

Agenda item 5

For decision - Update on the unitary programme and whether to pay to keep open the toilets and retain the CCTV for one year.

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Summary

Our previous programme updates in August [here](#) and in November [here](#) provided a summary of our how thinking has developed and the progress we have made to date.

This report provides the current update on an update on the financial emergency that Somerset Council is in; our commissioned work by our consultants Activist; our discussions with Somerset Council (SC) about asset and service devolution; the Frome Vale Local Community Network (LCN).

This report recommends some immediate actions to protect key assets and services, enable Somerset Council (SC) to make the savings proposed in their 2024/25 budget and provide a breathing space to discuss things more strategically in the future. These are:

1. Paying up to £23k to keep the toilets open and clean in the Market Yad car park for one year only on the condition that SC enters into a 25 year lease for the toilet block with a 2 year break clause. FTC will be in a position to choose whether to break the lease after two years giving us time to consider our wider priorities.
2. Paying up to £15k as a contribution to retaining CCTV services in the town centre in 2024/25, and £30k in the following two years via a 3 years' service level agreement with SC.

The report also includes a red, amber, green (RAG) rating on the current work programme agreed to support our Council Plan, set out in the table below.

Current status of Somerset Council's financial emergency

Somerset Council has avoided declaring a s114 notice by agreeing a balanced budget for 2024/25 at its Council meeting on 20 February 2024. This means that commissioners will not be appointed by Government to cut services and assets without SC approval for 2024/25.

This does not mean that SC's finances are now settled and acceptable. It is more a holding situation to deliver more significant cuts to services and structural transformation in advance of setting the budget for 2025/26. SC's news release following the Council meeting noted

"Based upon current forecasts there is a high likelihood that a Section 114 notice will need to be issued in respect of 2025/26."

SC maintains that without changes to Government policy on local government finances this remains a serious consideration.

Discussion on two of the services that will be removed and will stop on 1 April without our financial support are described below.

FTC's position

In the last update in November, we promoted four principles that we believe remain important and to keep in mind. These were:

1. That FTC does not become drawn into decisions based solely on the current crisis at SC. We should be aware of the link between assets and services that SC want to either stop and/or devolve and FTC's current and upcoming Council Plans.
2. That we should develop clear criteria for taking on any additional responsibility based on a combination of alignment with our Council Plan, affordability in the long term, our ability to deliver and our ability to manage the risks.
3. That we should not be diverted from developing the case for a Frome Town Deal that would have a long-term orientation and demonstrate how assets, budgets and powers can be integrated to create a better place. To date, SC has not been in a position to address this, but them agreeing a budget does provide an opportunity for them to consider cuts and devolution in a more strategic way.
4. That we should involve our partners in the LCN in these conversations as the collective ability of the 18 parishes together could lead to greater capacity than could be achieved separately. The LCN has recently begun to explore to merits of a Highways Steward, for example.

It's in this context that the rest of this report should be reviewed.

The Activist report

Our consultants, Activist, have been drafting a report advising FTC on how best to agree a good 'Frome Town Deal' with SC, and what that 'Deal' should include and how it will reflect our four principles described above. Part of the report will be a proposed Prospectus that we will be able to use as a basis for further discussions with SC. The report is in early draft form at the moment and follows two well attended workshops with Cllrs and research and discussions with stakeholders.

We expect to be able to bring the Activist report and prospectus to Council for discussion in April.

Short term decisions to protect public services in the face of SC budget cuts for 2024/25

While FTC is keen to address things in a more strategic way, as discussed above, there are a few services that will be cut unless FTC steps in to retain them and FTC needs to decide whether to do so.

Market Yard toilets

First, the closure of the toilets in the Market Yard. We need to work out via engagement with the community and other due diligence exercises whether we should retain the toilets longer term. We also need to consider this in the context of our wider vision for the Frome Riverside. It is proposed to buy a breathing space and step in and pay to keep the toilets open for one year at a cost of up to £24k. The other option would be to let SC close them which at this time seems the wrong thing to do.

To create some security for FTC, the Town Clerk has secured agreement from SC to take on a 25 yr lease of the toilet block *with a two year break clause* to enable both parties to decide on the best course of action. After two years we have the option to break the lease (as can SC), but we will have had this period to work out whether taking them on is strategically the right thing to do for the town and for the Frome Riverside area. This period enables us to engage with the community about whether keeping public toilets in the town centre is necessary.

Comprehensive due diligence and financial planning will be undertaken prior to signing a lease.

CCTV in the town centre

Secondly, SC announced that it will be retaining the CCTV service in town centres after all. It estimates that the cost of retaining this service in Frome will be up to £28k in 2024/25. However, SC noted in the news release following the Council meeting on 20 February that:

“(CCTV services) ... have been protected through devolution and partnership working with City, Town and Parish Councils.”

To confirm: no commitment has been made to SC on behalf of Frome and SC have not been able to provide firm costings and level of service until now. SC made the assumption that the towns would pay.

SC’s proposal is for each town to sign a 3 year Service Level Agreement (SLA) from 1 April 2024. A key element of the SLA will be that CCTVs in the town centre would be monitored all the time (24/7), which is better than the service provided by Mendip DC in previous years and, we understand, is of vital importance to the police.

The annual cost of the SLA will be £28k. This is based on the cost of the service over the whole county divided by the number of CCTV cameras in the town (Frome has 10 cameras).

It is recommended that Cllrs agree to enter into a 3 year SLA with SC.

The tricky part is in year one. This is because no town in Somerset knew whether CCTV would be under threat for sure and how much SC would need to keep the service going and, therefore, no town could accurately set a budget. Some towns allocated something, some towns didn’t. This means some towns can pay, and some towns can’t. Indeed, some towns may opt out and not sign an SLA, although the Town Clerk thinks this is unlikely. FTC did note in the budget reports in January that £14k from a CCTV EMR was allocated to the Devolution project.

Assuming Cllrs decide in favour of the SLA, the Town Clerk will negotiate the best deal possible for year 1. To ensure a CCTV service is retained, it is recommended that Cllrs allocate up to £28k while hoping that this figure might be less through negotiation.

Other devolution discussions

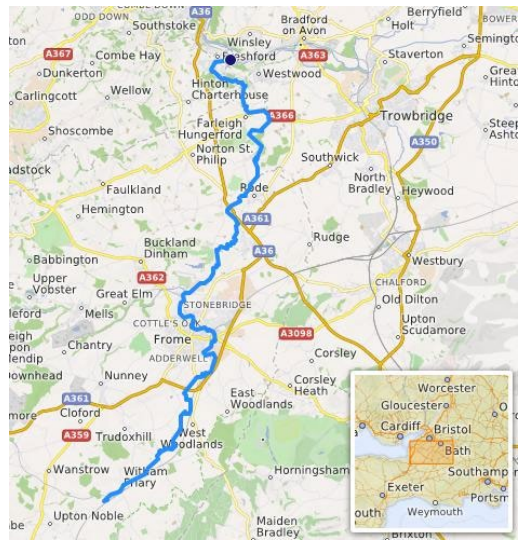
We are still discussing with SC possible devolution scenarios over open spaces and the Key Centre. But there is no detail as yet. The nature of these discussions are exploratory to ascertain information about options and possibilities for the devolution of assets that will make the town more successful place. A framework for our thinking was presented at the last discussion on this and is reproduced below.

	Primary outcome	Supporting outcome
1	<p>Improved Assets and Infrastructure:</p> <p>Our town has good connectivity, buildings, roads and transport.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Our town has the services it needs ○ Our key service delivery buildings are accessible and well used ○ Our town is well connected
2	<p>A Thriving Place:</p> <p>Local businesses are growing and providing jobs and prosperity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Our town and businesses are flourishing ○ Our cultural offer is good and growing, attracting people to our town ○ Investment in our town is increasing
3	<p>Improved Sustainability and Resilience:</p> <p>Our environment is greener and more sustainable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Our open spaces are well used, attractive and well maintained ○ We are protecting and enhancing our town's biodiversity ○ We are making good progress towards net zero
4	<p>Increased Community Wellbeing:</p> <p>People are leading happier and healthier.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We enable people to support one another ○ We promote wellbeing and help people to avoid crises ○ We promote a spirit of community and inclusivity

Progress with the Local Community Network

Since our last update, the following development have taken place:

1. The 'Vale of Frome' has met twice in Buckland Dinham and in Wanstraw
2. Work continues on the survey to determine the themes of a community plan. Members of the steering group are in the process of be visiting each parish to conduct a conversation about priorities so that we can collectively discover the issues that unite us. The outcomes of this will be available in February.
3. These themes will be explored at our next meeting in April and will then serve as the basis for a calendar of meetings that will allow us to ensure in advance that we have the right people and information in the room so that we can have productive discussions.
4. These themes will also serve as the basis for a written community plan that will contain all the key data to describe the current situation and the key areas for improvement. This plan will be updated to show progress in the selected areas.
5. Our meeting in December will be focussed on the financial situation at Somerset council. Parishes indicated interest in working together to jointly fund a highways steward and this proposal will be progressed through a working group.
6. Minutes are here:
<https://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CID=902&MID=7126&Version=4>



Progress review for the Unitary Programme

	What will we do	RAG	Progress at 6 March 2024	Next steps
1	Convene the relevant people to build on the work of mapping social and community assets to ensure that the 'FIND' scheme covers the whole area	Green	<p>The local Somerset Champion, Melody Hunter-Evans, is funded by SC under their Connect Somerset initiative and FTC manages. Focus at present is working to align the work of Connect Somerset and FTC, with a focus on Children, Young People and Families.</p> <p>The Frome Area CYP Working group continues to grow its stakeholders and focuses on the 'early help' offer for Frome's Children, Young People and Families.</p> <p>The Somerset Digital Connect project has been put on indefinite hold by Somerset Council due to the financial situation.</p>	<p>Continue to work in partnership with Somerset on the Connect Somerset project. The project has had funding extended till April 2025.</p> <p>To explore how we develop the FIND platform without the Digital Connect project.</p>
2	Support, in partnership with other parish councils, and public service organisations and the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector the development of a comprehensive early help offer	Green	<p>Community Hub in the Town Hall is going from strength to strength. Current offer is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome Hub for Displaced People • Wellbeing support for Displaced People • English for speakers of other languages classes for individuals and groups • Birth Talks Counselling sessions and Baby Loss Support Group • Somerset Council drop in point • Citizens Advice • Young Somerset • Parent Support Group for Neuro diverse children • Healthy Little Ones – Health Visitors 	<p>Continue ongoing conversations with partner organisations including MIND Somerset and with existing village provision that can be supported to enhance their community offer.</p> <p>Continue building links with partner organisations who have</p>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SEND Navigators Drop in sessions <p>Exploratory project planning about to start on understanding current early help offer, what is needed by community and impact of SC cuts. This will lead on to the development of a comprehensive early help offer.</p>	a community offer, such as The Good Heart and the Library.
3	Build the local community network and submit the outcome to the County wide evaluation exercise	Green	Complete	
4	Support and develop the work of the Local Community Network as a major route to influencing provision in Frome and surrounding areas.	Green	Continue to work with stakeholders in the coming months to establish priorities for LNC. Work to build the local plan and ensure buy in from public services in progress.	See left
5	Convene the relevant people to create a vision for the cultural quarter and town centre	Amber	Following stakeholder engagement over the past 12 months, meeting arranged for March with key SC staff to scope a co-designed Vision for Frome Riverside. This will be informed by the Activist work (see below) and provide the springboard for a coherent plan for this area.	See left
6	Develop a fully costed and modelled business case that describes the benefits to all parties (of a unitary town deal)	Amber	Activist report in draft. Now unlikely to include a full costed business case as SC haven't had capacity to engage with this yet. It will include a structure to guide FTC decision making as well as recommendations for how to approach devolution with SC and will focus on the importance of a Town Deal. Combined, these elements will ensure FTC considers asset and service devolution in a rational way.	Activist report planned for discussion at Council in April

7	Create a plan for the managed transfer of assets to the Council	Amber	<p>SC's Devolution Framework now published which, combined with the Activist report, will inform our work. Specific assets and services being discussed with SC are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transfer of a series of open spaces including access to SC highways depot (very early stages) • Transfer of The Key Centre and adjoining Mount Community Garden (very early stages) • Retaining the toilets in Market Yard Car Park (discussed in this report) • Paying SC to retain the CCTV service in the town centre (discussed in this report) 	Further due diligence and community engagement required which will inform any recommendations to Council in the coming months.
8	Promote our business case by obtaining cross-party support and engaging with the new Somerset council	Red	Somerset Cllrs are aware and supportive of our devolution goals	Promotion to be carried out once business plan developed and approved

Recommendations

1. Note the progress and next steps on the delivery of the work programme in the report above.
2. Agree to pay up to a maximum of £24k to keep the toilets open and clean in the Market Yard car park for 12 months from 1 April 2024 and enter into a 25 year lease for the toilet block with a 2 year break clause.
3. Enter into a 3 year SLA with SC to provide a CCTV in Frome. The cost in year 1 to be up to £28k and £28k in the second and third year.
4. Report back with update on progress to future Council meetings.