

Frome Town Centre Panel – Report of Findings

1. Aims

Panels are intended to draw on expertise in the town, they are time limited and should be pragmatic in their approach. They are not decision making bodies, they advise the Council, provoke debate and where appropriate provide a steer for future decisions based around “doable” projects.

The Town Centre Panel consisted of:

Cllr Mel Usher, Frome Town Council (Chair)
Cllr Sheila Gore, Frome Town Council
Cllr Pippa Goldfinger, Frome Town Council
Cllr Nick White, Frome Town Council
Cllr Colin Cobb, Frome Town Council
Cllr Tricia Golinski, Frome Town Council
Cllr Cath Puddick, Frome Town Council
Cllr Des Harris, Mendip District Council
Andrew Prince, Westway Centre
Mark Brierley, NVB Architects
Neil Howlett, Frome Chamber of Commerce
Juliet Solomon, access specialist

The following also contributed to the meetings:

Cllr Kate Bielby, Frome Town Council
Peter Wheelhouse, Frome Town Council
Mark Brookes, Frome Town Council
Patrick Moss, Frome Town Council
Jane Llewellyn, Frome Town Council
Alan Bennett, Frome Town Council
Lisa Millard, Frome College
Frome College students
Various other representatives from the community

Mendip DC as a key player were invited to send a Cabinet Member but no attendance was recorded. Jude Kelly of the Chamber of Commerce and Steve Macarthur of the Cheese & Grain were also invited as Panel members but did not attend any of the meetings.

2. Duration

The Panel met on 4 occasions between 11 August and 20 October 2015 to:

- Identify the issues in the Town Centre
- Evaluate evidence both locally and nationally around Town Centres and Frome in particular
- Determine potential projects
- Refine the projects
- Agree a way forward.

All meetings were advertised and open to the public; attendances varied from 13/14 to over 40 depending on the topic.

3. Issues in the Town Centre

Much of what was identified has been written before whether in the community plan or the annual Town Centre Benchmarking Survey or in reports prepared by “experts”. It's good to see a high level of consistency but disheartening to find the same issues re-appearing time after time.

3.1 Physical

The greatest concern remains the B390 in the Market Place. Traffic speed might not be so fast during busy period but vehicles dominate the space, determine town centre footfall and cause pollution (figures often exceed recognised safe levels at this point). Life is particularly tough for the old, the frail, the disabled, children, parents with buggies and those who don't pay attention. As this group contains a fair percentage of the population the Panel feels that it is imperative that the proposed scheme to make the Market Place more pedestrian friendly proceeds. It is no longer acceptable in 2015 for residents and visitors to be locked behind barriers, harassed by drivers or be forced to weave or run through traffic.

One Panel member likened the town centre to a play, it has some great actors who are let down by a shabby set (despite some jewels sewn into the backdrop). The town centre was described variously as scruffy, tatty and unkempt. Street furniture is poorly maintained and uncoordinated, signage is eccentric, flyposting endemic, litter remains a major problem and the car parks are purely functional and deeply unattractive. Most public sector toilet buildings are poorly looked after and have been derelict for a while. There are insufficient bins, trees and seats.

On the plus side there are great spaces in the Town Centre; where traffic is restricted new uses flourish, there are fine historic buildings and most shops are occupied and many are sparky and unusual. There is plenty to build on in term of improvement if only the public sector could get to grips with the public domain issues.

3.2 The Town Centre Offer

In terms of retail the town centre lacks the diversity found in some similar towns. What we have is good but it is not enough...many residents want more comparison shopping especially clothing. The Panel saw the need for more night-time offerings especially bars and restaurants. Where new businesses have emerged they have flourished, the success of The Cordero Lounge was cited in particular, it has changed the perception of The Westway. More pop up shops and restaurants were to be encouraged. The growth of the Cheese and Grain was seen as very positive although the building itself is semi-detached from the centre.

The Wednesday and Saturday markets are weak especially when compared to the success of the Frome Independent Market which still attracts many visitors and remains vibrant and interesting.

The Panel recognised the significance of events in the life of the town centres; they increase footfall, deepen the attraction and bring exciting new possibilities. The Festival is seen as a little highbrow and of a certain age; events need to be inclusive and reachable by all.

3.3 Car Parking

Many references were made to car parking within the town. The Panel recognises that there is a

conundrum between the need for Mendip to receive a predictable and increasingly crucial income and the impact parking charges have on the economic health of the town. Many felt that the charges were too high and too inflexible. Car parking in Frome is a problem, domestic parking in the centre is limited and cheaper parking is some way out of town. The appearance of the car parks is poor considering the amount of income they generate; they are the touchpoints for many visitors and need to be clearly signposted, well-marked and even pleasant.

3.4 Access

Access can be difficult across the town; as well as the Market Place commentators mentioned Gorehedge and the Lidl roundabout on the junction of Portway and Garsdale. Dropped kerbs are not universally available. Parking on or across the kerb seems to be becoming increasingly frequent and outside St John's Church was often cited. Access to the river is a problem for everybody and A boards in Cheap Street remain a hazard.

3.6 Young People

Four young people from the College attended one meeting and this is what they said:

On Tuesday the 20th of October I and several other students were invited to take part in a meeting of the Frome Town Centre Panel about how young people use the town centre and how we would like to see the centre of town developed in future.

The panel focused on how to make the centre of town a place that people of all different ages and interests could enjoy. We discussed what parts of town we enjoyed and used the most and how we could work to build on these aspects to make the town a better place for young people. Some key points we mentioned were how much we enjoyed the Independent Markets and all the events put on at the Cheese and Grain such as the steampunk fair and musical events like Later with Frome College. We talked about how we'd like to have more of these sorts of events in Frome and how we could encourage young people to get involved with the community. On top of this we said how we as teenagers would like to see more of the town centre pedestrianised.

I think it was a great opportunity to get our views as young people heard by members of the community who could really make a difference. The members of the panel really seemed to care about our views and I hope that our ideas will be taken forward to help develop a better town centre for everyone in the community to enjoy.

Sol Warsop

3.7 The Chamber of Commerce

The Chamber of Commerce have prepared a separate manifesto much of which echoes this report including; better signage for visitors and car parks, dealing with the closed toilets, better street cleaning, better maintenance of the footbridges, a transparent car parking review, making the market square more pedestrian friendly, co-ordinated marketing, a better retail offer and rejection of the Frontier application and a revision of business rates for the town centre.

So far this whole report may read like a list of complaints and moans, that was not the intention. The Panel has more positive views later in the report when recommendations are made.

4. Town Centres

The Panel investigated eight local and national reports. It was slightly disconcerting to come to the conclusion that there is no list of “things to do to make your town centre successful.” You know one when you see it and some key factors seem to be important i.e., footfall, spending, few empty units. It appears that nobody has yet devised a recipe for creating a successful town centre or even a good set of diagnostic tools to identify when one is becoming dysfunctionalalthough again you can see it when it has happened.

The Panel was particularly taken by the Southampton University Report of 2014 on the future of town centres. Some of the following characteristics are either already emerging in Frome or should be recognised as likely to happen:

- Events and festivals in town centres will grow in importance as test beds for urban innovation and sustainability, social marketing and entrepreneurship interventions. Town centre management will continue to play a pivotal role here, though it may well be through job descriptions such as “community engagement manager”, adopted in Frome but still unfamiliar to many UK towns
- Similarly the development of hybrid forms of town centre management including integrated destination management with a stronger focus on the visitor economy or online community management with a focus on people's virtual interactions with their town centres via social media will continue to develop.
- An expansion in the night-time economy offers opportunities for a growth in jobs and the possibility for new enterprises. New possibilities are emerging to fill vacant properties in ailing local high streets with hybrid bars/cafes and micro pubs for example.
- It is clear that any reconfiguration will inevitably be a continuation of the long term shift away from retailing to service but especially cafes and bars, health and beauty and medical services.
- With many modern retail high streets perfectly positioned for top-up shopping, achieving the right mix of multiple and independent retailers and leisure offers such as cafes and bars can position a centre alongside online shopping, not against it.
- Convenience shopping has emerged strongly from the years of crisis and austerity and now occupies a strategic position in ensuring the future vitality and viability of town centres. This has come from a powerful shift in consumer behaviour against out of town shopping.
- After two decades of Internet use we are likely to move towards a phase in which the distinction between the online and offline world diminishes. The increasing demand for retail properties from e-retailers and other types of firms such as artists and designers also fosters the growth of new retail concepts in town centres such as pop up shops and innovative shopping concepts.
- As such Internet based firms and technologies are currently able to and also will contribute to the viability of the high street. Experts expect that some 25% of total retail space will be

generated from the internet in 10 years' time. This means that the substitution effect of the internet on some bricks and mortar retail trade will be much greater in the coming decade.

- A clear retail vision and cooperation between actors at the local level is essential for town centres to adjust to online shopping in the near future and to benefit from the new business opportunities provided by the Internet.

There was a recognition by the Panel that you can't "beat the market" but you can influence it; accordingly we should recognise overtly and take advantage of, the changes predicted by Southampton University and already coming to fruition in Frome town centre.

Perhaps all we can do is facilitate a move in the direction of travel as indicated above. All town centres are a mixture of commercial and community spaces of considerable and deceptive complexity with their own history and unique advantages and drawbacks. Accordingly the Panel was determined to be pragmatic, to not indulge too long in fantasising or dreaming about how to make the town centre into something it can't be ... and probably most local people don't want.

Frome is a small, geographically restrained, local, service centre with an independent attitude backed up by independent retailers. Evidence of new uses and ways of management are already emerging. Significant steps could be made through small changes to the physical environment, the encouragement of appropriate national shops, increasing the number of restaurants and being aware that new businesses of whatever kind keep the town vital. These allied to a greater emphasis on the social and community aspects and being aware of the likely changes brought about through the internet will make a big difference in future and can only strengthen the local economy.

The question for the Panel became how do we make some of these things happen?

5. The Panel agreed 4 overall elements.

5.1 The Town Centre arouses strong feelings. Maintaining its economic health and vitality is viewed as a priority by a large number of residents – even by those whose shifting shopping habits are at variance with these objectives. The TC remains vital to the life of the town, it's the one place people can come together, and it was described as "the social and physical glue that binds the town together." Accordingly improvements to the TC are essential; we can't leave these improvements to chance or solely to the fluctuations of the market. Interventions are necessary ... and cost money.

5.2 A multi-use town centre is essential including shopping and living but also as a place for: leisure activities, multi layered social interactions, enjoyable events, somewhere to eat and drink, to act as a service centre from tattooists to lawyers to hairdressers and finally for businesses who want to be centrally located for network reasons. And all of this is changing fast, the past is no longer an indicator of the future.

5.3 To concentrate on smaller scale geographic and threshold improvements that are within reach. Moving too far beyond the immediate often produces scenarios which are creative but which become embarrassingly detached from reality in a very short period of time.

5.4 That detailed proposals for Saxonvale should be put on one side; there remains too much uncertainty and complexity to deal with this issue through this Panel. If the town is not careful we could however continue to delay other proposals whilst waiting for this issue to be resolved. That would be a mistake; already the Frontier application has stymied significant improvements for over 2.5 years. We do however make references throughout the report to Saxonvale which may help to tweak the outcome in terms of usage and mix on the site.

6. Proposals

Arising from these four elements the Panel agreed that:

6.1 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. The Panel wants the Market Place improvements to proceed and is disappointed by the interminable delays.

6.2 There should be a focus on enhancing the positive 'touchpoints' in the town especially for visitors including new maps, a central point of reference, enhancing the car parks etc.

6.3 The town centre needs to be flexible and inclusive for both formal and informal events. Co-ordinating and increasing event numbers is crucial and enabling them to happen in all weathers through for example the introduction of canopies in areas such as the Market Yard are worthy of investigation. Access for all to these events is very important.

6.4 There needs to be a greater recognition of the night-time economy whether through licensing, planning controls or creating events. A twilight market, late opening and click and collect opportunities may all encourage greater evening footfall although may not be universally supported by current retailers.

6.5 There is a whole raft of issues around hard and soft landscaping, signage (visitors, car parks, and toilets), access & street furniture – the Panel recommends the commissioning of a professional brief to start annual improvements including a comprehensive maintenance plan

6.6 There needs to be an honest recognition that the town centre is not cleaned well enough. There is a certain threshold beyond which town centres need to reach to make people feel comfortable, safe and involved (i.e. not drop their own litter). This has not been reached in Frome's case. The Keep Frome Clean Panel will provide more evidence and also make recommendations.

6.7 Recognise and absorb that town centres are changing because of the internet. This might not be to their detriment but only if the outcomes are understood and fitted into a comprehensive strategy that specifically recognises this element.

6.8 A recent survey of businesses in the town showed that 69% of respondents would like to be located in the town centre; to network and interact with customers and suppliers. Enabling a better mix of employment and residential in the town centre will help vitality.

6.9 Continue to rebalance the Town Council emphasis from physical to social and from ad-hoc to coordinated marketing

6.10 Market Place – develop the concept plan further to include lighting, street furniture, hard and soft landscaping, signage and other ways of improving the amenity of the area.

7. Moving Further

The Panel decided to look at 3 elements more closely:

- Events and Marketing through Mark Brookes, Town Centre Community Coordinator, FTC
- The Cattle Market Car Park through Mark Brierley, Director, NVB Architects, Frome
- Signage through Neil Howlett, Frome Chamber and Des Harris, Mendip District Councillor.

The Panel was also aware of evidence and proposals emerging from the Keep Frome Clean Panel relating to the Town Centre.

7.1 Events and Marketing

Marketing:

Frome doesn't have a traditional tourist town profile. It doesn't have major heritage or other attractions but what it does have is a rich programme of events, some of which are attracting large numbers of visitors. This is true of the Frome Independent Market which now attracts on average 10,000 visitors per month. Frome also plays host to some quirky events such as the Steam Punk Festival which are attracting people who might otherwise not come to the town. Frome's quirkiness reflected in its mix of independent shops, music scene, writers, artists and makers is a particular strength that should come through stronger in marketing the town.

With this and our recent 'Great Town' status in mind (awarded in part due the liveliness of our cultural offer), it would seem obvious to market Frome as a destination for events and the arts generally. Our marketing strategy should be set around a growing annual events calendar created with the help of venues such as the Cheese & Grain, Rook Lane, The Silk Mill, both theatres, the markets and live music pubs etc. Events should be constructed to benefit the whole town, increase footfall, fill hotel rooms and increase trade for retail and food outlets.

The recommended marketing mix includes:

Web: Further work to improve our 'Discover Frome' online presence and with a particular focus on events

Social Media / Apps: Increase profile and improve content

PR: Engage a professional firm building on the earlier successful national PR campaign for larger event marketing, reviews, press and blog coverage etc. and develop a more efficient in-house PR structure at FTC

Accommodation Providers: Improve listings of accommodation including Airbnb providers, developing offers/weekend packages that capitalise on the growing events programme

Visit Somerset / Bath Tourism Plus: Further develop our working relationship with these destination management organisations to reach a wider audience and ensure that their own marketing reflects Frome's unique offer

Recommended budget for 2016/17: £30k

New events:

The approach should be to work with the local community and where possible help develop, facilitate and potentially fund or part-fund events that have grown organically from within the town. There may be opportunities to combine new events with existing ones e.g. expand the Festival or Carnival or privately run events such as Steam Punk or vintage weekends. In order to make this a viable strategy we need to ensure that the various Frome based venues, promoters, organisations and individuals involved in staging events in the town pool information. Bringing the accommodation, food and drink providers as well as retailers into the event planning process is crucial if we are to present a complete offering.

New event ideas for 2016/17:

Frome Indie music festival – Students from Frome College have indicated that they would like a music event aimed at their age group; younger people are not currently catered for by live music venues in the town. It has been suggested that an event concentrating on 'Indie music' would fill a gap in the town's cultural calendar. An event management team with an age range from around 15-25 should be put in place including both college students and the Youth Production Network. FTC and the Cheese & Grain could help facilitate.

Shop local week – An expansion of this year's event to be held in early November providing a platform for local performers

Retail led events – Small bi-monthly retail led town centre events –designed to increase/spread footfall and increase retail sales

Frome Fashion week – An idea put forward by retailers - a week of small in-shop fashion events and a public fashion show (Silk Mill or Cheese & Grain) covering both shops and local makers with sponsorship from shops/suppliers.

Frome Festival of Design – linked in as a fringe of the Bath Festival of Architecture and based at Rook Lane Arts – possibly a fortnight of activities split between Rook Lane Chapel and The Old School House. Celebrating architecture, furniture & product design, graphic design etc.

Frome Beer festival – A privately run beer festival (in cooperation with CAMRA) is being staged at the Cheese & Grain on 18 & 19 March 2016. This event could be expanded a little further into the town centre by staging a small scale complementary event such as street theatre or a series of quality buskers helping extend footfall from the Cheese & Grain into the town itself.

Recommended budget for new events 2016/17: £25k (this is additional to commitments to longstanding town centre events e.g. Frome Festival and the Frome Christmas Extravaganza)

7.2 Cattle Market Car Park

Led by Mark Brierley of NVB, the Town Centre Panel has considered potential improvements to the Cattle Market Car Park that address the following:

- The need to improve access for HGVs and coaches
- The need to define a better route for cyclists
- The opportunity to create a more defined pedestrian route from the Cheese & Grain to the Westway Centre and other parts of the town centre recognising that the Car Park is an important 'springboard' for visitors wishing to explore the town
- The need to create greater flexibility for outdoor activities and events
- The objective of improving public access to the river

A schematic (see Appendix 1) has been developed showing how the Cattle Market Car Park can be improved. The components include:

- Service road for venues such as the Cheese & Grain that doesn't conflict with car parking.
- A new cycle way that picks up a route through to Justice Lane.
- Linking bridges and footpaths
- A series of activity spaces linked by a better defined spinal pedestrian route from the Cheese & Grain to the Westway Centre:
 - 'Bridge Square' could support events/performances.
 - 'Justice Square' would be an information point. Could be a tall 'marker' to identify this area.
 - Area from the toilet block to Cheese and Grain could be a 'Market Square' and could be covered.
- A park area and boardwalk that improves access to the River Frome in line with the Frome River Strategy. Changes in river levels could be dealt with by having paths at two different levels
- A new outdoor performance area immediately to the east of the Cheese & Grain (parking area not well used) – this feature could support the music festival discussed earlier in the meeting
- Ramp area to become more of a destination e.g. a children's play area and an allotment.
- Overall these plans are likely to reduce parking from 380 to 250 spaces.

This is a concept plan only but one around which investment decisions can be made. The Panel recognises that Mendip DC own the land and rely on the income. It does however illustrate the possibilities and the Panel is looking for a date to discuss this with the District Council at the highest level.

7.3 Signage

The following conclusions have emerged from the Panel's consideration of signage in the town centre:

- The importance of improving signage as part of delivering positive 'touchpoints' for visitors that will hopefully enhance their experience of visiting the town centre
- The need for better signs to car parks, better signs for visitors and better signs to public toilets
- The importance of implementing a 'wish list' that had already been developed between FTC, MDC and Frome Chamber in February 2015

A date is awaited for a meeting with the Highways Department of the County Council about the changes to signs which MDC, FTC and the Chamber agreed on earlier.

8. Saxonvale

The Panel recognises the importance of Saxonvale to the overall health of the town. The possibility that the Frontier scheme may now fall opens up all sorts of possibilities around land consolidation, links to the town centre itself and the ability to produce a development unique to Frome. This may be a once in a generation opportunity and the Town Centre Panel would recommend that all parties act promptly and decisively to ensure that this opportunity does not slip between our fingers.

9. Recommendations to the Town Council.

There are implications contained in this report for many actors in the Town Centre including the Chamber of Commerce, Mendip DC, the County Council, user groups and individual property owners. This part of the report refers particularly to the Town Council. Many of the recommendations will need to be the subject of separate more detailed reports but trying to get agreement and integrating some of them into council processes will allow for better resource planning.

Recommendation 1

The Grimsey Report in 2013 recommended that "all local authorities should act confidently and pro-actively to make the High Street the centre piece of their local vision", the Council endorses the spirit of this recommendation and further recommends MDC to do the same.

Recommendation 2

To commission a specialist report setting out guidelines on future street furniture, signage, soft and hard landscaping, lighting and their maintenance in the town centre and to include a sum of £15k for consideration in the 2016/17 budget for the completion of this report. Implementation to be funded using the existing Earmarked Reserve for Town Centre Improvements.

Recommendation 3

To commission a report on the likely impact of the internet on the development and usage of the town centre and include £10k for consideration in the 2016/17 budget.

Recommendation 4

To recognise that not all improvements are physical and to adopt the draft events and marketing strategy and include £55k for consideration in the 2016/17 budget.

Recommendation 5

To reconfirm the Council's commitment to phases 1 and 2 of Market Place improvements and the Council to endeavour to remove any blockages in the process of gaining approvals and completing the work as soon as possible.

Recommendation 6

For the Council to request a transparent parking review by Mendip of all town centre car parks to ensure that a fair charging policy is adopted in the future. If this is not forthcoming for the Council to undertake its own review with the Chamber of Commerce.

Recommendation 7

That the relevant members of the Town Centre Panel meet with the CEO and Leader of MDC to discuss possibilities for the Cattle Market Car Park.

Recommendation 8

That the relevant recommendation referring to the Town Centre arising from the Keep Frome Clean Panel be adopted for 2016/17

Recommendation 9

That the Council continues to play a leading role in the development of the Saxonvale site in an appropriate manner, it continues to commission the right level of skills to fulfil that role and suitable funding be included in the 2016/17 budget. The Panel strongly recommends that all public sector bodies involved in regeneration in the town, including the District and County Councils and potentially the Homes and Community Agency treat this issue as urgent and of the highest priority.

Recommendation 10

That the Council continues to pursue the possibility of a Neighbourhood Development Order for the town centre to assist in the development of Saxonvale and to reduce delay and uncertainty in future plans and proposals.