Agenda item 8

For information - Frome Town Centre Economic Survey Results 2017
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Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the survey work conducted in 2017 in collaboration with People & Places and Frome College. At the meeting Charlie Orr will provide information on the results collected from the annual Benchmarking Project and the Town Mapping Project.

Background

People & Places Town Benchmarking is an annual project that collects all kinds of useful information around the town centre and puts it into a report that is then compared with other towns across the country. The report is then used to understand, measure, evaluate and ultimately improve the town.

The project is broken down into a variety of different surveys that measure the KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) of the town. These KPIs measure everything from the kinds of shops that can be found on the high street, where visitors to the town come from to what users of the town centre really think about Frome.

In addition to this report, last summer students from Frome College embarked on a Town Mapping project as part of their work experience with the Town Council. Working together in small groups the students paid each business in the town centre a visit to gain a better understanding of how they operate, what they need to prosper and in what ways they can be supported in the future.

Information on employees and how long businesses have been in Frome was taken from the Town Mapping project with further information obtained from the Town Benchmarking project.

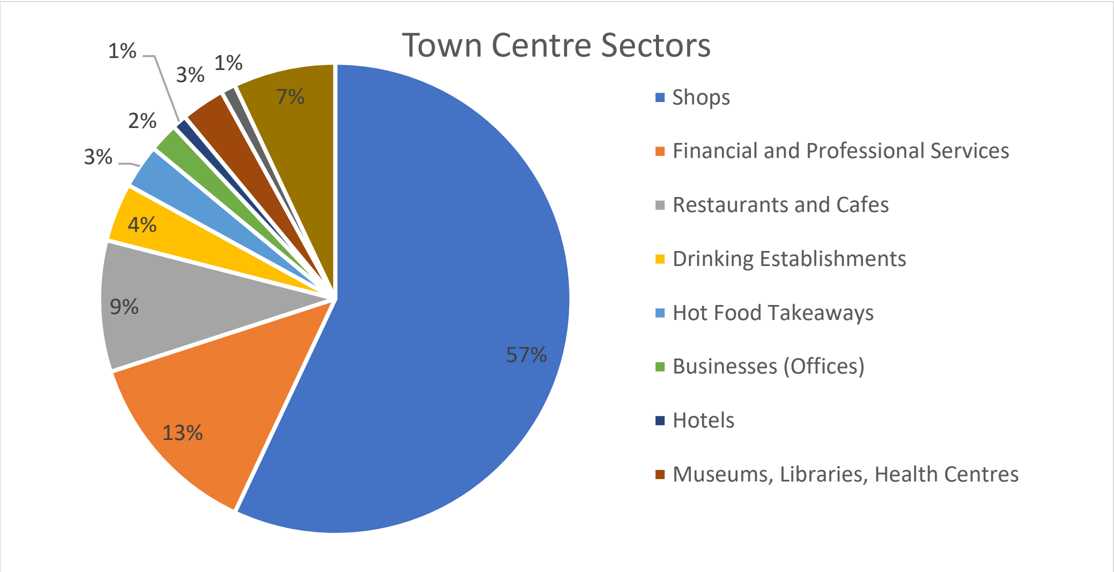
Key Findings

1. Sectors

- Shops
  - Frome has a slightly higher proportion of shops (57%) than the National (51%) and Regional (54%) averages.
  - Many of the businesses in the town centre are independent (74%) with the majority employing 5 members of staff or less, most of whom are part-time workers.
  - While new businesses are established every year, the majority in the town centre have been in Frome for over 5 years (66%), and of these nearly half have been in the town for over 20 years.

- Financial and Professional Services
  - 13% of the business in Frome are professional services in Frome 13%, which is in line with the Regional (13%) and National (13%) averages.
  - Like the shops, many of the financial and professional services have between 2-5 employees.
  - There were no new financial or professional services established in the town centre in 2017 and 32% have been operating for over 20 years.

- Restaurants and Cafes
  - At 41 (8%), Frome is also in line with its number of restaurants and cafés with the Regional (9%) and National (8%) averages.
  - Approximately 25% of the businesses in this sector have been trading between 5-20 years with a similar figure for businesses that are in their first 5 years. The number of employees ranges from 2-20 with the majority employing more than 10.



2. Vacancy Rates

Only 3% of the commercial units in the town centre were vacant at the time of the 2017 Benchmarking survey, which is lower than the National (10%), Regional (8%) and Typology (8%) averages.

3. Markets

The weekday market in Frome houses more traders (32) than the National (15) and Regional (24). Coupled with the popular retail offer of the shops, this has encouraged a strong footfall for the town centre.

4. Footfall

Footfall in Frome is much higher than the National and Regional averages on both a Market Day and a Non-Market Day. The Market Day figure of 185 persons per ten minutes is noticeably higher than the National and Regional figures of 93 and 122 respectively. Perhaps a greater indication of healthy footfall is that the Non-Market Day figure (182), one taken as a baseline for normal trading conditions, is double the National (83) and Regional (90) averages.

5. Retail Offer

62% of town centre users reported that the retail offer was a positive aspect of the locality. This compares favourably with the National (18%) and Regional (22%) averages.

6. Visitors

31% of shoppers live within a Post Code further than a 30-minute drive away. This is a huge growth on 2016 (6%) and exceeds the National (14%) and Regional (14%) averages. This is a really important factor to recognise as it evidences the fact that Frome is becoming a significant visitor centre, with the associated needs for information, signage, access and parking.

7. Parking

72% of businesses considered parking to be a negative issue compared to 51% nationally. While in 2016, 74% of town centre users considered parking in Frome to be a positive factor, in 2017 it dropped down to 19% with 35% considering it a negative aspect of the town. Following on from the last 4 years of Benchmarking suggestions, free parking continues to be called for.

Conclusion

The indication from the data from both the 2017 Benchmarking Report and the Town Mapping Project is that Frome continues to be a successful and popular local service centre.

It has a considerably low shop vacancy rate with many businesses operating for over 20 years and the amount of independent shops has become a leading characteristic of the town with a high footfall and popular retail offer.

Although Frome still caters to residents and nearby towns and villages, it appears that Frome is now attracting more visitors from further away and becoming a travel destination. This is bolstered by the exceptionally high rate of town centre users that would recommend a visit to Frome (96%).

However, parking remains an issue for businesses in the town centre. What is also clear in this report is that parking is now regarded as a negative for town centre users which was thought of positively in previous years. Calls for free parking from businesses and town centre users continue.

The physical appearance and the cleanliness of the town is also worth highlighting. Although businesses regarded the physical appearance and cleanliness of the town centre as a positive aspect of the town, a small percentage of town centre users felt the same way. This is reinforced by the fact that the responses from town centre users in 2016 were highly in favour of the appearance of the town.

The vibrancy of the town centre and its increasing attraction as a visitor centre from those further afield is well evidenced by both the Town Mapping surveys and the benchmarking survey. It supports the Town Council's strategy in supporting local businesses to thrive and paying attention to the infrastructure needed to do so. Parking and cleanliness are key issues. The need for premises, for fast broadband, for good bus and train services, for town marketing, for visitor information and for signage are other factors raised by local businesses as factors needed to support continuing prosperity and resilience.