

Agenda Item 3

For information and discussion - Update on the Frome Town Hall

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Summary

This report provides an update on Town Hall occupancy, a year-end income forecast and a summary of other initiatives to support the Town Hall and asks councillors to discuss the direction of travel to decide how best to continue to market Frome Town Hall.

Frome Town Hall currently is a hub of civic and community activity. It serves as our town council administrative centre, and it houses it houses various charities and meeting spaces. The building hosts town council meetings, public forums, and cultural events, and is reinforcing its role as a focal point for community affairs. Furthermore, Frome Town Hall has extended its offer to residents by providing a venue for weddings, training and exhibitions. The rooms within the building offer flexible spaces for diverse functions, and meetings and contribute to embedding the building's continued relevance in the community. However, we have continued to market the town hall in a similar vein for a number of years and it is time to review how we market the building.

Current occupancy

Please see plans at [Appendix 3.1 on the website here](#) and [Appendix 3.2 on the website here](#) showing locations of tenants and staff in the in the building. You will see that a larger proportion of the space is now given over to Frome Town Council staff as our team has grown. During the week this has the effect of making our meeting rooms extremely busy – it is now increasingly difficult to find a casual meeting room during the week and the Town Clerk’s office is frequently used as an overflow meeting space. In turn this helps the Town Hall feel like a busy vibrant useful place.

Tenants

The current tenant list is as follows:

Fair Frome	Elliot Building
Frome FM	Upstairs
Frome Learning Partnership	Two small upstairs offices and the Parlour

We have not tried to let the room vacated by Active and In Touch so that we have more flexible meeting spaces. There are several interested charities and groups looking for office space and this decision can be reviewed.

Another change is the development of the community hub. We are currently keeping Room 3 and the Café space available to community groups and organisation who fit the model of a

Community Hub – that is groups that fit our objectives around building and supporting more resilient communities. We have branded this The Community Hub.

This work supports our partnership working agenda and as such the café space has undergone a quiet makeover to make it a slightly cosier offer. Currently it is used as a drop in Citizens Advise point and the Somerset Community Access Point on a Monday and the Welcome Hub for displaced people on a Tuesday and a Thursday. Prosper Frome were also using the space, but the model didn't work for them – the Credit Union are now using it to see clients by appointment. Other groups such as birth talks and the NCT are also making use of the space. Use this link see the current [Community Hub timetable](#).

This timetable includes Fair Frome's pantry and its offers. Fair Frome have signed a new lease and they have launched a well-used pantry service from the Elliot Building as well as extended a welcome to both the Health Visitors and Young Somerset to extend their reach and make better use of the building whilst they are not there. The Credit Union, for example, also operates at times to coincide with the pantry opening hours to support pantry users.

Somerset Council funding is getting tighter and some of the services that we would aspire to bring to the Town Hall may be under threat in future. Conversely, as SC funding declines the demand for the services of community organisations is likely to increase. As we understand more about the implications of the cuts, we may need to review our offer at the Town Hall again.

Bookings

The Town Hall rental income actual v budget figures indicate a year end deficit of £6k. This is due to using Room 4 for staff offices and the loss of two large regular Chamber bookings - Garston Vets and Ceetec, who no longer deliver training in person.

Other points to note are that the Town Hall could possibly generate more income at the weekends. Some of the reasons for this maybe because it is midsized - not being as big as its main competitors, the additional internal cost of stewarding at weekends and the addition of VAT. Combined, these mean renting the Town Hall or the Chamber is more expensive than competitor.

This then is the right time to both revisit the Town Hall marketing strategy, and this could start following a discussion with councillors.

The Quinquennial Plan – planned maintenance work

Before, Cllrs discuss some of the issues outlined above, it is worth noting that maintaining a building always costs. Work is currently taking place to update the Town Hall quinquennial maintenance plan to bring it in line with rising costs – we are currently in year 2 of this five year cycle. This has been accounted for in the budget for 2024/25. Larger works that need to take place this year include:

- Outside pointing to reduce the risk of water getting in
- Decorating external doors and windows

- Draft proofing the nine council chamber windows
- Tarmacking of the path near the community fridge to help with drainage.

These are all in line with the plan. We have also recently reviewed the Fire Safety Compliance Matrix to ensure that our scheduling is in line with new legislation see [Appendix 3.3 on the website here](#).

Conclusion

The Town Hall has many functions but was acquired by FTC (and remodelled and repurposed) to respond to the needs of the town, as well as FTC. Housing charities and organisations as well as The Community Hub concept spearheaded by the Welcome Hub, CA and the Somerset Access Point, continues this same objective. As the town progresses into the future, Frome Town Hall needs to remain relevant and embedded in the civic life and in service to the town, and thereby fostering a sense of both community and civic pride. We are operating the building very much as a community model with income to offsetting costs of providing this.

In the upcoming financial year, the Town Hall is budgeted to generate a realistic income – slightly less than forecast in the current year as described above. This will create flexibility of space and enable FTC to continue to pursue The Community Hub model.

What follows are a few questions to stimulate discussion. It is not proposed to decide on a change of policy at this stage. The remit of the Oversight Committee includes discussion around direction of policy and a discussion will help staff to review policy and return with proposals at a later stage, if appropriate.

1. Increasing income from tenants. The council marches on its meetings and during the week it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a meeting room. The Town Hall is busy, and FTC's remit has increased the demand for meeting rooms to discuss things with the community, other staff and Cllrs so that we can take forward our objectives. So, the need for meeting spaces is important. However, bringing in another tenant may increase regular income for minimal effort. Currently, we are keeping the Town Hall as a flexible space and recognising that this may not be the most cost effective use of the building currently. Is the balance of priorities the right one?
2. Income from room hire, especially at weekends. The current cost of hiring the Council Chamber is benchmarked to ensure that the cost of hire is similar to other similar venues in the area, such as Rook Lane and the Assembly rooms. Do we want to make our offer more competitive and risk undercutting other venues in the town? The same goes for our meeting rooms. This doesn't make the Town Hall a cheap option, particularly at the weekends when we must charge an additional £15 per hour for stewards when no other staff are in the building. How do councillors feel about that, are councillors happy for us to continue along this model, or would councillors prefer that we more aggressively pursue the business on the weekends risking undercutting other venues. Calculations would need to be carried about the expected net income from cheaper hire costs with higher management costs. Have we got the balance between FTC requirements, community benefit and income, right?

3. We offer a business's rate and a community rate: the rooms are more expensive to book on the weekends in line with other spaces in the town and community groups can use any room on a Monday evening for the price of one hour. Here is a link to hiring the hall for reference - [Hire Frome Town Hall](#). Do councillors feel that we have broadly got the pricing policy right?