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Dear Councillors and Officers,

I have asked to speak at the meeting on the 13th January regarding the High Street Recovery Fund on behalf of David and I as Porlock High Street shop owners, but would like to present some thoughts prior to the meeting in this letter which I have asked the Clerk to distribute to all Councillors and Officers invited to the meeting, including Mrs Redston, The Economic Development Manager from Somerset West & Taunton.

We are very concerned that the High Street Recovery Fund might be lost after the process seemingly went off the rails in December so want to try and help get things back on track. We actually did not know so much had happened behind the scenes since returning our questionnaire and letter in August, until we heard in December that the video was about to be filmed. At that point we discovered that the Indicative Plan, resulting from the questionnaire results, had already been approved and was already being implemented. We wondered why, despite previously asking for a follow-up on the questionnaire, we had heard nothing and had not, as a High Street Trader, been involved or consulted, or even had a chance to view and comment on the draft Indicative Plan before it was finalised. We then received Mrs. Stanyon's resignation letter and questioned what had gone wrong.

On checking the PPC website, we discovered the Porlock High Street Partnership page which had recently been created, from where we found the Indicative Plan. On reading this, we wondered how the results of the questionnaire could have suggested that, wages aside, 20% of the fund should be spent on the PVRTA External Space Refurbishment. As it reads, the Plan earmarks £5000 to the Visitor Centre, as one business, for external refurbishment, with the rest of the High Street businesses offered £250 maximum matched funding for each shop front refurbishment. Unfortunately, as the PVRTA have been so involved in drawing up the Indicative Plan, it does look like they have favoured themselves disproportionately, even if this was not the intention. We then discovered that the High Street traders had had no specific representation in drawing up the Plan and concluded that this is perhaps what had caused the argument.

I can see from the published timeline that the Visitor Centre Manager did try and engage the business community with the seminar in early August but to no avail. I have to say, though, that we did not receive this invite, perhaps because, at that time, we were not on the Visitor Centre's mailing list, but I wonder how many other High Street traders also missed the invite. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, no businesses attended the meeting which presumably led to no traders being on the committee that drew up the Indicative Plan. Plus, the speed at which the Plan had to be submitted is possibly why no further consultation between the return of the questionnaires and the approval of the Plan was undertaken. It seems it is no-one's fault that the process got off to a false start and that we are now in the place we are, with High Street traders belatedly wanting to be more involved and wanting to have further discussion on and possible amendment of the Indicative Plan. But we have been offered Option B by Somerset West & Taunton Council to do just that. We could reboot the process in a more inclusive way with the benefit of hindsight and, hopefully with a bit more time if Somerset West & Taunton can give us that. More time would be particularly welcomed as with another national lockdown in place, it is unlikely that the High Street will be able to reopen properly until perhaps Easter, or even later.

Having read the outline plan of how to form a new committee and re-consult with traders (Item 5 on the original Agenda), I think the idea of how to best engage with the High Street Traders per se is a good one. After all, they are the people 'on the front line' so to speak, so maybe their involvement is paramount. I can also understand why it has been suggested that a free membership High Street Traders group is needed to advise and help implement the Indicative Plan. The PVTA, which is a members' led 'Tourist' organisation, does not specifically represent this retail group and its scope seems much wider than just the Porlock High Street, with the Visitor Centre website including businesses in Porlock Weir, Allerford, Horner, Bossington, Selworthy, Wootton Courtenay and even Dunster. And maybe the PVTA provides more appeal to 'accommodation and hospitality' businesses – certainly very few High Street traders have become members for whatever reasons and the vast majority of PVTA members seem to be accommodation and hospitality providers. Therefore, the emphasis of the current Indicative Plan is perhaps more on getting tourists to stay in Porlock and this is, of course, very important for the local economy. But from the High Street retailers' point of view, so are the local shoppers, day visitors (either tourists staying elsewhere or people from surrounding villages and towns), and the potential shoppers in the cars passing through Porlock. In the summer we saw lots of tourist traffic passing through Porlock, but it did not stop to look around and shop. We need a Plan that focuses on boosting footfall and turning them into shoppers if we are to support the High Street specifically. And, hopefully, it would be possible to involve any new High Street Traders group with the PVTA to the benefit of all. It would seem sensible to build on the work already done, involve other village groups who can help like the Porlock Community Association, and utilise everyone's expertise wherever possible so we can move forward quickly.

If there is an appetite to create a specific High Street Traders group, I would be happy to offer to help with this. I may also be able to offer some useful experience and knowledge: I have lived in Porlock for nearly 35 years, previously being involved with various village events and committees; I helped run our family IT/software company so have good IT skills; and until recently worked for Minehead Town Council working on a number of their 'green' initiatives, including the electric vehicle charging point. And I now have plenty of free time and enthusiasm to get involved with local issues again.

To conclude, if the Council chooses Option A, the Indicative Plan as originally conceived is still in place, with all the issues this raises, so may not resolve any of the arguments. Option C seems to require handing back the fund, which obviously Porlock Parish Council should not consider doing. So, please could the Council agree on Option B and let us give it another go, now that everyone understands the process better and everyone is fully engaged.

Best regards,

Lesley Thornton

(previously Lesley Price if that name is more familiar to some Councillors).