

Agenda item 5

For decision – Proposed cultural/community quarter - Saxonvale

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Summary

Interest is being expressed by several groups in the town in developing a cultural/community quarter within Saxonvale that enables local creative and community organisations to grow and add to the vitality of this part of the town centre.

This report briefs councillors on the opportunities to make something happen. It also highlights a number of challenges faced by local creative and community groups that relate to funding feasibility studies, the limited availability of non-residential space within the scheme and the lack of a strong and coordinated voice in negotiations with Mendip District Council and Acorn Property Group.

The report identifies a role for the Town Council to play in working with all interested parties to address these challenges.

Background

Mendip's planning policy, Acorn Property Group's emerging masterplan and FTC's position statement on Saxonvale envisage a mixed-use solution to the development of the site including non-residential as well as residential uses. FTC has gone further by suggesting that space should be provided for cultural and community activity that will enhance the town as a destination as well as enabling a number of local community groups to thrive.

This reflects the growing interest in the town in developing a cultural and community quarter at Saxonvale – a quarter that builds on the presence of the Silk Mill Studios and provides new space for contemporary art display and education, the provision of maker spaces and the interpretation of Frome's heritage on a scale that existing facilities in the town don't allow. It could also provide a home for organisations such as the Frome Weavers, the Frome Town Band and others that have a pressing need to move from existing premises.

The opportunity

Amongst the ideas is the acquisition and fit out of the former Weston Warehouse, a former industrial building which extends to 11,000 sq. ft. on four floors. This proposal is being led by Black Swan Arts (BSA) who have developed an outline business case for the Weston Warehouse, which it would turn into an art gallery, with two gallery spaces, together with education and digital spaces, workspaces, a café and a shop. It is possible that the building could be shared with other community/cultural groups including the Frome Heritage Museum, Frome Weavers and Frome Town Band.

It is understood that the Silk Mill wishes to expand to address a large and growing waiting list for artists' workspace and has registered interest in the vacant building that adjoins the Silk Mill that was formerly the Notts Industries offices.

Together, these projects could make a real difference to the ability of these organisations to grow and thrive and would add vitality to this important town centre development.

The challenges

So far, the indication is that Mendip District Council (MDC) as landowner and Acorn Property Group as developer are alive to the opportunities and have made time available to hear from the groups involved.

However, significant challenges are faced by the various groups involved. They include:

- The fact that at the time of writing this report only 45,000 sq. ft. of non-residential space has been identified within the scheme. As a result, local community organisations will be pitched against commercial investors and operators for the same buildings when bids are invited in late May/early June 2019.
- The lack of funding available for feasibility studies that would amongst other things address the condition and value of buildings, build and fit out costs, operational costs, revenue generation and the availability of investment funding.
- The lack of a strong and coordinated voice in negotiations with MDC and Acorn.

How these challenges could be overcome

It is proposed that FTC plays an enabling role by:

- Representing the interests of the various community organisations involved in negotiations with MDC and Acorn; amongst other things FTC should attempt to secure more non-residential space within the Saxonvale scheme and the ringfencing of specific buildings for cultural/community use
- Providing some funding for essential feasibility studies. It is recommended that the Deputy Town Clerk brings detailed costed proposals to councillors as soon as possible.

Recommendations

1. Authority is delegated to the Deputy Town Clerk to:
 - a. represent the interests of local creative/community organisations in negotiations with MDC and Acorn Property Group
 - b. try to secure more non-residential space within the Saxonvale scheme and the ringfencing of specific buildings for cultural/community use
2. Bring a report back to councillors setting out proposals for the funding of essential feasibility studies