

Frome Town Council
Strategy
2019 - 2023

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Introduction

This strategy, originally written in May 2019 and reviewed and amended in May 2021, aims to scope out the vision, principles and detail of what the current Frome Town Council wants to achieve and how it proposes to do that. The strategy provides enough detail to prepare the annual work plans and budgets whilst being flexible enough to take advantage of new opportunities as they arise. It also provides the framework within which the community, other councils, the voluntary sector and businesses can engage with Frome Town Council over the coming years. This is a living document which will be reviewed and evolve according to changing circumstances.

Section 2 sets out the Council's vision of Frome.

Section 3 describes both the wider and the local contexts for that vision.

Section 4 sets out the Council's philosophy at the heart of our strategy and how we envisage bringing this to life in the way that we work.

Section 5 describes our plans in more detail, spelling out how the strategy is to be achieved.

2. Vision

Frome is a town which looks for and tries out new ideas and 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 and have to take into account.

The wider picture

3.1 We are living in changeable and unpredictable times characterised by deep divisions in society, exemplified by the unfolding consequences of the Covid pandemic, an increasing poverty gap, Brexit and the climate and ecological 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, including Frome Town Council in December 2018, 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 The new unitary council in Somerset is likely to be in place by the end of this strategy period. We, in Frome, will continue to engage with the debate to explore what services should be best delivered at what level of local Government. This might mean that we provide - directly and with the community - some services currently provided by Mendip District Council and Somerset County Council.

The local picture

3.5 Working with the community, we have already started to take action in relation to climate change and accompanying biodiversity loss, austerity, political uncertainty and severe reductions in public sector funding. During 2020-21, we saw first-hand the value of community resilience in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We will need to continue to develop ways to increase local resilience across a wide variety of community fronts in order to respond creatively to whatever the future holds.

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 increase significantly and this will put substantial pressure on the town's roads (for both travel and parking); on education, health and social care provision; 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, more energy efficient homes, greater opportunities for self-build and community housing, protection of open spaces and employment sites and 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 and ecological change but may also reduce the power of local voices to respond to developments in their communities.

3.8 Frome faces two closely aligned problems of a 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 cases of 'sofa surfing', over-occupation and inadequate rental properties.

3.9 Our local environment strongly affects our experience of the town, ranging from the many things that make Frome a very special place to live, such as a thriving local economy with regular markets and the enjoyment of our recreational spaces and river corridor, To all the factors limiting or threatening that enjoyment, including availability of parking, ease of access to key services, the cleanliness of our streets, the confidence with which we can enjoy “active travel” e.g. cycling and walking in the town, increasing numbers of houses being built, and increased traffic congestion with the associated health hazards of speeding, air pollution and noise.

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 both within the town and to go to larger shopping centres. Frome is also a key hub for many small villages and communities, enabling people to access health services, education, banks, post offices and shops.

3.11 The global pandemic has strongly impacted local service and creative industries and will continue to do so for some time to come. Consequently, we will need to continue to review what is needed in Frome with the changing patterns of work, the pressing need for business space and the challenges that social distancing brings. We will continue our work to develop and improve vocational training and employment opportunities for young people.

3.12 The impact of Covid and its unfolding consequences on the town is yet to be fully assessed, and there are real challenges that are yet unseen. 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 these challenges and seize opportunities around inclusion, housing, educational attainment, employment, digital inclusion and wellbeing.

4. Our philosophy at the heart of our strategy

This section sets out our philosophy – the thinking and ethos that guides our strategy and how we go about what we do, and the ways that we work.

The Town Council's primary role is to serve the people of Frome, to support a town that thrives, to enhance our resident's wellbeing. The Council aims to bring about a community that is both ambitious, successful and inclusive as well as socially, economically and environmentally resilient.

4.1 Promoting community participation:

It is vital we stay in touch with the people of Frome, to engage with and listen to residents and businesses as well as bring forward those voices that are not usually heard. We want to neither stifle discussion nor bury dissent, but to encourage participation, engagement and allow space for enthusiasm, contribution and initiative.

We will work to build engaged and active communities and neighbourhood networks; communities that are strong and equipped to address local challenges, as seen during the pandemic, and that can thrive despite cuts in public services.

In pursuing all this, we will be transparent, open and accessible with good communication at the heart of everything that we do. We are committed to ensuring that our own processes, as a large group of independent Councillors, exemplify this commitment to engagement and participation, while embracing diversity and allowing debate and challenge.

4.2 Supporting and facilitating the town:

We will create an environment in which everyone can thrive; a cohesive community that brings people of different generations and backgrounds together. We will support local businesses to grow, helping to develop the local economy and, in turn, providing employment and prosperity. We will place extra emphasis on supporting young people to develop and achieve their ambitions. 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 with and learn from other towns and parishes.

4.3 Embodying leadership:

In being committed to being radical and innovative, we will be bold in responding to identified needs and making decisions on the basis of what we consider to be best for Frome. We will be nimble, taking opportunities as they emerge. At the same time as being elected to represent citizens' interests, and to work diligently to see those interests served, we will also be willing to lead and take decisions on behalf of the town in what we regard as its best interests while still taking into account historic public opinions and any other relevant data.

4.4 Encouraging resilience

In the face of the potential risks posed by the unfolding climate and ecological emergency (CEE), we will support and champion causes that enhance the resilience of the town, its neighbourhoods and protect against those which erode it. We will strive to ensure Frome is carbon neutral by 2030 by implementing a robust Action Plan (see 5.23). 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 practice what we preach, demonstrating and sharing ethical and environmental good practice.

5. Our plans

The Town Council has had many successes in the past ten years. In inheriting previous administrations achievements and plans already in process, we are not starting from scratch. We want to take every opportunity to do things even better. This section, informed by the vision and philosophy spelt out above, details our plans in more depth and informs the development of each year's work plan. Since things will inevitably change, we will remain flexible and allow these plan to adapt accordingly.

Finishing what we've started

5.1 As well as a number of smaller projects that require completion, 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

5.2 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.

5.3 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. We will actively explore opportunities to minimize the carbon footprint of the Town Hall as an example to the community of what can be achieved.

5.4 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 sense of pride in the town, making it attractive for residents, visitors and investors alike.

5.5 As the role of the Council grows, we will continue to develop the IT, finance and HR systems to ensure appropriate efficiencies and resources are in place. We will continue excellent financial management 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. We will work to improve access to enable everyone to engage with the work of the Council and activities within the town.

5.6 The Town Council will regularly assess its ethical policy with a view to enhancing our approaches. 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. 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. We will continue to lobby Somerset County Council's pensions committee to ensure that our staff's pensions are invested appropriately to promote solutions to the growing CEE.

Working with other councils and agencies

5.7 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. Looking further ahead to the new unitary council, we will work with all stakeholders to get the best deal for Frome and surrounding parishes. 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 effective relationships with Somerset County Council on issues such as 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.

5.8 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. Our relationship with Somerset County Council 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. Given the critical importance of national Government legislation and policy we will continue to support efforts to accelerate change, for example in registering our support with the CEE Alliance to lobby Parliament to pass the CEE Bill and other measures in the proposed Environment Bill.

Working in the community

5.9 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 our strategy.

5.10 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 such as through the new Community Connectors initiative. 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 e.g., during cold weather.

5.11 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 around what will be beneficial to their lives.

5.12 The current pandemic has necessitated the creation and development of strong and resilient neighbourhood networks. We will continue to provide ongoing support and resources for these new and emerging neighbourhood groups and building on our previous pilot, we will help these groups evolve into an even greater community resource for post-pandemic Frome.

Planning, development and housing

5.13 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 developments in the right places. We will continue to encourage local residents and businesses to participate in planning consultations and respond to applications.

5.14 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.

5.15 We will ensure developers are aware of our and Mendip's vision of the town and sustainability targets, and we will work with them 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. We will

push developers to produce housing that addresses the Climate & Ecological Emergency declared at all tiers with the aim of ensuring that all new developments are carbon neutral.

5.16 During the four years of this Council we will see significant progress on major new developments both in the heart of Frome, and on former industrial and commercial sites across and on the edge of town. We will be proactive in making sure that the town has a voice in shaping these developments, especially representing the need for genuinely affordable social housing, sufficient local amenities, an effective transport strategy and use of suitable building materials.

5.17 The need for more suitable affordable and social housing will be a priority in our lobbying. We will work with Mendip District Council, 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.

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

Business and education

5.19 Given the background of the severe restrictions imposed on local businesses during the Covid pandemic, a key role of the Town Council is to find ways to continue to support social enterprises and businesses to both keep and create jobs for local people, for example through information on Government and business grants, the Young Person's Kickstart programme, advertising the benefits of the Green and Healthy Future Programme and keeping the Council's Green Directory up to date.

Recognising much of Frome's economy is built on small businesses, we will continue to support their expansion and the creation of new ones, and continue existing work including training, networking and encouraging innovation. We will continue to actively engage in making the town centre more attractive particularly to pedestrians and cyclists through focussed initiatives for example the Fiver Fest, temporary street closures and closing some 'heritage' streets after 10am to vehicles. We will also continue to explore new initiatives such as extending Christmas lights to other areas, more seating and planters throughout the town centre and better signage. All of this will encourage visitors and help local businesses through increased footfall. We recognize that our markets are important economic drivers for the town, and we will continue to support and promote them. 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.

5.20 We will work with business and education providers to offer better 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, heritage and the arts

5.21 Culture, heritage and the arts are seen by many as key indicators of Frome's re-emergence in recent years. We recognise the crucial role they have played not only in 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 support and arise from radical communities and offer the opportunity for Frome to come together around common aims and themes; 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. We recognise that the current pandemic has added further burden on the arts on top of years of budget cuts and funding options ending.

5.22 We will continue to work with venues and 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 the 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

5.23 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, higher levels of local Government and others such as the Covenant of Mayors, to achieve this commitment. The Council's actions will aim to substantially strengthen the town's resilience with respect to the impacts of anticipated climate and ecological changes and the risks these pose.

5.24 The Council has resolved to establish an Environmental Resilience Framework (ERF) that: a) provides an overarching and cross-cutting framework for the Council's work addressing climate change and environmental issues, targeting CO2 emission reduction, mitigation, adaptation, biodiversity and ecological concerns; b) explores new initiatives to be pursued; c) ensures that environmental resilience is taken into account in everything that we do as a Council; d) identifies appropriate methods of monitoring and evaluation.

Our Climate Emergency Strategy and Action Plan is a part of the ERF and will be regularly reviewed. We will explore possibilities inherent within comprehensive community modelling, such as in the One Planet Living Framework, or Doughnut Economics, to ensure a truly sustainable and resilient future. Given the critical importance of National Government policy, legislation and funding in achieving our local targets, we will continue to support efforts to accelerate positive and radical changes at the national level.

5.25 Our CEE Strategy and Action plan will continue to be informed by Climate Panels, held regularly to ensure the opportunity for local participation. At the same time, we'll continue to use our media platforms to provide reliable and easily accessible information, such as the science behind the rationale for declaring a CEE, and providing a variety of options for individual and collective action to address reducing personal carbon footprints. We will also continue to provide information about how residents can work collectively as a community to not just achieve carbon neutrality by 2030 but also build genuinely more resilient and sustainable neighbourhoods and local economy.

5.26 Embedded within our commitment to an Environmental Resilience Framework (ERF), the plan will focus on projects that not only reduce emissions but also maximise benefits to the local community, as exemplified by participating in the Green and Healthy Futures Programme. These benefits include reducing air pollution, improving health and wellbeing, sharing resources, and making homes easier to heat. The plan will especially focus on 1) renewable energy supply and energy efficiency, 2) resource use and waste 3) transport, congestion and pollution (see 5.34 below)

5.27 We will work to significantly increase 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 power installations. And 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.

5.28 We will encourage schemes to 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. The plan will also explore resilience in the face of strains on food supplies due to weather extremes, both locally and further afield.

5.29 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.

5.30 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.

5.31 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 neighbourhood networks to 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.

5.32 Over the four years of this administration, 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 and enhance their landscape value and their biodiversity. We want to build on the success of our initial work in rewilding and to work with the community to plant a large number of trees in open spaces, streets and gardens across Frome.

5.33 We will work with organisations such as Friends of the River Frome to enable delivery of the adopted River Strategy and to incorporate the results of this into the revised Neighbourhood Plan.

Transport, travel, traffic

5.34 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 will work with all councillors representing Frome to lobby Somerset County Highways to fund a comprehensive, integrated Transport and Travel Plan for the town and surrounding parishes, building on the work achieved through their funding of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LWCIP). We also recognise the need for increased employment opportunities in the town to reduce commuting journeys.

5.35 We will continue to support the Walkers Festival and the Walkers Are Welcome scheme, fundraising efforts around the Missing Links projects north and south of Frome, Mendip's Access for All scheme and the network of multi-user paths to encourage Active Travel initiatives. We will look at opportunities for improved signage and lighting for cycle and walking routes along with options to make key routes more cycle and walking friendly. We will continue our work with schools through the School Active Travel Challenge, including exploring the possibilities for Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, safer routes for children to walk to school and Playing Out Schemes.

5.36 We will take steps to make cycling safer and more attractive. We will review 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.

5.37 Along with local groups such as Friends of Frome Station and FAVBUG, we will lobby for further development of public transport, and to reduce dependence on petrol and diesel cars as far as possible. This includes 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.

5.38 Recognising the need for car and van use, we will also promote cleaner vehicles and innovative approaches to Frome's residents and businesses, for example the use of an electric bike truck for in-town deliveries. 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).

5.39 We will test all planning applications for their impact on travel and transport within Frome, taking a joined-up approach to try to ensure 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

5.40 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 many sporting, educational, business and apprenticeship activities. We will work with our twin towns to share best practice in economic, environmental and social matters which might benefit the town.

Keeping track of how we're doing

5.41 We want to understand the impact and value of the work of the Town Council and understand how far we are progressing towards achieving our vision. 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.

Conclusion

We are in a good place to continue to shape and to embrace the remaining two years of this administration. 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.