

Frome Town Council

Frome Town Council Strategy 2016-2020

A Town Of The Future For The Future.

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1. Introduction

This Strategy sets out the broad vision and ethos of Frome Town Council. This vision sits within both the wider and the local context. It provides the detail of where we want to get to and how we should get there. It aims to provide the framework within which the community, other councils, the voluntary sector and business can interrelate with Frome town council over the next four years. The strategy provides enough detail to prepare the annual work plans and budgets – while being flexible enough to seize new opportunities as they arise.

2. Vision: a town of the future, for the future

The title of the strategy describes our vision of a town which doesn't sit on its laurels but looks for, and tries, new ideas and ways of doing things. A place that is proudly independent and which puts local solutions first but is also outward looking, seeking to build and maintain connections with the wider world. We aspire to be a town which makes decisions with the long-term in mind and a council looking to improve the lives of generations to come and not one that adopts quick fixes aimed at electoral success.

2.1 The wider picture

Frome is not independent from wider national and international events and change. Community groups have already taken action in relation to refugees – we may be asked to do more. While climate change may not directly impact

beyond some increases in flooding and extreme temperatures, much of the UK's food is imported and price fluctuations and shortages are inevitable.

Closer to home the National Government is pursuing a policy of austerity. The full impact on all public services – health, education and social care included - will dominate this strategic period. The decline in services will fall on all aspects of society but especially the disabled, the old, the unskilled, the poor and the unemployed. Continued deep cuts to County and District budgets mean they will be able to implement little – if anything – beyond the legal minimum.

2.2 The local context

During this strategic period many of the new houses identified in the District Council's Local Plan will be built and occupied. This will grow the town's population by 7,000 – a 24% increase by 2020. This expansion will put significant pressure on a town centre constrained by geography; roads (for both travel and parking); on schools; health provision; transport; leisure and sports provision and on employment. We are confident that the Neighbourhood Plan will reach a referendum and be accepted in 2016, this will provide a degree of control over the balance of housing, infrastructure and employment opportunities, but ultimately decisions on these key aspects will lie outside the town.

Older more traditional employment opportunities are fading although they are being replaced by service industries, the creative sector and a huge increase in micro-businesses (more than 75% of Frome's businesses employ less than 10 people). The success of the speculative Commerce Park extension on the

edge of Frome illustrates the popularity of the area if land and premises become available in the right location.

There are a significant number of businesses linked to recycling and 'green' activity. Frome continues to have low unemployment (though many people are working below the Living Wage and/or are self-employed). It will, however, be a significant challenge to prevent Frome's expanding population migrating to work elsewhere and there is a distinct danger that Frome could be even more of a dormitory town, Frome enters this strategic period with low crime, visible civic pride and an attractive reputation. But the scale of the increasing population could put great pressure on the 'coherence' of Frome as well as infrastructure. Responding to this will be a key challenge if we are to build and retain a coherent town.

2.3 The core of our strategy.

The central theme underpinning the council's approach will remain a focus on developing a **sustainable** town, but we have expanded what we mean by that. Everything we do and support will fall into three areas:

Wellbeing: a flourishing and active community of people and organisations working together.

Prosperity: a thriving business community, connected with each other and with the town, providing employment and prosperity.

Environmental sustainability: covering the attractiveness, variety and accessibility of the town's green spaces and an

increased focus on renewable energy, energy efficiency, waste reduction, and community transport.

Wellbeing, prosperity and environmental are intrinsically interlinked. For example: we will look to focus business support in ways that enhance ethical, environmentally-sensitive business practice – strengthening the business, wellbeing and environmental sustainability together. Similarly, many projects which enhance wellbeing also enhance green spaces, and a focus on green energy not only reduces emissions but also reduces costs and sustains regional economies.

3. Our approach- things that always apply.

We will be bold. Unconstrained by a party political agenda and without manifesto promises to maintain, we will be free to respond to identified needs and make decisions on the basis of what is best for Frome. We will take opportunities as they emerge. To do this we will ensure a Frome town council staff that have a wide range of skills and experience, draw on the expertise of councillors and work closely with individuals, groups and business within the town.

We will encourage you to get involved. Participation and engagement are central to the thinking of the council. Staff will remain dedicated to expanding and improving this approach. We will continue to experiment with council meetings that engage the public. We will assess the success of the Panels (adopted instead of constraining committees), adapting or adjusting them as required. We will look at the many emerging options for increased digital engagement.

We are also committed to ensure that our own processes, as a large group of independent councillors, exemplify this commitment to engagement and participation, embracing diversity and allowing debate and challenge. We want neither to stifle discussion nor bury dissent. We will work together effectively, be fair and participative and allow space for enthusiasm, learning and initiative.

We will enable others to be successful. We see the role of the town council is to support and enhance the energy and commitment of its citizens. Where appropriate we will provide additional resources, offer training, support network groups, or help to advertise, lobby or seek permission. Where significant issues arise the town council will look to support individuals and organisations collect evidence to help make their case. We will be prepared to support the founding of organisations to address the needs of the town.

We will campaign, lobby and lead. We will support and champion causes that enhance the continuing sustainability, prosperity and wellbeing of the town and argue against those which erode these.

We will practice what we preach. The town council will regularly assess its ethical policy with a view to enhancing our approaches. We will pay the Living Wage and we will continue to employ apprentices.

4. What we will be doing

4.1 We will continue to do what the town council has been doing.... and do it better.

The town council has had some success in the past four years and we are not starting from scratch but we want to take every opportunity for improvement.

Communication remains key and we will want a better flow of information both to and from the town council, with better internet resources and more use of social media. We also recognise the importance of face to face advice and will continue to build the skills and services we currently provide, moving these to the new Frome Town Hall when it opens.

We see a continued need to ensure interest in the town from the wider world in order to attract the right investment and spending. We want to continually improve the image and pride of the town making it attractive for visitors and investors alike.

Excellent financial management will be continued. As we access more diverse sources of funding and manage larger projects (such as Frome Town Hall) this will become even more important. We will strengthen the current work to make the finances clearer and more transparent.

Traditionally, the town council had a 'Planning Committee' which passed comment on every minor planning issue. We will continue the new arrangement whereby the Planning Advisory Group leads on campaigning and lobbying, working with community groups wherever possible, to ensure we get the right development in Frome.

We recognise the crucial importance of building and maintaining working relationships with other levels of local government and will continue to do this, while putting Frome first. We also recognise the importance of building new relationships with less traditional partners such as BANES and Wiltshire Councils and Bristol and will endeavour to do this.

Wellbeing

We will work closely with the voluntary sector to identify existing and emerging gaps in provision and co-ordinate the best use of resources at a local level to help plug these. We will continue to provide fundraising support, training and skills to help strengthen Frome's vibrant voluntary sector. Where a community organisation provides a key element of the council's strategy we may wish to provide significant support while working to ensure their long term independent future.

We recognise that Wellbeing cannot simply be provided and will work hard to create the conditions that enable individual citizens and the whole community to flourish. This means that we will ensure high quality facilities for walking and cycling and open spaces, recognising their wider benefit. We will also support activity which strengthens social connections and fosters networks and which creates a sense of belonging such as sports and social clubs. This is not an easy task, requiring the town council to be willing, nimble, and inventive and wherever possible to work with others such as the health centre to both better understand and meet community needs.

To underpin this, we recognise there is a clear need to build a shared – and shareable – understanding of the town’s interests and expertise: we will build and maintain this resource. This will help in increasing the number of volunteers.

Our approach to engagement will clearly recognise the need to reach beyond the ‘usual suspects’. For example, we will build on the past experience of working with a Youth Mayor and provide opportunities for young people to play a role and be included in the town’s decision making. Our aim is to run an annual Youth Conference as a starting point.

Prosperity

Traditionally, a key role of the town council has been to support business and we recognise the importance of this. We will implement a ‘Good Business’ strategy (‘Good’ defined as acting in ways that are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable) through inviting businesses to engage with our recently-developed review framework which clarifies good practice and offers feedback; our hope is that this will lead on to the development of a ‘good business’ award.

We will continue to market Frome as an exciting business base for ethical, green, socially-engaged businesses.

We will build on the success of the redeveloped markets in Frome. Working with those responsible for the markets to attract more stall holders and making town centre market shopping a realistic option for more people.

We will invite businesses and other enterprises to play a role in the wider community – supporting initiatives, sharing

resources, partnering, lobbying for required transport services and first-class educational facilities. We will work with businesses and education providers to offer more opportunities for our young people and people looking to retrain, so that they can live, work and learn here – building on the apprenticeship role that we are currently funding – but also seeing if businesses can offer input more informally.

We believe the town has benefited from town council support to the ‘thematic conferences’ which the Twinning Association has spearheaded. We will engage with these and hopefully build on their outcomes, while continuing to fulfil the civic duties associated with Twinning.

‘Culture and the Arts’ are seen by many as a key indicator of Frome’s re-emergence in recent years. We recognise the crucial role these play not only in a business sense but in the wider wellbeing and social regeneration of the town. The town council will continue to support this area and work with organisations to widen their funding base.

Environment

‘Resilience’ (like ‘Wellbeing’ and ‘Sustainable’) are concepts used in differing ways. We use them in this strategy to give the direction of travel we wish to take, while allowing the flexibility that rapidly changing needs and opportunities present.

We aim to build the resilience of Frome in two key ways: Firstly, to further develop the concept of One Planet Frome which underpins the Neighbourhood Plan. This will focus on work with the existing group of ‘green’ businesses to enhance their contribution (for example, through increased use of renewable

energy and joined up waste management), before moving to more ambitious aims. Secondly, working with the wider community to reduce Frome's impact on the environment, for example, through expansion of the car club, energy clinics and projects with 'waste' food. We recognise the importance of ensuring that this work has direct tangible benefits – especially to the less well off – as well as playing our part in a global need to reduce carbon usage.

The town council has successfully invested in solar energy – directly through the Cheese and Grain solar array and as a founding shareholder in Frome Renewable Energy Co-Op (FRECO). The town council will continue to work closely with community groups, supporting their aspirations to significantly increase renewable energy production and to supply a Frome electricity tariff.

The strategy risks underestimating the very considerable ongoing maintenance and improvement work carried out by the outside staff. The town council now owns significant green space in Frome with the Old Showfield and the Dippy added to Rodden Meadow, Welshmill, Victoria Park and the Mary Baily Playing Field and a number of smaller areas. This significantly alters the balance of responsibility from traditional park maintenance to a wide range of needs. For many in the community this is the 'face of the council' which receives both the bulk of praise and complaints. We will provide the support necessary to ensure the team can carry out their work and to provide a cleaner greener town.

Over the next four years we will develop a comprehensive long term plan for all green spaces to provide for both the plants and

animals that live there and the people who enjoy them. We recognise there are clearly different needs in the town centre and 'wilder' areas of our estate and will provide for this appropriately. To meet our aim of doing what we do better will require further strengthening of partnerships with community groups.

4.2 Finish what we've started.

As well as a number of smaller projects that require finishing, there are two so significant that they will potentially occupy a large proportion of staff time and effort in the short to medium term:

[Frome Town Hall](#)

The new Frome Town Hall will become a resource for all the community. There will be work space for key community groups alongside the town council, advice and networking opportunities for existing and fledgling groups and access to information for anyone who needs it as well as space to hold ceremonies and celebrations. We intend to get this right and create a real centre for the community.

[The Town Centre](#)

The council remains committed to phases 1 and 2 of Market Place improvements which will put people and their needs ahead of those of the motorist. With funding already in place, there are no good reasons why the work cannot take place, allowing safer crossing points and creating a space in which the town centre can flourish. The impact of the main works will extend with the implementation of a coherent design for street furniture leading to significant improvements in signage and removal of extraneous clutter.

Considerable work has also already been undertaken to enable the Cattle Market Carpark to be significantly improved, along with plans to link the organisations that border this space. The council will continue to support these initiatives, making the most of this key entry point for visitors and enabling access to the river for us all.

4.3 New Themes

We recognise the priority of finishing what we have started and the ongoing work. However, there are a number of other themes and projects which are hovering on the horizon and issues where a clear and unmet need is presenting itself. These needs present the council with a real challenge: Do we expand on what we do or concentrate on what has been started? Some of these needs arise as a result of public sector cut backs and others out of changes to our local and national economy. Wherever possible we will seek to lobby and persuade the original providers to continue or improve. However, we recognise as a last resort there may be occasions where we need to find ways to do it ourselves with new and innovative solutions enabling the community of Frome to help itself. We intend to tackle some of the following issues.

The development of **Saxonvale** is hardly a new theme, but it is one where, to date, Frome has largely had to react to proposals presented to us from outside. The town council has worked hard to change this with plans to give Frome a real voice, but it is not clear whether these will succeed. If they do, then Saxonvale's development will demand considerable time and resources – with the potential prize of a radically changed town centre putting the needs of Frome first. If we are unable to

create and take such an opportunity then further stop start piecemeal development may eventually fill the site.

Frome is home to an extraordinary range of **sports activity** with enormous and wide-ranging benefit. We will ensure that the needs of these groups are better included in the support we give to the voluntary sector. We will work with the sports groups to clearly identify opportunities for greater co-operation and thus identify where gaps in provision remain. We will then work to meet those needs, either directly or working in partnership to lobby and request support from outside the town. This may include looking for opportunities to help clubs which struggle with limited facilities.

There is a challenging and increasing requirement for public **transport** which meets the need of people living and working in Frome. We will look for real alternatives in this area as well as promote workable schemes for lift and car share.

Both business, community groups and individuals will require constantly improving **digital services**. We will work with others to push for the highest standards in Frome.

Finally, we recognise that accessing **affordable accommodation** is a crucial issue for many in Frome. This covers two areas: Firstly, the building of houses that are actually affordable to buy and to live in (rather than houses sold at slightly less than market value but still beyond the reach of many) – we will support initiatives that enable self-build and co-housing as well as encouraging developers to build high quality housing. Secondly, we will support broader initiatives to reduce empty housing, and inform and enable those seeking to share

and take part in more radical models. This will require seeking expertise from within or outside Frome.

Conclusion

This is going to be a tough four years, as traditional services deplete and the Frome itself changes. For many this would indicate the need to retrench, reduce and resign ourselves to making a minimal impact. However, this council was elected to continue the optimistic and ambitious approach which has proven so successful since 2011. We believe this new strategy meets that need while also providing a pragmatic approach that fully recognises the context in which we operate.
