

Frome Town Centre Panel

3 September 2015

Note of meeting

Present

Cllr Mel Usher (Chair), Frome Town Council
Mark Brierley, NVB Architects
Neil Howlett, Frome Chamber of Commerce
Andrew Prince, Westway Centre
Juliet Solomon, Access specialist
Cllr Pippa Goldfinger, Frome Town Council
Cllr Colin Cobb, Frome Town Council
Cllr Tricia Golinski, Frome Town Council
Cllr Sheila Gore, Frome Town Council
Cllr Nick White, Frome Town Council
Peter Wheelhouse, Frome Town Council
Mark Brookes, Frome Town Council
Patrick Moss, Frome Town Council
Allan Bennett, Frome Town Council

Apologies

Jude Kelly, Frome Chamber of Commerce
Cllr Des Harris, Mendip District Council
Nigel Harris, Frome Chamber of Commerce

Note of last meeting

Tricia Golinski queried whether her workshop group had actually agreed that the location of the town centre bus stops are a problem. Access was good for some people.

Issues/thoughts emerging from the background papers

Mel Usher asked the Group for their views on the background papers that had been circulated and the conclusions that can be drawn from them.

There were many contributions and a considerable degree of consensus but they can be summarised as follows:

- It is difficult to compare Frome with other places as each place was built with a different purpose in mind; Frome has grown as a working town with its own history.
- It is difficult to accurately measure retail footfall as there are no automatic counting systems and we are therefore reliant on conflicting anecdotal evidence from retailers. Given the time period the Panel has to work to, we don't have the luxury of collecting more evidence.

- The Town Centre has been described as ‘A good play but with a shabby set.’ What makes the town centre is the activity that goes on within it but if we can enable improvements to the environment or the set we can influence that activity and therefore the town centre’s success
- Particular attention should be paid to decluttering the Market Place e.g. getting rid of unnecessary street furniture to help people appreciate the buildings and spaces and generally making it more pedestrian friendly.
- A recent survey of businesses in the town showed that 69% of respondents would like to be located in the town centre; it would appear that the opportunity to interact with customers and suppliers in cafes, restaurants etc. is a particular draw. Enabling a good mix of employment and residential in the town centre can help to generate new footfall.
- The town centre should be inclusive and meet a wide variety of needs. The town centre needs to be flexible to enable different uses and users to come together. Access is very important.
- There is a recognition that you can’t beat the market; we should work with it and that includes taking advantage of changes in shopping habits including the growth in online retailing.
- The perception is that more should be done to encourage people into the town in the evening. The new Cordero Lounge has had a positive impact on the Westway and suggests that encouraging investment in new restaurants may have the desired effect. A twilight market, late opening and click and collect opportunities may all encourage greater evening footfall although may not be universally supported by independent retailers.
- Enabling events to happen in all weathers through for example the introduction of canopies in areas such as the Market Yard are worthy of investigation.
- There should be a focus on enhancing the positive ‘touchpoints’ in and cleanliness of the town centre; the things that already make a difference to people’s experience of visiting the place
- A theme should be improving information for visitors and residents alike

Questions from the Chair

Mel Usher posed a number of questions to help move the Panel towards an action plan. The responses from the Panel were as follows:

1. What should our overall approach to the Town Centre be?

Improvements are essential

2. How important is the town centre to the life of the town?

The perception is that it is the social glue that holds the town together and even if some people don’t regularly use it, most people care about it

3. What's the purpose of a town centre now?

Retail
Other business
Leisure
Social
Events
Eating out
Service centre
Somewhere to live

4. How do we improve what we have got?

Through small steps that are geographically focused

5. What can the Panel put to one side?

Major projects such as the development of a masterplan for Saxonvale (the plan will be developed anyway by the Council and its partners)

Ambitions for the Town Centre

A number of potential ambitions were considered as follows:

1. Recognise & facilitate change e.g. role of internet, cafes and bars & click and collect
2. Hard and soft landscaping, signage (visitors, car parks, toilets), access & street furniture – commission professional brief and move towards action including future maintenance plan
3. Better street cleansing
4. Finish the Market Place and make more pedestrian friendly
5. Coordinate and increase events, festivals, markets etc.
6. Rebalance emphasis from physical to social and from ad-hoc to coordinated marketing
7. Car parking strategy
8. Business improvement district and greater role for private sector
9. River frontage improvements
10. Decorate empty shops

It was agreed that the Panel should focus on 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 as we have most control over those things.

Next steps

It was agreed that short papers/presentations would be prepared for the next meeting to provide a focus for discussion and agreement on actions. These will be:

Marketing (Mark Brookes)

New events (Mark Brookes)

Market Place – develop the concept plan further to include lighting, street furniture, hard and soft landscaping and other ways of improving the amenity of the area (Peter Wheelhouse)

Signage (Neil Howlett)

Cattle Market Car Park – concept for improving the area (Mark Brierley)

Street Cleaning (Mel Usher)

How do we better measure the success of the town centre? (Andrew Prince)

Date of next meeting

Thursday 24 September, 7 pm, Elliott Building, (to rear of Frome Town Hall and accessed via car park in Park Road)