

Agenda item 4

For Discussion - Community Development update

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Background

In 2014, Frome Town Council initiated a project to engage residents in Frome more widely in the democratic decision making processes in the town. Participate Frome set out to find out 'What one thing people liked about Frome and why' and 'what one thing they would change about Frome and how'. Inspired by an asset based model of community development the key question was how... How could residents' impact positive change in their immediate and wider environments? What could they do to bring about the change they wanted?

Building on the ethos of IfF we learnt that residents were further down the ladder of participation than we had anticipated and FTC decided to build more participative practices into our work as a result.

Since then, we have changed the format of council meetings, delivered a series of topic based forums, increased our presence at events and created other opportunities to meet and talk to residents across Frome, including young people. We tend not to *decide* on behalf of our community and steer away from *consulting* with them. Rather, we try to *engage and enable* them to *participate* in the decision making process. This is not always possible, of course, but that is usually our first thought.

Green spaces

In 2016, we commissioned a report into Community Connections which recognised the importance of building relationships in communities and identified green spaces as being particularly conducive to building these. Our work at Packsaddle, Tower View and most recently Egford Lane green spaces has been based in this participatory philosophy.

Street level

In 2018, we delivered a pilot project that supported the newly formed Trinity Community Group to build neighbourhood and street level groups, delivering practical projects and addressing issues important to residents living in the area. The work in Trinity, and the consecutive research project undertaken as a part of it, recognised the importance of street level activity and the role of a development worker in fostering and building relationships which would enable strong, resilient positive action to occur in neighbourhoods.

We learnt about the dynamics of power and how, as a council, we have an important role in facilitating conversations with other authorities and organisations but that we should also be mindful of taking power away from residents and adding layers of bureaucracy to grass roots action which is built on mutuality and equitable relationships. Whilst Frome Town Council, its staff and councillors hold knowledge, skills and assets so too do residents in streets and neighbourhoods. In short, we have developed a philosophy of enabling, facilitating and supporting rather than doing for, and actively avoiding doing too.

Over the last 8 years we have seen street and neighbourhood groups come together for street parties, community events and gardening projects and also to address issues that they would like to tackle.

Covid – 19 and the first national lockdown in 2020 saw a growth in the number of neighbourhood groups connecting through WhatsApp, Facebook, email, checking in on their five nearest neighbours, sharing resources and building new street level networks of support and activity.

National Lottery funding enabled FTC to support these new groups and support the growth of the Frome Neighbourhood Network; a place where representatives of street networks could come together, share ideas, provide wider peer to peer support. This was a development of the community training programme for streets initiated in early 2020 that explored how to run street parties and other local initiatives. We now have a permanent Community Development Projects Officer working 28 hours per week to support local, street level activity, often taking the form of neighbourhood groups. Furthermore, our philosophy of building on the assets (skills, knowledge, enthusiasm etc) already held within a community underpins our participative engagement practices in the Wild about Trees projects, the development of groups around parks and open spaces and increasingly our work in resilience and supporting businesses too.

Next steps

We will continue to support the Frome Neighbourhood Network, identify and work in areas where street groups are sparse and support interested residents to build their own networks and street groups. We'll do this using a community development model which is underpinned by asset mapping and mutuality. We will support existing groups with training and resources, making our mayor's grant and the shed full of resources available to streets, enabling street parties, playing out and gardening projects. We will continue to build on requests from residents to support them to address issues such as anti social behaviour and parking through initiatives such as Restorative Conversations.

This participative approach to Community Development aims to build resilient neighbourhoods equipped to support each other and enable grass roots activity. We expect that this approach will reduce isolation, reduce demand on statutory reactionary services, create healthy happier neighbourhoods and build food, environmental and social resilience.

At the meeting Kate Hellard and Hannah Stopford will illustrate how some of these outputs are delivered in practice.