

Agenda item 4

For decision - Management options regarding the Market Yard toilets

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Summary

The management and the maintenance of the Market Yard toilets is becoming increasingly problematic as the Market Yard toilets reach their end of life. This paper explores the immediate options available to us lays out the options and recommends a course of action for decision.

Background

The site is strategically located at the centre of the Market Yard car park, a key gateway to the town. Over the past year, we have overseen the provision of the Market Yard toilets and gained valuable insights. We have found that the facilities are at the end of their operational life, costly to maintain, and reliant on parts that are both consumable and difficult to source. Additionally, they frequently become blocked even with typical use, and they have become a focal point for anti-social behaviour.

They require short term investment for repairs. Longer term full refurbishment will be a major investment so the long-term viability of providing the service must be carefully weighed against potential alternative solutions.

This report has been informed by that experience and explores five possible options and recommended option five. All options enable Council to decide whether investing an estimated £150k in refurbishment at some point in the future, unless and until the current building is repurposed.

Objectives

There are a number of desirable objectives for toilet facilities in the Market Yard. Throughout this report we don't want to lose sight of why toilet facilities are important in our town.

1. Improved standards and control

Currently we have a substandard offer and so whatever option we choose we want to improve standards; increasing maintenance, cleanliness, and operational standards of the facilities.

2. Enhancing visitor experience

Market Yard is a key location for visitors, particularly those attending events, shopping at markets, or exploring the town centre. Clean, well-maintained public toilets contribute to a positive visitor experience and support Frome's reputation as a welcoming, well-managed destination.

3. Supporting local businesses and market traders

Nearby businesses, including shops, cafés, and market traders, benefit from accessible public toilets, as customers are more likely to stay longer and spend more. Traders and event

organisers would have greater confidence in hosting activities in the Market Yard area, knowing that a high standard of essential facilities are available.

4. Aligning with town centre regeneration and public realm improvements

There are broader ambitions to improve this area of the town centre as other spaces come across to us from Somerset Council. And public toilet arrangements are an essential part of any accessible, inclusive town, supporting residents and visitors of all ages.

Potential for additional funding and grants

Frome Town Council may be eligible for funding and grants to improve public amenities. Other options such as sponsorship, advertising, or partnerships with local businesses could help offset running costs – saving money by taking a decision now, would mean more budget available for match funding.

Options for management

There are five options for future management. All of them retain the Changing Places loo in situ with the exception of the option to close down the whole site

Option 1: Frome Town Council directly manages and staffs the facility while considering whether to invest in their refurbishment

FTC directly employs cleaning and maintenance staff to manage the Market Yard toilets.

Pros

- Full control over staffing, standards, and operations.
- Flexibility to adapt schedules and tasks as needed.
- Builds a local employment opportunity.

Cons

- Significant increase in FTC's direct responsibilities and payroll costs.
- Recruitment and ongoing management of staff require resources and expertise.
- Higher fixed costs compared to outsourcing.

Costs

- Potential refurbishment cost: £150,000
- Annual staffing and operational costs: £40,000

This option ensures maximum control but increases FTC's direct financial and management burden. It is not cost-effective compared to outsourcing or community-based solutions and doesn't solve the problem of closed end of life units.

It is not recommended to proceed with this option.

Option 2: Frome Town Council continue to manage the current toilets via contractors while considering whether to invest in their refurbishment

FTC retains ownership and overall responsibility. Cleaning and maintenance are outsourced to a private contractor.

Pros

- FTC retains control over the facility and ensures consistent standards.
- Familiarity with current operations.

Cons

- Ongoing management remains time-consuming for FTC staff despite contracting the cleaning out.
- Contracting maintenance is expensive due to market rates and increasing costs.
- Risk of contractor performance issues, requiring continued oversight taking up a large amount of staff time.
- No scope for creative options and – propping up a substandard existing facility

Costs

- Potential refurbishment costs £150,00 minimum
- Annual operational costs (cleaning, maintenance, utilities): £60,000
- Management time/staff hours: 25 hours per month (at the least)

This option is familiar as we have been trialling this year, but it is not, in the opinion of the staff, sustainable. It is expensive, burdensome, and prevents FTC from focusing on strategic priorities.

It is not recommended to proceed with this option

Option 3: Close the Market Yard toilets permanently

Pros

- Immediate cost savings on maintenance, cleaning, and utilities.
- Eliminates FTC's management and oversight responsibilities.
- Allows a reimagining of the space

Cons

- Risk of public dissatisfaction due to reduced toilet availability.
- Increased pressure on nearby facilities, which may require upgrades – e.g. The Black Swan
- Accessibility concerns for individuals needing facilities closer to the Market Yard.
- Potential reputational impact for FTC if closure is perceived as a reduction in services.

Costs

- Potential one-off signage and communication costs: £ 500

While this option saves costs, it significantly reduces service provision and may impact FTC's reputation. Public access to toilets is vital for visitors, markets, and events.

It is not recommended to proceed with this option.

Option 4: Cheese and Grain takes over management while FTC consider whether to invest in their refurbishment

Cheese and Grain, a key community organisation and stakeholder in the area, assumes full responsibility for the toilets. They leverage their existing facilities management expertise, cleaners, and resources.

Pros

- Cheese and Grain already employ facilities staff and cleaning teams, providing efficiency and cost-effectiveness.
- Reduces FTC's administrative and financial burden.
- Maintains access to public toilet facilities for residents and visitors.
- Builds on Cheese and Grain's trusted community role and operational capabilities.

Cons

- Requires negotiation of terms, including financial support or a transfer agreement.
- Cheese and Grain may require initial investment for upgrades or integration
- Increased ongoing repair costs instead of full refurbishment

Costs

- Potential refurbishment cost: £150,000
- Annual operational costs under Cheese and Grain: £20,000 + consumables + repairs

This option provides a practical and efficient solution, leveraging existing expertise to deliver better value for money and reduce the burden on FTC. There is scope for a reimagining of the toilet options as the Cheese and Grain facility looks to the future and a remodel/extension. However following preliminary conversations the Cheese and Grain prefer Option 5.

It is not recommended to proceed with this option.

Option 5: Close the Market Yard toilets, with the exception of the Changing Places loo, and extend the "You're Welcome" scheme in particular by directing users to the toilets in the Cheese and Grain

The Market Yard toilets are closed and local businesses are encouraged to participate in an expanded "You're Welcome" scheme. Sufficient, additional signage would be added to the current block clearly redirecting everyone to the Cheese and Grain and financial support is provided to Cheese and Grain to enhance their toilet facilities for public use. The option of whether to invest in refurbishing the existing toilets is retained.

Pros

- This option offers substantial cost savings on maintenance and staffing.
- And builds partnerships with local businesses and the community.
- Expands the range of accessible facilities through the You're Welcome scheme.
- Reduces the risk of vandalism as toilets will be within the Cheese and Grain

Cons

- Public dissatisfaction with closure may persist due to relocating public toilets inside another building.
- Requires robust communication and monitoring to ensure scheme effectiveness.
- Some businesses may be unwilling to participate to enhance the You're Welcome Scheme.

Costs

- Potential refurbishment cost: £150,000
- Annual financial support to Cheese and Grain: £15,000
- Additional loos for annual events £4,000
- Marketing and signage for the "You're Welcome" scheme: £5,000 – currently £2500 in next year's budget
- Total budget for year - £21,500

This option balances cost savings and community involvement but may face challenges in implementation and public perception. Effective communication and partnership-building are essential. This is the Cheese and Grain's preferred option.

It is recommended to proceed with this option.

Conclusion

Given the moving parts that there are potentially in this area, the option of closing the toilets other than the Changing Places loo and provision provided through an enhanced contract with the Cheese and Grain appears is the most viable, sustainable, and practical solution in the short term. It balances cost savings, operational efficiency, and public benefit, as the Cheese and Grain already has facilities open to the public.

While this approach may place an additional burden on event organisers, who would need to bring in supplementary toilet facilities as required, a supporting budget has been included in the figures above to account for this. Crucially, it would significantly reduce FTC's financial and staffing burden, while ensuring continued access to essential public toilets and allowing time for further engagement and exploration of long-term refurbishment or other uses for the space.

This option would still deliver a centrally located Changing Places facility, addressing a long-standing accessibility need in the town centre. Additionally, it offers the Cheese and Grain a new revenue stream to support their wider community work. And it leaves open the decision about whether to explore and invest in full refurbishment in the future.

Recommendations

1. Temporarily transfer cleaning and maintenance of the Market Yard toilets to the Cheese and Grain, retaining the Changing Places facility open as current.
2. Close the other toilets as they become non operational
3. Redirect people to the Cheese and Grain toilets
4. Allocate £15k pa to pay the Cheese and Grain for cleaning to come from the Market Yard toilet budget
5. Continue to monitor public response to inform next steps
6. Explore quotes for refurbishment of existing toilet block
7. Include the refurbishment/repurposing engagement conversation of the public toilet facilities into the wider Riverside / Cultural Quarter vision