

## Agenda item 4

For information and discussion - Update on work to reinvigorate the town centre

Authors: Cllrs Mel Usher, Lisa Merryweather, Nick Dove and Peter Wheelhouse, Economic Development & Regeneration Manager and Deputy Town Clerk and Rachel Griffin, Marketing & Communications Manager

### Summary

The following paper has been prepared by way of introduction and background to a discussion at the Council meeting to be led by Cllr Lisa Merryweather. It sets out the issues facing the town centre, work completed to date and some thoughts about the future.

## 1. Introduction

We must take collective responsibility to help town centres thrive, reinvent their function, and meet the needs of residents, businesses, and visitors for the 21st century.

The Council has looked at town centres on several occasions in the last year. Purposefully, most of the information has covered problems faced by centres across the country, whether in small towns or large cities. In this report, which is for discussion and engagement, we intend to concentrate on Frome. There seems little point in developing grandiose visions when resources are so scarce.

This future of the town centre would be worthy of a quite extensive consultancy study with a much deeper analysis than we can provide. Eventually, the Council may feel it would be worthwhile to commission such work. Until then this report is largely based on previous history, trends and readily available information.

It is also important to recognise that developments and forecasts described here are rarely driven by the Town Council, most of the time we have limited control, all we can do is highlight issues, cajole, prioritise our resources, influence others and ensure that residents and stakeholders are engaged.

## 2. A short reminder of wider issues

Virtually all towns in the UK, whether small or large, poor or prosperous have the same multiple issues which lead to very similar outcomes.

- In the past, there has perhaps been too much concentration on retail, often of the wrong type in the wrong place leading to identikit, soulless town centres dominated by foot-loose national retailers.

- Habits have changed, shopping has been a leisure activity for many, and probably still is, but now there is more emphasis on personal experiences and activities. Locations where the town centre is comprised almost exclusively of retail are suffering the most, it has been estimated that in some towns there is up to 40% overprovision. On average for every 7 shops you pass in most towns in the UK, 1 will be empty.
- The cost-of-living crisis and the changes wrought by Covid and lockdown led to a noticeable drop in footfall in many towns, and residents have continued to stay away.
- The increase in Internet shopping has slowed but still represents around 25% of the total retail turnover. That is slightly down from the covid height of 31%. Food and drink have bounced back quicker than fashion. Out of town shopping is still holding its own although evidence from the States where empty malls proliferate, suggests that even this might decline in the future.
- Many professional services, civic, financial functions and noticeably banks have also gone online, leading to a decrease in frontage diversity and reducing the necessity for face-to-face contact
- All of this plus the lack of investment by local entrepreneurs and public bodies has led to run-down streets, shabby public spaces, abandoned areas, poor maintenance and a general feeling of personal insecurity and anxiety, sometimes because of anti-social behaviour

### 3. Future of Town Centres

Predicting the future of retail, footfall figures and square footage requirements are imprecise sciences, often proven to be inadequate. However, understanding the issues and attempting, where possible, some remedial actions is still important. The High Street comes 4th in people's concerns after the cost of living, NHS and the economy. We are certain that most people in this town, and probably elsewhere, could, with some accuracy, name the 5 town centre issues that need addressing most.

Town Centres are in transition, perhaps even a paradigm shift. Whatever the future holds however, the recent past won't return, the siren cries for a new Woolworths equivalent or primarily city-based fashion shops are doomed to failure. Neither should we delude ourselves as a Town Council. We have few powers and even less resources, in addition, many of the issues described here represent national, possibly international shifts in behaviours, technological advancement and investment priorities.

However, here are some of the forces that might influence how town centres and Frome will develop in the future.

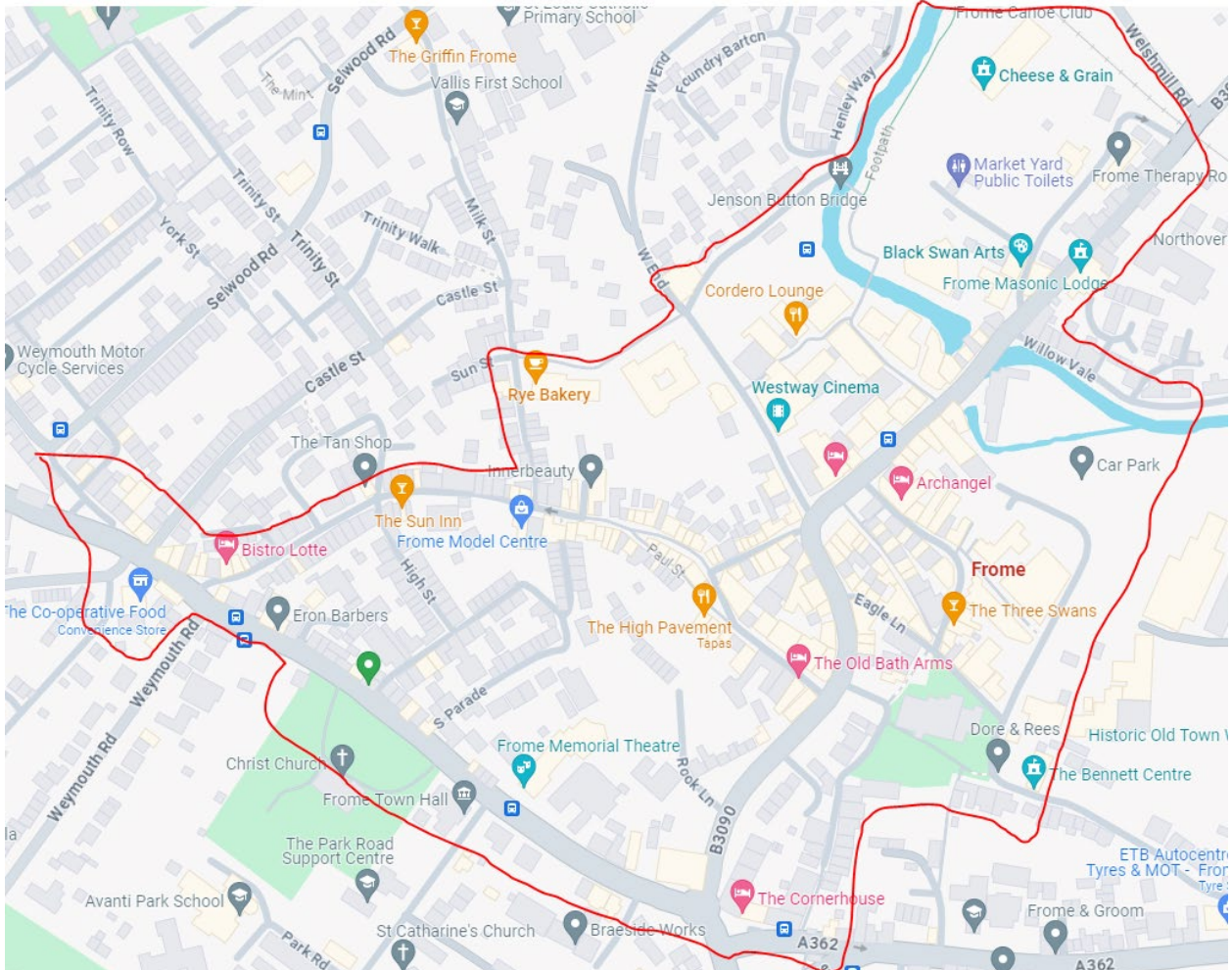
- People will still want services, especially personal ones that they can't buy online, so there will probably be a continuing proliferation of nail bars, beauty salons, tattoo parlours and perhaps more face-to-face medical and health centres.

- Also, expect more social and entertainment uses; bars, restaurants, cafes, cinemas, music venues, small theatres etc
- Fewer identity-kit centres and retailers will probably mean increased scope for more independent shops and community uses. Interestingly 75% of all buildings in town centres are owned by individuals/small companies but they only amount to 25% of all vacancies. Most vacant buildings are owned by larger, often national limited companies, who have fewer direct incentives to ensure their rapid turnaround and continued use.
- Whilst car parking will always be a contentious issue there is likely to be less emphasis on the car (despite recent government backtracking). Recently Coventry excluded cars on certain Saturdays throughout the year and saw a 25% increase in footfall on those days.
- Many people already want safer, cleaner, attractive, varied and ever-changing environments leading to a new emphasis on improved maintenance, greener areas, multiple local events and promotions, markets, colour and even quirkiness.
- Temporary will become the new permanent with knock-on effects for landlords and demands for faster planning decisions where times have frequently been measured in months and years (or even decades in the case of Saxonvale)
- More people will want to live closer to centres. With the right policies, this could attract new residents made up of diverse age groups, socio-economic profiles and space requirements.

None of these changes are necessarily being pursued by the Town Council, everyone understands that change will be patchy and it will not all be good news for some residents. Understandably some will hark back to previous more stable times, they will mourn the passing of businesses with deep histories and they may feel isolated or even excluded. It is important that their needs are recognised too.

#### 4. What is Frome Town Centre?

The area that most people would recognise as Frome Town Centre is within the red line on the plan below.



With the exception of the Westway, Kingsway, Market Place and Badcox, much of the commercial activity takes place within small premises in narrow medieval streets including Cheap Street, Stony Street and Catherine Hill. This configuration doesn't make these buildings appealing to national retailers, but they have proven popular with independent businesses who have taken advantage of the relatively low rents and rates. At least 70% of town centre businesses in Frome are independent. Nonetheless, the town centre continues to offer some national brands including M & S, Boots, Superdrug, Iceland, Poundland, Peacocks, Co-op and Fat Face. On the financial front, Nationwide and Coventry Building Societies remain, both of which also operate as banks. There are two regular markets on Wednesday and Saturday run by Somerset Council, both of which can be of variable quality.

The latest count of outlets in the town centre is as follows:

- Food and drink: 57
- Health and beauty: 38
- Other retail: 99
- Arts and entertainment: 19

That last statistic reflects a vibrant cultural/arts scene which together with the range of independent retail and hospitality outlets has enabled the town over a number of years to outperform in footfall generation other market towns of a similar size. The Cheese & Grain, Black Swan Arts, Silk Mill Studios, 23 Bath Street, Rook Lane, the Westway cinema, the Library, Frome Independent, the annual Frome Festival and other operators and events have all made a significant difference.

## 5. Issues in Frome Town Centre

Several initiatives have been identified as having the potential to improve some issues, and no doubt there will be others.

### *Crossing the main road*

Far too much vehicle traffic comes through the town centre via Bath Street, despite height and weight restrictions. There are no traffic calming measures and although it's a 20mph zone this is frequently exceeded. The pollution levels are regularly measured and are dangerously high.

This issue was the most frequently cited problem in the town centre when the Community Plan was prepared a decade ago. This is what was said then;

*“Being able to move easily around the town centre is important to the people of Frome. How this is achieved remains to be seen, but it is very clear that pedestrian movement is hampered by heavy traffic and lack of safe crossing places in the town centre. If traffic can be reduced in the town, it would not only make it a more pleasant area in which to shop and spend time but it would also improve the air quality. This is poor at the bottom of Bath Street and not helped by the topography and buildings which create a canyon effect.”*

Not much has changed. Many residents still feel very wary of crossing the road, especially if they are older, have restricted movement or are supervising young children. In 2023 it is unacceptable that this problem continues to be such a major concern without any proposal for resolution.

There are no crossing points from the Boyle Cross to either the George Hotel or to the bottom of Stony Street. This is the actual town centre and ironically it is now more dangerous than when the Community Plan was launched. Works leading up to two proposed courtesy crossings were prepared in partnership with the then County Highways Dept. Although much of the improvement work to Boyle Cross was completed the courtesy crossings themselves were cancelled by Highways only days before their construction. People now gather at the proposed crossing points and try to catch the eye of passing motorists in order to make a run for it. Not ideal.

It is also not living up to the spirit of the new Highway Code which gives pedestrians priority when crossing roads, especially at junctions.

There is no immediate solution to this concern and matters are now made worse by the financial woes of Somerset Council. That should not stop us from trying to find a solution with the Highways Authority and Somerset councillors, including tighter restrictions on cross

centre traffic, better signage to the ring road, pedestrian priority points and the location of permanent SIDS.

### *Empty Units*

There is no immediate and simple solution to empty shops, they have been a long-standing problem in town centres. Currently there are 58k in the UK and 17 are in Frome.

There are some worrying signs. Summer footfall figures for 2023 were down on those recorded in 2022. The closure of three banks in the Market Place as well as the general cost of living and changing consumer behaviour are likely to contribute to a further decline if not checked.

Clearly, trying to regenerate town centres by building more retail space is now a broken model. The solution in Frome must be to improve the mix of uses in the town centre bringing footfall, life and vitality back. Empty shops, banks and even shopping centres can be replaced with green spaces, medical centres, offices, workshops, pop ups, college outlets and housing. Some London Boroughs, for example, are investing in a number of exploratory and inventive uses of empty shops that include art and cultural projects, incubator spaces for start-up businesses, retail training units, visitor centres, units for people who have lost employment to gain support and skills.

In the Levelling- Up Act there was also a reference to “Forced Auctions”. If a property has been empty for longer than 12 months the landlord can be forced to allow the local authority to auction it for rent. The landlord gets to select the winner but they must choose between bidders. This could be a powerful tool in Frome. It would be interesting to know how it could be used by a Town Council, perhaps in partnership with Somerset? Regardless there may be some merit in the Town Council regularly identifying empty properties, chasing those responsible, naming and shaming (especially if they are owned by institutions) and even in exceptional cases taking control on a voluntary basis with a view to tidying up and reletting.

The proposed review of the Neighbourhood Plan could be quite significant in Town Centre improvements. Two examples, first a parish council can promote a Neighbourhood Development Order which will grant a general permission for particular types of development within a defined area or second increasing new house building in the town centre with mixed developments catering for many different groups. Having new people in the immediate town centre is bound to increase footfall for all sorts of usages and have climate benefits.

### *Improving the Environment of the Town Centre*

One area in which the Town Council can make a difference is in the maintenance and use of spaces in a planned and co-ordinated way. A recent council report said this;

*“We should endeavour to make the centre as attractive and welcoming as possible by fine grained concern and work. It is always surprising that we expect something as intensively used as the town centre to look after itself.... it's bizarre if you think about it.*



*There is also no point trying to get Somerset to do what they think is not in their contract and anyway it goes way beyond that into painting, cleaning, repairing, cajoling and reporting on a day-to-day basis. So we are suggesting a dedicated town centre ranger with a budget, ”*

The Council accepted that something needed to be done and now employs Mike Scopes as a dedicated Town Centre Ranger. The success of this experiment will be measured closely over the next 12 months

However, this should only be the start. Enhancing certain areas in the town centre with a combination of planters, seating, new rubbish bins and street art will also be impactful.

A more intensive and perhaps professional piece of work needs to be completed on how the town centre could be improved by small steps rather than grand schemes. This naturally leads to a real question that the Council must ask itself and soon. Should a significant sum be put aside for Town Centre physical improvements and can the first tranche be included in the 24/25 budget?

## 6. Business opportunities

One of the roles of the Town Council is engaging with existing business owners to recognise the potential of their properties and nearby empty units and smoothing the way through the plethora of rules and regulations.

For example, recently the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and the British Retail Consortium (BRC) have developed and launched a new type of lease specifically aimed at small retail businesses looking to take up empty units on the high street. The Small Business Retail Lease could be very useful in Frome with its large number of independent shops and frequent turnovers. It has been developed to simplify the process of taking up commercial property which has often been seen as a significant barrier for small and independent retailers. Is it in common use and can the Town Council assist? A full version of the lease and the heads of terms can be found on the RICS website at <http://www.rics.org/uk/knowledge/more-services/professional-services/small-business-retail-lease>

Here are some almost random suggestions showing what might be possible with more resources. The private collection of commercial waste by different operators could be replaced by a unified daily collection. Palmer Street currently has 6 hospitality venues. Only 1 has outside space. Creating a food court atmosphere in Palmer Street with restricted vehicle access, installing mobile planters, lighting and seating would encourage al fresco dining – something which would increase footfall by enhancing the town’s attraction. Restricting vehicle access up Catherine Hill during opening hours will also create a healthier and safer space for visitors and residents.

## 7. Events

*“When asked about underpinning strategies for supporting successful town centres of the future, a strong independent retail offer (52 per cent), a year-round programme of cultural events (48 per cent) and family-friendly activities (45 per cent) are perceived to be very important.*

*(Institute for Economic Development)*

And there you have it - the significance of cultural events and family friendly activities could not be clearer. This is a route that the Town Council has been involved in, but can we and other stakeholders do more in the future? With the right priorities, resources and entrepreneurial spirit these two areas are ones we could directly influence for the betterment of the town.

The following events have generated a clear spike in town centre footfall:

- The varying uses of the Cheese and Grain which include significant concerts, at least 3 regular markets, roller skating, talks from national figures, comedy programmes and specialist fairs.
- Independent Market - first Sunday in most months - (spike on both Saturday and Sunday)
- Twice weekly market on Wed and Sat in the market yard, and the Somerset Farmers Market on the Boyle Cross
- Photo Frome Festival - 24 June - 12<sup>th</sup> July
- Frome Festival 7 - 16 July
- Children's Festival - 23 July
- Frome Carnival 23 September
- Drone Show - 4 November (afternoon spike)
- Xmas lights switch on - 24 November

So far we have involved councillors and staff and others without any overall plan or annual co-ordination. Certainly, there has been little on which to base an overarching advertising campaign for the town. There are numerous possibilities, 'The Market Town', 'Quirky Frome', 'The Family Town', 'See and Believe' and so on.

It might also be time for some radical thinking on how the whole process, is set up and managed. Maybe the Town Council's role should spin off a dedicated CIC to be the organiser, part funder and presenter of Frome Events.

For example, taking the markets back from Somerset and perhaps combining the management with the Independent would be a start. Much will depend on vibrant partnerships where real gains can be identified. This cannot be done on the cheap and possibly not solely by a municipal and necessarily bureaucratic organisation. The Council needs to decide whether this is something important and then open discussions with others to determine its viability. Currently we are woefully underpowered in staffing and investment in this whole area.

## 8. Engagement

The Council can encourage a 'community hub' solution so that retailers and hospitality businesses can benefit from working with tourism, leisure and health sectors to build a strong recreation and leisure offer.

To stimulate engagement the Council had an initial meeting called "Invigorate Frome" in December 2022 followed by subsequent meetings culminating in a large gathering in the Town



Hall in March 2023 out of which came 3 groups looking at the aesthetics, USP and events. These were led primarily by councillors in the absence of any dedicated staff.

The initial idea was to meet separately and come up with ideas for each strand. Inevitably the energy and enthusiasm have waned somewhat and we are now in the position where the plans are piecemeal rather than coordinated.

However there have been some real successes.

The agreement by Council to fund the post of a dedicated Town Centre Ranger who is now in post is delivering immediate results. He has a base next to the Cheese & Grain, a vehicle and proper equipment to allow him to make a meaningful impact. There is a small fund for local improvements and minor works.

Councillors Dove and Butler have been engaging with the local business and residential community in the area at the top of Catherine Hill and in Sheppard's Barton to see if a relatively small investment could transform this space and use it as an exemplar for the rest of the Town Centre. So far, suggestions for Sheppard's Barton include the careful placing of attractive planters, installing a metal arch at the entrance from Wine Street, and around the steps, restoring the Cockeye lamp, installing new lighting, and including some designed street art on gable ends. Elsewhere in the vicinity there are suggestions to install a large planter outside the Model Shop, clean up the small car park with a clearly delineated rubbish area (perhaps using the old railings from Cork Street) and erecting more planters by the Valentine Lamp. A small group of interested residents and retailers are keen and assisting in the planning and design.

Councillor Merryweather has been leading on the interaction with Xplorelocal.com as a potential opportunity to revamp a "What's On" facility to inform visitors as well as residents as to what's on where, and when using mobile phones. There is also a potential offer to include a rebuild of the Discover Frome website with FTC funding the sign up and subscription to the app for an initial period as well as access to a part-time person employed by Xplore to coordinate campaigns, liaise with local businesses and promote Frome more widely as a visitor destination. Further details will be provided at the Council meeting.

This might be the first time that a town has developed an innovative and ambitious way to build and enhance a business community in partnership with the local council. This proposed partnership has also been of interest to Ian Harvey, CEO of the Institute for Place Management, and addresses some of the barriers identified by the High Street Task Force's [findings from across England](#), (which) found that 40% of places lack local collaboration and partnership working, with a need for the local authority, businesses, community groups and services to work more closely."

Councillor Dove is also part of a small group led by Councillor Campagna negotiating with Photo Frome and working with FTC staff team to further develop the Frome Photo Festival which could bring in large numbers of visitors over the summer. Think Hay on Wye literary festival! A regular schedule of planned, signature events such as this over the calendar year could support the marketing and promotion of the town centre as a destination for residents and visitors.

## 9. Dynamic leadership

If we are to stem the decline of Frome Town Centre the Council needs to be bold in pulling all of the leadership levers open to it to help create the right environment for innovation. This means creating a 'sense of place' – ensuring each business is signed up to a distinctive town vision – one that gives people a reason to visit. This could be emphasising Frome's heritage or its events through a recognisable 'look and feel', cross-promotion.

This will by necessity involve the community more – a move away from top-down 'build it and they will come' regeneration to an approach that involves Frome as a town, revealing the services and amenities important locally.

One thing learnt from authoring this report is that the numerous actions required cannot continue to be coordinated and implemented by unpaid, voluntary councillors with no ability to commit any finance or work time of staff. Coordinating all of the possibilities described in this report (and there are more, like grant applications and researching what is successful elsewhere) is a full-time job for a skilled and experienced individual. That fact plus the need for seed corn money may need a reordering of council priorities and resource allocation.

Finally, this does matter. We have rightly been concerned about communities and neighbourhoods but we have been less successful around the town centre. And yet this is the area we all visit. Town centres build those informal relationships that are most crucial to our mental health and viable and attractive town centres can make people feel proud of their town and community.

### Recommendation

Following the discussion and steer from the meeting, Cllrs Merryweather, Dove and Usher with Rachel Griffin and Peter Wheelhouse to draft a workable strategy to support this area of work. To report back to Council in February 2024 with recommendations.