

Agenda Item 3

For information: Town centre benchmarking update

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Summary

This report highlights the key findings from the town centre benchmarking exercise that Frome Town Council carries out each year to understand what businesses and town users feel about the town centre and to help inform our work to support town centre businesses.

A presentation will be made at the Committee illustrating the main results from the research.

Background

Students from Frome College helped carry out the market research as part of their Work Experience Week. This involved visiting shops and businesses in the town centre with a survey about how their business was performing, what they see as the positive and negative aspects of Frome's town centre, and what suggestions they would make to improve the area. The students also surveyed town centre users about their views on the town centre.

The exercise provided the students with valuable market research experience, as well as the opportunity to work on a real live project to help improve the town.

National comparisons from 2018 survey

The results from the 2018 survey were collated by People & Places Insight to see how Frome compared to other similar sized towns that took part in the national survey.

Positive Aspects

One of the key indicators of the vibrancy of a town is the low percentage of vacant units. Frome has a particularly high occupancy rate, with the survey identifying that only 3% of units were vacant at the time of the research, compared to the national average of 9% for similarly sized towns.

Businesses in the town centre were asked to complete a confidence survey regarding their turnover and profitability. 64% of businesses who completed the survey from Frome felt that their turnover would increase over the next 12 months, compared to an average of 42% of businesses nationally. Only 16% of businesses in Frome stated that their profitability had decreased over the last year, compared to 36% of surveyed businesses nationally.

71% of businesses felt Frome had a positive physical appearance (compared to 50% nationally), and 62% of businesses viewed the town as being prosperous (42% nationally). Businesses also felt that the markets taking place in the town were a positive aspect of Frome and that events/ activities make a positive contribution to the town.

Town centre users were also surveyed - 35% of those surveyed said they used the town centre for shopping, and 21% of people surveyed used it for work. There was a relatively equal split between travelling in on foot (47%) to coming in by car (46%).

In terms of positive aspects of Frome town centre, 82% viewed the physical appearance of the town centre as a positive aspect (compared to 45% nationally); 72% for cleanliness (40% nationally); and 76% believed the town centre felt safe (23% nationally). The town centre users surveyed also felt that the café and restaurant premises in Frome were good with 85% citing them as a positive aspect of the town (compared to 56% nationally). The markets, cultural activities and events in Frome were viewed as significantly more positive than the national average in other towns.

One of the most encouraging points to come out of the survey was that 97% of town centre users surveyed would recommend a visit to Frome town centre.

Negative Aspects

The businesses surveyed highlighted that crime was an issue for businesses in Frome's town centre with 33% stating that their businesses had suffered from crime over the previous 12 months, which is higher than the 27% stated nationally - 53% of the crimes to businesses in Frome were for criminal damage, with 47% for theft.

Car parking was reported as a major concern for businesses in Frome, with 81% of businesses citing it as a negative aspect of the town centre (compared to 44% for businesses nationally).

Key findings from 2019 survey

The national comparisons from July's surveys will not be available until March 2020. However, we can report back on the key findings from the businesses and town centre users who took part in the 2019 survey.

There was an encouraging lift in the number of businesses expecting their turnover to increase over the next 12 months with 80% of businesses expecting an increase. Only 11% of businesses surveyed claimed that their current profits had declined.

Businesses felt even more strongly about the prosperity of Frome's town centre with over 90% seeing it as prosperous and over 80% liking the physical appearance of the town centre. The support from businesses for the events and activities that take place in the town centre was strong with 92% seeing these activities as positive aspects for Frome.

Car parking, however, continues to be a negative issue for businesses in the town centre with 92% of businesses seeing it as a problem.

In terms of the public's view of the town centre, 79% felt the physical appearance of the town centre was positive, with 68% of people surveyed feeling it was clean, and 73% felt the retail offer in Frome was good.

Businesses and town centre users were asked what suggestions they would like to make to improve the town centre. Free parking was overwhelmingly put forward by businesses,

followed by improved security. Town centre users were keen to see better bus services, cheaper parking and more men's clothing shops.

Conclusions

Frome has a thriving town centre relative to the national average. Compared to last year most businesses were more positive about the future and users remain happy with the offer. People using the town centre feel that is a clean and safe environment.

The cost of car parking and public transport remain in the negative column. Although we may have influence over these, Mendip remains firmly attached to the income derived from the former while public transport provision remains in the hands of the private sector.

In future, we should perhaps focus our efforts on things we can directly influence.