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Vitality Fund special

Shopping and transport boost

PROJECT 2: Empty Premises

Even before Covid, Helston had already experienced the fastest rate of increase in empty retail premises of any town in Cornwall, leaving Helston with a 15.5% vacancy rate in 2019 – worse than the Cornwall average of 12.6% and national average of 12.9%. This has a significant impact on the appeal of Helston town centre, especially as it is the larger premises which stand vacant.

Although venues such as the Museum of Cornwall Life, CAST and Coronation Park are promoting the town and attracting increasing numbers of visitors, the level of footfall in the town centre continues to be low. People, both residents and those from out of town, need to be given more reasons to come into Helston.

The team has already viewed several of the larger empty buildings, meeting with agents and owners in an effort to find a way to bring them into use as community facilities, residential units or workspaces. Many of the premises are owned by large, national property companies making discussions more complex.

The Town Vitality funding will allow the group to investigate the legal issues around ownership, assess and survey buildings so that it can develop proposals for its use and negotiate with property owners.

Project chair David Turnbull said: “This is not a quick fix, and it will take time to make a difference, but if we can increase the number of homes and live/work spaces available in the

town centre, and provide space for micro-businesses and start-ups to develop in the heart of the community, this will have a strong impact on the town. Working with other local organisations we also want to establish more community facilities in the town centre, especially for families and young people.”

PROJECT 3: Reconnecting Helston

Helston is typical of many rural market towns across the UK with significant reliance on lengthy car journeys for its community to access services, training and employment. Comparing Helston and its surrounding area with other Cornish towns, it is one of the most isolated towns in Cornwall based on its reliance on a poor road network for the vast majority of journeys, lack of cycling and green routes, and very high costs and journey times for public transport.

In fact, of all towns in Cornwall, Helston is the most isolated when it comes to safe cycling routes, both within and around the town. And Helston has a significant reliance on the motor car – for example, 97% of trips to Falmouth are made by car, showing how little public transport is used. This presents a real challenge for a town that has committed to being carbon neutral by 2030.

The Town Vitality funding will help the group develop plans across three areas:

- Cornwall has benefitted from significant investment to its cycle network over recent years and Helston

must now champion its case for future infrastructure improvements. To put Helston in contention for future funding it needs to produce a Walking and Cycling Plan, defining where the town need better paths and cycle routes within the town and also routes connecting the town to other areas. Over the coming months residents will be asked for their views on proposals to define this plan and ensure Helston is high on the list for the next rounds of government investment.

- Secondly, with nearly 200 large buses per day using Coinagehall Street and very low passenger usage, the group needs to look for a better public transport solution for the town. A smaller, more frequent electric hopper bus joining the residential areas, attractions such as Coronation Park and other key locations (surgeries, main inter-town bus stops etc) would support many more residents and make it easier to access the town centre.

- Thirdly, the aspirations to re-connect Helston to the rail system have been long held and the group has been successful in our first stage proposals for this to be examined properly. The Town Vitality funding has already enabled it to put together a second stage proposal to central government for rail reconnection. Clearly this is a long-term project which will take much future effort, but it has strong support from MP Derek Thomas and the town council, and will keep pressing the case.



■ Funding will develop proposals for town centre improvements

Why it's all happening – and how to change Helston's future fortunes

PROJECT 4: Re-imagining Helston's High Streets

Helston has a strong sense of heritage with many historic buildings and well known ancient traditions which have been preserved for generations. The group believes Helston's town centre should be the centre of the community.

David Turnbull, chair of the Place Shaping Board, said: “Each of the Town Vitality projects has a part to play in addressing this, however we also need to ensure that Helston has an attractive town centre – a place which will encourage more people, including the local community, nearby residents and tourists, to visit and spend more time in the town.”

“This project relates specifically to the roads, pavements and open spaces which form Helston's main streets. It covers vehicle and pedestrian movement, streetscape and the visual appearance of the town centre.

“As a team we can't change the business rates or the rental charges levied by property owners. And we can't force businesses, retail chains or independent traders to invest.

“But we can create the environment which will make it attractive

for investment, for visitors and for the community.

“For example, improve the pavements and kennels, keep traffic flowing through the town but make it easier for people to get about, cross the road, enjoy being in the town. Enhance spaces with seating and facilities for pop-up market trading.

“Over the coming months we will develop some initial proposals, with drawings and visuals which can be displayed for everyone to comment, add their ideas and identify their preferences.

“This will build on the Helston CIC meetings and consultations done prior to Covid.

“The Town Vitality money will support this work and the surveys, design and costing activity needed to clearly define the project and the funding needed.”

So why does Helston always miss out?

According to Mr Turnbull: “Undoubtedly Helston has consistently missed out on large scale investment and funding over many years, whilst much has been ploughed into the north coast and other Cornish towns.

“But if all we do is moan about

this we won't get far. Looking in detail at the work other towns such as Penzance have done to define exactly what they need and to develop plans for their towns, this work has raised their profile for funding.

“Their projects which are now gaining investment have been developed to a point where costs, designs, public support and clear outcomes have been well defined.

“Helston's £100,000 may not sound much in the scheme of other towns' announcements of multi-million-pound investment. But no-one will give us significant money if we don't have a clear plan of what is needed and, importantly, what will make a positive difference to the town.

“The Town Vitality funding will help us develop the ideas we've been proposing over recent years to the level of detail where proper investment can be justified.

“We have 12 months to use this funding to define projects worthy of investment, know exactly how much they will cost and that they will make the difference we seek. Each project will include consultations with residents, businesses and visitors to ensure plans are well supported.”

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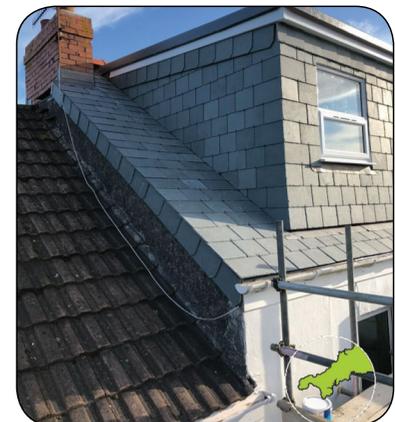
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