

Agenda item 13

For decision – Proposed cultural destination - Saxonvale

Author: Peter Wheelhouse, Economic Development & Regeneration Manager & Deputy Town Clerk

Summary

This report seeks councillor approval to commission a study into the feasibility of turning the former Weston Warehouse at Saxonvale into a new cultural destination. This builds on interest principally from the Black Swan Arts and the Frome Museum in the opportunity to provide new gallery facilities and space for the interpretation of Frome's heritage. The study would investigate how the building could be converted, how the acquisition and capital works could be funded and the scope for collaboration between local partners.

Background

At Town Matters Committee on 24 April, Cllrs received a report that highlighted the growing interest in the town in creating new cultural facilities at Saxonvale. Those facilities would build on the presence of the Silk Mill Studios and provide 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. Principally, the interest has come from the Black Swan Arts and Frome Museum but other groups have registered their interest too e.g. Frome Weavers. Cllrs agreed to receive proposals for some feasibility work as soon as possible after the election.

The report also highlighted that the amount of non-residential space proposed by developers Acorn Property Group i.e. 45,000 sq. ft. was likely to be a constraining factor and may result in community interests being pitched against commercial ones when it came to bidding for space. Cllrs agreed to delegate authority to the Deputy Town Clerk to negotiate with Mendip District Council and Acorn to secure the maximum possible amount of non-residential space within the Saxonvale scheme and a ringfencing of space to be used for cultural and community purposes. Those discussions are continuing.

The opportunity

The Council's initiative is welcomed by Mendip/Acorn and they have confirmed that time will be given to enable some feasibility work to be undertaken before expressions of interest for space need to be lodged. The feasibility work needs to be completed by the end of July 2019 for consideration by Mendip/Acorn around the middle of August.

At the moment, attention is focused on the former Weston Warehouse, a three and a half storey former industrial building adjoining the Silk Mill. At the time of writing, we were waiting to hear whether Mendip/Acorn were willing to ringfence this building for cultural/community purposes. Whilst there are some that are calling for a design and build solution, Mendip/Acorn are steering interested parties towards the former Weston Warehouse at this stage. In any case, it is likely that proposed new buildings within the scheme would

command a relatively high value which may be unviable for a cultural/community use. Therefore, it is logical that any feasibility work should be focused on the former Weston Warehouse building.

The feasibility study

The starting point for any feasibility study must be an appreciation of the requirements of prospective occupiers. Black Swan Arts (BSA) have indicated that they would turn the building into an art gallery, with two gallery spaces, together with education and digital spaces, workspaces, a café and a shop. They are willing to entertain sharing with other community/cultural groups. Frome Museum are seeking to grow and support a feasibility study. Currently, they would consider either renting or a joint venture to deliver new gallery space.

Ultimately, it will be necessary to consider how the new venture would be operated and that would require detailed business planning work. But at this stage, the main requirement is to complete the following work:

- Condition survey and valuation of former Weston Warehouse
- Review concept, occupation requirements and the scope for collaboration between local partners
- Prepare feasibility options for the whole building
- Identify costs of acquisition and conversion (shell and core and full fit out) and funding options

To complete this work would require building surveying and valuation expertise as well as architectural and quantity surveying skills. Conversely, it is considered that there is sufficient knowledge within the Town Council, Black Swan Arts and the Museum to explore how this project could be funded.

Neither Black Swan Arts nor the Museum have cash available to finance feasibility work and so the proposal is for the Town Council to commission this work in consultation with Black Swan Arts and Frome Museum. Tenders would be invited from suitably qualified specialists.

It is recommended that an Earmarked Reserve (EMR) of £15,000 is set up to help fund early feasibility work. This would be financed using the Saxonvale capital receipt.

Benefits of this project

Potentially, the benefits of this project include:

- Protecting and enhancing a heritage building within the Saxonvale development
- Enabling a new cultural destination to be established with wider benefits for the Saxonvale scheme and Frome Town Centre in terms of vibrancy and footfall
- Supporting the growth of established cultural and community organisations

Recommendations

1. Delegate authority to the Deputy Town Clerk in consultation with the (to be appointed) lead Cllr for Saxonvale, Black Swan Arts and Frome Museum to prepare a brief and commission the feasibility study into the cultural/community use of the former Weston Warehouse at Saxonvale
2. Set up an EMR of £15,000 for this purpose utilising the capital receipt from the sale of FTC land at Saxonvale
3. Report back to Cllrs on the outcomes of the feasibility study