

### Agenda Item 3

For decision – Work to invigorate our town centre

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#### Summary

This report provides an update on the Council's work to invigorate Frome Town Centre. There follows a summary of progress to deliver the various actions identified in the Council Plan with a Red/Amber/Green status update for each. Green indicates that the project is going ahead without issues, amber indicates that there are impacts on delivery or timeline, and red indicates a significant obstacle threatening delivery.

Much of the work to date has taken place in councillor led stakeholder groups – this report also lays that out and indicates next steps.

## Progress review for invigorate Town Centre:

Project	Update	Status
Define the actual town centre	This was discussed at the workshop involving businesses and other community representatives on 1 March but still to be defined.	
Engage with Somerset Highways and find a way to make the two crossing points to the BC pedestrian safe	We commissioned PJA Transport Planning (funded by Somerset Highways) to develop a Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). Improving crossing points in the town centre was identified as a priority and this will help us to raise funding for design of a solution and implementation when funding allows.	
Develop a plan to ensure more trees and plants, more places to sit	Aesthetics Group has divided town into quarters – are developing plans	
Identify key stakeholders in the town centre- property owners both residential and non-residential, tenants and business owners	Attendees to event on 1 March, with a focus on property and business owners, database being developed based on listings	
Bring together local independent businesses in the retail and hospitality sector with town centre premises at the Town Hall for a facilitated meeting to identify how we can work with them to enhance the town centre for locals and visitors alike	This work has been led by Councillor's Dove and Usher and three meetings with members of the business community - a summary of the findings is in the report below	
We will monitor the situation regarding the collection of rubbish in the town centre and the cleanliness of the streets and press for improvements where necessary	We are working with barrowman employed by ID Verde under the SC ground care contract to improve the cleanliness of the town centre. However, the level of cleanliness in the town centre remains unacceptable. See the proposals below on how to address this via a Town Ranger and regular contract compliance meetings.	
Consider ways in which we can calm vehicle traffic by using planters and other street furniture to make the town centre feel safer and pedestrian friendly	Aesthetics Group working on this project	

Encourage and support local business to organise events in the town centre for example a cycling festival	We continue to work businesses and organisations to support events across the town: This year work has taken place to include a drone show, a cycling event, the Somerset Farmers Market at the Boyle Cross, and the Cheese and Grain 25 <sup>th</sup> birthday celebration, and Frome Busks, Remembrance and a Christmas light switch on, as well as conversations around events in Rodden Meadow, and a View from here, a new series of sound walks.	
As part of our Unitary conversations, explore how greater control of the town centre car parks could bring mutual benefits	Some initial conversations have been held with Somerset councillors and senior staff around our ambitions including our desire to secure greater control over car parks. We are now awaiting a draft Devolution Framework Document which will set out the opportunity to pitch – this is expected late summer/early autumn.	
Collaboration, advocacy & influence across a wide range of projects important for the town	Capacity is currently limited to make progress on this	
Promoting the town to visitors and residents through Discover Frome	Discover Frome is the brand through which we promote the town pivoting on our visitor offer, independent shops, accommodation, events and local walking and cycling opportunities. It includes: a well-used up to date website; an information point, about to be moved to the library; a partnership to deliver a physical publication - The Annual, promoting shops, cafes and restaurants, galleries and venues and accommodation throughout the town; a network of noticeboard ambassadors to look after the noticeboards supporting events.	
Preservation, restoration & maintenance of Open Space assets	Work to date includes: on-going management of Boyle Cross including maintenance of the fountain, pop up electrics, seating and florals, new removable Bollards allowing improved vehicular access; preparation and delivery of Christmas tree and lights; Actively supporting use by the Markets; Managing bus shelters; Supporting other restoration initiate such as Cockey lamp project in partnership with the FSLs; liaising with environment agency over riverbank management; and looking after Chateau Gontier, it's access and presentation.	

## Background

There have been several attempts to improve the Town Centre over the last decade, from grand designs along the riverside to the proposed cultural quarter to improvements at Boyles Cross and to small environmental enhancements. There have been varying degrees of success, and of course the onward march of changes to shopping habits and internet shopping. Suffice to say that our town centre often doesn't look its best. There has also been a significant rise over the last few years in vacant properties and general untidiness.

## Wider Issues

It is also worth recognizing wider national trends. The following issues have been identified from an LGA Report called "The Future of the High Street" and many issues highlighted there are appearing in Frome.

## Partnerships

A rise in the number of private/public partnerships would serve to change the relationship between businesses and local authorities. Disagreements are most likely to form between how local authorities view the future of the high street, how businesses/private landlords view it and what the various elements of the community desire.

## Community oriented

More purposeful town centres would help shift the high streets and town centres of the future towards a more community-oriented approach – meeting the needs of local populations and providing a broad range of utilities. This will require the building of new relationships and the alteration of existing ones between businesses, local authorities, and local communities.

## Move to self-related provision

This trend is likely to drive a shift in the sort of facilities and shops that high streets look to provide, with 'self' related businesses and venues (e.g., hairdressers, gyms, and hospitality venues) replacing other more 'stuff' orientated stores.

## Numbers

Buoyant footfall is a vital component of thriving town centre. Working in ways that support this is key. High streets will need to adapt to changing work patterns with reduced total worker numbers active in town centres on any day. Town centres will probably be busy again, but never quite with the same level of footfall. Local town centres can benefit from increased visitor numbers during the work week – and may see increased demand for some hospitality attractions typically associated with inner-city work culture (e.g., bars, higher-end restaurants, and pop ups).

## Resilience

High streets and town centres may see businesses continue the shift to more risk-averse models – with the reduction in the presence of large, branded stores. More resilient and local high street businesses can work to reduce store closures in the medium-to-long term – helping build longer-lasting high street environments.

### Multi Use

In the long run, temporary and cheaper solutions may encourage greater diversity and easier entry into the High Street. Much will depend on the imagination of entrepreneurs and the attitude of landlords and the success of increased events and attractions.

### AI

Businesses in town centres can benefit not only from the back-of-house organisational utility of AI but will benefit in customer facing ways also. Chatbots and customer-data-analysis will offer new ways to tailor offerings to better suit consumers. Data tracking and AI analysis also offers local authorities and planners a way to better understand how high streets are used to create or update high streets to better fit their local community.

### Accessibility

Greater need for accessible access to high streets and town centres will result in costs for both businesses and councils – but brings obvious benefits by expanding who can access facilities, stores, and venues and making sure that high streets are well suited to the communities that use them.

### Opening Hours

Extended opening hours would support broader trends around the deregulation of life and pedestrianisation and could lead to the high streets and town centres adopting a more European model – becoming cultural and leisure centres for their communities later into the evening in a way that commercially-dominated high streets currently do not.

### Green Focus

Explicitly green-focused businesses and high streets will find themselves becoming more attractive for consumers – with the opposite true for businesses explicitly associated with non-green attributes. Green consumption is likely to become a part, even if not always the main part, of many consumer interactions.

### Pedestrianisation

Pedestrianised high streets can help turn town centres into broader attractions – adding community and leisure spaces to areas currently associated with traffic and commercial shopping. Where successful, visitor numbers could rise whilst the vision of high streets as true community centres could come closer to fruition.

### Community Ownership

Where present, community ownership will drastically change how high streets and town centres are run – reducing the influence of businesses and creating what may become a more holistic, community centred approach. Finding a way to involve communities as stakeholders in high-street decision-making processes has benefit for communities and for businesses.

The challenges are therefore plenty and as high streets adapt, unattractive empty properties are increasingly common which makes town centres look defeated and no longer a destination in themselves. In line with national trends and in a move away from the 100% occupation pre-pandemic, we currently have 16 premises within the town centre currently closed. This comprises 8% (tbc) of the current total stock. The data from our first post-pandemic footfall comparison (comparing June this year to last year) shows that footfall is down in the town

centre by roughly 1.4% to 84,941 in June. The dwell time shows an increase of 13.8% to 198 minutes. Looking forward, however, we have three of the four banks closed in Market Place alongside the running soar of the Shoe Zone. This perhaps helps to illustrate the challenge we face and that there's no need for compliance.

### Stakeholder engagement

Lead by Councillors by Mel Usher and Nick Dove, the invigorate the town centre group was formed with two objectives:

1. To try and draw in a group of key stakeholders in town to identify issues; see what is required; to encourage and empower them to act; and to work collaboratively recognising that the Town Council cannot solve the issue alone.
2. That the emerging solutions should be deliverable in terms of their scope and budget. Any proposed work will help build a partnership base and relationships, which could enable a wider and better perspective to develop organically.

### Progress so far

A well-attended meeting was held on 1 March – ‘Shaping the Town Centre’ - was an invited group of stakeholders. There was discussion in groups about the challenges and opportunities to drive future success. A number of volunteers then came forward who have been working in three groups:

- **Town centre aesthetics and cleanliness** – this group is collating information on businesses and property owners and there is interest in establishing a Business Improvement District (BID) and a Property Owners Forum. Some quick wins around more planters, seating and ways to improve cleanliness are being worked on
- **Frome’s USP** – ways in which Frome’s uniqueness can be built upon are being explored.
- **Events & attractions** – this group has come up with a proposal for how events taking place in Frome could be better advertised using an improved Discover Frome website augmented and improved by the support and ideas of creatives in the town.

### The appearance of the town centre

In view of the control that Somerset Council exercises in terms of the work to keep the town centre streets clean and attractive and street furniture in good condition, we have been working with Somerset’s ‘barrowman’ to try to improve the cleanliness of the town centre with some early success. However, pressure must be kept up to ensure that a good level of contract compliance is maintained, and new ideas are explored so one of the recommendations is to keep the contract under scrutiny in regular ‘official’ minuted meetings with IDverde and Somerset County, It would also be beneficial to explore how the community could be involved in the delivery of improvements through a mechanism such as a Business Improvement District (BID) funded by a levy on business ratepayers. This is a business-led approach and the drive for this would have to come from the business community, but FTC could facilitate if additional staff capacity was made available.

Potentially a BID could also help to fund the development of gateway signage to create a sense of arrival and help to build the town centre's identity. Badcox, Bath Street, Vicarage Street and North Parade are all potential sites for such signage. As our finger post project has demonstrated however these types of project can prove to be complex, costly and time-consuming. This highlights the importance of properly resourcing such a project and a BID could provide a useful vehicle for doing so.

### Quick wins

#### 1. Town Centre Ranger

To support the findings of the Town Centre Aesthetics Group, it is proposed that a total of £55k is allocated from EMR 358 for the following:

1. £30k is allocated to employ, on a one-year experimental basis, a dedicated Town Centre Ranger, under the management of Rob Holden, to deliver a programme of repairing and replacing street furniture, removing graffiti, work on areas such as repairing and painting railings, supporting more planters, cleaning pavements, removing weeds and responsive after over exuberant night time activities. This will act as a trial which, if successful, could attract funding from other sources including from a BID.
2. £10k is allocated from this EMR to cover additional costs for capital items, under the budget management of Rob Holden
3. £15k is allocated to carry out repair work by the Town Centre Ranger, under the budget management of Rob Holden

#### 2. Discover Frome

There is already a commitment in our work programme to revamping Discover Frome with £35k identified in this year's EMR 390 for this purpose. Drawing together both our in-house expertise and the talents of local creatives would be beneficial and it is proposed that a Discover Frome Advisory Group is established to take this work forward. The target would be to complete the reworking by the end of the financial year and would aim to build on the aspirations of the Events group to improve the user experience of the What's On section.

#### 3. A Town Centre Partnership

Whilst the drive for much of this work may come from businesses and other community representatives, so much more could be achieved if we could enhance our staff capacity to support those representatives and facilitate the exploration of innovative ways of delivering results. Currently, staff capacity is constrained. Whilst the Deputy Town Clerk, Environment Manager and Marketing & Communications Manager and their teams make a contribution, their time is limited due to other work programme commitments.

This could be addressed by recruiting a Town Centre Partnership Officer to work with our new working groups, develop a Town Centre Investment Plan and come up with ways of funding it.

Aspirations for the role could include:

- To innovate, coordinate and lead an investment plan for the town centre to deliver a range of improvements meeting diverse needs for a thriving community.
- To devise and take forward an achievable town centre management plan, responding to key local town centre issues such as developing strong business and community relationships, and providing quick response to key issues that are affecting their town centre experience, including but not limited to, anti-social behaviour, fly tipping and empty properties.
- To champion the town centre in collaboration with others ensuring its promotion, grant exploration, marketing and new project developments.
- To lead the emerging town centre working group and liaise closely with other council services.

However, at this stage further work is required to explore with the town centre community how a partnership post could be developed. It is recommended that we create a formalised advisory group, to report back on how this role could be funded to report back to council within 3 months.

The empty shops remain an issue and so it is proposed that we immediately begin to work with premises owners and businesses to explore creative solutions.



## Recommendations

1. To support the findings of the Town Centre Aesthetics Group, a total of £55k is allocated from EMR 358 for the following:
  - a. £30k is allocated to employ, on a one-year experimental basis, a dedicated Town Centre Ranger, under the management of Rob Holden, to deliver a programme of repairing and replacing street furniture, removing graffiti, work on areas such as repairing and painting railings, supporting more planters, cleaning pavements, removing weeds and responsive after over exuberant night time activities. This will act as a trial which, if successful, could attract funding from other sources including from a BID.
  - b. £10k is allocated from this EMR to cover additional costs for capital items, under the budget management of Rob Holden
  - c. £15k is allocated to carry out repair and replacement of street furniture, for example, by the Town Centre Ranger, under the budget management of Rob Holden
2. Establish a Discover Frome Advisory Group to take forward the revamp of Discover Frome developing the 'What's On' by the end of the financial year utilising the approved EMR 390. The Group will be led by Cllr Merryweather with the support of Rachel Griffin.
3. Establish a Town Centre Partnership Advisory Group: to explore the merits and function of a Town Centre Partnership Officer; to explore how this post might be funded; and return a report to Council in 3 months with recommendations. The Group to be led by Cllrs Usher and Dove and supported by Peter Wheelhouse.
4. Support ID Verde in complying with Somerset Council's street cleansing contract by establishing a monthly formal minuted managerial and Cllr level meeting comprising Somerset Council, ID Verde and FTC. This meeting could also be useful in exploring innovative ideas including devolution of services.
5. Write to owners of vacant properties asking them to support the effort to ensure that our town looks and feels vibrant and open for business and hold them to account for the condition of their property.