



# FROME TOWN COUNCIL

## A Strategy For Success 2011 - 2015



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# FROME - A STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS 2011-2015

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has”*

*Quote attributed to Margaret Mead, an American cultural anthropologist*

## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

In May 2011 a new Town Council was elected. It inherited a three year Strategic Plan which was to run until March 2012. The plan followed the traditional format of Corporate Aims, Objectives and Policies.

Many of the objectives were fulfilled however it is unclear how or whether the plan itself was judged a success. This is not a criticism of the previous Council, through which much was accomplished; but strategic plans in the public sector are notoriously time-consuming to produce, frequently play little part in the day to day life of the organisation and often end up sidelined or simply ignored by decision makers.

As a result this plan adopts a more radical approach identifying

- A ‘golden thread’ which runs through all of our work
- The aspirations for the town and the Council
- Areas on which the Council intend to focus and, within those, the actions we intend to undertake, especially over the next 18 months.

### **1.2 The Golden Thread**

As a town and a Council we are faced with both huge challenges and timely opportunities. Traditional economic growth can no longer be assumed, nor is it environmentally sustainable. Our emphasis will be on the ‘human economy’ which is plentiful, dynamic and sustainable – supporting the resources of individuals, families and the social networks that sustain society. Radical thinking, using the new Localism Act, will provide opportunities to move beyond just service provision to an equal partnership between the public and those who ‘serve’ them.

Of course we recognise the limited role of the Town Council but we believe genuinely that small is beautiful and that the time is right for towns like Frome to have a greater influence over their own destiny. We believe that this Town Council can sow the seeds of long term change, and make key decisions which will enable Frome to be more resilient and better able to take advantage of the challenges that lie ahead. But we must be bold, our aspirations to 2013 are necessarily constrained by practicality and a time lag whilst institutions and individuals adjust to the new reality, but beyond that, we must dream the impossible in the belief that this will stir debate and enable Frome as a town to stand out from the crowd.

### 1.3 Aspirations

We have articulated our aspirations in a retrospective assessment of achievements; effectively looking back from the year 2015. This is an unusual approach; we acknowledge that the Town Council are unlikely to achieve all of the aspirations and we understand that those that are not met might be used as a stick to beat us in the future. However, we believe that if we don't know where we want to be, we won't know which direction to go in, nor will we know when we are likely to arrive.

### 1.4 Areas of Focus

To guide these aspirations and, indeed, individual decisions as they arise, we have five areas of focus:

- Building a Sustainable Economy
- A Vibrant Participatory Community
- A Thriving Town Centre
- Efficient and Effective Public Services
- An Innovative and Supportive Town Council

Wherever possible, in all of the five areas, we will embed green aspirations and activity. With the aim to reduce Frome's vulnerability to undesirable changes, and to build a platform from which to take advantage of opportunities in these areas.

Plans on their own are worth very little, action is the key. Therefore specific actions which flow from the five areas of focus have been identified and are detailed in the appendix Action Plan. This also allows scope for flexibility as new opportunities and problems arise.

### 1.5 Community Plan and V4F

In preparing this document, we have relied heavily on the Frome Community Plan 2008-2028 prepared by Vision For Frome (V4F) in 2008. Small parts have needed revision, much has happened globally and nationally in the three years since it was prepared, but the bulk of the findings are still relevant. V4F received over 3000 comments arising from a complex and thorough detailed consultation exercise.

Shortcomings in the Community Plan have arisen not in its content but in its implementation.

*How do you get decision makers to respect its findings?*

*Where will the resources come from?*

*How does the plan match up to new economic circumstances brought on by a worldwide recession?*

*How can the less tangible or aspirational objectives be achieved?*

*What priorities can be placed on the 85 objectives found in the plan?*

There are no easy answers to these challenges and the Town Council do not pretend to have resolved all of these concerns.

Accordingly, the Council has adopted a pragmatic approach, we have pushed some proposals into later years, after all, the Community Plan is intended to run until 2028. Others can be more easily resolved.

## **1.6 Priorities of the Frome Community Plan 2008-2028**

In a combination of the Frome Community Plan and the Town Council priorities, there are too many objectives to allow sufficient focus to ensure achievement. To help the Council decide where the initial focus might lie we can employ a matrix based on assumptions of how easily the objectives might be achieved and how important the objectives are to the town.

An example of the methodology that may be used and the matrix can be found under Appendix 1 on pages 12 to 14.

## **2 Back to the Future**

If we don't have something to aim for, we won't know where we are going and we won't know when we've arrived. So here are the Town Council's aspirations for Frome written retrospectively from 2015.

### **2.1 Identity**

Thank heavens that three years ago, the Town Council started to look at how people inside and outside of the town viewed Frome, it has really helped to differentiate Frome from other market towns. We settled on becoming The Innovation Town and Frome now has a clear identity, in all its aspects of life, as a pioneering, inventive and exciting place to be and in which to invest.

### **2.2 Employment**

We have bucked the trends on employment and there is now a wealth of opportunities in numerous enterprises, especially in the once nascent creative and media enterprises.

The Neighbourhood Plan, expediently finished in 2012, protected employment land but also created space for low cost manufacturing incubators; there is now a waiting list for empty units.

Many people work from home because of the way Frome positioned itself in the UK Broadband Strategy, having established itself as a national leader for e-commerce in 2011. The light industrial estates on the edge of town are also thriving because of the increased interest in new technology aimed at renewable energy. Everyone without full time employment who can work is encouraged to play a part in the life of the town through useful community schemes.

### **2.3 Education**

The Great Education Debate took place in 2012 and many new ideas surfaced from the hundreds of people that attended. Schools now respond more clearly to the needs of the town and are used much more intensively as hubs and resource centres linked constructively to the community. The middle schools are now all academies, are working together, and are finally achieving their true potential and have transformed attainment levels for all children.

Frome Community College is nationally renowned for meeting the real needs of all local youngsters in a challenging world. Discussions have advanced for the University of Somerset with a role emerging for the College as a campus. A new free school has opened in Frome increasing parental choice. This school is underpinned by thriving programmes of adult and community education, run by the community and taking place in venues throughout the town.

### **2.4 Town Centre**

Since the responsibility for cleaning the town centre was returned to the Town Council in 2012, the town has become a lot cleaner and tidier. What a difference it makes having local paid employees working closely with local communities.

Also in 2012, the Town Council came to an agreement with Somerset County Council and Mendip District Council to look after municipal environmental services including weed control, grass cutting, minor potholes, priorities for highways spend and street furniture.

The Town Centre itself is thriving, thanks to the continued focus on economic development, market regeneration and town promotion. Much of this work has been with the help of the Frome Development Community Interest Company.

The Wednesday and Saturday markets have been revived and moved into the Market Place. Specialist markets seem to happen every week, empty shops are few and far between and the independent retail sector, using the online Frome Portal to reach a wider audience, has continued to flourish. The arrival of sophisticated independently run eateries in 2011 has led to a good selection of options for eating out and the live music scene has gone from strength to strength.

At last pedestrians feel a lot safer now that the speed limit in the town centre and around schools has been reduced to 20mph. The Market Place and Bath Street, temporarily closed on Wednesday and Saturdays, have been transformed as part of the final stages of the Shared Space Project which removed all barriers, crossings and unnecessary signs. Many people were wary when Shared Space was first suggested but after some lively debates most were won over when they saw what was possible.

Improved alternate arrangements for bus parking and through traffic, with enforcement of restrictions on heavy lorries, were also big steps forward. Pedestrians and cyclists are now better informed of a network of paths and routes that avoid the main roads, and run alongside new plantings of perennials chosen to enable increased biodiversity and fruits.

Parking is not quite free but now that Mendip District Council has transferred the operation and maintenance of car parks to Frome Town Council, the income is targeted at local projects and good causes. This changes every six months, for example, we started with the Joint Arts Foundation, then moved onto supporting services for the elderly, and more recently spruced up some tired shop fronts.

In 2012, the debate on the Saxonvale development stopped bouncing around the town once the main protagonists realised that they agreed on 80-90% of what were believed to be their differences. The recession stopped most big regeneration schemes nationally and locally. The Town Council started working with local and far sighted developers to put together a series of interlinked improvements led by the Planning Brief and the Neighbourhood Plan. Thankfully the foundations are now in and work is finally on its way.

## **2.5 Local Investment**

The establishment of the Frome Development Community Interest Company (FDCIC) was a significant landmark for the town. The Trust, using private donations, has enabled several schemes to go ahead that would otherwise have foundered. The FDCIC and its Directors have established themselves through support for the market schemes, assistance to the independent retail sector and the purchase of land for allotments. Investment in the FDCIC continues apace as a revolving budget. The original investment has been matched and is now double that of the initial sum.

## **2.6 Parks, Trees, Grass and Recreation**

The Open Spaces Strategy in 2012 really helped to enhance play and green spaces across the town and allowed rational discussion to be held on new investment arising from the Localism Act passed in late 2011. The Welshmill development in 2012 was a model of how local groups, the Town Council and external funding such as the Lottery can work together.

Many new trees have been planted in the town; the Council is especially proud of being able to break up the monotonous Cattle Market car park with new planting. Significant work has been carried out to enhance the river corridor and the new bridge allowing access from River's Reach to Rodden Road (partly supported by the new Health Centre) has become an important route for walkers and cyclists – among a range of well advertised alternatives to roads.

## **2.7 Arts**

Frome continues to have a thriving arts scene that, despite some heavy financial blows in 2011, still continues to engage, entertain and energise the town and its visitors. A strong arts sector has also brought economic benefits: jobs have been created and businesses have been drawn to the town. In particular, the arts have helped bring about a well-established creative industries sector to Frome.

This creative sector has worked closely with the Town Council to target potential funders. However many local arts organisations still rely solely upon the help of private sponsors, local people and the Town Council. As a result their financial security remains fragile. The introduction of initiatives such as joint marketing and ticketing arrangements have reduced costs and increased market penetration to a wider market.

Security and income has been provided for Frome's Cheese and Grain. Three years ago the town's largest music and arts space installed photovoltaic cells on the roof which now generate a substantial income. The Town Council also explored the option of using the Cheese and Grain as offices.

## **2.8 Public Services**

Frome was one of the first small towns in the country to set up a form of pooled community budget. The negotiations were difficult but the commitment of Somerset County Council, Mendip District Council and the Police have been crucial. At least the Town Council now knows where all the money goes, we are co-ordinating services better and have formulated ideas on which services, starting with the elderly and youth, are valued by users.

The opening of the new Police station in the town centre made citizens feel more secure and subsequently reduced incidents of antisocial behaviour. Crime levels have dropped to an all time low. The Library is now buzzing since its rejuvenation as a community learning and communications hub.

The new Health Centre, next to Frome Community Hospital, opened in 2013. This allowed the two organisations to deliver a vastly improved local health service with longer opening hours, more facilities on site, better access by bus from all parts of the town and an increased ability to run successful health campaigns.

## **2.9 House Building**

New house building continues apace, 300 new dwellings have been built of which 33% were deemed as affordable. The Town Design Statement was completed and adopted by Mendip District Council in 2012 and has at last backed Frome's demand for high quality development with a statutory planning document. No longer do developers see Frome as a soft-touch. The New Homes Bonus and Community Infrastructure Levy have allowed the town to benefit to the tune of several hundred thousand pounds from new housing developments. The majority of these new homes have some form of solar energy collection and exceptionally high levels of insulation. The designation of a sizeable piece of land for sustainable self build homes minus the normal planning requirements has attracted national interest and the first few homes are definitely distinctive.

## **2.10 Sustainability**

Scepticism about climate change and the descent from peak oil has evaporated as the reality begins to stare us all in the face. Progress on new schemes has been steady rather than spectacular; the provision of new allotments in 2012 set off a chain of similar developments around the town. The revitalisation of the markets has encouraged more local food sales at affordable prices. There is also an exciting proposal to use the bulk purchasing power of the town to buy gas and electricity at reduced prices.

The community led Frome Energy Company has made significant progress in plans for bio-gas production using Frome's waste food and green materials along with industrial side products. Pretty soon the Council hopes no waste will be leaving Frome to be transported around the county and beyond.

Sustainability has increasingly underpinned the work of the Town Council both in its own activities and in the significantly increased grants made to community organisations. The success of these initiatives in the town is now being measured in a healthier environment, increased wellbeing and more diverse employment opportunities. All of which have ensured more people are staying in Frome and valuing its strong community cohesion.

## **2.11 The Council and the Community in 2015**

As the Town Council has taken on more services it has grown. The review in 2012 of its purpose, staffing levels and quality of services set a new direction and ethos. The Power of General Competence introduced by the Government in 2011 allowed the Council to undertake any function not deemed illegal and helped to resolve many uncertainties.

Gradually the Town Councillors got the hang of using all of the expertise found in the town and have supported the voluntary sector both in resources and expertise. Most work by Councillors is now undertaken outside of Council meetings and through engagement with the local community.

Council meetings themselves have become much more accessible after an extensive overhaul of the rules governing the way they work. The parallel Youth Council provides an important source of advice and inspiration from young people, as well as ensuring the Council remains relevant. As ever, resources have proved difficult and every year there has been a healthy debate about efficiency and local tax levels.

## **3 Actions**

### **3.1 Introduction**

To achieve the aspirations cited above we need to take action. Below is a summary of the actions the Town Council intends to undertake in the next 18 months. An Action Plan accompanies this Strategy which will monitor actual progress on a regular basis. After 18 months, a thorough review will be undertaken.

Recognising the limitations of our resources, we intend to focus on 5 key areas;

- Encouraging a Dynamic and Sustainable Economy
- Creating a Vibrant Participatory Community
- Enhancing a Thriving Town Centre
- Ensuring Efficient and Effective Public Services
- Establishing an Innovative and Supportive Town Council

In all of the five areas, we will embed green aspirations and activity in order to reduce Frome's vulnerability to undesirable changes, and to build a platform from which to take advantage of opportunities in these areas.

### **3.2 Encouraging a Dynamic and Sustainable Economy**

The bedrock of Frome's economy is in the light industry based primarily on the trading estates, the local farming economy and in commuting to employment found outside of Frome. We need to be aware of pressures that a flat economy, rising fuel prices and climate change place on these. The Council must provide support for ideas and innovations that soften the blows and take advantage of new and radical initiatives.

In recent years, the town has gained a reputation for attracting creative industries. Building on this by attracting and retaining small and medium sized enterprises is key.

The Town Council will seek to carve out a new niche for Frome in green technology, building on our existing status as a Transition Town, and the considerable expertise within the locality.

To achieve these ends Frome needs a clear identity, clarity of approach on economic development and a willingness to market itself to residents, visitors, innovators and investors alike. This positioning will not happen by chance and Frome must stand out amongst many other market towns, highlight the many positives and not be afraid of blowing its own trumpet.

### **3.3 Creating a Vibrant Participatory Community**

Much of today's general dissatisfaction and social isolation can be traced to the fact that many of us have relatively little control over our lives and rarely enjoy the fruits of our own labours. We may look on others with suspicion and expect the authorities to take care of the public realm, and then grumble when it is not done well.

Yet the antidote to this might simply be to encourage participation and greater involvement. Frome is already good at this with a vast network of societies, informal social services, active community and neighbourhood groups.

Many of these areas are under intense pressure with reduced funding, aging membership and increasing demand for services. The Town Council must quickly move to identify where best to provide support not only in funding but in networking and facilitation. The Council will support and encourage communities and empower them to look after their own neighbourhoods and interests because they know what needs to be done and they will do it best.

### **3.4 Enhancing a Thriving Town Centre**

The town centre generated most comments in the Community Plan. The debate continues around the future of Saxonvale. Undoubtedly the people of Frome want more diversity in their shopping and choices for eating out. Town centres should be more than just retail, the Town Council would like people to re-imagine the town centre as a place to live in, a place of learning, a green and safe place and somewhere that is creative and exciting. Little of this will happen if we do not rise above a hygiene threshold; so that the streets are clean and repaired, pedestrians feel safe, the markets function well, empty shops are filled quickly, parking issues are resolved and so on. We need to demonstrate that someone cares, and it can only start with us as a Town Council.

### **3.5 Ensuring Effective Public and Voluntary Services**

Towns such as Frome are heavily dependent upon public services, for example the police and social services, being delivered in a timely and effective manner. Many agencies, voluntary and public, work in Frome and spend millions of pounds in the town every year; and yet there is no co-ordination, no one measures their effectiveness and integration is generally ignored. To a layman or anyone running a business, this must seem like madness, it certainly makes navigating your way to the right services a trickier task than it should be.

The next four years will see a massive upheaval in all services, schools will migrate to academies, the health service will once again be reorganised, the police will come under increasing budgetary pressures and volunteers will take on key roles in many of these services. The district and county councils are already changing significantly, some services will disappear perhaps forever.

Frome has to break away from merely complaining about the changes. The Town Council is key in bringing everyone together for the greater good of the town, taking advantage of any new opportunities, claiming resources where tasks are being delegated and ensuring training and support is given to volunteers in new roles.

### **3.6 Establishing an Innovative and Supportive Town Council**

The Town Council must be bold in pursuance of its aspirations and will explore novel and creative approaches. It must actively support organisations from within the town in genuine partnerships to meet the aspirations of both the Council and the people. The Council must be an exemplar employer and constantly seek to run, or organise, its own services effectively. When enacted, the Localism Act will extend the powers of the Council and the opportunities presented for Frome must be explored as a priority.

The Council must:

- Inspire the people of Frome, accepting they are the innovators, if only we can see our way to empower them.
- Work with and through others, facilitating and co-ordinating what people do rather than doing it for them.
- Hold others to account especially in the provision of services.

These are lofty ideas, requiring significant change. Frome Town Council as a whole will need to reflect on whether its current organisation and ethos is fit for purpose.

### **3.7 Focus April 2013 to April 2015**

The current Councillors hold office until 2015 and we don't expect to achieve everything in the next 18 months. Ongoing and further actions that the Town Council would like to implement following the initial programme are also documented in the Action Plan. Some of these actions follow on from those in the first 18 months and some are new. Again many come from the Frome Community Plan 2008-2028.

These priorities may change over the next 18 months. Our decision will be influenced by the changing political and economic situation, our success (or otherwise) in the first 18 months and what the people of Frome say they want.

### **3.8 The Role of Negotiation**

There are a number of areas where, as a Town Council, we would like to have an impact but where it is very clear that the power to act and change lies elsewhere. In these areas we will act as the spokesperson for Frome advocating, negotiating and demanding the right course of action with the appropriate decision makers. We will work in conjunction with both Mendip District Council and Somerset County Council to help achieve our objectives.

These areas include:

*Parking* - Encouragement for townspeople to walk and cycle but also create a car parking policy that allows the town's businesses to compete with those in nearby towns.

*Public Transport* - Consideration towards increasing the number of trains calling at Frome and the range of destinations accessible from Frome.

*Roads and Highways* - Enforcing the appropriate weight and speed limits in the town centre. In addition, ensuring that replacement street furniture is sympathetic to the historical nature of the town's streetscape.

*Cycling* - Completion of the missing link in the Sustrans cycle network.

*Crime* - Reduction of crime, disorder and alcohol related anti-social behaviour in the town centre.

## **Appendix 1 - Methodology**

As touched on in section 1.6, the methodology used to determine the priorities of the objectives from the Frome Community Plan and Frome Town Council comes from attaching weightings to the individual aims, however the Town Council accept that this is not necessarily the same view for everyone.

Two questions were asked of each of the objectives in the Frome Community Plan's six areas of focus.

Question 1:

*How easy is it for the Town Council to achieve the objective?*

Answer takes into account:

*Where the authority lies to make decisions*

*Whether the skills, knowledge or expertise exist in the town*

*How much it will cost and how it will be funded*

*How long it takes to achieve it*

Question 2:

*How important is the objective to the Council's aspirations?*

Answer takes into account:

*How widespread the benefits are*

*Whether the benefits are felt directly or indirectly*

*How important it is to the people of Frome*

*How sustainable are the benefits*

The answers are scored and collated producing two scores; one for ease and one for importance. The two scores are then plotted against each other on a graph showing Ease of Achievement along on the horizontal axis and Importance to the Town on the vertical axis. Consequently those that appear in the right hand upper quadrant are those actions on which a greater emphasis is placed.

Example of the Methodology

We have noted on the next page the aims and objectives from the Getting Around section of the Frome Community Plan.

	<b>Aim 1: To improve pedestrian access and safety</b>
A	To campaign for the provision of new official crossings where pedestrians routinely cross roads
B	To encourage pedestrian priority schemes
C	To examine best use of the Market Place, in order to unite the shopping areas and provide a safe location for the Saturday market
D	To aim for the provision of clean, even and continuous pavements
E	To aim for the provision of town-wide linkages with dropped kerbs
F	To aim for the provision of new river crossings for pedestrians and cyclists
G	To encourage walking by providing seats at intervals along pedestrian routes
	<b>Aim 2: To improve parking and traffic flow</b>
H	In consultation with the Heritage team, to look at ways of improving the design of the Market Place and moving bus stops
I	To work towards the implementation of vehicle size and weight restrictions in the Conservation Areas
J	To consider new parking and traffic-flow systems within congested areas, in consultation with affected residents and the relevant local authorities, and to prepare alternative routes for future road and bridge repairs.
K	To investigate possibilities for new road links and parking provision within large development schemes
L	To look at the provision of cycle networks and encourage the completion of the Sustrans cycle route through the Frome area
	<b>Aim 3: To reduce quantity and impact of through traffic</b>
M	To work with the Highways Authority to ensure regular monitoring of heavy traffic passing through the town centre and encourage the placing of signs indicating alternative routes to divert HGVs before the town limits are reached
N	To seek to ensure traffic light controlled crossings are provided on the A362 through town at regular intervals
O	To consider the strategic management of traffic in Frome and surrounding areas and to make relevant representations to the Department of Transport and the Highways Authority
	<b>Aim 4: To increase use of public transport and decrease use of fossil fuels</b>
P	To negotiate with bus service providers and Somerset County Council for a more appropriate service for Frome and surrounding villages
Q	To make a business case for improving rail provision to Frome, including a main line service
R	To seek alternative ways of getting around that do not use fossil fuels

Based on the scores from the two questions on these example aims, they have been plotted into the graph as shown below.

Consequently, the results show that objectives C, K, N and R are those where the initial focus should lie and these features will therefore feature heavily in the Town Council Strategy.

