

Agenda item 6

For information – 2020/21 Work Programme – end of year review

Authors: The Management Group

Chris Stringer, Environment Manager

Jane Llewellyn, Planning and Development Manager

Rachel Griffin, Marketing & Communications Manager

Peter Wheelhouse, Econ Dev and Regen Manager and Dep Town Clerk

Sarah Williams, Business Manager

Kate Hellard, Community Development Manager

Summary

The purpose of this report is to update the Council on the delivery of the 2020-21 Work Programme.

The report summarises work that was undertaken in 2020-21. It highlights where there were challenges in terms of delivery (for example, because of the impact of the covid pandemic, dependence on others to deliver, budget constraint or staff capacity), as well as a brief summary of the many areas where there was positive progress.

Introduction

The Work Programme is reviewed at monthly Management Group meetings.

Managers have devised a system of RAG rating (Red / Amber / Green) the priorities within the work programme. Green indicates an action is on track for delivery or completed, Amber means an action is on track for delivery but there are potential issues that could affect this and Red means an action is not on track for delivery. This can be viewed at [Appendix 1](#).

This report highlights progress against each of the following areas:

1. Resilience
2. Environment
3. Prosperity and Economic Regeneration
4. Community development
5. Relationship building
6. Marketing and Communications
7. Finance and central business matters
8. COVID-19 response

1. Resilience

Transport

- Secured £75k of funding under Somerset Climate Emergency Community Fund to enable work to start on a Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) and employ a Resilience Engagement Officer to support community engagement around all our resilience projects
- Secured £117k of Department for Transport funding that will enable work to begin on a School Street/Corridor project that will encourage active travel around four local schools
- Concern has continued to grow over traffic and transport in and around the town, so a working group of Cllrs from all three tiers was formed. We are in the early stages of looking at how we can collaboratively bring forward a strategic transport strategy for Frome.
- Electric bike hire continued to be popular, and we covered all costs
- New electric bikes purchased to enable delivery of Cycling Together project as part of Green & Healthy Futures programme

Energy

- Submitted Salix grant application for decarbonisation measures at Town Hall and when declined due to oversubscription, used the evidence gathered to secured zero interest loan instead
- Negotiated and signed contract with CSE to deliver Healthy Homes project as part of Green and Healthy Futures Programme. Have engaged Frome Medical Practice and will be piloting letters in May followed by launching project fully in June.
- Drafted Supplementary Planning Guidance on sustainability for new buildings in Frome
- Launched round 2 of Solar Streets with 60 people signed up to information evening

Waste

- Presented to Edventure's new composting start-up and followed up with information and support
- Restarted Climate Emergency Resources Group

Climate Change

- Secured £300k of National Lottery funding for Green & Healthy Futures programme in partnership with Edventure and Frome Medical Practice
- Secured partnership with Plymouth University for the Evaluation project of Green & Healthy Futures programme. This will be an important piece of work that lays the groundwork for measuring our wider impact and emissions reduction.
- Updated Climate Emergency pages to include more resources and information
- Developed relationship with Mendip DC and other Somerset Resilience Officers as basis for collaboration on climate action

2. Environment

For obvious reasons, the last fifteen months have been challenging; and sometimes difficult as well as different.

Nevertheless, the Rangers have adapted to changing demands and new ways of working; and that has meant that – for the most part – we’ve been able to complete all the essential work that goes into keeping our parks and our places looking and feeling like they do.

Highlights: What we’ve done...

A quick review of the work programme. In no particular order, but picking out some important things - and some things you might have missed:

- Supported by Edventure, we’ve recruited a new Trainee Ranger – Phoebe – who will be working with us and training for six months to learn new skills and gain workplace experience. Phoebe’s role has been funded by the Government’s Kickstart scheme
- We’ve added lots of Share boxes to our parks and green spaces following requests from community groups and people in the town
- We’ve maintained high standards in the town's parks and green spaces. And like this time last year, the comments and anecdotes that have come in during the lockdowns have suggested that we’re getting things right for the most part; and also that people are increasingly valuing and discovering the town’s green spaces
- We’ve continued to review our management plans in public at our Council Matters meetings
- We’ve made a boules court and planted a new hedgerow of native trees at Packsaddle play area
- We’ve secured Government funding for a Tiny Forest at Egford Lane
- And progressed community conversations about plans and ideas for Egford Lane
- The Litter Warriors are helping to keep our parks and our streets clean and tidy
- We’ve been putting in lots of new Ranger-made benches, so people have more places to sit and enjoy our parks and green spaces
- We’ve started putting in way-marker posts, so people know the names of the places that we look after
- And added a new bench and some planters off Catherine Hill

3. Prosperity and economic regeneration

Planning & Development

- Since April 2020, the Planning Committee has been consulted on and responded to 300 planning applications ranging from works to trees and householder extensions to large housing developments. We have also considered some significant applications, including 3 allocation sites at Little Keyford, totalling 330 dwellings with discussions on these sites still on going.
- Several of the applications considered in the last year have been locally controversial and the Planning Committee has worked with both applicants and residents to try and help resolve the issues. Amongst other things we took every opportunity to influence Acorn Property Group’s scheme for Saxonvale and engaged the community in doing so.

- All the planning committee meetings since April 2020 have been held virtually, despite this, there continues to be good attendance if not more people at the meetings. We have also had pre-application discussions with developers and householders, meeting on site where possible. We continue to make representation at the Mendip District Council Planning Board and Council meetings.
- The second round of public consultation on the proposals for Selwood Garden Community took place, with Land Value Alliances (LVA) holding an online public consultation on the updated proposals. To ensure that as many people as possible were informed about the proposals and to enable us to hear the view of residents and other interested parties, we hosted a series of virtual consultation meetings. The feedback we received from those meetings was then used to inform our consultation response.
- General enquiries for help and advice on planning and other related matters have increased significantly over the past year, this is due in part to the fact that Mendip planners have had a reduced capacity, dealing with the response to the pandemic.
- We worked closely with the Frome Area Community Land Trust, supporting them with planning advice and information, when needed and attending regular meetings.
- Improvements to Market Place were substantially completed in October 2020
- We have continued to investigate the possibilities of bringing forward a project to regenerate the Western warehouse and adjoining buildings at Saxonvale – those investigations are continuing

Vocational Training

- The Vocational Training steering group has continued to meet up online, roughly every 6 weeks, for the training providers and group members to update each other and discuss challenges and opportunities. In October 2020, the new Spring Forward section of the website went live which signposts readers to training opportunities in and around Frome.
- We promoted the Kickstart programme to local businesses. The scheme offers young people who are on Universal Credit a 6-months work placement and training. FTC worked with Edventure, who are the main Kickstart coordinators for the town. 33 placements have been put in place since the scheme was launched. In September 2020, we ran a webinar about Apprenticeships and Traineeships with SS&L and Skill Up Somerset for local businesses.

Business Support

- During the pandemic we moved our business events and training activities online. Through working with Frome's Chamber of Commerce, we offered online training in social media, top 20 marketing tips for retailers and creators, developing podcasts, and hospitality. The sessions included a presentation/ training, along with the opportunity to network through break-out rooms.
- Central Government announced a number of grant support schemes for businesses and self-employed workers. We developed a new section on the FTC website to outline the support available and direct businesses to the relevant grants schemes, plus helped with individual business's application queries. Due to the volume of business support

information coming from Central Government, we increased the bi-monthly business newsletter to fortnightly at crucial points during the year.

- We ran a three-day Fiver Fest campaign in October 2021 to encourage shoppers to come out and shop locally. Shops promoted what people could buy locally for £5, with 39 shops taking part. During lockdowns we developed the Discover Frome website to showcase the different ways that residents can continue to support local shops through promoting retailers offering click and collect, vouchers and online shopping.
- In December 2020 we launched a Virtual Christmas Market to identify local makers and creators who do not have a shop front, many of whom who would have made sales through Christmas Markets such as the Bath Christmas Market. Through offering a virtual stall to traders joining the group we connected with a new business sector (independent makers) and ran a follow up training webinar for this sector in February 2021. To encourage shoppers to go out and visit the shops when they opened again on 2 December 2020, we ran a spot the shelf on the shop shelf campaign throughout December on the run up to Christmas.

Twinning

- The Twinning Quadripartite event planned for July 2020 in Murrhardt has now been rescheduled to 2022 due to the pandemic, and any work exchange placements between the twin towns are on hold. We have continued to stay in touch with the Frome Twinning Association over the year.

4. Community development

In March 2020, our Community development team were redeployed to support the community response to Covid-19, initially this involved recruitment and support of volunteers and the development and delivery of a Shop for Me service.

The Community response built on the ethos of facilitation and participative engagement to enable communities, individuals and practitioners to create and sustain projects which have a positive impact to the lives of Frome residents. We continued to deliver our community work programme priorities and build on the groundswell of local, street level mutual aid.

Our work in communities is underpinned by the communications team and also supported by colleagues across all areas of prosperity, regeneration, environment and resilience. We work with residents, practitioners, voluntary and statutory services to develop place-based models of best practice and services that meet the needs of local people.

Support for Community Organisations

We have continued to provide bespoke one to one support for local voluntary and statutory organisations, particularly in areas of strategic planning for trustees' boards, fundraising support and advice. The regular updates and newsletter for Community Organisations was particularly supportive during the lockdowns and rapid changes in guidance and funding opportunities in 2020/21.

Grants

In 2020/21 we provided:

- 5 Mayor's grants which totalled £3750
- 10 Substantial Project grants to the value of £80,500
- 19 Community Project grants which totalled £20k
- And 3 PB Events were funded which totalled £21,702, one delivered, two deferred to this year.

During 2020/21 we worked with The Democratic Society, through their Public Square project to enable the co design of a new grants programme for FTC. The six month project has resulted in a new improved Community Grant Scheme and a new Major Grants fund for Community Organisations.

Children and Young People

Following the mapping and research of the previous year we have developed:

a) FIND

The Family Information and Networking Directory (FIND) for Frome. A web-based portal for information sharing, hosting information about projects, facilities and services for children, young people and their families. It will fill an identified gap in information on how and where to access services, who to go to for help and advice and support local residents, families and practitioners to help themselves and help each other.

b) Play Strategy

Children's Scrapstore were commissioned early in 2021 to create a participative Play Strategy for Frome that will provide a strategic overview of what exists and what is possible, recognising the importance of play in social, economic, health, wellbeing and educational contexts enabling Frome to become a playful town for children and adults alike. The strategy will inform future developments in parks and open spaces and look to influence town centre and planning design across the town. However, it is not just about places to play but attitudes that enable play, for all ages, and is particularly important as we come out of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions and become familiar with socialising again.

c) Link and Learn Community Training

Our children and young people's project officers developed an online training offer for residents which has included:

- The new Playful training - the power of play, the science behind it and hints and tips for creating playful settings.
- Starting Conversations – talking about Young People's Mental Health and how to access local support and advice.

d) Partnership and coordination

We have worked closely with schools, statutory colleagues in Health and Communities teams and other partners to mitigate the impacts of national lockdowns on children and young people. In doing so, we have identified potential and existing gaps in services and are coordinating a community response to filling these gaps. In the case of Mental Health support for young people this has resulted in a comprehensive offer in Frome and FTC will continue to facilitate a regular forum with a range of partners, identifying gaps and considering best routes to fill them.

Community Development

Covid – 19 and the first national lockdown in March 2020 saw a growth in the number of neighbourhood groups, connecting through WhatsApp, Facebook and email, and encouraged by FTC's communications to '*check in on your five nearest neighbours*'. We saw the sharing resources and building new street level networks of support and activity.

National Lottery funding enabled FTC to support these new groups, alongside existing groups and together they created a Neighbourhood Network which is a place where representatives of street networks could come together, share ideas, and provide wider peer to peer support. This built on the community training programme for streets looking to run street parties and other local initiatives that initiated in early 2020.

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. The ambition is to harness and build on the assets already held within a community underpin 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.

We are aware of 69 street level groups in Frome - an increase from 23 in June 2020.

Neighbourhood Network

The Neighbourhood Network has been active for over a year now and FTC have been supporting with admin and catch-up meetings, collating a monthly newsletter, and linking into training. Our community development projects officer is also supporting a sub-group of 'Organisation Builders' who meet to shape the vision and aims of the group. So, it is of most value to the members, this group is exploring the best structure and looking to become an independent organisation.

Training

FTC and the Neighbourhood Network have hosted a series of training sessions for street representatives on: how to grow their street network; introducing playing out; sharing initiatives; growing projects; and, how to organise a street party.

Restorative conversations

A desire to support the resolution of neighbourhood disputes led to training in Restorative Conversations and a new group of interested community members with a mixed background in restorative justice was formed following the training. This group aims to promote a restorative culture in Frome. The early stages of exploration are currently underway, and the group is supported to meet every other week.

5. Relationship building

The core of this area of work is around building and maintain good working relationships with colleagues beyond Frome and those Cllrs sitting on the district and the county council. Following the decision by Government to start the unitary debate in Somerset, we now meet regularly with neighbouring and nearby parish councils to ensure we are all clear about the

implications of unitary on us as well as how we might influence the debate. The regular monthly meeting of all Cllrs representing Frome at all three tiers of local government has become established.

Our campaigning work on the unitary debate was completely successful in that our seven recommendations for the new unitary regardless of geography area were adopted by both the One Somerset and the Stronger Somerset proposals. At the time of writing, we are working closely with both teams, as well as local parishes, to ensure that our seven recommendations are acted on by the successful proposers. Government will announce this in July 2021.

Dealing with the covid pandemic meant that we haven't been able to develop our inequalities assessment nor our project to assess local impact of FTC both socially and economically.

6. Marketing and Communications

The Marketing & Communication area of work continues to have a prolific output delivering our own projects within the strategic objectives of FTC and working across the entire team to deliver high quality communications and events. It is fair to say that this year our work has been mainly responsive but this is a particular strength of our team.

Increasing the information output of the Council for the purposes of well-being and civic pride – this small sentence represents a vast majority of our work as we work to ensure a solid professional output to support all FTC projects.

- The well-being of our residents was paramount in our work this year and all channels continue to be used to support all the projects that the Town Council is undertaking from print to online digital content. This continues through the campaign work around information such as wild about growing, starting conversations etc.
- We launched our new fully accessible website this year and continue to develop the directory to enable The Family Information and Networking Directory (FIND)
- We had a significant increase in Social Media output, through a clear and developed digital strategy, a rethink and an increase both in uptake, a boost to our Insta channel through a new Town Hall weddings campaign but also a reorganizing of our online newsletters
- Noticeboard ambassadors have largely been stood down as we worked to be covid safe and Town Hall staff delivered this element of work with cheery aplomb. We continue to install more noticeboards wherever we can.
- Creating and co ordinating of a volunteer bank and subsequent services including three town wide leaflet drops represented a huge body of work supported both town and team wide

Improving the image of the town through the visitor experience

- Discover Frome website has been entirely redeployed over this time to support our businesses as they have navigated covid. There have also been three rapid town centre campaigns revolving around social distancing, including *Open for Business* and *Let's get Christmas wrapped up in Frome*.
- It now also has an entirely new section for families

- Walking has been such a prevalent activity that we have focused on supporting that element through publishing new and re-vesting older walks and maps.
- The Discover Frome Information Point volunteers are excellent ambassadors to the town – and our two volunteer coordinators have done an excellent job keep the group together and engaged, meeting bi-weekly and producing their own newsletter.
- Guide Walks programme continued where they could and are now just about to be relaunched.
- Work continues with the Friends of Frome Station – who have finally received the keys to the other side
- We continue to be committed to the performing arts in Frome by continuing to promote all the amazing events that Frome has to offer throughout the town as they open up. We worked with the venues through the forum to try and look at what is needed for the future going forward.

Participation and engagement

- We continue to have participation and engagement as the underpinning principle of all our work – last year this included a town wide *What next for Frome?* following the first pandemic lockdown. A survey went through every door, we had an online version too, as well as a number of stakeholder meetings – the only element missing was face to face. This engagement generated an enormous amount of data which was processed to form part the recovery plan.
- Participatory budgeting events – Last year's event winners were Gen z, Frome Festival and Window Wanderland. Only Window Wanderland was able to deliver their event and so the funding for the other events has been carried over to the current year.
- The town vote did not take place last year and The Make it Happen Conference was postponed until later this year.

Events

- Events are an important element of our Communication and Marketing strategy allowing us to engage both with the community in a different way but also as an outreach tool for increased participation. They are a great way of garnering public opinion. And it's fair to say however last year direct engagement had to be substituted for online events.
- Our Christmas lantern parade was planned for with all the work that that entails only to have to be redirected at the last minute into a lantern trail and a trail that had to be discovered rather than mapped at that. This was true of other events too. Feedback suggests that residents found this to be enriching and worthwhile and there was definitely an assessment that it supported our community development work.
- Most events across the town were cancelled. However, we were still able to set up and support a host of online events including climate action events, Made Differently days, the Walking Festival, a Virtual Christmas Facebook market and Women Mean business conference
- We did manage a few actual events including Fiverfest in October and we supported both Window Wanderland and Window Wanderland Halloween events and their trails.
- Our biggest news Events wise is that the Town Hall saw a return of weddings after 42 years- the happy couples have been delighted.

Town Hall

- The Town Hall was closed to the public for most of the year other than for statutory services and tenants. However, it has still had to be looked after.
- It was open as a testing station for NHS staff for two months before the Mobile Testing Unit was set up at the cricket club.
- The in-house Cleaning Staff have proved to be a valuable asset to the everyday working of the Town Hall, having done an extraordinary job of adapting to whatever is thrown at them in terms of new processes. We have expanded this team to include a weekend cleaner, who also takes care of Victoria Park loos.
- The support stewards team continue to go from strength to strength to support the Town Hall. However, this year they have, like the rest of the staff team, been diverted to supporting other elements of work such as noticeboards and leaflet drops and the Mobile Testing Unit.

7. Finance and central business matters

Budget, Precept, Audit & Finances for 2020-21

The financial year ending March 2021 is reported separately at this meeting under the Annual Return 2020-21. Overall, the year ended underspent to budget with new Ear Marked Reserves (EMRs) approved by Council in January 2021 and additionally at this May 2021 Council meeting. Due to unexpected expenditure and reduced income resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic we ended the year with reduced reserves but a sufficient 2021-22 budget and strong EMRs to carry progress with the Work Programme and delayed projects through 2021.

The Internal Auditors were entirely satisfied with their investigations during the year and the Annual Governance Statement & Return will be submitted to the External Auditors following approval at this meeting. Their response would be expected around late August 2021.

IT, VOIP & video conferencing

During the pandemic year our IT equipment including the new SonicWall router, site based server and VPN service, VOIP Horizon telephone system and mobile/laptop apps, along with our Zoom subscriptions and Teams apps, were utilised to full capacity and enabled us to function and communicate well as teams of staff redeployed to new environments and, in many cases, to new tasks. Staff adapted extraordinarily quickly and brilliantly well under the circumstances and maintained excellent communications and services throughout the year.

By March 2021 we completed the upgrade of all laptops to Windows 10. The majority of our older devices would not work sufficiently fast enough with Windows 10, so we had to renew more laptops in the 2020-21 year. With the old devices, those that could be used by browser only had their hard drives replaced and were given to Fair Frome for distribution as appropriate. For the unusable devices, we destroyed all the removed hard drives and sent the cases to the recycling centre.

We proceeded with the agreed purchase of a new onsite server paid for outright with the allocated EMR in March 2020. As stated at the last report, the rationale for the cash purchase is that it cost less than two years' quoted cloud-based subscriptions and we are not tied to one provider for the five years of a lease purchase. We are therefore planning to review the suitability and cost of cloud-based services again in early 2022.

The main IT project for 2020-21 was to be the development of the CRM database which will improve communications and overall administration of the Council's work. This project started late in the year and will now be the focus for 2021-22. The direction and speed of development may also be subject to the new Unitary arrangements, but we will aim to future proof connectivity and collaboration as far as possible without holding back the improvements needed internally at FTC.

At the time of writing (May 2021) using a mix of our existing IT & AV equipment and Zoom functionality, we have the technical capability to enable both in person and remote attendance at Council meetings held in the Chamber, as well as a live stream to YouTube. We will be putting this to a formal test for the first time at this May 2021 Council meeting.

HR

Ellis Whittam (solicitors) and SW Councils (HR advisors) have continued to be helpful for HR support and legal advice over the past year. Annual appraisals were completed in March & April 2021 and there are no areas of concern. Laura Flaherty, Executive Assistant to the Town Clerk has completed her Diploma level Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) qualification and now carries out the bulk of the HR administration and research. We were in the process of appointing of a Business Apprentice just prior to the first lockdown. It is hoped to reinstate this process when we return to the Town Hall fully, perhaps in the Summer.

Town Hall Tenants

Our long-term tenants at the Town Hall and Elliot building continue to be Fair Frome, We Hear You (WHY), Frome FM and the Frome Learning Partnership (FLP). Active & In Touch are unable to return to their old office as due to social distancing measures it would really only suit one person at a time.

General Enquiries, telephone call and email volumes

Over the 2020-21 year (Apr20 to Mar21) our VOIP telephone system handled 12,183 incoming calls to FTC, a weekly average of 244, daily 49, and 11,373 outgoing (weekly average 227, daily 45). 3,895 (78/16) incoming calls were direct to the public number 01373 465757 and 8,288 (319/64) incoming direct to other FTC staff extensions (excluding their mobile phone calls). Whilst the number of incoming calls to the 'front desk' is down by 40% (from 123 to 78 weekly) since the last report, the number of email enquiries received is up by 22%, from 123 to 150 per week. We believe that lockdown and no meeting & booking enquiries is largely responsible for the reduction.

Email volumes in the 180 days to 12/06/2020 totalled 151k across the 50 @frometowncouncil email address holders, 39k sent and 112k received. The average for the highest ten users was 285 emails sent & received a week (ranging between 157 and 458).

Email volumes in the 180 days to 8/5/2021 total 177k across the 56 @frometowncouncil email address holders, 42k sent and 135k received. The average for the highest ten users is 288 emails sent & received a week. Although this is a similar volume per person to the last reporting time, the use of Teams for meetings and brief chats means that in real terms the volume of email usage has increased because many brief messages are now sent via chat in Teams whereas they would previously most likely been in person or by email.

We expect to see a reduction in email volumes as in-person interaction returns when more staff are working from the Town Hall on a regular basis, but this is just an estimate, so we shall see!

8. Covid-19

In this review we have included our Covid-19 response as a separate section as it is not reflected in the work programme.

In March 2020 we built upon our existing work with community organisations and neighbourhood networks to provide emergency support services for residents in Frome. Over the course of a few weeks, we redeployed our staff team to set up and deliver '*Fruber Eats*' an emergency food delivery scheme, '*Shop for Me*' a volunteer supported bespoke shopping scheme, a telephone information and signposting service and support for local organisations to increase their capacity and meet new demand for their services as part of a town wide approach to supporting each other. All underpinned by our campaign to *Check in with your nearest 5 neighbours*.

During this time, we have also built on our work to support neighbourhood networks with a regular newsletter for existing and new networks and increased the opportunity for peer to peer support through regular zoom meetings.

Covid 19 saw our work stop in its tracks as we worked out how to close the Town Hall and redeploy our efforts to best support our community. The '*Check in on your five nearest neighbours*' campaign was conceived very quickly, alongside a takeover of the home page of our website to the Covid response information, and the Discover Frome - *Business as unusual* sections of the website and implemented across channels. Other campaigns emerged as the need arose around town centre businesses including '*Take out to help out*' and *Open for Business*. We will continue to be responsive as the world unlocks.

All staff across all teams at have worked tirelessly and efficiently to maximise the best possible level of communication and information exchange in very uncertain times. We have ensured that Frome residents know that they have a place to call, where they will speak to a really helpful person who will be able to signpost them to access help and support.

Frome Town Council's work during this time has been really well received as evidence by feedback from the *FruberEats* and *ShopforMe* recipients and more generally by the *What Next for Frome?* household survey.

9. Recovery Panel actions

See page 6 of [Appendix 1](#).