

Agenda item

For Decision - Poverty update

Authors: Kate Hellard, Community Development Manager and Cllr Anne Hills, Lead Councillor for Poverty.

Summary

This report is to update Cllrs on the poverty area of the Council Plan and associated work programme. It highlights progress to date and next steps and is asking for decision on taking forward the Welcome (Refugee) Hub for Frome.

In the 2022/24 Council Plan FTC said that we will work with our partners to:

- Reduce the impact of the burgeoning cost of living crisis on the people of Frome, as well as tackling long term deprivation.
- Reduce reliance on the current forms of emergency support, as people are enabled to live well without these things and enjoy independence and dignity in their lives.
- Improve access to training and secure investment in new job opportunities that deliver greater economic resilience.

The Community team have built on a way of working developed by FTC over 8 years ago which is underpinned by an asset based approach to community development on a street based level, an enabling approach to working with Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) partners in Frome and the surrounding area, the facilitation of practitioner forums bring together both statutory and voluntary partners, to better understand the needs of residents map existing services, identify gaps and coordinate the filling of gaps through existing and new initiatives. Our objective is to stem the flow of residents reaching crisis through the development of place based community services.

Following on from the Covid Pandemic and taking what we learnt into account, we continue to deliver projects which support residents to mitigate the impacts of the Cost of Living Crisis and also the deeper rooted issues of poverty; financial, health, food, education and social.

Our work is underpinned by a strengths based and participatory community development model, which provides the mechanism to better understand what is important to residents and their experiences. By increasing community resilience our aim is to inform and build place based services, reducing the demand on crisis and responsive statutory services. This work also serves to support residents to build local projects, empowering our community to make positive changes in their immediate and wider communities.

We laid out a table of anticipated activity to help us reach these objectives and we are reporting progress to this on the following page. There is a combination of discrete cost of living related projects and longer term work which includes Community Development, Support for Community organisations and the Welcome (Refugee) Hub - see the discussion below following the table.

The work to identify need and opportunities, acting as advocates and champions, convenors and coordinators, sign posters and catalyst for new and innovative solutions, with regard to poverty, is intrinsically interlinked with the work to support Children, Young People and their Families detailed in the Unitary area of the Council plan and associated work programme.

Council Role	What will we do	RAG	Progress	Next steps
Advocate/ champion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gather information we need and understand what the situation is in our neighbourhoods in four areas of need - food, energy, housing & income 		Complete	
Convenor/ co-ordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bring together all the organisations that are working on poverty and identify the people most at risk and monitor gaps in the current provision. 		Whilst this action is complete re the cost of living we continue to host and facilitate forum and contribute to existing forum in order to continue to monitor and address gaps and opportunities.	
Sign poster/ guide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve access to existing support (financial, practical, emotional) for those in need everyone eligible & wanting to claim welfare benefits are claiming. 	ONGOING	We continue to work with CA and other agencies to improve access to information and advice – promoting existing systems and considering	To work with SC, CA, Connect Somerset and other partners to build drop in and face to face opportunities for the Frome Area.
Convenor/ co-ordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify best practice food initiatives (Community Kitchen, Supermarket and Dining) and work with partners to enable local projects 		Complete – Fair Frome are looking to develop a community pantry offer. The community Fridge continues to grow, and other groups of local partners continue to develop new initiatives.	Provide the space for the Frome Pantry to be delivered by FF.
Convenor/ co-ordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will work to join together the various initiatives stemming from the County Council, the NHS and community groups so that they create a help hub (digital & physical) 	ONGOING	This ongoing project is now funded through Connect Somerset (FTC’s CYP Officer is fully funded to reach these objectives)	

Catalyst / supporter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide practical resources, support, advice and training at a street level to neighbourhoods identified as most in need to reduce poverty and mitigate cost of living increases 	ONGOING	FTC's community development programme continues to create, support and facilitate street level initiatives which in turn enable opportunities for enhanced community cohesion and connectivity, signposting support and advice.	Continue to develop street level activity as a mechanism for engagement and understanding of the lived experience of residents (see below for an update on the work FTC is doing at St Johns).
Provide / manage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide support during this period for existing initiatives that can be used by all residents: welfare rights advice, food bank, community fridge and coat rack. 	ONGOING	This support is provided through grants, in kind donations of time, accommodation, support and advice.	
Catalyst / supporter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the development of new and existing initiatives for those in fuel poverty: to include support for warm banks and warm homes. 	ONGOING	The resilience team continue to build support and advice for Frome residents through the GHF programme.	
Provide / manage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create and distribute information and signposting material for Frome residents detailing local information about sources of help 		The comms team created and distributed a leaflet to all households in Frome detailing where to get help and support re the cost of living. It remains available and up to date online here	
Provide/Manage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To support during this period the management of the refugee hub for the Frome area on behalf of Somerset Council 	ONGOING	This project is currently 60% funded by SC through Charis. The two projects officers are fully funded however we underestimated the amount of additional management and support the project would require.	We have submitted a tender to continue the delivery of this project for 12/18 months to support SC support an anticipated increase in displaced persons re located to the Frome area over the coming year. We anticipate this become 100% funded. (see below)

Advocate/ champion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pressure public service organisations to target reductions on those in need, especially a 100% council tax reduction scheme 		Somerset Council has aligned its support for residents with regards to council tax support resulting in 100% council tax reduction scheme and other enhanced council tax support schemes.	
Catalyst / supporter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore how partners can improve the training and business incubation offer in the Town to keep people out of poverty 	Not started		To explore a scoping exercise with colleagues at SC linked to the unitary / LCN working group
Provide / manage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deploy the Substantial Grant Fund to specific targeted cost of living mitigation projects. 	ONGOING	A number of organisations were funded through this scheme for specific cost of living projects to fill gaps in existing provision.	The grant paper June 2023 recommends further developments to the Community Grants scheme which includes consideration of projects which meet the needs of residents including cost of living.

Work on supporting refugees

The Frome Welcome Hub is funded by Somerset Council through Charis who manage the contract that supports refugees. It provides a safe space with a range of services to support all displaced people that reside in the Frome Community. Whilst the Hub offers a physical space for support, signposting, language lessons, welfare checks and interviews, the Hub is a collaborative community project that is not confined by physical space, and as such, is responsive to the specific requirements of Refugees and People seeking Asylum in our locality. It is anticipated that the number of displaced persons relocated to Somerset will significantly increase in the coming 18 months, building on an increase from circa 200 persons to 2000 persons, in the last 2 years. When we tendered for this project a year ago in partnership with Frome Welcomes Refugees it was in response to the war in Ukraine and considered to be short term. The national refugee and asylum seekers landscape has since changed, and we are working closely with Charis and Somerset Council to consider the next steps for the project. We have now tendered for another 12/18 months with the expectation that a longer term Somerset solution will be commissioned in a year's time.

Update on work on St Johns

Hannah Stopford will be providing a verbal update on this work at the meeting.

Background

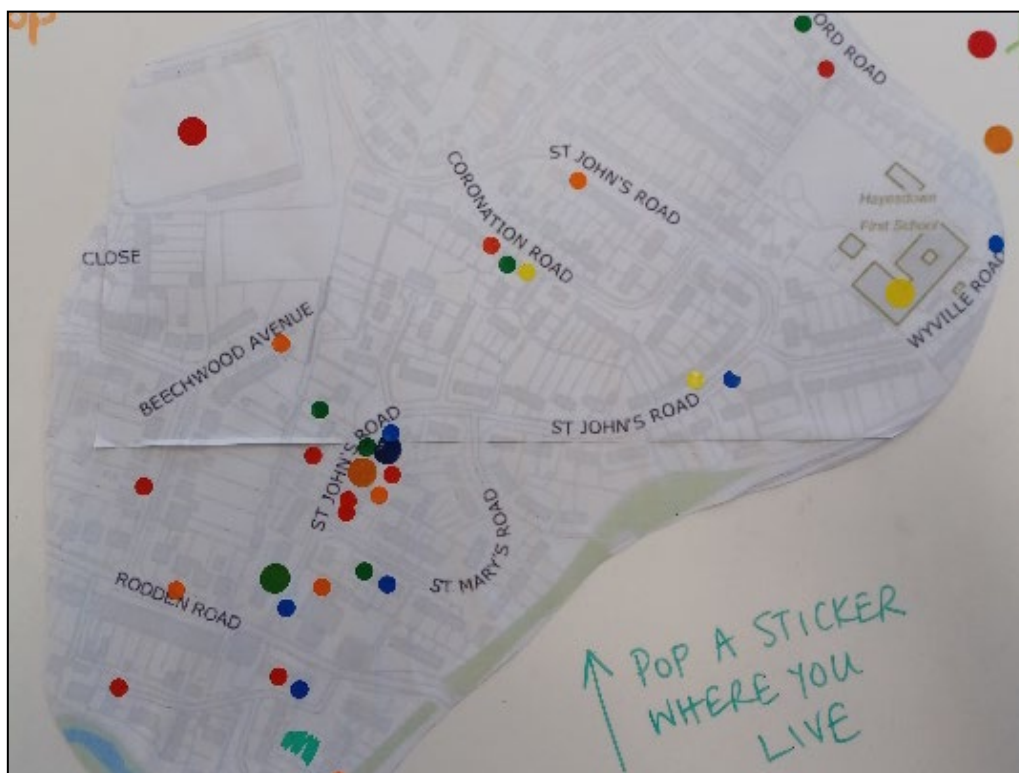
Frome Town Council's approach to community development is strengths-based and participatory. There is a lot happening in this town for individuals and community groups to get what they need and be able to do things for themselves. We recognise however, that in order for us to know exactly what communities and neighbourhoods want and need, we need to hear their stories and understand their lived experience. Unless we go out to our diverse communities, we will only ever hear the voices of those who are already engaged, empowered, and accessing our (usually centralised) resources.

We chose a neighbourhood in Frome which (the data indicates) experiences higher than usual levels of poverty and that we don't hear from often: no Neighbourhood Network groups, community organisations, events etc seem to happen here. The focus of the following engagement exercises was to go into this neighbourhood with no hidden agenda and discover:

- What matters to the people who live here?
- What strengths already exist to help make these things happen?
- How has the Cost of Living crisis impacted this neighbourhood?
- What support or connections might people here ask for to get things going?

What we already knew about St Johns

Frome St Johns is one of "The 5 highest concern neighbourhoods within the LCN" (according to SCC data for LCN vulnerabilities analysis, with criteria of note including adult substance misuse, and Young People referred to homelessness mediation service). It sits within the Berkley Down Ward, and the postcodes we planned to work in fall within the bottom 30% of Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). Those on the social housing register are higher than at District level and there are a higher percentage than both County and District with no qualifications. There is known to be a high number of settled travellers living in this area, one of Frome's most marginalised and discriminated against populations.



Engagement – what I have done so far and who I've spoken to

- Several sessions of door knocking over the last few months, conversations with at least 45 residents
- Conversations with the social housing officer, and local businesses.
- Hosted a regular coffee morning at the local football club.
- Held a pop-up event outside the local chip shop, engaging with over 40 adults and 20 children. This event was organised in partnership with the local businesses and as a result was well attended and supported by the community.
- Neighbourhood Litter picking event (upcoming).



What I've found out

There were some main themes that came up in conversations, including the following:

People value the 'peace and quiet' of the area, and generally feel well connected to the rest of town, especially via the bus routes. This connectedness is very dependent on personal mobility and those who struggle find it very hard to access more centralised services.

The cost of living is having a big impact on an area that was already struggling. Some people at the chip shop event wanted to save their chip tokens to spend another day.

A sense of connection to neighbours varied quite dramatically door to door. It seems people tend to look out for one or two other neighbours and when that works well, they feel it is a friendly area. There was general agreement that the neighbourhood is less friendly than it used to be, and that 'pride of place' has gone downhill especially regarding litter and waste in the street and alleyways.

There was a perception that some of the more centralised offers in town are not for them: "the green stuff feels snobby".

There is no current community venue or social space for residents here. However, the well-used shops at the Rodden Road end act as a community hub of sorts, partly because of the location but also the business owners here are well respected and dedicated to the local community, providing much needed social interaction. People loved having the tables and chairs outside the shop. There was interest in having somewhere to share information e.g. a noticeboard or neighbourhood Facebook page.

There was some pessimism about whether initiatives like sharing boxes or community fridge would work, partly because of vandalism. There was some interest in a community growing space, with some residents interested in sharing gardening skills.

The park facilities are not suitable for or well used by younger children, and there is also a gap around accessible toddler and pre-school activities.

Traffic, particularly speeding up St John's Road, can be an issue here. Shopkeepers comment on drug dealing and ASB that occurs near the garages just up from them, and a lack of opportunities for young people to get involved in training or activities.

Although some people talked about a division with the settled traveller community here, I witnessed an affection and respect, especially between this community and the businesses, including the football club.



What's next

Thursday 8 June - Neighbourhood litter pick

Attendees at the Chip Shop Pop Up said they would be keen to get involved in a community litter pick to smarten up the area. This event will get that started and through further engagement, identify key figures in the community who might be able to support / take forward some of the ideas that have been mentioned by residents so far, including:

- Neighbourhood Jumble Trail
- Community Noticeboard
- Summer Fair outside the back of the shops
- Street party on St Mary's Road
- Community Growing Project (currently looking into applying for a Somerset Community Fund grant to set up the infrastructure for a Neighbourhood Composting and Growing project to start in Spring 2024)
- Youth activities e.g. at football club

Recommendations

1. Agree the ongoing delivery of the Frome Refugee Welcome Hub, on the basis of 100% external funding.
2. Note the progress to date and ongoing activity in the above table.