

Our agenda for economic development 2017/2018



Frome Town Council

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An economic vision for Frome

Imagine a town with very low unemployment, with lots of opportunities for young people to live and work here, able to set up their own enterprises or find meaningful secure work, access a wide range of training and job opportunities and find somewhere to live. This town has an attractive, thriving and 'buzzy' town centre, with good transport links and excellent fast broadband. There is room for small enterprises to grow and find new premises, and access business advice and finance. The businesses, big or small, link together, and find ways of pooling resources and expertise. They work closely with educational and training facilities to enable both young and old to be well- resourced to engage with the world of work. The business community is community-minded, interested in the long-term future of the town and its citizens, sensitive to the importance of waste reduction, of local sourcing and energy efficiency, of clean air and attractive public spaces. Public sector bodies work with Chambers of Commerce and other agencies interested in creating and sustaining a thriving, prosperous, economically-resilient town. And this economic resilience, itself supported by the lively arts and music scene in the town, and Frome's strong values of community-support and entrepreneurship, contributes to improving the wellbeing of all the people of the town and underpins the prospects of generations to come.

This is the economic vision of Frome Town Council (FTC) which underpins our strategy and work plan for economic development for 2017-18.

How has the Town Council developed its work programme to support the achievement of this economic vision?

We believe that active economic development will play a key role in achieving this vision. And of course, we are not starting with a blank sheet. Much has already been achieved, through the efforts of local entrepreneurs, dedicated volunteers and community-minded businesses, together with public sector bodies. There is already a lot of work that we as Frome Town Council (FTC) are pursuing with our partners. Much of this was introduced in the paper, 'Economic Development Frome style' last year, and that paper was influenced by the content of FTC's Strategy, 'A Town of the Future for the Future' which was adopted in December 2015.

To decide what actions to take, we have consulted with the local business community through the Frome Business Breakfast programme, contacted individual enterprises and undertaken

more in-depth research, relating to the requirement for new workspace. We have also built on previous research (e.g. A Vision for Frome (2008)) and used census and other statistical data to understand the changing situation in Frome and its surroundings. We have now agreed a work programme that reflects what we have heard regarding the conditions needed to support the needs of enterprises in the town and the prosperity of all. We will continually update our knowledge and understanding through engagement with businesses and community enterprises and ongoing research.

What *is* economic development?

Over the years, many definitions of economic development have emerged but most practitioners would agree that it is about pursuing policy interventions that will have a positive impact on people's economic and social wellbeing. So, economic development is designed to lead to more job opportunities, more space to set up businesses, better transport and broadband infrastructure, greater support for innovation and developing skills and greater access to resources and professional advice. It provides the conditions in which enterprises can become established and thrive.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) has a perspective on this which is relevant as it accords with FTC's core values. They say that: 'A successful society is one where economic activity delivers high levels of sustainable wellbeing for all its citizens.' In other words, the impact on people and the planet matters and the goal of economic development is to create sustainable wellbeing. Linked to this are NEF's concern with inequalities in wellbeing – for example whilst levels of employment and average incomes may have risen since the financial crash, inequalities continue to grow within our communities (*Inequalities in wellbeing – challenges and opportunities for research and policy*, NEF, 2015). This suggests that we should be concerned about the impact of our economic development interventions on **all** the people living in the town and on the prospects for future generations.

Why is economic development important to Frome?

Why does the Town Council feel it has a role to play in economic development? We, as a town, have low levels of unemployment and Frome does not have the feel of an area of deprivation. The proportion of people claiming Job Seeker's Allowance or Universal Credit (and are out of work) is lower in Frome than it is nationally. The town is bustling with more events and lower levels of vacant shops than we have experienced in many years.

But all of this hides some important issues that need to be addressed. Firstly, there are not enough jobs in Frome. Only 38% of Frome residents who work, work in Frome – the largest net flow out of Frome is to Bath, followed by Trowbridge and Bristol reflecting higher concentrations of economic activity in these places. The Mendip District Local Plan sets a target of 2700 new jobs to be created in the town by 2029 to help meet the needs of a growing population but the challenge is to ensure that employment growth keeps pace with the development of housing in Frome so that it does not become a dormitory town.

Secondly, Frome, whilst prosperous overall, does have areas of deprivation and inequality. The town has a relatively higher proportion of lower level occupations than Somerset and England and Wales, which impacts on income levels. Compared with Somerset, Frome has a relatively higher proportion of children and people aged 60 or over who are in income poverty. Compared with Somerset, Frome has an above-average proportion of people (1 in 20 residents) living in one of the 20% most deprived areas nationally (ONS, 2011)

Thirdly, Frome has lost many of its traditional employers in manufacturing, printing and engineering. Whilst other parts of Somerset still have strong large-scale industry (in aerospace and energy), Frome must be more creative in ensuring a viable economic future, to guard against becoming a dormitory town, or one with empty premises and little appeal.

Frome has attracted many micro-businesses (employing less 10 people) in recent years and currently 72% of our businesses fall in this category. This is a very positive development, and one we wish to support. The benefits of micros are that many are very innovative, find new ways of working and offer new possibilities. Equally, many are practical and meet local needs e.g. plumbers, builders and other trades and craftspeople. Micro-businesses are becoming an increasingly rich source of employment in today's economy. Smaller firms have been increasing their share of total employment year-on-year in the UK and in 2010 their share was triple that in 1998 (*Firm Dynamics and Job Creation in the UK*, Enterprise Research Centre White Paper No. 6, April 2013). But they do need support in many ways and particular conditions in which to sustain and grow. Research by Enterprise Nation and the Institute of Chartered Accountants for England & Wales (ICAEW) in 2015 listed the following conditions towns need to support this small business sector:

- Opportunities to network
- Positive media coverage
- Lively entertainment & arts
- Access to business advice/strong business support networks
- Access to finance
- Entrepreneurial public servants.

It is good to see that the lively entertainment and arts scene for which Frome is well-known plays a vital role in making the town a great place both to live and work. As highlighted, many small businesses welcome advice on marketing and finance, support to network with others, training and mentoring. Also, as research commissioned by FTC has highlighted (see Land & Premises below), there is currently a shortage of affordable business space to support the establishment and growth of micro-businesses in Frome and this is something we are addressing directly.

What does FTC's strategy say about this area of work?

FTC's strategy is to develop a 'thriving business community, connected with each other and with the town, providing employment and prosperity.' The strategy also identifies that prosperity, wellbeing and environment are intrinsically linked and so our emphasis on

economic development is to build a community of thriving ethical, sustainable and socially engaged businesses.

An important objective of our strategy is to ensure that we can have a bigger impact on the inequalities within our community. More jobs and opportunities for establishing small businesses and enterprises need to be created so that people can improve their financial security. To do this, we must also address people's access to work experience, training and employment.

How will we get there?

- We will ensure that the town supports the development of businesses but especially micro-enterprises where the biggest potential for employment growth exists and help them to grow.
- This includes ensuring that the right environment is in place for such enterprises to support each other and become more engaged in the wider community.
- We will enable people to access the opportunities that those businesses offer – skills development and access to appropriate advice and information will be key as will the further development of links between education and employers.
- We will join up our interventions that relate to 'Prosperity', 'Health & Wellbeing' and 'Environment' in order that we can have a bigger impact on economic, social and environmental wellbeing.
- We will ensure that we continue to work with educational and training organisations to ensure that young people and those retraining are supported in achieving qualifications, developing skills, finding apprenticeships and work opportunities.
- As set out in Frome's Neighbourhood Plan, we will continue to push for mixed use developments and the provision of new employment space so that there are premises for businesses – managed offices, spaces for 'making' and manufacturing, shops and work hubs especially in the town centre but we will also explore how development can come forward in other parts of the town to address the fact that existing business parks e.g. Commerce Park are being developed out.

Our current work programme

Currently, the main components of our work programme are:

1. **Land and premises** - Safeguarding existing employment sites and encouraging the development of new workspace primarily but not exclusively on brownfield land
2. **Improving the image of and pride in Frome** – through public realm improvements, marketing the town as a place to live and as a place to site businesses and other enterprises, developing and promoting new events to encourage town centre footfall and trade and attract new investment to Frome
3. **Resilience programme** – Working with businesses and their employees to help make the town more resilient by reducing waste and energy consumption, encouraging the use of low carbon alternatives to the private car and renewable energy generation;

- encouraging investment in bus and train services, promoting car sharing and electric and hybrid vehicle use and promoting walking and cycling
4. **Developing a community of businesses and other organisations** - Bringing businesses, social enterprises and community organisations together, through 'Frome Business Breakfast', 'Discuss and Do' and other specialised events - not only to help identify and meet their development needs, but also enable them to support each other and contribute to the wider community and improve skills.
 5. **Strengthening the way education and training can underpin the future for those entering and re-entering the workplace** – Building links between education and employers to help create new opportunities for young people primarily through the development of work experience programmes, traineeships and apprenticeships. Strengthening links with local universities and college and community education schemes to create a 'joined up' approach.
 6. **Seeing Frome as part of the wider world** – taking note of the changing wider socio-economic landscape and ensuring we are alert to shifts in policy, are able to seize opportunities, mitigate threats and build alliances.

Our work programme in more detail

1. Land and premises

An essential plank in our strategy is the Neighbourhood Plan, which has now been adopted as formal planning policy by MDC following a successful referendum. Amongst other things it seeks to safeguard existing employment sites in the face of pressure to redevelop them for housing and other uses.

To help guide future investment in workspace, we commissioned some research from Team Consulting (Frome Land & Property Study, March 2017) primarily to identify the property requirements of local businesses. This research has now been completed and identifies a gap in provision of affordable premises suitable for small businesses especially micros. There is pent-up demand for 'grow on' space for more established and growing firms. The survey also highlighted some concerns around other infrastructure including: a frustration around the limited scale of public transport provision and slow broadband speeds in some locations including Commerce Park.

Our approach to addressing these needs includes:

- The provision of business space particularly at Saxonvale on land owned by the Council. FTC is committed to working with SCC and MDC through the Saxonvale Steering Group to help deliver this provision and is currently seeking a joint venture developer/investor partner with whom a development can be brought forward
- Working closely with MDC and landowners to bring forward development in other parts of the town
- Working with the businesses located at Commerce Park and the site's managing agents with a view to improving accessibility to the site

- Influencing the investment plans of BT Open Reach and other providers with a view to securing faster broadband services across the town
- Identifying privately-owned premises within the town centre e.g. space above shops and on trading estates with a view to encouraging landlords to make this space available to small businesses
- Ensuring the newly-acquired Town Hall can create space for local enterprises as well as offering 'hot-desking' and meeting room space

2. Improving the image of and pride in Frome

The Town Centre has been a focus of much of our work in recent years to improve the image of and pride in Frome given its importance as a destination for visitors and its increasing importance for businesses (the Team Consulting Research on premises demonstrated that the town centre is a preferred location for office occupiers).

On public realm improvements, approval in principle has been secured from Somerset County Council (SCC) for a scheme that will make the Market Place and approach roads more attractive and pedestrian friendly. Planning consent has been secured on appeal for improvements to the area around Boyle Cross. A new visitor map has been developed with dispensers installed on the street – early indications suggest that the map has been well received.

It is recognised that Frome's rich programme of events is an important part of its appeal. Those events help to generate footfall and trade, not least The Frome Independent market which is estimated to attract up to 100,000 visitors p.a. to the town and generate up to £2m p.a. for the local economy and the Frome Festival that over 10 days in 2016 put on 169 events and generated ticket sales in the region of £100k with the vast bulk of this revenue going back to performers, groups, promoters and venues.

Currently our work programme includes:

- Providing £130 k and expertise to support the development of the Bert Jansch Media Centre at the Cheese & Grain including a new recording studio and training facilities
- Continuing to work with SCC and MDC to deliver the remodelling of the Market Place to make it more attractive, pedestrian friendly and a more functional location for markets and events – work is expected to start in the current financial year
- Improving the public realm around the railway station
- Working closely with Visit Somerset, Mendip Tourism and others to market Frome as a visitor destination with a focus on the performing arts, walking and cycling, shopping and other activities – the Council is employing an undergraduate from University of Bath as a Marketing & Tourism intern on a 1 year contract to help deliver this work
- A multi-year agreement that will provide 3-year funding (a total of £30k) to the Frome Festival from 2017/18
- Piloting a new 'Discover Frome' information point in the town centre that promotes what's happening in Frome and where to go

- Improving signage for pedestrians and cyclists between the railway station and town centre

3. Supporting greater resilience

FTC has been piloting a ‘Good Business Framework’ with businesses in the town. The purpose of this initiative is to encourage ‘Good Business’ practice defined as not only meeting the development needs of the business from a commercial point of view but also encouraging ethical and sustainable behaviour in terms of employment practices, use of energy, transport etc. and greater engagement in the wider community.

There is evidence that this pilot has helped the businesses involved to stand back from their day-to-day operations and reflect on how they might be adjusted in the future. In some cases, e.g. Dennis Maps (who hosted an exercise mapping business on Marston, undertaken by Frome College students), the businesses have become more engaged in the community.

We continue to be committed to:

- Influencing public transport providers to improve their services and investigating alternative forms of community transport with surrounding parishes
- Further ‘Good Business Framework’ visits
- Promoting the installation of solar panels on the roofs of business premises in partnership with the Frome Renewable Energy Co-op
- Encouraging food businesses to reduce waste by donating food to the Community Fridge
- Encouraging local people to borrow more through initiatives such as the Share Shop
- Encouraging the use of the E Car Club (electric cars) and car sharing schemes
- Installing more electric charging points for vehicles
- Investigating the establishment of a trade waste consortium

4. Developing a community of businesses and other organisations

FTC has become increasingly involved in bringing businesses together with the aim of identifying what businesses need, can share with other businesses and give to the community. The Council has worked in partnership with Frome & District Chamber of Commerce and Mairi Connelly to deliver the monthly ‘Frome Business Breakfast’ which provides ‘bite size’ opportunities for employers to obtain the latest advice on a range of topics and to engage in debate about issues that affect the town. Discuss & Do delivered in partnership with Frome Chamber and Enterprise Mendip deals with these topics in greater depth normally in the early evening and delegates work together to offer solutions based on their own experience. The Retail Group brings together town centre retailers, the Council and the Chamber to deliver events and other initiatives that will help to improve footfall and trade.

The term ‘business’ in this context is interpreted broadly – increasingly we are seeing community organisations and charities that trade coming along to these meetings reflecting the broad appeal of the topics covered. All three groups are well-attended and now represent

growing communities of interest that are keen to make a difference to the ‘prosperity’, ‘wellbeing’ and ‘environment’ agendas that the Council is pursuing.

Our commitment extends to:

- Continued financial and in-kind support for Frome Business Breakfast, Discuss & Do the Retail Group and occasional larger events (e.g. the Energy Conference we hosted as part of the Twin Towns last year)
- Building the level of engagement by the community and voluntary sectors to ensure that the benefits of the advice on offer are broadly shared with a wide range of organisations and to ensure that the ‘communities’ that are developed bring together a wide range of interests
- Enabling sole traders to meet and support each other
- Identifying larger businesses who could provide a volunteer mentoring service to newly-established and growing businesses in the town
- Seeking to establish an online ‘large notice board’ where businesses can find information about events, services, resources and share information and advice.

5. Developing an education and training strategy to help individuals and businesses succeed

FTC has been active in bringing education and employers together primarily through financial support for the Frome College ‘Next Steps’ programme and the work of the Apprenticeship Project Coordinator. This has been employer led with the Apprenticeship Project Coordinator working with businesses to provide advice and assistance to those interested in taking on apprentices. With the support of the Coordinator, the College is also delivering a pre-apprenticeship programme under the brand of ‘World of Work’ where students enjoy work experience over 3 days a week with the remainder of the week taken up with improving developing work skills and improving GCSE grades. Many of the participants have now been offered longer term apprenticeships on the back of their performance.

The experience to date is that the job is as much about building awareness of local employment opportunities and the motivation of young people to take them up as persuading local employers to engage in the programme. Also, with so many micro and small businesses operating in Frome, many are not geared up to providing apprenticeships but have got involved in other ways e.g. by attending ‘careers cafes’ where students have the opportunity to meet and ask questions of business leaders.

We are also strengthening links with local universities, particularly the University of Bath, to ensure we benefit from courses and resources and from students seeking work placements and research opportunities. We are interested in how we can extend and develop such links to create a more integrated strategy to support both young people seeking to launch their careers, older people wishing to re-train, and all those who would like help and support in launching their own enterprises.

- Providing support for mock interviews, other preparations for the world of work and providing direct apprenticeship, internship and work experience opportunities within FTC
- Providing funding for YMCA through a 3-year agreement starting in 2017/18
- Building on the Council's growing links with the university sector – this is particularly in higher apprenticeships and supporting technological advances within the town's businesses and offering work placements and research opportunities to students

6. Frome as part of the wider world

An economic development strategy for a town needs to bear in mind that it is part of a wider economic and social community. We are keen to keep abreast of developments in the wider world – in Europe and at the national and regional level. We want to ensure we both understand the changing economic and social and political climate, can find new partners and opportunities, and can claim our share of public and other resources. Our links with relevant councils and other bodies are vital, as is our ability to spot opportunities for local businesses to access resources and markets elsewhere e.g. Heart of Wessex Local Action Group and Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership.

For example, FTC has been working with partners in the twin town of Murrhardt, the Twinning Association and Frome based employers to develop an international work experience programme to enable young people to experience working abroad. A pilot involving 2 weeks of work experience in Frome for young people in Murrhardt has already been completed.

This area of work shows the way in terms of what can be achieved to meet both the 'Prosperity' and 'Health & Wellbeing' ambitions of the Council.

Specific actions to be pursued include:

- Continued support for the work of the Apprenticeship Project Coordinator based at Frome College
- Progressing the international work experience programme
- Ensuring we keep abreast of developments and opportunities more broadly in economic development and public policy and be well-positioned to take advantage of any opportunities

Further information

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