

St Neots Market Square – Permanent Performance Stage



What are we doing?

The Market Towns Programme team has been collaborating with architects AOC to investigate the feasibility of constructing a permanent performance stage on the west side of St Neots Market Square and develop three costed design concepts for consideration. So far, HDC are only committed to a spend of £21,500 for this commission from a budget allocation of £210,000. This is made up of £110,000 of CPCA (St Neots masterplan phase 1) funding and a notional £100,000 of HDC CIL funding.

Why are we doing it?

During the process of briefing the administration on the main St Neots Town Centre Improvements scheme and the progression of the scheme into detailed design, we were asked if it would be possible to provide the option of adding a permanent stage into the designs for the project, or as an add-on option separate to but compatible with the main project design.

The potential value of a stage would be to take fuller advantage of the opening up of the public realm by the improvement scheme, reducing the cost and logistical barriers to organising public events on the Market Square. This could increase the quality and quantity of events on the square, cementing its change of purpose from car parking to events, markets and the arts. As well as improving how much the new square was used, this could maximise the draw of residents and visitors to the town centre and its businesses. There would also be potential disadvantages, and these would also need exploring as part of considering any stage option.

As the main project was in detailed design, but a stage had not been investigated as part of that process, to create the scope to add one into the main project design at that point would have delayed the start of construction. However, following consultation with the St Neots masterplan phase 1 steering group - which was reconvened specifically to consider proposals for project delivery using unspent

funds from the masterplan phase 1 allocation - we committed to commissioning a feasibility study and development of a concept design. This work would take place alongside the main project, to ensure that the idea was investigated and developed without causing delays to the wider works. It would also allow for additional engagement and decision-making processes; in the event this was confirmed as a sufficiently viable and desirable option to merit this.

The St Neots masterplan phase 1 steering group that endorsed the stage (feasibility) project as above was made up of a selection of local stakeholders including residents, Town Councillors, and local business representatives, with HDC taking responsibility for pursuing the project.

Whilst it was agreed that HDC would work with AOC and others to consider the concept and potential to deliver a stage, there remained questions over who would deliver the project, who would be responsible for any ongoing revenue or other implications, and how a democratic decision would best be taken upon whether actually to deliver it, which would need concluding in the event the feasibility work merited pursuing.

What have we done so far?

AOC have developed three costed concept designs for HDC to consider, based on a list of requirements and desired attributes drawn up in a design workshop conducted in April 2024. This was attended by:

- Charlie Honeywood – Project Manager – HDC
- Sam Caldbeck – Programme Manager – HDC
- Jasellia Williams – Project Support – HDC
- Daniel Crawshaw – Project Manager – CCC
- Tom Coward – Architect – AOC
- Dan Wilkins – Architect – AOC
- Cllr Sam Wakeford – Portfolio Holder – HDC
- Cllr Ben Pitt – HDC and SNTC councillor
- Cllr Rob Simonis – SNTC councillor and Mayor of St Neots
- Chris Robson – Town Clerk – SNTC
- Karen Pollecutt – Operations Staff - SNTC
- Jacqueline Coleman – Operations Staff - SNTC

The aim of this workshop was to help AOC understand what any potential stage would be used for and the requirements for the design, which would allow them to develop concept designs. The group was kept deliberately small and focused, but members were encouraged to reach out for input from others outside of the workshops where appropriate and would add value to the process. Town Council members and staff attended in an advisory capacity with no formal mandate.

A public engagement session took place in July 2024 at a Saturday Farmers Market where responses were largely positive, albeit the sample size was small. The feedback from this session fed into the ongoing design development process.

A second engagement event took place in November 2024 aimed at sharing the emerging design concepts and gaining feedback on them. This event was on a Thursday market and, recognising that a weekday event may not suit everyone, an online survey was also shared to gather as much feedback as possible.

The survey closed on 5th December and a report was submitted by AOC in February 2025 detailing all work conducted as part of RIBA Stages 0-2 for the stage proposal.

Project timeline

The feasibility and concept design phase of this project took was anticipated to be completed by autumn 2024 to allow further design development to take place into 2025. There was an outside possibility that, if the design process proceeded smoothly and a formal decision was taken to proceed, that a stage could be built during the main Market Square works, however this was never committed to by HDC as there were too many unknowns to do so. Unfortunately, the feasibility and design process took significantly longer than anticipated. The appointed architect, AOC, is also engaged by HDC in the delivery of the Priory Centre project, which is at an advanced stage and soon to commence construction, as well as the development of the Ramsey Great Whyte project. This has meant that AOC's resources were heavily committed to these two schemes, rather than to the stage feasibility project. Whilst this is understandable given the scale and complexity of those two projects in comparison to the relatively simple and low-value Market Square stage feasibility, expectations around likely timescales could perhaps have been managed better. A further delay was built into the decision-making process after the second public engagement event in late 2024 and the subsequent two-week extension of the online survey element in response to public feedback. The volume of responses to the second public engagement event in late 2024, whilst extremely valuable, also necessitated extending the programme due to the time taken by AOC to process the sheer number of responses across the different platforms.

Project Manager View and Recommendations

Having thoroughly reviewed AOC's final report, despite the extended timeline I am satisfied that the brief was met, the agreed outputs have been delivered, and that we are in a good position to make an informed decision on whether to proceed with further design development and construction of a stage in the Market Square.

That said, **it is my recommendation not to proceed further with this project in the form developed by AOC.** The reasons for this are:

1. The cost estimates (between £406k-£478k depending on preferred design) at this early stage of design development are significantly higher than anticipated and, in my view, the proposal represents **poor value for money**. Key elements of the project scope, such as the stage size, fixed roof and integration of AV/lighting systems, were agreed to ensure that the stage could offer maximum benefit over the current provision, which is the hiring in of such equipment at a cost which prohibits all but the largest events from doing so. Descoping elements of the scheme such as these could reduce the overall cost but would also reduce the benefits and still require the hire of equipment, therefore would not increase the value of the proposal.
2. Public feedback to the proposal has been lukewarm. The results of the public engagement events show a marginal majority in favour of a performance stage; however there were clearly polarised views. We are also well aware of comments and opinions shared by means outside of the face-to-face events and online survey, for instance comments made on social media, albeit this is never expected necessarily to be representative of the wider public view, nor did it necessarily benefit from explanation of the potential benefits. This mixed feedback has also been exemplified by HDC Councillors for St Neots.
3. The proposal still faces significant hurdles, including but not limited to heritage and conservation considerations, highways audit, statutory approvals such as planning permission and building regulations – noting in particular that it would be challenging to gain planning permission for this site due to the heritage harm that could result from such a structure. Each of these presents a risk which will require further time and money to overcome during stages 3-4, which are yet to be quoted for or tendered. If the proposal had received more public support and could be delivered at a lower cost, I would be inclined to suggest proceeding with further design development and engagement to eliminate these obstacles, however with limited public support and costs far exceeding the currently available budget, the argument to do so is significantly weakened.

In addition to the above, there are further unknowns at the present stage which represent potential impediments to the project. These include:

- Responsibility – There would need to be clarity who would be responsible for managing and effectively operating the stage area on a day-to-day basis. Things such as cleaning, ensuring relevant risk assessments are in place, managing bookings and preventing inappropriate or unauthorised use. In essence who would adopt the structure.

- Revenue impacts – Linked to the above, there would need to be agreement who would be responsible for any subsequent revenue implications – for example cleaning, repairs and maintenance, power costs.
- Insurance / Anti-social behaviour etc. – These will be relevant practical considerations which link to the above points. Despite the ability to embed crime prevention measures within the design, there remains a residual risk, and this may have a direct impact in the ability to gain insurance, but also indirect implications on the reputation of the body responsible for operating and maintaining the stage. Further considerations such as noise and impacts in terms of public protection remain concerns.
- Reputational risk – In addition to the mixed feelings identified earlier, the provision of a permanent stage also creates a potential reputational risk. Whilst it is hoped that such a facility would be well received, there is potential for negative impacts reputationally resulting from the design, location, operation, and cost (construction and ongoing) from such a proposal.

The above are not exhaustive lists but hopefully provide an indication that this is not a straightforward project to deliver and operate. Whilst it is recognised that there could be benefits arising, and that there are synergies with the Market Square, it is not considered that these benefits would be so significant, or that the stage is so fundamental to the success of the market square, that these would override any residual concerns that would remain.

It is also noted that there are many other examples where Councils (Town and/or District/Borough Councils) have collaborated to provide dismantlable staging that is available for use during specific events or provided on market days (such as linked to Teenage or Christmas Markets) where the opportunity to perform can be encouraged. Albeit this requires some of the same considerations above regarding ownership, storage and construction, and would not reduce the cost and organisational complexity in using a stage as much as a permanent one already in place.

On reflection, the decision to commission an external consultant, AOC, to carry out this exercise for a relatively (in the context of construction design) small amount of money (£21,500) proved to be a sensible move. If we are to proceed with the project we would be doing so from a strong foundation of knowledge and with a clear roadmap for delivery. Alternatively, if we do not proceed with the project beyond this stage, we have the facts to justify that decision and support investigation of other options.

Next Steps

There are alternative options that could be explored, as opposed to simply providing a permanent stage. Officers advise, based on the report received, that it would be preferable to do so.

My suggestion would be to investigate the possibility of investing in equipment that can be used to deliver events on the Market Square, such as a temporary stage, lighting, audio and visual equipment, and/or potentially long-term installation of AV equipment that could complement temporary staging.

This would mitigate a significant issue that currently exists when delivering events on the square of any kind of scale – the costs of hiring in equipment - but without the cost, risk, and future maintenance liability of constructing a permanent stage. Unlike a permanent stage, however, temporary equipment would still require costs upon each use associated with the labour to construct/install and then remove it again, as well as storage. Longer-term installed AV equipment would have some of the same costs/risks/liability of a stage but on a much smaller scale.

Reducing the costs of hiring equipment as above will lower the barriers to more varied and frequent public events on the square, which will still help cement the change of use of the Market Square into a public space that is the cultural and historical heart of the town once more. Naturally and as touched upon, this approach will also require details to be resolved (ownership, storage, safety and insurance to name just a few), but in my view this solution warrants further investigation and discussion with partners.

A change request was submitted to the CPCA Investment Panel to extend the funding into the next financial year, which has since been signed off by their Chief Executive, albeit with the caveat that any investment in permanent stage equipment be thoroughly and carefully assessed before any purchase made. This will allow sufficient time to fully assess the feasibility, costs and benefits of purchasing stage/performance equipment on the basis above, and to understand the practical considerations of deploying it.

If this is not acceptable to the Town Council, and they do not wish to work with HDC on this solution, we remain committed to working with them to find alternative solutions to utilise the existing funding; equally we would be willing to work with other organisations who may be interested in taking forward a stage option for the town.

This report, and the AOC report which accompanies it, will be shared with the Town Council (through its appropriate officers and committee/s), Executive Councillors, and HDC ward Councillors for St Neots, so that there is an open and clear understanding of the professional opinion and suggested direction of travel.

Charlie Honeywood, Project Manager – Market Towns Programme – HDC