflective of feedback.

The next steps, supporting continued public engagement, will include:

- A BDG Workshop to develop the look & feel of the interior, discussing materials, colours, textures and environmental impact.
- Process of material sampling
- Approval of Conditions



Illustration of The Priory Centre from St Anselm Car Park



Image of Existing Approach from St Anselm Car Park

*Statement prepared by AOC Architecture Ltd  
on behalf of Huntingdonshire District Council  
February 2024*