

## **Town Centre Discussion Paper**

### **Introduction**

This paper draws substantially from background papers prepared by Neil Howlett for Frome Chamber of Commerce as part of their work on a Manifesto on the Town Centre, which is included elsewhere in the agenda. Any changes, errors and conclusions are however the author's.

Frome is fortunate that in an environment in which town centres are changing rapidly, it has moved ahead of some trends. There is also some research which provides a limited evidence base. There is however a good consensus across most of the reports on what might be done to improve the Town Centre. Time and again the same issues emerge and they will provide a checklist for future projects as well as a reaffirmation of what is already on the stocks.

The history of Frome proves that when local people and local authorities work together things can be achieved, some of which have been the foundation for Frome's current success.

This paper addresses three questions:

- What do we know about the health of town centres?
- What do we know locally about the health of Frome Town Centre?
- What conclusions can we draw from these reports and can we construct a doable checklist which will garner widespread support and where possible funding?

## What do we know about the health of Town Centres?

For all the talk, reports and policy-making around Town Centres, there is remarkably little evidence about how to produce a successful Town Centre. You know one when you see it and some key factors seem to be important i.e., footfall, spending, few empty units. What we don't have is a recipe for creating a successful town centre or even a good set of diagnostic tools to identify when one is becoming dysfunctional .....although again you can see it when it has happened.

Most of the indicators are only surrogates. It's hard to tell which are causative and which a consequence of town centre health. Even where data exists the traditional indicators like footfall may no longer be useful comparators as retailers expand into other forms of distribution, such as click and collect.

Critically for Frome and specifically Saxonvale, researchers Wrigley and Lambiri identified as one of the 'don't knows':

*"...the conditions for successful interaction between corporate retailers and independent town centre stores and services, like leisure. Expenditure retention and linked trips are vital – but we need to know more about how they work. How could these conditions for successful interaction be codified and communicated clearly to help decision makers?"*

Even where the researchers did think evidence existed it was not sufficient to predict outcomes:

*"Evidence on the impact of large shopping centres developed in town suggests these can act as a catalyst for change, shifting the prime pitch, but in turn weakening peripheral areas and increasing turnover/vacancy rates. However, the attraction added to the town centre frequently offsets the trade diversion impacts. Careful spatial design/planning is key to strengthening the functional linkages between regenerative improvements and the existing facilities."*

In the absence of any reliable overall "theory" on town centres we therefore need to rely more heavily on local data using a higher degree of qualitative assessment than we might have imagined. This absence of a theory also confirms the Panel's belief that we should concentrate on factors which we can influence or resolve locally.

## **Evidence about Frome Town Centre**

### ***Qualitative Evidence***

Identity and place branding play a vital role in a local feel good factor, retailing and tourism. It's important therefore to understand what people think about a place. Reputation is key; it produces a "halo effect" which can be very powerful even when reality does not quite measure up to the image.

Over recent years, Frome has developed sub-regional, regional and national identities, all of which come with their own potential markets. Numerous articles and blogs have been universally positive (well almost!) and anecdotal evidence suggests that potential visitors and investors have absorbed the message and reacted accordingly. The Frome Independent Market has helped tremendously to maintain the longitudinal profile of the Town.

SIREN PR, who specialise in place marketing, produced "An outsider's view" which listed characteristic for which Frome is known despite any co-ordinated campaign:

- USPs: Creativity, History, Lifestyle, Entrepreneurial, Confident.
- Personality: energetic, disruptive, Independent, exciting, forward thinking, collaborative, passionate, active, intelligent and supportive.

### ***Vision for Frome (V4F)***

This community planning initiative was undertaken between 2006 and 2008. It is a valuable resource as it recorded the views of the people of Frome through a wide consultation process. It produced the Community Plan for Frome stretching from 2009 to 2028, many parts of which have been adopted by Frome Town Council. These are the key findings relevant to the town centre.

#### *Town centre traffic.*

- Promote "shared space" for pedestrians, bicycles and vehicles
- The location of the bus stops mean that buses cause bottlenecks
- There should be restrictions on deliveries to shops
- Take traffic out of town centre, Frome needs a clear transport strategy for the wider town centre
- Reduce pollution by reducing HGV traffic and traffic generally

#### *Improve town image & facilities*

- Issues around upkeep of key buildings

- Consistent treatment (e.g. shop fronts, street furniture)
- Retain uniqueness of Frome
- Toilets should be reopened
- Return removed benches – the elderly need seats

#### *Eating out*

- A wider range of eating places is essential - fast food and healthy eating
- Venues for kids/youth, families
- Quality restaurants and bars are in short supply

#### *Shopping locally*

- Little support for more out of town shopping
- Develop the existing local markets
- The good balance of shops needs protecting
- There is a need for more high street names to supplement independents but local independent shops should be valued
- Shuttle buses to ASDA are stealing town centre trade

#### *Parking*

- More parking is needed
- Parking is too expensive and there are calls for free parking
- Illegal or inconsiderate parking on streets causes traffic chaos
- There is insufficient parking in residential areas
- Parking should be free on market days

#### *Disabled access*

- Accessibility - e.g. bus steps too high
- Cars parked on pavements
- Disabled car park spaces abused
- Dial a Ride needs to stay
- Shop accessibility is difficult when no ramps available

#### *Cleaner streets*

- Litter - Dog fouling- Fly tipping, all too frequent
- Street cleaning frequency is questionable

#### *Enhance & promote the river corridor*

- Many want the river corridor improving as a wildlife and recreational asset

- Partnership approach needed to manage this resource
- Potential as a tourist attraction

### ***RTP Mendip Town Centre Study 2010 (RTP)***

This report provides a good baseline. It was commissioned by MDC to provide a health check for all the Mendip Towns. The RTP report is comprehensive and robust.

RTP's key findings were:-

- Frome is the largest of the Mendip towns. Its historic character and artisan reputation have helped create a vibrant town centre with a wide range of shops and retail offer. Its main role is a local service centre offering day to day access to a range of services and facilities. However there are a range of issues which could hinder the towns future, these include traffic and congestion, poor public transport facilities, lack of eating and drinking establishments, outdated shopping precincts and a large vacant and derelict site adjacent to the town centre.
- Frome's primary qualitative needs entail enhanced evening and leisure uses for the town centre and an increase in national multiples to balance the strong and supported independent sector. The Saxonvale development opportunity presents a potential opportunity to achieve this balance.
- Frome is thought by many to have functional relationships with the West Wiltshire towns and Bath, more than it does with the other principal settlements within Mendip. However, the town does serve a rural hinterland of Mendip residents to the south and west of Frome.
- The key message for Frome is that there is qualitative need for an enhanced evening economy offer, better quality and a greater number of restaurants and drinking establishments would be a welcome addition. Increasing the range of national multiples would also address the current imbalance – the Saxonvale development opportunity offers potential to do this.

### ***Retail Hierarchy & Trade Retention. Bath and North East Somerset study 2011***

Frome performs well in retaining expenditure. Examining the retail leakage by sector, it loses out primarily to Bath and to a lesser extent to Trowbridge, both of which are substantially higher up the retail hierarchy.

- Bath is ranked about 30 on the national retail hierarchy. Frome loses a significant proportion of high value and luxury goods expenditure to Bath
- Trowbridge is ranked about 300. Trowbridge is about 20 minutes from Frome with a population twice the size. It was identified as a centre for growth by Wiltshire Councils and has a very wide range of chain retailers.
- Frome ranks between 600 and 900. The limited space in the town centre (even including Saxonvale) make it impossible for Frome to compete with Trowbridge on floorspace.
- Only 3.3% of people in Frome did their main convenience shop outside the relevant Frome zone.
- Although many people from Frome shop away from the town centre for clothes, footwear and other fashion goods so do many people from Trowbridge, with the proportions going to Bath being 52.9% and 41.2% respectively suggesting little likelihood of a substantial recovery of these shoppers.
- For household textiles and soft furnishings the leakage from Frome was to Bath (18.1%) more than Trowbridge (15.5%).
- For luxury goods, household appliances, hardware and for audio-visual equipment the leakage from Frome and Trowbridge were roughly equal.

### ***Town Benchmarking Reports***

Frome Town Council commissioned health checks in 2012, 2013 and 2014. These are comprehensive and include footfall, car parking, town centre users and trader surveys and comparisons with similar towns nationally, regionally and by typology.

Over the last three years, town centre users have consistently called for these improvements:

- A more pedestrian friendly town centre
- Cleaner streets
- More seating and better landscaping
- Cheaper car parking
- More restaurants
- More clothing shops
- A focus on getting Saxonvale redeveloped

### ***NEMS Market Research.***

The on-street survey of pedestrians carried out by NEMS provides useful qualitative information. The survey shows that the dominant use of the town centre is for comparison shopping needs (35 per cent), followed by personal services (banks, hairdressers, solicitors etc.) which accounted for 25 per cent of visits and lastly, food and groceries shopping (10 per cent).

The survey also asked all shoppers whether they were shopping in the nearest centre to their home residence – in Frome’s case, 70 per cent of the shoppers were nearby residents for which Frome is their closest centre, demonstrating strong local patronage but also that the town predominantly serves a local catchment.

### ***Policy implications of recent trends in the high-street/retail sector.***

URS and GL Hearn were commissioned to assess the policy implications of recent town centre and retail trends. They included Frome in a study of 50 towns, and their report was published in December 2014. They based their work on a number of criteria including retail performance, local economic context, size of the centre and the diversity of the shopping experience.

Frome was identified as “Type 4 Small, strong local economic context, thriving”,

However Frome in particular demonstrated that even relatively small town centres are internally diverse. The researchers themselves identified that although on their statistics Frome was under-performing this was a consequence of only one part of the town, probably at the time the Westway, while the rest was over-performing.

Contrary to popular belief the study also found that independent retail space had actually risen proportionately and in absolute terms over the last decade. The strongest examples of this phenomenon was found in over performing centres like Frome. This is a heartening finding as much of the town’s attraction lies in the independent sector.

### ***PER Town Centre Healthcheck 2015***

Produced by PER Consulting for MDC this provides some very bare statistics but is of limited value as some of the data is questionable and it is not easily comparable with other surveys.

The comparisons between the Mendip towns are not really relevant. The relevant rankings for Frome would have been Trowbridge, Bath, Bristol and possibly Warminster. The Mendip towns are each different and don't compete.

The comparisons that were done might have been relevant if robust typologies were in place but size alone is not enough. Raw population figures are one factor but less important than the market area, socio economic breakdown, in and out commuting.

### **Neighbourhood Plan**

In preparing the Plan, Citizens Panels drawn from a broad cross section of the community were established and they were asked to identify their priorities for the Town Centre. Remodelling the Market Place was considered to be the highest priority and should comprise:

- A layout that is more pedestrian friendly including better accessibility for wheelchair and pushchair users as well as cyclists and pedestrians
- Traffic calming
- Signage improvements
- A tree planting scheme and improved street furniture including seats

Other priorities that emerged from public consultation included:

- The need for additional restaurant, hotel and guest house accommodation to extend the active life of the centre in the evening
- Improving the range of shops especially fashion and comparison goods
- Improving visitors' first impressions of the town from the entrance points and car parks
- Improving access to the River Frome
- Increasing the number of visitors, footfall and dwell time in the town centre
- Supporting independent retailing including street markets
- Promoting a comprehensive and sustainable regeneration plan for Saxonvale
- Providing facilities to enable new businesses to start and grow

These priorities are reflected in the policies within the Plan.



## **Conclusions and a draft check list of potential projects.**

Very little has changed over the last few years concerning what is required. There is a remarkable consistency amongst all of these reports. But very little has happened, except organically or where improvement has been market driven. Public sector improvements to date are marginal; the most significant investment was probably the refurbishment of the Cheese & Grain by Frome Town Council in 2013.

Some issues are “wicked”, meaning almost impossible to stop or change ...austerity will affect spending power, changing shopping habits will move inexorably forward especially the use of the internet, investment decisions made at corporate HQ's are difficult to fathom, whether it's opening a new shop or investing in improvements to a shopping centre. Having said that, others might be capable of being influenced. It will be interesting to see whether the local, cross organisation, civic leadership approach to Saxonvale will influence the decision on the Frontier planning application. We need a vehicle and process to decide as a town which battles to fight and which to accept. If this is to happen we may need to be more nimble in mobilising support and consistent in our messages.

Retailing is changing and planning decisions and perceptions are not keeping up. The only thing that is certain about retail and the high street is that it is changing.

Is retail space:-

- Shelf space for selling objects that purchasers take away?
- Sample space or a gallery or showcase for, brands or style?
- A collection point for pre-ordered goods?
- Social space?
- A workplace?
- An order processing facility?

How do you measure the different values and health of these and how do you ensure that temporary uses are encouraged and fostered?

The dangers in a report such as this and for the Panel is that we indulge in an elaborate fantasy over how to make the town centre into something it can't be and most local people don't want. The various reports show that the Town Centre is small and will remain so, is geographically constrained, and acts primarily as a local service centre with an independent attitude well supported by independent retailers.

Pedestrian friendly changes to the layout in the Market Place, recognising the significance of “events” and markets, the encouragement of some more nationals, developing the

evening economy and diverse usages and more love, care and attention to the environment would all go some way to addressing long standing issues. .

### **How do we as a Panel make some of these things happen?**

Saxonvale still presents the best way forward to fill some of those gaps but only if a mixed use development locked into and complementing the rest of the town centre is developed.

### **Once the Frontier application is determined will the Panel support a more locally driven approach to development?**

It's heartening to confirm through this report that the existing projects currently championed by the TC (presented to the last meeting) are still relevant especially making the Market Place more pedestrian friendly. For complex reasons this scheme has been in the planning stage for far too long; there is now an urgency for it to be approved and implemented. Indeed shopping habits are changing so fast that we may need much quicker decision making, less red tape and more flexibility....the old rules no longer apply.

Potential doable projects to be discussed and adopted by the Panel could include:

- Improving all aspects of the cleansing of the town centre starting with an urgent review of current services and ending with a revised responsive and comprehensive service that is noticeably different.
- Commissioning a professional brief on a consistent approach to signage, street furniture, tree planting, other soft landscaping and public land ownership in order to prepare a costed timetable for improvements and ongoing maintenance.
- The reputation and media image of the town, including the town centre, is positive and widespread. To ensure this continues a common message needs to be established and supported as part of an ongoing campaign.
- Markets, events, alternative meetings (like the tattoo and steam punk happenings at the C and G), fairs, street parties, festivals, celebrations, Xmas extravaganzas, carnivals, music and art throughout the year are all likely to be part of successful towns in the future. Town Centres are now optional whereas once they were essential; the town needs to radically rethink how all of this occurs and is supported. Leaving this element to chance would be an opportunity missed.
- Parking remains an issue and will continue to fester unless there is a clear, locally specific and rational transparent plan. It would be in everyone's interest to make this happen smoothly and quickly. A Parking Plan is required.
- The river frontage needs exploiting better through enabling greater access. What's the best way of achieving this?

- An understanding needs to be created that all public sector bodies (and their contractors) operating in the Town Centre should be increasing co-operation as budgets are squeezed and that the private sector has a part to play in investment and time, for example through the establishment of a Business Improvement District. Does this mean establishing a new Town Centre body or even continuing with this Panel to provide objective advice, monitoring and chivvying?

There will be other projects that the Panel members might identify and raise on the night or through any additional papers. At this meeting and through discussions on this report the Panel needs to start to identify which projects to support. Members may also wish to put some personal time and experience into advancing one or more of the projects. At the moment the list may be too long to manage.

**Cllr Mel Usher**  
**Chair, Town Centre Panel**  
**25 August 2015**