



**NEW ROMNEY TOWN COUNCIL**

**CAPITAL PROJECTS REPORT – FULL COUNCIL MEETING 8<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2023**

## **COMMUNITY HALL, SPORTS PAVILION AND NURSERY PROJECT**

There is currently nothing to report in respect of the progress of the Community Hall, Sports Pavilion and Nursery Project due to the fact that (i) the project planning application is currently being processed by Folkestone & Hythe District Council Planning Department and (ii) the project Design and Build Contract is currently out to tender and awaiting returns, which are due early December.

A meeting of the Project Steering Group will, however, take place within the coming weeks to further discuss with the Football Club its options in respect of temporary changing facilities during the project build and the Steering Group will be continuing its work to update the project Business Plan.

As soon as initial tender returns early next month provide an indication of the financial feasibility of the project, it will be necessary for the Town Council to take an important decision in regard to drawing down the authorised Public Works Loan, since the deadline for doing so is 6<sup>th</sup> January 2024. A detailed financial report will be presented to the Council in order that it can make a fully informed decision at that time.

Town Clerk

1<sup>st</sup> November 2023

### **In the two most recent editions of The Looker, further mis-information has again been published regarding the Community Hall, Sports Pavilion and Nursery Project**

Page 2 of The Looker states as standard: “Every effort is made by The Looker newspaper to ensure that information is correct”. However, this has clearly not been the case in respect of reports about this project — so, in line with good practice in order to mitigate the impact of misinformation being circulated amongst local residents, further corrections are provided below for public information:

*Italic font in black:* lifted directly from The Looker article published on pages 1-3 of The Looker Issue 336, dated 18<sup>th</sup> October 2023

**Standard font in blue:** fact checked information provided by the Council to correct publicly published misinformation.

## ***Time's Up for New Romney's Elusive Community Hall: A 14-year saga of promises and failures***

*The origin of this prolonged drama dates back to 14 years ago. The community was brimming with optimism when the news broke that a hall would be built from the proceeds of a land sale on Church Lane, back in 2008, coinciding with the height of the financial crash.*

This project was commenced in **2016** (7 years ago) with the appointment of a Project Management Team, following some initial public consultation to find out what residents would like in the Town, having concluded a land sale in **2013** which resulted in a sum of money (£650,000.00) to be set aside for all capital projects. Of this sum, £630,000.00 was allocated for a community hall and sports pavilion, following public consultation in 2013.

The project was to provide a Community Hall and Sports Pavilion and to upgrade facilities for the adjacent nursery.

*Instead of efficiently utilising these funds, the Town Council dragged its feet for years, pondering how best to allocate the money.*

At an especial Council meeting in October 2013 (min ref 409/2012-13), it was agreed that this project would be allocated £630,000.00 from the balance of the capital receipt (after first reimbursing general reserves and allocating a small amount to the new outdoor gym and playground on The Greens) – so, within only one year of receiving funds from the Church Lane sale of land. A further small amount was allocated, at that time, to new outdoor play equipment, town signage and a potential heritage centre. A Capital Spending Plan was approved which identified these allocations.

The community hall and sports pavilion project commenced in earnest in 2016 following further consultations to find out what local residents thought should be provided within these proposed facilities - and in 2017 the intention to upgrade nursery facilities as part of this project was established.

*The [past] Mayor of New Romney, with the assertiveness befitting of his office proclaimed that the completion of the hall would be under his regime. However, the irony cannot be overlooked. Those initially commissioned plans, which cost the town tens of thousands of pounds, were now abandoned as unaffordable.*

There is no evidence of any such statement from the past Town Mayor. The original design was abandoned as, due to spiralling costs as a result of the covid pandemic and a subsequent war in Europe which combined to severely impact on economies around the world, it was no longer affordable and it was absolutely right and proper to mitigate any risk to public funds. Thus, in February 2022, the Council took the brave decision, as a result of a stringent tendering process, to halt the project in its original design, to set a fixed budget and to re-design the project to be delivered within a fixed budget.

*Yet, the disappointments were far from over. Instead of the grand edifice that residents were promised, a new 'dumbed down' design emerged. This version would subsidise a nursery operated by a private entity, benefitting from incredibly low rents.*

In January 2023, NRTC agreed to move forward with a revised, fully costed design that could be achieved within the available budget. The Synergy project management

team and Architect showed that the revised scheme, including a new building which could be used by the adjacent nursery – a much valued provision within the local community, would be much better use of public money than re-furbishing the very old existing Nursery building. Far from being ‘dumbed down’, the revised design was perceived by the District Council Planning Department to be more charming than the original and more in keeping with the Town of New Romney.

This additional new building which can house the local nursery that is already on site is absolutely NOT being subsidised by the sports pavilion and community hall project. No future rent arrangements have as yet been discussed. Even the current rent paid by the nursery for the very old, poor condition building which it currently inhabits exceeds any income from the Maude Pavilion some six fold. Thus, the existence of a local business accommodated in a Town Council building on the sports field site actually assists in keeping costs for the community use of the site down.

*The current state of affairs? A nebulous tendering proposal is in circulation, with no clear indication of its appeal to potential companies.*

The revised project has, indeed, gone out to tender. However, the proposal is NOT nebulous in any way (definition of nebulous: hazy / cloudy eg. There is a hazy proposal on the table that lacks any detail) and there absolutely has been an indication that the project still appeals to potential companies as the professional project management team made preliminary enquiries to ‘test the water’ before publishing the very detailed tendering pack on the government’s National Contract-Finder portal.

*Councillor Thomas has claimed some behind-the-scenes manoeuvring to expedite planning permissions.*

This is not correct. Councillor Thomas reported that a formal pre-submission meeting had taken place with the FHDC Chief Planning Officer to ensure there were no issues with the planning submission so that its consideration by FHDC can be expedited. This is normal practice in order to be able to smooth out any potential issues that the Officer might highlight before submitting an application in order to avoid any delays post-submission.

*With promises of shovels hitting the ground by January 2024 and an opening a mere 50 weeks thereafter, we can only wonder: How realistic is this timeline?*

There have been no promises made regarding a definitive start date. When the question was asked early in 2023 as to what the project timescale was, it was confirmed that if the project remained on schedule, the aim was for a January 2024 start and that there was a 50 week build schedule following commencement. However, the editor of The Looker, as a Member of New Romney Town Council, is aware that there have subsequently been further delays whilst further consultation with the sports clubs was on-going. Thus, the envisaged January 2024 start date has now been delayed by several months.

*Italic font in black:* lifted directly from The Looker article published on page 40 of The Looker Issue 337, dated 1<sup>st</sup> November 2023

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*David, despite being on a committee (supposedly with some semblance of power) seemed as much in the dark as a bat in broad daylight. He lamented about promises made regarding a new community hall in New Romney, courtesy of our beloved former mayor, Paul Thomas.*

Does this refer to the Community Hall, Sports Pavilion and Nursery Project Steering Group? This is not a committee; it is a steering group – a small group of Councillors appointed to keep the project moving forward between full meetings of the Council. It has some limited authority but no ‘power’. All of the information reported back to Full Council by/on behalf of the Steering Group is a matter of public record and is freely available to view on the Town Council website.

No promises have ever been made by any Member of New Romney Town Council regarding this project – except, perhaps, that the Council will do its utmost to try to deliver the project.

*Twelve years have passed, and what was meant to be a sports and community hall seems to be undergoing a sudden identity crisis, now wanting to double as a children’s nursery.*

This project was commenced in **2016** (7 years ago) with the appointment of a Project Management Team, following some initial public consultation to find out what residents would like in the Town, having concluded a land sale in **2013**.

The project was never to deliver a ‘sports and community hall’; it was always to deliver a ground floor sports pavilion and a separate first floor community hall – the ground floor facility to be used by the Town’s sports clubs and the first floor to be used by the Town’s community groups and local residents.

The re-designed project still aims to provide a ground floor sports pavilion for use by the Town’s sports clubs and a first floor separate community hall for use by the wider community. It is NOT the intention that this building will double as a nursery; the project provides for a separate additional building that can house the existing nursery instead of expending funds on refurbishing the old existing building which has a limited life span. If the existing nursery was to cease using the envisaged separate building at any point in the future, it would be entirely possible to use it for an alternative purpose – either as an alternative income stream to support Town Council service provision or for additional community use.