

## Agenda item 6

For information – Key Centre Update

For decision – Key Centre Objectives and next step for Nursery tenancy

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### Summary

The Key Centre and Cabin has been under FTC ownership for three months now. This report gives a brief update and outlines the proposed objectives and vision for reviving this community centre for agreement. The building comes with a purpose-built nursery setting, and we will explore options to make best use of this part of the Key Centre.

### Background

The Key Centre was first opened in 2007. The project was driven locally by members of the Keyford and The Mount community and paid for by Lottery funding alongside Somerset County and Mendip District Council contributions. It became part of the New Labour Government's Sure Start programme which aimed to improve children's health and well-being, enhance their development, and support their parents/carers. Sure Start provided a range of integrated services delivered in the community out of places like the Key Centre. Sure Start is a good example of an early help programme that is returning to the forefront of policy making again.

Government funding tailed off by 2010 and the Key Centre and Community Garden was later transferred to Somerset County Council which did not have funding available to keep the services going. There was some investment made in the building recently which improved renewable energy production and energy conservation.

The Key Centre's location near the edge of Southeast Frome makes it a vital asset for the town. As well as being on the other side of town to Frome's GP services, there is only one school within a 15-minute walking distance. In addition, the area to the south is very likely to become Selwood Garden Community, a new development of about 1,700 homes that within a decade or so will increase the population of Frome by about 4,000. The Key Centre will become a central point for people living in this part of town.

As outlined in the [Devolution Prospectus which can be viewed on the website here](#), acquiring the Key Centre is at the centre of stage one of our Early Help and Community Support plan. This has been achieved: FTC agreed in February 2025 to acquire the freehold with the aim to provide 'a vibrant, inclusive space at the heart of the Mount community, providing a welcoming space where people of all ages and backgrounds feel connected, supported, and empowered.' [The report can be found on the website here](#). It was transferred to FTC three months ago.

We are now entering stage two of our plan outlined in the Devolution Prospectus which is:

*“Use these assets (the Key Centre and the community garden) to provide space and support for a range of preventative activities delivered by community groups including family support, groups aimed at supporting mental health and other community activities.”*

The rest of this report proposes how we will do this.

There has been a budget of £61k attached to this first year which is being used to make vital building improvements, employ a part time Centre Co-ordinator, and purchase necessary resources. In addition, the Mount is one of our current focused neighbourhoods for the Engagement Team and Liz Stone is based there 3 days a week doing community development work. The Facilities Manager will start work in September and the Key Centre and Cabin will make up part of their buildings portfolio. There was agreement at the February meeting that we would adopt a 'test-and-learn' approach for one year, using insights gained to establish a longer-term model.

### Key Centre and Cabin update

At the council meeting we will see a short video that updates progress so far on taking on the centre. This is framed around the proposed aim and objectives that we are using to guide the work as follows:

#### Proposed aim (derived from the Devolution Prospectus):

To create a vibrant, inclusive and welcoming space at the heart of the Mount community that supports a range of preventative activities by community groups and others including family support, supporting mental health and other activities needed by the community. A space where people all ages and backgrounds feel connected, supported, and empowered.

#### Proposed objectives for the test and learn year

1. To honour the history and heritage of the Key Centre as a local intergenerational community hub.
2. To codesign the offer here with local community and other stakeholders and create opportunities for the wider community to help shape its future offer.
3. To establish an advisory group made up of residents, users, partners and other stakeholders that will shape the final vision and objectives for the centre.
4. To build social capital and connectivity in this neighbourhood, enabling the delivery of early help and preventative services.
5. To explore ways to maximise financial robustness including income generation, grant funding options, and partnership models (while aware that it's unlikely to become a cost neutral asset).

### Options for the Purpose-Built Nursery Space

A big part of the Key Centre building is the purpose-built children's nursery wing. This section of the centre is made up of a large central room with a kitchen connected by a hatch, an office

space, a separate side room (used for naps), a utility space, a staff room, children's toilet cubicles and good-sized garden with play equipment. It has capacity for 64 children aged 0-4.

While we want to use this year to 'test and learn' what works in the Key Centre generally rather than making long term commitments, the nursery space offers us an opportunity to establish reliable income, fill a proven gap in childcare provision in the town (see below) and extend the reach of users; thus enhancing the early help and signposting potential of the centre.

There is a known sufficiency gap for childcare in Frome (see [Somerset Council data](#) and [our own research from 2023, at Appendix 6.1 which can be viewed on the website here](#)), particularly for the 0-2 age range that this offer would fill. In February, Council agreed the objective to 'address the town's nursery provision gap'.

Below we outline three options for using the nursery space in the Key Centre.

Option 1: Lease the space out to a nursery to provide year-round childcare provision for 0-4 year olds.

#### Pros

- There is a proven demand for nursery places in Frome
- Somerset Council's Education Places team would support us through the tender process.
- A nursery would be installed before the beginning of the Summer term in 2026 and there are several "meanwhile use" options for the space that could maximise its community value and bring in income in the meantime.
- A functioning nursery would bring families through the door and into the pathway of other services, offers and connections.
- It offers a regular and stable income from rental.
- It's a purpose-built nursery and requires little investment other than redecorating.
- Engagement so far shows us the nursery provision here was well loved and sorely missed.

#### Cons

- The size of the space makes it likely that the most suitable tenant for the nursery would be a larger scale provider, thus narrowing the pool of possible candidates slightly.
- Christchurch School has its own preschool (3-5 year olds) nursery, and although we would want the Key Centre nursery tenants to prioritise 0-2 s (where the biggest gaps are), we are advised we would need to permit the new nursery tenants to open up their offer to the older age group too, especially as people travel further for under 5 care and those attending might not necessarily be in the feeder school's catchment area. We understand that current demand exceeds the combined provision of the school and the Key Centre. We are already in conversation with the school and the MAT about this and would work closely with them throughout the tender process to ensure their interests are supported as far as possible. They are already aware of the benefits that a flourishing community centre next door will bring to their families and services.

- It would be necessary to offer a lease that would extend beyond the yearlong ‘test and learn’ phase. We are advised by the Education Places team that a minimum 6-year lease would be usual. This requires commitment from us as a council to trial this for a period beyond the current administration.

Option 2: Lease the nursery space out to a local organisation or business for other uses.

Pros:

- It would bring in regular and stable income.
- Depending on the nature of the organisation, it would bring in different users, and there might be potential for partnership working.
- Anecdotally we know that there are a lot of organisations looking for space in Frome to deliver their work.

Cons:

- Because the space is purpose-built as a nursery, structural adaptations would have to be made for an alternative organisation (but we might be able to negotiate that the tenant does this themselves). The works required create a longer-term commitment than the year-long test phase.
- There is a risk of bringing something into the centre that doesn’t feel like the ‘right fit’ for the community or bring the best value to the offer of the space.
- It doesn’t fill the sufficiency gap of childcare in our town.
- A lease option for a business or organisation would be more appealing if the tenancy offered was longer than the year-long test phase. If this option was chosen, we would need to spend more time exploring how the offer could be shaped and possibly bring it back to council.

Option 3: Add the nursery rooms and garden to the list of spaces available to rent and use the test-and-learn year to keep renting them out ad hoc or to regular sessions.

Pros

- It would bring in some income.
- It would complement the ‘test and learn’ ethos as we see what kind of groups can use the space.
- It maintains flexibility.

Cons

- The space is a purpose-built nursery so might not appeal to a wide range of users.
- It adds to administrative workload for the bookings and liaison process.
- It doesn’t fill the sufficiency gap of childcare for our town.
- If we later decide it is better to tender out to a nursery it would dramatically delay a potential start date.

We believe that the benefits of the nursery provision outweigh the risks of the longer commitment to the tenancy. Deciding on this now will enable us to work effectively with Somerset Council on the tendering process with the aim of a nursery re-opening a nursery at the Key Centre by the beginning of the summer term 2026.

We therefore recommend Option 1 as the best course of action because it provides an income, fills an important gap for local parents and enhances the community offer for the centre and the people and families that use the space. While the longer-term commitment can be seen as a risk it also offers appropriate time for the nursery setting to flourish as part of the wider Centre offering.

#### Recommendations

1. Agree the Key Centre aim and objectives.
2. Agree to put the tenancy of the Nursery out to tender for full time occupancy and delegate to the Engagement and Partnership Leads to manage this process in partnership with Somerset Council's Education Places Team.