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Way forward for Sidmouth's Port Royal

Focus on improvements and Drill Hall will be marketed for redevelopment

A way forward to improve Sidmouth's eastern seafront around the Port Royal area has been agreed following 18 months of consultation, communication and engagement with the local community to find out what they would like to see there.

Town organisations have played a key role in having their say in how the area should be improved and have joined landowners of the site - Sidmouth Town and East Devon District Councils - in discussions about the future uses of Port Royal.

Last week both councils agreed on their next steps to redevelop the area which has become run down over the last few decades.

The redundant Drill Hall site, owned by the district council, will be marketed for redevelopment most likely for a bar, restaurant or similar use. This reflects what people said they would like when they were consulted last year as part of a dedicated scoping exercise of the area and through a question in the Sid Valley Neighbourhood Plan consultation.

The area around and including the Drill Hall site is allocated within the East Devon Local Plan for mixed use including 30 homes. However, it became clear during the scoping study that to deliver all the mix of uses including new homes and retaining the active existing facilities of a lifeboat station and sailing club, a building of five storeys would be needed on the site. The scale of such a development has been ruled out.

The scoping study, which was carried out by consultants on behalf of the councils, identified that while there could be significant development in the area, there were major challenges too, including providing affordable homes, historical covenant restrictions and flood risk in the area.

The district council will commission a marketing exercise to invite investor interest in redeveloping the Drill Hall site. The council bought the site which enabled the proceeds to be reinvested in a new drill hall for Sidmouth and the council wants to see a return on the investment. East Devon will work closely with the town council on the marketing of the site in a similar way to the successful partnership that has operated so far.

The Drill Hall site will be marketed for six months to allow both commercial and non-commercial bids to come forward. It is expected that the site will be marketed from the Spring.

Sidmouth Town Council has agreed to focus on improvements to the Fishermen's shed and Fish Shop area.

Cllr Paul Diviani, Leader of East Devon District Council, said: "The run down appearance of Port Royal is widely acknowledged. We are not proposing a large scale development in the area having listened to what the people of the town have said and understanding the challenges identified within the scoping study. We do however want to reflect the local desire for development and improvement involving a better leisure offer in the form of a bar, restaurant or something similar and to that end we are putting the vacant Drill Hall site to the market."

Councillor Jeff Turner of Sidmouth Town Council said: "This has been a successful and effective cooperative process between the two councils sharing the costs. The studies' aims, to identify the opportunities and constraints with the Port Royal site and to understand the public's views on redevelopment of the site were achieved and, together with the views expressed in the Sid Valley Neighbourhood Plan surveys, demonstrated that a mixed-use development as proposed in the Local Plan would not be acceptable within the constraints identified. It was clear that the Sidmouth public did not want a large scale development but wanted to see improvements and, ideally, new restaurant and bar attractions.

"I'm pleased that we have come to a decision on an acceptable way forward through the district council's proposal to market the drill hall site. Much will depend now on the results of the marketing."