

Agenda item 4

For decision - Frome Town Council's Strategy for 2020 - 2024

Authors: Frome Town Cllrs

Summary

This strategy has been developed by Cllrs over the first six months of the current administration. Views of staff and others outside the Council have informed it and we thank all of those who have taken the time to contribute. This strategy will underpin the work of FTC over the next four years but will be reviewed annually to ensure it remains valid and up to date.

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Frome Town Council Strategy 2020-2024

1. Introduction

This Strategy sets out the broad vision and ethos of Frome Town Council. This vision sits within both the wider and the local context. It provides the detail of where we want to get to and how we should get there. It aims to provide the framework within which the community, other councils, the voluntary sector and businesses can engage with Frome Town Council over the next four years. The strategy provides enough detail to prepare the annual work plans and budgets – while being flexible enough to seize new opportunities as they arise. This is a living document which will be reviewed and developed through the four years and will evolve on the circumstances around us.

Section 2 of this strategy sets out our vision for Frome.

Section 3 describes the context in which we live, both the wider national and international pictures and our more local environment.

Section 4 sets out our philosophy as a Council and how we will bring this to life in the way that we work.

Section 5 identifies the main themes for our work in the next four years: the heart of our strategy.

Section 6 describes our plans in more detail.

Section 7 looks at how we will monitor progress towards our vision and how we will review this strategy.

2. Vision

Frome has become a town which looks for and tries new ideas and new ways of doing things. It is a place that is proudly independent and puts local solutions first, but is also outward looking, building and maintaining connections both nationally and internationally.

From these solid foundations, we want to build:

- A positive and inclusive town where no-one gets left behind
- A clean, healthy and happy town
- A thriving and resilient community and local economy
- A town that actively encourages local people to participate in and feel ownership over ideas, spaces and assets
- A town which embraces innovation, takes risks, celebrates its successes and learns from its experiences

3. Context

This section describes the context in which we live. Section 6 sets out our responses to these issues.

The wider picture

3.1 We are living in changeable and unpredictable times, characterised by deep divisions in society – exemplified by debates concerning Brexit and the Climate Crisis. For all our independent spirit, Frome is intimately connected to and influenced by wider national and international developments that inevitably affect the wellbeing and confidence of Frome’s residents and businesses.

3.2 The National Government has set legally binding targets for net zero emissions by 2050. Parliament and all tiers of local government in Somerset have declared a Climate Emergency, and Frome Town Council has pledged to make Frome carbon neutral by 2030. In recent years, the council has built a strong reputation for environmental resilience. This has ranged from establishing the UK’s first community fridge that inspired 60 more around the country, to the UK’s first Library of Things.

3.3 The impact of cuts to public services – health, social care, education and emergency services included - will continue to dominate this strategic period as it did the last. Cuts in services have affected all aspects of society and especially the more vulnerable people in our community. Continued deep cuts to County and District council budgets mean that it will be challenging for them to implement much – if anything – beyond the legal minimum.

3.4 There may also be a unitary Council debate in Somerset during the life of this strategy. We, in Frome, will engage with the debate to explore what services should be delivered best at what level of Council. This might mean that we begin to provide - directly and with the community - some of the services being provided by Mendip District Council and Somerset County Council at the moment.

3.5 Working with the community, we have already taken action in relation to climate change, austerity, political uncertainty and severe reductions in public sector funding. We will continue to develop ways to increase local resilience across a wide variety of community fronts in order to creatively respond to whatever the future holds.

The local picture

3.6 During this strategic period many of the new houses identified in the District Council's Local Plan will be built and occupied. The town's population will rapidly increase and will put significant pressure on a town's roads (for both travel and parking); on education, health and social care provision; and on leisure and sports provision; and on demand for employment.

3.7 We are confident that the policies within the adopted Neighbourhood Plan will help to secure better urban design, energy efficient homes, opportunities for self-build and community housing, protection of open spaces and employment sites and to encourage town centre regeneration. The Neighbourhood Plan update process will begin during this period and will help to reinforce key themes in this strategy. The revised National Planning Policy Framework creates more opportunity for policy that addresses climate change.

3.8 Frome faces two closely aligned problems of lack of truly affordable housing and homelessness. We recognise that these are countrywide issues and not limited to Frome. Without genuinely affordable housing, the people of Frome lose the opportunity to stay living in the town. Homelessness is a largely hidden problem. Although there may not be many people forced to live on the streets, there are incidents of 'sofa surfing', over-occupation and inadequate rental properties.

3.9 Our local environment affects our experience of the town: from issues around air quality and litter through to our great green spaces, and the river corridor.

3.10 Frome's location, its hills and the placement of key services and facilities around town mean that many people living and working in the town rely on cars for their day-to-day travel. Frome is also a hub for many small villages and communities, enabling people to access health services, education, banks, post offices and shops.

3.11 Local service and creative industries are continuing to grow; this has helped the local economy to remain resilient to a decline in traditional employment. A challenge will be to ensure that the availability of space keeps up with demand and businesses have opportunities to grow on in the locations where they wish to operate. There are also opportunities to improve vocational training and employment opportunities for young people in Frome.

3.12 Frome enters this strategic period with visible civic pride, a thriving community sector, low crime and an attractive reputation. However, there are real challenges around making sure people feel a part of Frome, especially as it undergoes such rapid growth and change. Collaborative working and community participation have always been central to how we work and we will continue to find ways to work with the people of Frome to address challenges and seize opportunities around inclusion, housing, educational attainment, employment and wellbeing.

4. Our philosophy

This section sets out our philosophy – the thinking that guides what we do – and how this translates into the ways that we work.

4.1 Serving the people of Frome

We see the role of the Town Council as to support and enhance the energy and commitment of its citizens. We will enable others to be successful. We will support and champion causes that enhance the resilience of the town and protect against those which erode it.

4.2 Engaging, listening, acting

We will encourage everyone to get involved. Participation and engagement are central to the thinking of the Council. We will remain dedicated to expanding and improving how we do this. From our community development work in Trinity, to our town-wide engagement for the People's Budget, we are always looking at new ways to listen to Frome's residents and businesses and to bring forward those voices that are not usually heard.

We will be transparent, open and accessible with good communication at the heart of everything that we do: this is an overarching aim of this council.

4.3 Staying radical and innovative

We will be bold, responding to identified needs and making decisions on the basis of what is best for Frome. We will be nimble, taking opportunities as they emerge. To do this we will ensure our staff, Councillors and people in the town have the range of skills and experience that they need. And we will share what we learn with other towns and parishes, keeping Frome on the map.

4.4 Demonstrating and sharing ethical and environmental good practice

We will practice what we preach. The Town Council will regularly assess its ethical policy with a view to enhancing our approaches. We will continue to pay at least the Living Wage and we will continue to search for opportunities to employ apprentices. We are committed to minimising our own environmental impacts and to supporting local businesses and residents to do the same.

4.5 How we work together

Lastly, we are committed to ensuring that our own processes, as a large group of independent Councillors, exemplify this commitment to engagement and participation, embracing diversity and allowing debate and challenge. We want neither to stifle discussion nor bury dissent. We will work together effectively, be fair and participative and allow space for enthusiasm, learning and initiative.

5. The heart of our strategy

This section sets out the main pillars of our strategy; the key areas of our work for the next four years.

5.1 The central theme underpinning the Council's approach will be supporting a town which is ambitious, inclusive and socially, economically and environmentally resilient.

5.2 We will continue to increase participation and build engaged and active communities that are stronger, better equipped to address local challenges and better able to thrive despite cuts in public services.

5.3 We will create an environment in which people can thrive. We will work to build a cohesive community that brings people of different generations and backgrounds together. We will place extra emphasis on supporting young people to develop and achieve their ambitions.

5.3 We will support local businesses to grow, helping to develop the local economy and, in turn, providing employment and prosperity.

5.4 We will work with the community to enhance our shared local environment, including local green spaces and the river; to improve air quality; and to make Frome clean and welcoming.

5.5 In the face of a climate emergency, we will strive to make Frome carbon neutral by 2030 by implementing a robust Action Plan (see 6.23). To do this, we will continue to lead the community and address cultural attitudes through informing the public on the facts, and encouraging debate on the issues and choices that face us all. We will seek to increase renewable energy supply and energy efficiency, reduce waste, and address transport congestion and pollution.

6. Our plans

The Town Council has had many successes in the past eight years. We are not starting from scratch but we want to take every opportunity to do things better. This section sets out our plans in more depth. It will inform the development of each year's work plan. We know that things will change over the next four years, so we will remain flexible and allow this strategy to adapt.

Finishing what we've started

6.1 We will finish what we've started. As well as a number of smaller projects that require finishing, our work to regenerate the Town Centre and getting the best possible development at Saxonvale will continue to be priorities in the short to medium term.

How the Council operates

6.2 We will work to enable truly meaningful engagement by improving the flow of information, both digital and otherwise, to and from the Town Council. We recognise the importance of face to face experience and will continue to build on the skills and services we currently provide through the Town Hall and Discover Frome.

6.3 The Town Hall has become central to our operations and those of other community groups. It serves as an example of our ambition and best practice as an excellent town amenity. We will work to maintain the facilities to the highest standards and ensure that it remains an open, accessible and well-used town resource.

6.4 We see a continued need to attract interest in the town from the wider world. This will not only enable us to share best practice but also to attract investment and spending. We want to continually improve the image of and pride in the town, making it attractive for residents, visitors and investors alike.

6.5 As the role of the Council grows, the IT, finance and HR systems will continue to be developed to ensure appropriate efficiencies and resources are in place. Excellent financial management will be continued with careful budget development and monitoring, and prudent and ethical investment of reserves. We will regularly upgrade our software and the way we work to comply with regulations and best practice.

6.6 We will continue to apply the Ethical Decision Matrix in our choice of suppliers for products and services, boosting our contribution to the local economy. We will seek to measure this contribution and the local multiplier effect from our investments in an economically resilient Frome.

Working with other Councils and agencies

6.7 We recognise the crucial importance of building and maintaining working relationships with other levels of local government. We will continue to do this, while putting Frome first. We are already seeing a more constructive and open relationship with the new administration at Mendip District Council. This is a work in progress and provides us with some exciting opportunities. However, Frome is often at the periphery of thinking at County level and we are keen to build stronger relationships with Somerset on issues like transport, education, policing and social care. To do this, we will work closely with other towns and parishes in Mendip, building a collective voice to the County Council. Many of our residents commute to work in Bath and North East Somerset and Wiltshire and we will actively seek opportunities to work with Councils, parishes and others in these areas on issues that matter to all.

6.8 We will continue to build on our relationship with Somerset County Council and will maintain a strategic overview of services and opportunities for Frome residents, paying attention to priority areas over the coming months and years. We will work with partners in statutory services, the voluntary sector and businesses to identify existing and emerging gaps in provision and co-ordinate the best use of resources at a local level to help plug these. This relationship is vital if we are to defend services which are currently under threat - whether social, educational, emergency or other - but where necessary we will stand up for Frome and look for alternative ways of provision. We will particularly seek out community-led and creative ways of providing services, helping foster and support groups and enterprises to build Frome's resilience.

Working in the community

6.9 We are genuinely committed to engaging people across Frome to help shape and support the town. We will continue to look for innovative ways of getting people involved - particularly those whose voices may be less likely to be heard - to help shape our thinking and to encourage community participation in reviewing our progress in delivering this strategy.

6.10 Community resilience and happiness cannot simply be provided. We will work hard to create the conditions that enable individual citizens and the whole community to flourish. This means that we will support activity which strengthens social connections, fosters intergenerational networks and creates a sense of belonging. With our partners, we will take a facilitative approach to identifying issues using creative solutions; we will work with the

community to support those who may be particularly vulnerable at different times in their lives or who may face seasonal vulnerabilities (eg, during cold weather).

6.11 Young people in Frome have always shown an interest in using their voice, and we are continuing to look at ways to build opportunities for them to contribute. We would like to encourage even more participation from the young people of the town, particularly in regard to working with the council to promote activities and to engage in generating ideas that will be beneficial to their lives.

6.12 We will support the development of strong and resilient neighbourhoods by providing support and resource for new and emerging neighbourhood groups and building on our pilot to provide intensive support in identified neighbourhoods.

Planning and development

6.13 Frome Town Council will increasingly lead on campaigning and lobbying, working with community groups wherever possible, to ensure we get the right developers building the right development in the right places. We will continue to encourage local residents and businesses to participate in planning consultations and respond to applications.

6.14 Decisions on key aspects of new development will ultimately lie outside the town. We will work closely with Mendip planners to ensure that all developments benefit the town and are aligned to our policies on climate change, social housing and affordability. We will explore devolving some planning decision making and actively seek out a close working relationship with statutory bodies and decision makers as well as with developers.

6.15 We will ensure developers are aware of our and Mendip's vision of the town and sustainability targets, and we will work with developers to ensure new homes are as sustainable as possible. We will proactively seek out innovative developers to encourage them to bring new ideas, designs and practices to the town.

6.16 The coming four years should see significant progress on major new developments in the heart of Frome, on former industrial and commercial sites across the town and on the edge of our town. We will be proactive in making sure that the town has a voice in shaping these developments.

6.17 We will also seek out opportunities to build on the Council's history of bringing assets into community ownership and use.

Housing

6.18 The need for more suitable affordable and social housing will be a priority in our lobbying. We will work with MDC, community groups such as Fair Housing for Frome, the Frome area community land trust, Frome Co-housing and other interested partners to create a town where everyone has a home. We will continue to work with developers and co-housing groups to ensure additions to the housing stock are suitable, desirable, sustainable and not solely motivated by maximising profits.

Business and education

6.19 A key role of the Town Council is to support enterprises and businesses to create jobs for local people. Recognising much of Frome's economy is built on small businesses, we will continue to support their expansion and the creation of new ones. We will also work closely with Mendip District Council, Somerset County Council and others to support and encourage larger businesses to grow and invest in Frome.

6.20 We will work with business and education providers to offer more opportunities for our young people and people looking to retrain so that they can live, work and learn in Frome. We will engage with young people of all abilities to help them develop the life skills they need to successfully enter the workplace.

Culture and the Arts

6.21 Culture, heritage and the arts are seen by many as a key indicator of Frome's re-emergence in recent years. We recognise the crucial role they play not only by bringing visitors to the town, and with practitioners working as micro enterprises, but also in the wider sense of wellbeing and social regeneration of the town. Culture, heritage and the arts both support and arise from radical communities and offer the opportunity for Frome to come together around common aims and themes, and as a council we support and celebrate that. We also recognise the role that events play in the fabric of the town and seek to strengthen and support them through good communication and engagement.

6.22 We will continue to work with venues, and with organisations to explore new opportunities and collaborations which may arise to support the cultural life of Frome. We will also continue to support these areas by working with existing and emerging organisations to widen their funding base and to support and communicate their offer through the provision of Discover Frome brand. This will in turn provide opportunities for those working in the creative arts to flourish in the town, and to enhance inclusion, education and communication.

Environment

6.23 In December 2018, the Council declared a climate emergency and pledged to make Frome carbon neutral by 2030. We cannot achieve this goal alone: we will work with the community, Mendip District Council, Somerset County Council and others, such as the Covenant of Mayors, to develop a robust climate emergency plan that will be regularly reviewed, alongside the Frome Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP).

6.24 It will be informed by Climate Panels to be held regularly to ensure the opportunity for local participation. We expect emphases within the climate emergency plan to include: ensuring sustainability is embedded in all that the Council undertakes and substantially strengthening the town's resilience with respect to the impacts of anticipated climate changes and the risks this poses. This would especially focus on transport (see 6.33 below) and energy and resource use while taking account of an increasing size of local population. The plan will also explore resilience in the face of strains on food supplies due to weather extremes, both locally and further afield.

6.25 We will significantly increasing renewable energy generation locally, including building on the Solar Streets and Solar for Businesses initiatives that help households and businesses benefit from reduced electricity bills through free or discounted solar.

6.26 We will work to reduce energy demand by supporting better energy management and installation of insulation and other energy efficiency measures, especially in the town's older buildings, while also encouraging use of renewables for all new housing and business developments.

6.27 We will explore opportunities to improve land use for a wide range of environmental benefits. Where carbon sequestration via an ambitious tree planting programme is insufficient, we will connect with other organisations and businesses to work collectively to reduce the town's carbon footprint.

6.28 We will reduce waste through sharing, repairing and recycling, supporting more businesses to work towards being plastic free and promoting other community and Council activities to encourage reduction of resource use.

6.29 The Council now looks after over 65 acres of parks and green spaces across the town, from riverbanks to meadows; and woods to play areas. Managing and looking after these spaces to the high standards set by us (and expected by the town) is a unique and pressured challenge, one met by the hard work and initiative of our Town Rangers. The Rangers are very visible in the town and represent the public face of the council in relation to our parks and green spaces, as well as working with a number of local schools and charities. We'll continue to support them as our responsibilities in this area increase.

6.30 We will explore opportunities to take on more green spaces and more public places; and we will provide the support necessary to ensure that the team and the community can carry on making Frome a better place and a cleaner, greener town. We will strengthen our partnerships with community groups and seek opportunities for community stewardship of Frome's green spaces and for allotment provision and community growing. We will work with the Allotments Association to help manage waiting lists and to find ways to meet the growing and changing demands for future allotment space.

6.31 Over the next four years, we will continue to plan how we create and manage open spaces in Frome, focusing on the people that visit and enjoy them but equally balancing the need to conserve their landscape value and their biodiversity. We want to build on the success of our initial work in re-wilding and to work with the community to plant a large number of trees on open spaces, streets and gardens across Frome.

6.32 We will work with organisations such as Friends of the River Frome to update the River strategy and to incorporate the results of this into the revised Neighbourhood Plan.

Transport

6.33 We will take a more active role in issues related to transport, recognising its links to wellbeing, economic development and protecting our local and global environments. We will

continue to work with local transport groups, transport providers and the community to encourage more active and sustainable travel, improved public transport and cleaner vehicles. We also recognise the need for increased employment opportunities in the town to reduce commuting journeys.

6.34 We will continue to support the Walkers Festival and the Walkers Are Welcome scheme, and fundraising efforts around the Missing Link. We will look at opportunities for improved signage and lighting for cycle and walking routes and options to make key routes more cycle- and walking-friendly. We will continue our work with schools through the School Active Travel Challenge.

6.35 We will take steps to make cycling more attractive and safer. This will involve reviewing the infrastructure facilitating use of bicycles as well as educating motorists. We will support the increased use of e-bikes and moving goods around locally by bicycle/e-bike. We will lobby to ensure that all housing developments incorporate cycle-friendly infrastructure and provision for cycle storage.

6.36 We will lobby for further development of public transport, and to reduce dependence on petrol and diesel cars as far as possible. This could include more effective bus connections from Frome to mainline train stations and between business locations and trading estates across the town. We will continue to support and promote Community Transport as a low-cost way for residents to access local services.

6.37 Recognising the need for car and van use, we will also promote cleaner vehicles and innovative approaches to Frome's residents and businesses. We will work with local businesses to explore ways of rationalising deliveries and improving the delivery fleet; we will also work with service providers to look at how fleets of cleaner vehicles can be used (for example, waste contractors, bus providers).

6.38 We will test all planning applications for their impact on travel and transport within Frome, taking a joined-up approach to try to make sure that new developments in one location do not cause problems somewhere else. We will also encourage footbridges across the river to create better connections between neighbourhoods.

Twinning

6.39 We will continue to work with the Frome Twinning Association, and with our twin towns in Chateau Gontier, Murrhardt & Rabka Zdroj, to engage in a shared understanding of how our towns work. We will utilise the opportunities offered by them to involve our own local residents, particularly young people in the town, in many sporting, educational, business and apprenticeship activities. And we will work with our twin towns, to utilise best practice in economic, environmental and social matters which might benefit the town.

7. Keeping track of how we're doing

7.1 We want to understand the impact and value of the work that the Town Council and the community do and how far we are progressing towards achieving the vision set out in Section 2. We will engage the community with the process of reviewing this strategy to find out how and where we are making progress, who we are helping and who we may need to support further with new projects or activities.

8. Conclusion

We are in a good place to shape and to embrace the next four years. This Council was elected to continue the optimistic and ambitious approach which has proven so successful since 2011. We believe this new strategy meets that need while also providing the pragmatism that fully recognises the context in which we operate.

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