St Neots Town Council

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Town Clerk – Chris Robson **Mayor** – Cllr Catherine Goodman

10/11/2026

M&CO Building
25-27 Market Square
St Neots
PE19 2AR

Planning Statement: Proposed Change of Use

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TOWARDS CARBON ZERO

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1. Introduction

St Neots Town Council has been awarded Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding in principle to purchase and refurbish the ground-floor unit at 25–27 Market Square, a 260 sqm property identified as Unit A on the submitted floor plans. The acquisition is subject to securing CIL funding and planning permission from Huntingdonshire District Council for a change of use.

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2. Existing Use

The property is currently vacant, having previously operated as an M&CO retail clothing store (Use Class E – retail). The building has since been subdivided, with the rear unit now occupied by Cook, a frozen food retailer. This arrangement restricts servicing and delivery options for the Market Square frontage, reducing its viability for continued retail use. This retail building has been vacant since April 2023 and marketed since this date but without any successful uptake from a buyer or renter.

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3. Proposed Use

The Town Council proposes to establish a dedicated youth centre managed, staffed, and maintained by the Council's experienced youth team that brings this building back into use. Demand for such a facility has intensified due to sustained housing growth in St Neots, particularly in eastern expansion areas and without a corresponding increase in specific youth infrastructure. St Neots has experienced significant population growth through major developments including Loves Farm, Wintringham and the eastern expansion area. Whilst additional housing has been delivered, there has been no equivalent delivery of a dedicated youth facility serving the town as a whole.

The proposed facility will operate as a permanent youth hub and operational base for the Town Council's youth team and will be in active use for most of the week.

The building is intended to operate six days per week, accommodating a mix of targeted youth provision during daytime periods, including counselling, training,

mentoring, and specialist support delivered with partner organisations. This will be in addition to open access universal youth provision during afternoons and evenings.

Young people will play a central role in shaping the centre's operation, facilities, and identity through the St Neots Youth Council, which has met fortnightly since 2023 to advocate for positive change. The centre will provide inclusive, welcoming space offering:

- Drop-in social and youth café provision
- Music, media, and creative activities
- Meeting and workshop spaces for learning, mentoring, and support
- A small kitchen/café area for soft drinks and life-skills training, with limited public opening during community events

The hub will be fully staffed, managed, and maintained by St Neots Town Council's experienced professional youth work team.

Unlike unstructured street loitering, this facility provides structured, indoor, targeted, and universal safe spaces, steering youth engagement productively. It also allows the potential offering of activities in school holidays, a time that often sees a rise in antisocial behaviour.

The centre will operate under strict professional safeguarding policies and work in close partnership with local police, community safety teams, and business groups.

This facility will enable consistent, visible, and professionally supervised youth provision in the heart of the town.

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4. Functional Need

St Neots Youth Council has clearly identified the need for a permanent, centralised youth facility to scale up the impact of the Town Council's youth services. A town-centre location maximises accessibility, sitting within 30 minutes of surrounding neighbourhoods and on key bus routes, while supporting

efficient staff deployment.

Positioned opposite Market Square, the site offers opportunities for outdoor activity, links to Riverside Park, and strong visibility within the civic heart of St Neots. The centre is designed around a youth café and social space for casual engagement, supported by flexible rooms for structured programmes including arts, music, mentoring, counselling, and youth council activity.

Importantly, the inclusion of office and meeting space enables private, confidential engagement with young people, parents, and carers. This is something not currently available and strengthens safeguarding and early-intervention support. The building will also provide bookable space for partnership work, such as the St Neots Youth Partnership Group and specialist youth training.

Additionally, a district-wide Youth Survey undertaken in 2024/25 involving 673 young people across Huntingdonshire identified a clear demand for additional youth provision and dedicated youth spaces. The survey found recurring concerns regarding the lack of indoor facilities available to young people and identified requests for more youth clubs, safe places to meet, and spaces where friendships could be developed and support accessed. The survey further identified mental health support as the highest priority issue for young people, with 68% of respondents highlighting this as important, whilst approximately one-third reported that loneliness affects their wellbeing. These findings provide independent evidence that there is both a current and growing need for a permanent youth hub capable of delivering social, recreational, educational and wellbeing-focused activities within an accessible town-centre location.

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5. Requirement for a Dedicated Facility

The Town Council's experience of delivering youth services in St Neots demonstrates that effective youth work requires more than access to shared or intermittently available space. Young people consistently engage more positively where they have a clear sense of ownership, identity, and continuity within a dedicated environment.

National statutory guidance and professional standards for youth work recognise

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that effective provision requires dedicated, consistently available facilities rather than shared or intermittently available spaces. Effective youth work is relationship-based and depends on continuity, safeguarding, and a sense of ownership by young people.

The proposed youth hub will operate six days per week and function as the permanent base for the Town Council's youth team, supporting targeted daytime provision alongside open-access youth activity. Shared hire-based venues, while valuable for wider community use, do not provide the permanence or operational flexibility required to deliver this level of sustained youth provision.

At present, youth services are delivered across a number of different venues within St Neots. This requires staff to factor additional travel time, venue hire arrangements, and set-up and dismantling periods into the planning and delivery of activities. As a consequence, council resources are used less efficiently, whilst the reliance on third-party venues can create scheduling constraints, additional hire costs, and disruption in the event of cancellations or changes in availability.

The absence of a dedicated facility also limits the ability to provide a consistent point of contact for young people and their families. In some instances, youth workers have been required to meet parents within their own homes due to the lack of a suitable and permanent venue. It also means there is often an inability to provide confidential support sessions and lack of a recognised town-wide point of contact. A dedicated youth facility would provide a recognised and accessible location for parental engagement, support meetings, and community outreach activities.

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, youth engagement levels remain strong throughout the year. The Youth Café alone saw 415 visitors across the first 3 months of 2026.

However, it may also be noted that current service delivery is fragmented across multiple sites, reducing operational efficiency and limiting opportunities to establish a single, identifiable hub for youth provision within the town. A dedicated facility allows secure storage of records and equipment, confidential one-to-one support sessions, controlled access arrangements and consistency of safeguarding procedures that cannot be delivered effectively through a constantly changing programme of hired venues

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Youth Attendance per Month

Count of Column L																
<03/04/ <03/04/2025 Total	- 2025									2025 Total	- 2026			2026 Total	Grand Total	Times
Row La 03/04/2025	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec		Jan	Feb	Mar			
2-1 In School Support - youg person at longsands								2		2					2	12-1
Arts and Crafts Club - Roundhouse Primary School		17								17					17	12-1
Arts and Crafts Club - Winhills Primary Academy			31	18		9	16	11	18	103	9	22	18	49	152	12-1
Arts and Crafts Club - Wintringham Primary Academy			15	21		43	32	31	15	157	34	37	32	103	260	12-1
Arts and Crafts Club- Crosshall Junior School						7	28	30	16	81	16	20	37	73	154	12-1
ASD Club - bar grove centre cromwell road		8	21	11		28	20	25	12	125	20	22	27	69	194	3.30-7
Breakfast Club - Paines Mill			34	18	13	11	19	12	3	110	6	4	15	25	135	9.30-10.3
Create and Chill - Young Carers Group - citizen hub		2	7			8	8	8	8	41	4	3	5	12	53	5.30-7
Drink and Chat - Paines Mill - youth hostel		12	19	28		21	24	21	14	139	14		8	22	161	6-7
Halloween Teen Club Night - event at citizen hub and 2 at loves farm community centre							31			31					31	6.30-8.3
Life Skills - Home Education Group - scout hut bedford street			7	10		9	4	6	4	40	9		14	23	63	3.30-5
Multi Sports - Duck Lane - sntc owned non chargeable	26	83	85	63		56	64	88	38	503	44	53	64	161	664	5.30-6.3
Multi Sports - HDC - Multi Use Gym Area							73	121	79	273	18			18	291	4-5
Multi Sports - Loves Farm - multi use gym area outside non chargeable owned by hdc						58		71		129	35	39	59	133	262	4-5
Pride Group - Longsands Academy						60	93	114	66	333	79	74	100	253	586	12.30-1
Pride Group -Ernulf Academy		24	93	33		116	37	54	54	411	56	65	70	191	602	12.30-1
Youth Café - loves farm community centre		66	153	116		105	188	124	81	833	119	117	179	415	1248	3.30-5
Youth Council - SNTC Museum		14	23	23		26	23	25	12	146	18		22	40	186	5-6.30
Youth Lounge and Wellbeing Hub - note this was chai hub hire		14	24							38					38	4.30-6
(blank)																
Grand Total	**26**	**240**	**512**	**341**	**13**	**557**	**660**	**743**	**420**	**3512**	**481**	**456**	**650**	**1587**	**5099**	

Figure 1: Youth Attendance

The St Neots current Neighbourhood Plan speaks to the need for dedicated youth infrastructure becoming increasingly important, as St Neots has experienced substantial growth through major residential developments. The Neighbourhood Plan recognised the importance of ensuring that community assets, youth provision and associated facilities keep pace with population growth. The proposed youth hub therefore represents not only the delivery of a youth service facility but also an investment in community infrastructure that helps address an identified gap between residential growth and provision for younger residents.

In summary, the proposal would therefore support the provision of accessible community facilities, improve service efficiency, and encourage greater participation by young people in a sustainable town-centre location

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6. Lack of Suitable Alternatives

The Town Council has considered whether existing community buildings could accommodate the proposed youth hub but has concluded that no suitable alternative currently exists that would allow delivery of a permanent, six day per week youth facility without displacing existing provision or significantly compromising the effectiveness of the service.

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Current youth provision is fragmented across short-term, shared venues, limiting continuity, personalisation, safeguarding, and access to gender-neutral facilities. No alternative central sites are available without significant constraint:

- The Oast House is Grade II listed, poorly accessible, internally unsuitable, and would require complex and costly adaptations unlikely to qualify for heritage funding process currently underway.
- The redeveloped Priory Centre, while high quality, is a shared, bookable venue and cannot function as a permanent, youth-owned space. Experience shows ongoing difficulties around availability, flexibility, and suitability, compounded by proximity to bar uses and riverside access.

Neither option meets the operational or safeguarding requirements of a dedicated youth centre.

The Town Council also owns the Eaton's Community Centre. This facility functions as multipurpose, hire based venue and is regular demand by a wide range of community groups. Repurposing this building as a dedicated youth hub would remove valued community capacity and would still fail to provide young people with a centralised permanent, youth owned space due to the need to retain shared use.

Other community facilities within St Neots, such as Loves Farm House, are not owned or controlled by the Town Council and deliver their own established programmes for local residents. These venues are therefore not available to meet the identified need for a centrally located, town wide youth hub.

This site is uniquely suited to this use due to its central location within Market Square, prominence within the town centre, proximity to public transport services, and walking accessibility from surrounding neighbourhoods. The building is available now, large enough to accommodate a range of youth activities, and capable of being adapted with minimal physical alteration. No other available premises within the Town Council's ownership offer this combination of accessibility, visibility, flexibility, and operational suitability.

7. Planning Policy Context

The proposal supports the objectives of the National Planning Policy Framework by promoting healthy and inclusive communities through the provision of

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accessible community facilities.
The proposal also supports the objectives of the Huntingdonshire Local Plan to 2036 by:

- Bringing a long-vacant town-centre building back into active use.
- Supporting community infrastructure and social wellbeing.
- Delivering development in a highly sustainable and accessible location.
- Supporting young people through the provision of dedicated community facilities.
- Enhancing the vitality and activity of St Neots town centre.

The proposal also aligns with the objectives of the adopted St Neots Neighbourhood Plan 2014-2029, which seeks to encourage the growth of retail, leisure and community facilities within the town centre, enhance the leisure and entertainment offer available to residents, and promote the town centre as a focal point for community activity. The Neighbourhood Plan further supports improved community assets and specifically encourages accessible youth provision and educational opportunities in response to population growth within St Neots. The proposed youth hub directly contributes towards these objectives by bringing a long-vacant town-centre building back into active community use as a dedicated and professionally managed facility for young people.

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8. Conclusion

The former M&CO building directly meets the identified functional need for a central, accessible, dedicated and permanent youth facility. The proposal requires no structural alteration and focuses on proportionate internal refurbishment, representing a strong value-for-money investment.

The scheme delivers essential, long-term community infrastructure that supports young people, responds to town growth, and strengthens the social fabric of St Neots and while ensuring active occupation of a prominent town centre site for the majority of the week.

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Appendix A

Huntingdonshire Youth Survey 2025

The need for the proposed development is supported by the findings of the Huntingdonshire Youth Survey 2025, commissioned through Cambridgeshire County Council Communities Service and completed by 673 young people across Huntingdonshire. The full report is attached as Appendix A

Youth Survey Report & Recommendations Huntingdonshire April 2025

Report produced by kerrie.tonks@cambridgeshire.gov.uk and
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March 2025

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Appendix B

Neighbourhood Development Plan

