

MIDSOMER NORTON TOWN TRUST

Town Hall, The Island, Midsomer Norton, BA3 2HQ

Cleo Newcombe-Jones
Economy & Growth
Bath & North East Somerset Council
Lewis House
Bath
BA1 1JG

1st July 2019

Dear Cleo,

Re: Letter of Support for Heritage High Street Expression of Interest Bid - Midsomer Norton

The Midsomer Norton Town Trust supports the application by Bath & North East Somerset Council ('B&NES') for Midsomer Norton to be identified as a 'Heritage Action Zone', and is wholly supportive for the expression of interest bid to the Heritage High Street Fund for £750,000.

It has long been an aspiration of the Town for the potential of Midsomer Norton's High Street to be unlocked, by transforming it into a vibrant place focused around entertainment, leisure and services. This would move the role of the Town Centre from largely being a supplier of commodity services to a town centre with purpose, with a distinct unique selling proposition based around an experiential retail and heritage/cultural offering.

Unfortunately, the Town Centre currently suffers from a lack of investment in its public spaces and has been unable to break out of a decade's long downward spiral. First the threat came from out of town shopping/supermarkets but now Internet retailing seems likely to spell the end unless investment can be found, it is a Conservation Area at risk and key heritage buildings are derelict or in dilapidated states. We have an increasing number of vacant shops and premises and many of those businesses hanging in there are weak and struggling to survive.

The Midsomer Norton Town Trust was formed in 2014 in order to create a custodian to hold, manage and develop key community assets - a role which B&NES, as the Unitary Authority, was simply unable to provide. After 11 years of negotiations, on the 25th February 2019, B&NES transferred the freeholds of Midsomer Norton Town Hall and a number of other community buildings and assets to Midsomer Norton Town Council. The Town Council then immediately gifted these assets to the Midsomer Norton Town Trust which is now in a position to face the challenge head on of taking these forward. Taking on the magnificent Grade II listed Victorian Italianate Gothic Town Hall was a bold step - but the transfer is backed with detailed plans to unlock the potential of this iconic building in order to allow it to play its original pivotal role in the economic and community life of the town.

The Town Trust's vision is to put back the original 1859 ground floor Market Hall in the Town Hall at the same time B&NES and the Town Council work to develop the original, adjacent, Town Square in The Island into a usable place to hold markets and events. This thinking is based on two key factors; firstly that the 2017 Midsomer Norton Shopper Survey highlighted one of the key failings of the Town as not having a wide enough retail offer and secondly; the ability of markets to boost the retail offer and to secure as a basis for small businesses to develop and grow locally and possibly take empty shops in the medium to long term.

Indeed, there is a fundamental story to tell about how Midsomer Norton became a market town and could and should be again. In 1242, our Lord of the Manor, Hugh de Vivonne bought a Royal Charter from King Henry III for a Thursday Market. This is what gave the initial impetus to the development of Midsomer Norton from a rural hamlet to a market town. Surely as a Market Town the reasoning goes the Town should have a market - described locally as a 'no brainer'.

Whilst the discovery of coal in the mid-18th century gave a massive boost to the Town it was in the 1860's that our Victorian forefathers adopted the same vision as today and built the Market Hall (now Town Hall) to develop Midsomer Norton as the retail centre of the Somer Valley.

We have deep concerns about the current state of the High Street and believe that we may well be reaching a tipping point for footfall with a massive impact on, not only local businesses, but also on the local community service infrastructure such as banks, buses and food retailing. Vulnerable people in our community, who cannot travel to larger local centres such as Bath or Bristol, rely on this infrastructure to live their everyday lives.

However, overall resources are painfully limited and there is a need for major investment to facilitate some of the transformational projects and tackle underlying structural issues which are holding back the town from reaching its potential.

The Midsomer Norton Town Trust is delighted to have the opportunity to formally support your bid and wish you every success.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S Plumley'.

Steve Plumley
Trustee & Managing Committee Member
Midsomer Norton Town Trust