



REPORT ON THE CONSULTATION ON NESTON TOWN COUNCIL'S DRAFT CORPORATE STRATEGY 2022-2025 - 4.10.22 FC05/82.1

Introduction

This follows a similar report produced for the remote meeting of the Strategy Working Group on Wednesday 28th September 2022, when it was intended to provide a little guidance to help Members through the many responses to the Consultation and draw out emerging trends. It proved helpful, and has been revised to include the recommendations of the Working Group for full Council on 4th October.

I have said several times since the start of the process that the Strategy must be that of the Council. Members should listen to other views but as an elected body of representatives, make its own decisions. Hopefully it will be ambitious but realistic.

Background

On 26th June, Council approved a draft Corporate Strategy 2022-2025 for consultation purposes and delegated the precise details of the consultation to the Council Manager within broad parameters set by Council and an approved budget.

Members rightly wanted a wide-ranging consultation aimed at reaching as much of the community as possible and other partner organisations. A questionnaire was available both electronically and in paper format and advertised on the website and social media. Several personal sessions were undertaken in the community. Personal visits to each of the High Street businesses by the Council Manager were made, and Cllr Hinks visited the businesses on Clayhill. The Governance and Operations Manager visited some community groups. Our Mayor, Cllr Kynaston visited each of the local schools and Cllr Warner engaged with, and made arrangements for the consultation to be made at the NC&YC. A number of Councillors took turn to man the 3 drop-in sessions at the town hall and also make themselves available at the Councillors surgeries and at an NTC stand at our market. Each of the councillors and staff played their part in encouraging interested parties to complete the survey. The full Strategy was available on the website and in hard copy at each venue or upon request.

Some Members have expressed disappointment at the number of responses but the consultation was thorough and wide ranging and the level of response was much as expected for this type of exercise.

An initial analysis of priority ratings against specific questions was generated electronically to which paper responses have been added manually. [Appendix A].

In addition, space was allowed for individual comments and these have been compiled under the four outward facing objectives. Four respondents sent responses in the form of letters and those comments have been included in this summary. [Appendix B].

I would like to thank Alison and George for all their hard work on the analysis.

Who responded

It can be seen from Appendix A that the vast majority of the 105 respondents were residents. Three voluntary/community groups responded directly and one public sector partner.

Over 90% of respondents were over 41 years or older, with almost 9% between 26 and 40 years. It is disappointing but perhaps not surprising that only one respondent was 25 years or younger. Maybe when the Strategy is finalised, effort needs to be made to promote it to younger members of the community.

What priority respondents gave to actions identified by Council: Appendix A

A Town to Live in

Of the six actions consulted on, 3 received an absolute majority for high priority, with all receiving at least 75% support as a high or medium priority. In only two cases did more than 20% of respondents consider them low priority.

A Town to Work In

Of the seven actions consulted on, 4 received an absolute majority for high priority, with the other 3 being viewed as either high or medium priority by a majority of the respondents. A sizeable minority (39.6%) considered place branding a low priority therefore the Working Group have recommended its removal as a priority. 34.65% considered lobbying to become a digital town a low priority.

A Town to Enjoy

Of the ten actions consulted on, 5 received an absolute majority for high priority. There is very clear support for a Ranger and huge support for Green Belt and conservation areas. All others were viewed as either high or medium priority by a majority of the respondents. A sizeable minority (42.57%) considered creating opportunities for artists to be a low priority.

A Community with Pride and Celebration

Of the eight actions consulted on, 3 received an absolute majority for high priority. Working to support young people had massive support with over 70% rating it high and less than 5% considering it low priority. The remaining 5 were viewed as either high or medium priority by a majority of respondents. Grants for community organisations, foodbanks, empowering volunteering, events and delivering Neighbourhood Plan actions all had considerable support.

Learning from Comments Received: Appendix B

Vision

Comments are supportive but one queries the Council's role in coordinating other bodies. This is I believe a very legitimate role, but only comes in to play when it is needed. Council make it clear in the Strategy that it does not want to duplicate.

A further observation suggests that both the Vision and Mission should refer to environmental sustainability. Working Group Members recommended no change to the Vision.

Mission

Again, a very supportive comment but an expressed concern about direct delivery of local services by the Council. Here I think the responder misunderstands that council supports local services whoever the provider. The Council's "gap filling" approach is made clear in Goal 5, "Deliver excellent services according to both need and consumer choice".

A Town to Live in

- There are some comments about speeding traffic, some regarding specific locations. This supports a stated priority.
- A number of respondents would like to see a higher police presence. The priority refers to a PCSO presence and a wording change is recommended.
- One comment suggests that the Council has no role in law enforcement-this misses its legitimate supporting role in community safety.
- There is a very valid comment about recognition of local housing initiatives such as the Community Led Housing Project and a Community Land Trust to help satisfy the need for affordable housing. A wording amendment to the "housing" priority is suggested to make clear the Council's support for such projects.
- Following comments re health and social care, two priorities have been merged.

A Town to Work In

- Several responses refer to a lack of a post office in the town centre. The Working Group have added a specific priority, recognising a number of imaginative schemes around such as in cafes or pubs.
- A number of comments call for better bus and train services. Specific examples could be referred to the Transport Working Group. A suggested change to the wording of the integrated transport action is suggested.
- Despite the included definition of "Digital Town", the term does appear to have caused some confusion. A rewording of the priority has been suggested.
- It has been suggested that an action should be added to encourage Neston's businesses to sign up to Cheshire and Warrington's Fair Employment Charter. The Working Group did not wish to add this as a specific priority, but see it being discussed in a business forum.
- It is suggested that "Lobby to maintain suitable and accessible waste management and re-cycling facilities" is not necessary as it suggests the facility is under threat. The Working Group have recommended deleting this.
- Several residents comment about the need to revitalise the Town Centre, empty shops, concrete planters, variety of shops etc. The Working Group have suggested an additional priority.
- One respondent suggests a partnership with the Leahurst Campus.

A Town to Enjoy

- A point has been made that a number of groups already exist trying to affect change eg; Neston Earth Group and Fair-Trade Neston. It would be more effective to support these groups than to set up new ones. This was always the intention and a wording change is suggested to make this clearer.
- It is suggested that under the heritage priorities, a commitment to protecting nature and supporting natural regeneration would be helpful. The Working Group this was adequately covered in the Environmental priorities.

- It is suggested that a priority to oppose new developments where natural resources such as trees are lost and not replaced. The Working Group this was adequately covered in the Environmental priorities.
- It is suggested that an additional priority could be to Support the CW&C Heritage Strategy. The Working Group have suggested an additional priority.
- Several respondents complain about the condition of the Market Square.
- A comment that the Strategy seriously undervalues the role of the council in promoting walking and cycling for local trips in our community. The Working Group did not agree.

A Community with Pride

- One responder suggests the Council could provide financial support/advice for families affected by the current financial crises, promote/supplement out of school activities for children and young people, particularly from vulnerable families. Some local councils are now becoming involved in these areas (although not direct financial provision). The Working Group considered these issues could be addressed under other priorities.
- One response urged abandoning the Neighbourhood Plan. Many of its aims remain valid and the Council has advocated a review.
- A suggestion is made for a Design Guide for the Town Centre. The Working Group this should be considered as part of the Neighbourhood Plan review.
- A comment that formal Neston Civic Awards are not mentioned. The Working Group pointed out this was included within Goal 4 under "Build a single engaged and empowered Neston Community".
- A comment about more links with churches. The Working Group considered this is covered in working with community groups.

Additional Comments

- There is a suggestion of better communication between the Council and residents and about following through with plans. These points are well covered in Goal 5 (which was not consulted on), both under "excellent communications and transparency" and "performance management".
- There is a suggestion that changing the term "lobby" to "influence" may be more in keeping with the "working in partnership" tone of the document. This has been taken on board where appropriate
- A comment suggests that the Council is in need of a radical re-appraisal. Surely this is what this whole exercise is about?

Conclusions

There are a good number of supportive comments on the Strategy and that together with the priority ratings in Appendix A, indicate that the Council is in tune with current community thinking. There are one or two comments that the Council is straying in to areas in which it doesn't belong, however it is now expected that town councils look more widely at how they can help their areas and indeed this was the purpose of the general power of competence. Sensibly, the Council have made it very clear that it accepts there are practical limits on what it can achieve on its own, with its limited legal powers or resources.

Priorities and detailed actions to achieve the strategic priorities to be determined in the annual Delivery Plan.

It was always intended to phase the implementation of the Strategy according to both priorities and available resources. The current cost of living crisis will mean

even less headroom in the budget and therefore it will have to be accepted that progress may be slower than originally hoped.

Recommendations

1. To adopt a final Strategy as set out in Appendix C.
2. To recommend Council to authorise the Council Manager to update data in the "Context" boxes as it becomes available from the 2021 Census or other sources.
3. To recommend Council to authorise the Council Manager in consultation with the Mayor to add the foreword.
4. To set out priority actions, timescales and lead responsibilities in a annual Delivery Plan and decide whether to delegate this to Finance and Administration Committee.

Peter C Cooper