

Agenda item 5

For decision – Enabling a community owned football club

Authors: Cllr Mel Usher and Peter Wheelhouse, Economic Development & Regeneration Manager and Deputy Town Clerk

Summary

This report provides a brief update on efforts to establish a community owned football club. It also seeks authority to recruit a consultant that can support the set-up of the Frome Town Community Benefit Society and for FTC to incur further expenditure that will enable further legal and other professional work to be completed ahead of the Council exercising its option to acquire the football ground and further protect this important community asset.

Towards a Community Benefit Society

When Cllrs agreed on 18 May 2022 to enter into the agreement with Frome Town Football Club, there was a commitment to working towards a new structure for the Club that would enable community ownership. Since then, we have worked closely with a range of stakeholders including not only the Club but also supporters, the national Football Supporters Association (FSA) and the wider community to explore a way forward. The FSA's strong advice based on work with 40 other clubs in recent years was to form a Frome Town Community Benefit Society (CBS) to protect the long-term future of the ground and to allow local "one person one vote" control. A key event was the community meeting held at The Clubhouse on 3 October at which the majority of attendees supported this project.

Some very competent volunteers stepped forward and in November, working groups were formed focused on the establishment of the CBS, fundraising, improving facilities and community engagement and we have now reached a point where the necessary application is ready to be submitted to the Financial Conduct Authority. A draft vision has been prepared shown on page 3. The graphic shows what is possible around this project.

But most of the running is still being done by the Council. The upswell of "let's save the club" has not yet materialised. Some capacity is needed to get the CBS to a point where it can start operating and fully engage and involve the community. The proposal is to recruit a consultant with a background in the start-up of not-for-profit organisations that can guide this work over the next 6 months. It is proposed to make available up to £16k from the New Projects budget, included in the proposed 2023/24 budget, to enable this to happen.

Protection of the Football Ground as a community asset

On 18 May 2022, councillors agreed to authorise expenditure to pay off the Club's debts to Goldchevron and FRECO as part of enabling a community-based football club. After various negotiations, the Goldchevron debt was paid off on 22 July 2022, the final redemption figure being £310,618 plus associated costs of some £43k. As part of the deal, FTC has the option to

acquire the freehold of the football ground for £1 by 15 July this year (2023). The intention clearly stated at the time was not to run the club but to own and improve for the good of the town a potentially valuable community asset.

Subsequently, on 5 October 2022, councillors agreed to delegate authority to the Town Clerk and RFO, in consultation with Cllrs Usher and Collier, to expedite the option to purchase the stadium for £1 when the time and conditions are right. It is becoming clearer that unless FTC's option is exercised by the due date, the Council will have little control over future decisions and the funds so far invested will be wasted. On that basis, there is a need to complete the necessary due diligence work including taking legal advice and professional advice on fire, health and safety matters.

Assuming that the decision is taken to proceed, a short-term lease will need to be prepared that will enable the Club to continue operating until the end of the current season and a longer one for the CBS once it is established. To enable all this legal and professional work to proceed, authority is sought for further expenditure up to £20k to be financed from the balance of Saxonvale Legacy EMR funds (£80k).

Recommendations

1. Approve the recruitment of a consultant to support the set-up of the Frome Town Community Benefit Society and to incur up to £16k for this purpose utilising the New Projects budget
2. Approve expenditure up to £20k for further legal expenses and risk assessments to be financed from the Saxonvale Legacy EMR

