

**CONGLETON TOWN COUNCIL**  
**COMMITTEE REPORTS AND UPDATES**

<b>COMMITTEE:</b>	<b>Community &amp; Environment</b>		
<b>MEETING DATE AND TIME</b>	<b>3 November 2022 7.00pm</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>Town Hall</b>
<b>REPORT FROM</b>	<b>Jackie MacArthur – Deputy Chief Officer - Communities and Environment</b>		
<b>AGENDA ITEM REPORT TITLE</b>	<b>CEC Consultation on Town Centre Vitality Plan</b>		
<b>Background</b>	<p>Cheshire East Council is consulting on plans to revitalise Alsager, Congleton, Handforth, Knutsford, Middlewich, Nantwich, Poynton, Sandbach and Wilmslow. A bespoke plan, known as a town centre vitality plan' (TCVP), has been created for each centre highlighting potential priorities for the town. The Town Councils have been consulted on the development of the plans.</p> <p>The objective is to provide a clear sense of direction for supporting the town, that has public backing, so that actions can be taken forward as and when opportunities arise and resources allow. Knowing that proposals are supported by the public and has local authority support is important for attracting funding.</p> <p>This paper is to alert members to the consultation on the <a href="#">Congleton Town Vitality Plan</a> and seek common ground to formulate a response from the Community and Environment Committee ahead of the close of consultation on the 8 November 2022.</p>		
<b>The Plan</b>	<p><b>Congleton Priority Areas for Intervention</b></p> <p>The Congleton Town Centre Vitality Plan sets out the Priority Areas for intervention in Congleton, and the potential actions that will be taken to achieve these. For each of the ten priorities listed, respondents are asked to say whether they think the project is very important, fairly important, not very important or not at all important for the vitality of the town (also an option to say don't know) .</p> <p>There is also an option to write to the regeneration team at Cheshire East with more detailed comments on the proposals.</p> <p>To aid the discussion officers have given their thoughts on the 10 proposals and given some direction to what they believe could have the biggest impact on the vitality of the town.</p> <p>The proposals are:</p> <p><b>1. Opportunities for change around Congleton Museum and Police Station</b></p> <p>The historic Market Square space to the north of the Museum and Town Hall (currently a grass square surrounded by highway) is underutilised and has a poor relationship with the Museum and Town Hall. There is an opportunity to reinstate a function to the space that supports uses and functions within the Museum and</p>		

	<p>Town Hall and could accommodate wider town wide events/fairs e.g. a Makers Market or outdoor events space, which could support Congleton's evening economy.</p> <p><b>How</b></p> <p>CEC may have long-term aspirations for the area to be developed but it has been vacant for a number of years and there is scope for it to be better used as a communal area to host gatherings and events.</p> <p>Short term:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Temporary lighting.</li> <li>2. Coordination with landowners/licensing with Council to allow access Closure to car parking on event days.</li> <li>3. Removal of post &amp; rail fencing.</li> <li>4. Introduce seating and shelter for dwell space on non-event days.</li> </ol> <p><b>Officer Response:</b> This is an interesting proposal, it is a great site that is currently has no purpose. CTC and Congleton in Bloom has asked a number of times to use this site and so we believe we should welcome the opportunity to open up the space to public use and to improve the link from the bus station to this area. TOP LEVEL SUPPORT.</p> <p><b>2. Repairing the severance and impact of Mountbatten Way</b></p> <p>Mountbatten Way is an imposing feature. It is vehicle dominated, restricts pedestrian movement and creates severance between the town centre and its northern areas, including the park. This limits its ability to grow to the north. The roundabouts also create major barriers to pedestrian and cycle movement.</p> <p><b>How</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reducing the width of the vehicle carriageways, potentially reducing the number of vehicle lanes for a shorter distance for pedestrians to cross</li> <li>• Traffic calming along Mountbatten Way to slow traffic speeds and allow for more opportunities to incorporate pedestrian crossings. Reinstating historic Park Road across Mountbatten Way to connect the Park with the Town's historic Town Hall</li> <li>• Creating redevelopment opportunities to the south, with scope for active ground floor uses to front onto and address Mountbatten Way</li> <li>• Introduce more soft landscape features to visually enhance the corridor</li> <li>• Introduce cycle lanes and bus routes to promote more sustainable development</li> <li>• Expand the public realm on Bridge St to other key town centre streets. This should include High St, Lawton St, Mill St, Swan Bank and West St.</li> <li>• Progress a phased and costed study for Mountbatten Way reduce this severance.</li> <li>• Enhance the gateway node at Market St to reveal the town centre, which currently turns its back to Mountbatten Way.</li> <li>• Enhance the connection with the riverside particularly via Park Road</li> </ul>
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**Officer Response:** This was in the Town Centre Plan from 2012 and although would make the town more attractive for active travel and improve connectivity between the park and town centre, the costs will be huge and there are other priorities which are more likely to come to fruition. Level 2 support.

### 3. Enhancing Walking and Cycling

Congleton is connected to National Cycle Network Route 55 which links to Biddulph and Stoke-on-Trent and north to Macclesfield. However, there is potential to improve the walking and cycle network in Congleton and encourage more trips to be made to the town centre by active modes. Support the introduction of high-quality safe cycling routes throughout the town. Cycle hubs linked to improve green links and introduce secure, safe cycle parking.

#### How

- Explore design options to create a joined-up walking and cycling network through the town centre. Explore options for West Heath to Congleton Town Centre.
- Explore options for the connection between Congleton Railway Station and Town Hall
- Provision of new/enhanced cycle routes along the River Dane.

**Officer Response:** This is in line with proposals supported in the Local Transport Plan, however for Town Centre Vitality we do not believe this priority will have the greatest impact on the vitality of the town and suggest level 2 for priority.

### 4. Opportunities for change around Market Hall

The areas north of the Market Hall are in a key location, with direct access and visibility from Bridge Street and Mountbatten Way. A number of barriers to development in this area currently exist including the change in levels, sites in multiple ownerships and historic buildings in structural disrepair. The sites collectively have huge potential for a new development which can:

- Provide a mix of uses such as retail, leisure and residential
- Improved frontage onto Mountbatten Way, Mill Street and Market Street
- Improve links from shopping areas along Bridge Street through to Market Street, Mountbatten Way and onto the river and park
- More efficient parking solutions to allow land to be used for town centre uses.

#### How

There is an opportunity to look at different sites within this area collectively, either informally with different landowners coming together or using a master planning or development framework approach.

**Officer Response:** We believe improving this area could have the greatest impact on the town and as there is a proactive developer already linked and working on the site this priority should be promoted and supported at the highest level.

## 5. Showcasing Congleton's Heritage

Congleton boasts a number of high quality heritage buildings including the Grade II\* Town Hall which sits at the centre of a historic street. A heritage trail is available providing details of a number of buildings of heritage value. Considerable scope exists to make more of the Town's heritage assets.

### How

Advancements in technology has opened up lots of new opportunities to showcase heritage assets in new and exciting ways. The use of QR codes or apps mean that the current trail on the Town Council's website could be translated into an interactive walking tour. This could also be linked to other trails - ghost trail or pub trail and to use these to encourage visitors into other parts of the town.

To work with and share best practice with other local centres also looking to make more of their heritage assets

More events focused on heritage should also be considered showcasing the Centre's other assets including the River.

**Officers Response:** Further promotion of Congleton's fascinating heritage can only be good for the town. It is an action that could be fairly easily picked up between the museum, town council and partnership. If funding was available to enhance the heritage this is something that we would like to take advantage of. Level 2 support

## 6. Making more of community assets

There are a number of community assets in the Centre including buildings and parks. Consideration as to how these assets would be better utilised to attract footfall into the Centre and serve the needs of the local community.

### How

There are a number of public/community assets which sit within areas which have the potential to be brought back into more active use.

The Town Council is also active and may be willing to take a proactive role in managing some of these assets. How assets could be used in the short term to activate areas or provide revenue whilst longer term development plans are worked up should be considered. E.g. could the land in front of the museum be used for events or activities (boules/pop up food festivals/specialist markets etc).

The use of (low energy) lighting to animate areas should be considered.

**Officers Response:** This is an area that is of interest to the Town Council, and in the past we have expressed interest in both Bradshaw House and Moody Hall. It is a long-term plan and we would be open to suggestions from the principal authority, although a careful business plan would need to be put in place. Level 2 support

## 7. Raising Congleton's profile

Congleton has a comprehensive website showcasing the Centre and whilst this is a

<p>great start there are lots of ways in which the Centre's offer could be promoted to attract local residents, workers, visitors and tourists.</p> <p><b>How</b></p> <p>Consider what other information could be included on the website – local walks, cycle routes etc. Development of a brand (Wilmslow has recently done this) Linking website to other sites e.g. other centres with heritage assets such as Sandbach and Nantwich, CEC website and local visitor attractions.</p> <p>Other mechanisms to raise Congleton's profile:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved signage (physical and virtual via app/ QR code)</li> <li>• Establish Town Ambassadors</li> <li>• Enhanced programme of events</li> <li>• Engage with other similar market towns to showcase each other's assets to attract new visitors e.g. Leek, Buxton etc</li> <li>• Town Council's new role in responsibility for the Tourist Centre will support this.</li> </ul> <p><b>Officers Response:</b> We are always receptive to ideas to help promote and enhance the marketing and promotion of Congleton. A new website is in business plan and happy to work with other towns on mutually beneficial promotions. Level 2 support.</p> <p><b>8. Mobilising the Business Community</b></p> <p>Congleton already has an impressive network of local community groups who support the town and its amenities. It is recommended that this energy is extended more to the business community (those in the centre and in employment locations around its edges). Engaging with these businesses and encouraging them to collaborate more effectively will support the economic growth of the area. Many businesses are also considering how they can add value to their local communities.</p> <p><b>How</b></p> <p>Supporting local businesses to network and understand how they could get involved in the actions in the Vitality Plan. If actions can be identified around issues/opportunities that relate to their core function, businesses may be able to provide the following to support the Town's aspirations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sponsorship</li> <li>• Materials</li> <li>• Technical support</li> <li>• Volunteers</li> </ul> <p>Businesses networking could also identify "themes" where businesses can drive opportunities forward e.g. retailer and F &amp; B hosting a fashion show/beauty event. Businesses could also come together to established loyalty schemes to support shoppers to stay local.</p> <p><b>Officer response:</b> There is always more that can be done with networking and communications and both officers and councillors have been engaging with the business community. Level 2 support.</p> <p><b>8. Tackling void properties</b></p>
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The attractiveness of parts of Congleton is undermined by vacancies and the closure of a number of large stores. There is a need to focus on long-term empty units in town, however a number of smaller units have been occupied over the same period.

#### **How**

Identifying new retail occupiers for large vacant units is difficult, especially after Covid, as well as change in the retail sector. Instead of focusing on new retail occupiers it is worth trying to target leisure operators?

Flexible workspace is being looked at in some vacant department stores but usually in those with some character.

Residential is another option for smaller units on the edges of the town or above shops. To work with local developers and to complement the wider new homes being developed on the edge of the town.

Meanwhile uses and pop up stores or activities can support footfall and allow potential occupiers to test the local area.

Other short term solutions which brighten up vacant shopfronts include “wrappers” promoting the town and its businesses.

**Officer Response:** It would be great to bring all the buildings in the town centre back into use – whether residential, retail, business or leisure. We would welcome the opportunity to work with Cheshire East Council on any pilots to help in this area. The principal authority has powers around development control, business rates, planning and enforcement and could help us to reduce vacancy rates. TOP LEVEL SUPPORT.

### **10. Enhancing Public Transport**

As a medium-sized town Congleton struggles to support a fully integrated and high frequency public transport network. There are though a number of services within Congleton which provide links to locations including Crewe, Macclesfield, Sandbach, Middlewich, Holmes Chapel, Alsager and Biddulph and there may be opportunities to build on the Beartown bus network.

The recent CEC Bus Service Improvement Plan should ensure more collaborative working between CEC, bus operators, public transport user groups and rail stakeholders.

The railway station is an asset to the town, with hourly connections to Manchester, but connections between the town centre and railway station should be improved.

#### **How**

- Improve bus services and reduce fares around Congleton to locations including the Congleton rail station and areas such as West Heath, Buglawton and Mossley.
- Explore design options for the connection between Congleton Railway Station and Town Hall, as identified in the LCWIP.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explore options for delivering an enhanced Bus Interchange area/structure for Congleton.</li> </ul> <p><b>Officer Response:</b> Whilst we don't disagree with any of this and would love to see improved public transport, we know CEC has not been successful in gaining in Government money to enhance bus improvements and we believe some of the other priorities are more achievable in the current climate. Level 2 support.</p>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<p>We should write to Cheshire East Council thanking them for their interest in the vitality of Congleton and the work on this project. We acknowledge that all the projects listed would have a positive impact on the town and if funding were readily available we would be happy to work with CEC on any or all of the projects. We identify numbers 1, 4 and 9 as our top priorities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Area at the back of the Town Hall, as this is an area that we have wanted access to for a number of years.</li> <li>4. Area around the Market – this has been an area with a promise of development for two decades and currently has momentum that needs to be pushed.</li> <li>9. Reducing empty buildings – as this has a positive effect and builds confidence in a town, plus CEC could add value to this priority in helping to repurpose empty buildings and positively encouraging developers.</li> </ol> <p>We should also take this opportunity to comment on</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The long term aim to relocate the museum to larger and more suitable premises.</li> <li>2. A desire to reduce the number of barriers on Mountbatten Way</li> <li>3. A wish to sort out the ownership of street furniture and a maintenance programme for them</li> <li>4. A concern that reinstatement work is carried out correctly when utility companies carry out work in the town centre.</li> </ol>
<b>Financial Implications</b>	There are currently no financial implications or CEC budget available to develop proposals in this consultation.
<b>Environmental Implications</b>	An environmental impact of the various options would need to be considered if taken forward.
<b>Equality and Diversity Impact</b>	None of the proposals should have a detrimental impact on any member of our community. All improvements should be around making the town more inclusive, and accessible.
<b>PROPOSALS</b>	To accept the officers' recommendation to give some importance to all the projects but to give the highest level of support to numbers 1, 4 and 9.