

Agenda item 4

For information & debate –Frome Town Centre Economic Survey results 2017 & 2018 & work to support the town centre economy

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Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide information on the town centre survey work conducted by the Council with the support of Frome College in 2017 and 2018. The report also sets out the services that are currently being delivered and some conclusions for councillors and others attending the meeting to debate.

1. Background

Every year, the Town Council undertakes a series of surveys to evaluate the economic and social condition of the town centre. These surveys are conducted through the People & Places Benchmarking project, a national scheme that compares Frome's performance with that of similar towns across the country.

The surveys measure what kind of businesses can be found on the high street, footfall levels, vacancy rates and the opinions of business owners and town centre users. This information provides a valuable insight into the nature of the town centre and allows the Town Council to implement strategies to ultimately improve and support the town. Recently, the Town Council has received assistance from Frome College, with students conducting the Business and Town Centre Users surveys for the 2018 Benchmarking project.

2. Points of Interest

a. The importance of independent businesses

During the 2017 Benchmarking Survey, it was reported that 74% of shops in the town centre were independent, rather than regional or national chains. It was also identified that 66% of businesses have been in Frome for over 5 years, half of whom have been in town for over 20 years and that 86% of businesses are micro-enterprises (employing 10 people or less). Based on the information collected from the recent 2018 Business Survey, the percentage of businesses who have been in Frome for over 5 years remains the same. The number of micro businesses has risen to 96%.

Current responses:

- Advice, information & networking opportunities:
 - FTC already provides support for independent businesses in partnership with the Frome & District Chamber of Commerce. Frome Business Breakfast, Discuss & Do, and Soul Traders are monthly events with a growing community that are designed to help address their needs, encourage the sharing of expertise and knowledge with each other and explore how they can become more engaged in the

community. As well as providing a useful networking opportunity, the events focus on topics of practical use such as advice on the new GDPR regulation, social media training and they also help businesses to explore collaborative ideas e.g. collaboration on waste reduction and plastic free projects. These events are well attended.

- The Economic Development & Regeneration Manager and Project Officer also provide one-to-one advice to businesses where necessary. Through the Good Business initiative, Cllr Jean Boulton and Anna Francis have worked with small businesses to enable them to step back from their day-to-day operations and reflect not only on their business performance and how this can improve but also how they can become more environmentally sustainable and involved in the community.
- Online resources:
 - The 'Your Business' page on the Frome Town Council webpage at www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/your-business works to support the small business community in Frome. Examples of useful information include events, premises availability, links to useful resources elsewhere and apprenticeship information. There is also an opportunity to sign up to our regular business newsletter and other information on how to develop your business, connect with a wider network and develop important skills.
 - The Discover Frome website at www.discoverfrome.co.uk, the Discover Frome Information Point and the featured articles in the Frome Annual are designed to raise the profile of independent businesses and events in the town centre including up to date listings and promotions on a wide variety of events. The audience includes both residents and visitors to the town.

b. Low vacancy rates

At the time of the 2017 Benchmarking Survey, only 3% of the commercial units in the town centre were vacant, which is lower than the National (10%), Regional (8%) and Typology (8%) averages. The 2018 vacancy data will be confirmed at the meeting. In line with Frome's low vacancy rate, smaller units in the town centre are quickly acquired and over the last two years, Frome has welcomed a number of new businesses. These include:

- Pop and H'poy on Cheap Street
- James Oliver, Six and Palmer Street Bottle on Palmer Street
- Real Ales and Ramshack on Stony Street
- Frome Hardware, Gant and L'Aperitivo on Catherine Hill
- Brewed Boy and the new cinema on Cork Street

Current responses:

- Connecting businesses:
 - Providing a space for new businesses to interact with the wider community is important for their assimilation and growth within the town. The Frome Business Breakfast and Discuss & Do events offer a valuable opportunity to do this while providing an avenue to gain advice and contribute to the networks within Frome. The recent Catherine Hill event encouraged pop-ups and sharing of premises and

Discover Frome has helped to connect businesses as well as attract new ones e.g. Covers Vinyl Record Store on Catherine Hill who came to Frome after seeing Frome on the Discover Frome website.

c. Healthy footfall

Based on the results of the 2017 Benchmarking Survey, the footfall in Frome is much higher than the National and Regional averages on both Market Day and Non-Market Day. While the National average is 93 people in one area every ten minutes, in Frome it is 185. A greater indication of healthy footfall is that the Non-Market Day figure of 182, one taken as a baseline for normal trading conditions, is double the National average of 83. With regard to 2018, we won't have a comparison with other towns until the People & Places Report is published early next year.

Whatever the footfall surveys tell us about Frome's relative position, anecdotally, town centre retailers reported a difficult first quarter in 2018 in terms of trade. Generating additional footfall through events is seen as an important response. The Business and Town Centre User Surveys conducted by Frome College in July 2018 found that 70% of respondents regarded Events/Activities as a positive aspect of the town. As this figure was at 52% in 2016 and 65% in 2017, this suggests that the events around the town are steadily gathering strength and support. In addition to this, in 2018, 78% of town centre users thought that the markets were a useful town asset, a huge growth on the 2017 figure of 34%.

Current responses:

- Events:
 - In March 2018, FTC arranged Frome Busks, a busking competition that encouraged a wide variety of visitors to explore the town and discover its fantastic retail offer. FTC also offered its support for the Catherine Hill Pop Up event in June, an event that turned a popular shopping street in Frome into a mini-festival that attracted a wide variety of visitors into the town. The Council continues to provide grant aid for the Frome Festival (£10k per annum under a 3-year multi-year agreement.) We await a report from the Festival and local traders in terms of the impact of the Festival on footfall this year. The Council continues to support The Frome Independent market through promotion and the company's Management Group on which Cllr Nick White is a Director.

d. A growing visitor profile

In 2017, it was reported that 31% of shoppers lived within a Post Code that was further than a 30-minute drive away. This is double the national average and a huge growth on the 2016 figure of 6%, illustrating that Frome has become a significant visitor centre. It is interesting to note that Frome has a high rate of town centre users that would recommend a visit to the town centre (96%).

Current responses:

With its blend of popular events and diverse range of independent shops, Frome has received a lot of attention in the national media and is increasingly becoming a visitor destination. The Discover Frome Information Point welcomes hundreds of visitors each month and the

Discover Frome website has seen a 90% increase in the interest in its event pages receiving over 11000 hits per month in the last year.

The 2018 publication of the Frome Annual contains featured articles on a wide range of shops, cafes and businesses and actively encourages visitors to explore the town. 68% of the businesses surveyed by Frome College in July 2018 have expressed interest in being included in future years. New fingerposts will be installed before the end of the year to guide visitors from the railway station to places of interest within the town centre.

e. Parking

72% of businesses considered parking to be a negative issue in 2017. Based on the findings from the recent Business Survey, this has now increased to 75% with calls for free parking to facilitate shoppers visiting the town centre for short period. Adding to this, the 2018 Town Centre User Surveys found that 54% of shoppers also believed parking to be a negative with further requests for free parking. The lack of free parking, the price of car parking in Frome and the condition of many of the car parks are considered to be issues by many of the respondents.

Current responses:

In response to this, the Town Council coordinated a response to the recent proposal by Mendip District Council to increase prices generally and introduce Sunday charges. The outcome of this was that Mendip DC agreed to waive Sunday charging on Independent market days and phase in proposed increases in permit ticket prices. But there is more to do. The proposed policy penalises those that run events on other Sundays and there is still a need to address the poor condition of many of the car parks. Equally, we need to ensure that the parking provision for Frome is suitable for a growing town, both in terms of visitors but also due to new housing commitments. The aim is to ensure that an integrated transport/parking strategy is developed for the town and both the District and County Councils have been contacted about this.

3. Conclusions

The information obtained from these surveys indicates that the Town Centre of Frome continues to be a successful local service centre and growing destination for visitors. With a high percentage of independent shops and businesses with their own character and appeal and a wide range of popular events, Frome has an exceptionally high rate of town centre users who recommend a visit to the town centre.

A significant effort and resource is going into supporting the town centre businesses. Those efforts include direct advice to businesses, the Good Business visits, online information resources, monthly events that allow smaller businesses to tap into local resources and develop their skills. The Discover Frome Information Point caters to a growing number of residents and visitors each year and supported events encourage increased levels of footfall to the town.

But we should not be complacent. Town centres are coming under increasing pressure due to the growth in out of town retailing, the growing pressure on rents, online shopping and the

demise of some national multiples. Increasingly, consumers are interested in town centre trips that deliver new experiences and this is challenging our traditional view of the high street.

Thankfully, Frome has been relatively resilient in the face of these pressures largely down to relatively low rentals, the fact that many of the shops are small and therefore exempt from the requirement to pay business rates, the prominence of independent retailers and the full and exciting events calendar in the town that helps to deliver the experiences that visitors to town centres increasingly look for.

But there is no doubt that we are going through a significant period of change on the high street and working with Frome Chamber of Commerce and others we should use all our creativity to support the continued vibrancy of Frome's town centre. We should continue to work closely with our business community to support business development and explore new opportunities to deliver experiential trips and generate footfall and trade.

Amongst other things, there is a growing trend nationally of collaboration between online retailers and traditional bricks and mortar retailers. For example, Soda – School of the Digital Age, who sell technology products have built a loyal community of online customers. They have been experimenting with pop ups in partnership with large bricks and mortar retailers such as Selfridges and Brown Thomas.

Could some of Frome's online start-ups partner with town centre retailers to mutual benefit? Could some of the creative and technology businesses operating in the town offer innovative ways for our independent retailers to trade? Already, there are signs that some of the town's independent retailers are enabling pop-ups on their premises. We are also enabling a fledgling creative sector network to get off the ground. It would be interesting to see if we could put them and the Retail Group together to explore the potential for collaboration.

Councillors and others attending the meeting are invited to discuss these conclusions.