

Agenda item 6

For information - Update on work to reinvigorate the town centre

Authors: Peter Wheelhouse, Economic Development & Regeneration Manager and Deputy Town Clerk, Rob Holden, Environment Manager and Rachel Griffin, Marketing & Communications Manager

Summary

The internal Town Centre Working Group has met to develop a plan of action to take the agreed work programme for 2024/25 forward and this report sets out the work that is planned

1. Background

At the last Council meeting, councillors approved a budget and work programme for 2024/25 including a list of projects designed to reinvigorate the town centre. An internal Town Centre Working Group comprising the following staff and councillors has been convened to take forward this work:

Peter Wheelhouse, Economic Development & Regeneration Manager & Deputy Town Clerk
(Lead staff member)

Rob Holden, Environment Manager

Rachel Griffin, Marketing & Communications Manager

Cllr Nick Dove (Lead councillor)

Cllr Mel Usher

Cllr Lisa Merryweather

Cllr Mark Dorrington

Cllr Sara Butler

[They have discussed a plan of action to be taken forward and this is summarised in the accompanying table Appendix 6.1, which can be viewed on the website here.](#) Further details are set out here and will be presented at the meeting.

Improving pedestrian safety

It was agreed at Council in January that we will explore with Somerset Highways how additional crossing points can be created and traffic can be better managed to improve pedestrian safety.

An earlier attempt had been made to deliver 'courtesy crossings' in locations that are already popular with pedestrians as part of the Market Place improvement scheme in 2020. However, on the eve of the start of construction, Somerset Council raised an objection to these crossings, and we were only able to include the build-out elements to shorten the crossing points between The George and Boyle Cross and the Coventry Building Society and Boyle Cross. Somerset Council referred to safety concerns expressed by the national Disabled

Persons Transport Advisory Committee and the challenges faced by the visually impaired, those with neuro-diverse and mental health conditions, and those with a learning disability. Councillors will be aware that Somerset Council have allowed courtesy crossings to be installed as part of the current Frome Safer School Streets project. The opportunity to introduce this measure in the town centre will be explored again initially with our consultants, Sustrans and then with Somerset Council. The support of Somerset councillors will be sought as part of this process.

Improving planting, places to sit and delivering essential repairs

On the back of Council's agreement to increase the number of plants, trees, places to sit and make essential repairs, the Environment Manager will be working with the Marketing & Communications Manager to develop a style guide that will set out broad principles for this work. They will be doing this in consultation with the Planning & Development Manager. A report will be brought back to Council on this as soon as possible.

Alongside this, Nick Dove is continuing to engage with town centre stakeholders to develop plans for improving various parts of the town centre and further details will be provided at the meeting. It is considered that the agreed budget of £25k could be used to match fund grant funding from various sources. Amongst these we will be investigating the potential of the Rural England Prosperity Fund which is due to open in April and for which Frome is an eligible location.

Events and lighting

At January Council, councillors expressed interest in taking control of the Wednesday and Saturday markets and promoting third party events. Discussions led by the Deputy Town Clerk have begun with senior officers at Somerset Council around developing a joint vision for the Frome Riverside area and this will provide an opportunity to pursue our interest in running the markets.

The Marketing & Communications Manager has been working with lead councillors to develop plans for future events with the Events Advisory Group. It is agreed that the group will meet every two months and have oversight of upcoming events and future planning, with a fit for purpose remit. Much work is already being done in this area to support and promote events throughout the town and the group will work to ensure that the events are in line with the Council plan.

Five sets of cross street Christmas lights are due for replacement. The Environment Manager has reviewed our lighting scheme with contractor Blachere and will review these with councillors at the Christmas planning event that will be set up shortly.

In March, Nick Dove will be bringing a proposal to Council regarding year-round lighting for the town centre.

Empty shops

Whilst there has been some movement recently to take up vacancies, empty shops remain an issue in the town centre and there is a commitment confirmed at January Council to encourage the occupation of these.

There is increasing interest in pop-up retail as an alternative to traditional long leases. A pop-up store can look like a regular store, but many brands use them to create unique shopping experiences because they provide flexibility and the opportunity to experiment with less risk. Locally, we have seen interest from community-based arts groups in this concept and a way forward is being investigated by the Deputy Town Clerk. Amongst other things, he is studying an experiment in Wellington where the Town Council has rented a shop in the high street and is making it available on a short-term licence basis to groups in the community. Further information will be provided at the Council meeting.

The Environment Manager has been working with the former Shoezone shop owners to manage the shop frontage to deter its use as an overnight sleeping area and improve the visual look and will update at the meeting. The Marketing & Communications Manager will now work with the team to support a creative visual appeal for the hoarding. Work is also proceeding with the TSB leased Cheap Street Buildings and the Open Art Trail to create attractive window vinyls.

Street cleaning and maintenance of the public domain

Alongside the work of the Town Centre Ranger and as part of a broader service devolution conversation, the Environment Manager is in contact with Somerset Council to explore how FTC can take responsibility for Somerset Council land within Frome, including possible depot access. Discussions are ongoing and changes are most likely to start from April 2025, although there may be the possibility of some asset transfers in April this year.

Also to be noted, after a period of some months without a post in place, Idverde have now recruited for the position of Town Centre barrowman which will significantly help with raising the presentation standards in the town centre. Our Town Centre Ranger will coordinate working closely with this postholder on areas of notable concern and specifically working jointly to remove weeds.

Advice from our consultants, Activist will inform the development of other projects.

Discover Frome and promotion of Frome

It is acknowledged that there is a lot of work to be done in this area and progress has been delayed. However, the first meeting of the Discover Frome Advisory Group will meet on the 20 February. This group will focus on practical outcomes and in the first instance they will look at this area of work as a package – identify the purpose of the work, look at what we have, identify issues and gaps, and look at ways to repurpose, reposition or update, as necessary. The other meetings will bring in a series of partners in the community to identify solutions and develop a clear action plan.

With regard to promoting Frome as a base for ethical, green and socially engaged businesses, conversations are proceeding with Loop Frome and Edventure about how we can build on the 'Keep It Frome' campaign.

You're Welcome

This project is about promoting and administering the Community Toilets project ensuring that there are open and accessible toilets across the town centre. We are preparing for the new season and ensuring that all the required promotional materials are in place.