

Agenda item 5

For discussion – A digital engagement platform for Frome

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Summary

Frome Town Council aims to be a bold and effective town council – one that doesn't just consult but instead empowers local people to be active decision-makers for our town.

We have worked hard to build a culture of participation and to ensure every voice is heard. However, people lead busy lives. Surveys, comment boxes and idea sharing for different projects, spread across separate platforms, can lead to fatigue and confusion.

One solution is a digital platform tailored for engagement. We've started exploring what these platforms have to offer – and the discussion at this meeting will inform how we move forward.

What is a Community Engagement Platform?

The term can apply to any digital platform that allows a community to participate in decision-making processes. While some platforms focus on a specific function such as surveys or mapping, we have been looking at options that have a wider range of tools.

Using one of these platforms, Frome Town Council could create a dedicated online space for participation and use a toolbox that includes surveys, ideas sharing, open discussions, mapping, voting, participatory budgeting and group creation, along with sharing timelines, updates and outcomes and the hope would be that it would uniformly sit alongside our website.

Why explore a Community Engagement Platform, and why now?

The decision to explore creating this kind of dedicated online space is a direct result of listening to local people. In our [Building a Picture of Frome 2024](#) townwide engagement, several people expressed a need for convenient, accessible and safe ways to find out what FTC is working on, share their views and discuss with others. Some people specified that they wanted a dedicated online space away from social media platforms.

Following this feedback, the [Frome Town Council Plan 2025-27](#) included the following key outcome in Aim Five:

“More participation in council decision-making, and use of a new civic engagement digital platform”

The [2025-26 Work Programme](#) includes the following objectives:

- Explore ways to increase participation in decision making processes within the council for example through deliberative processes and a Citizens Assembly in 2026/27 (Community Engagement and Development)
- Invest in a digital platform to support participatory decision making, for example Go Vocal (Marketing and Communications)

FTC currently uses a variety of means for online engagement including Survey Monkey, event broadcasts on Ticket Tailor, and comment boxes on our website. We have also used Your Priorities, a platform for sharing and voting for ideas within a project, most recently in 2022 for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

The scope of FTC's work and the ambition of our engagement strategy is growing. There is a desire for hyperlocal discussions such as those around individual open spaces devolved to FTC, and for exploring new ways for participatory budgeting and grant-making – needs that our current tools can't meet well.

However, in the last few years, platforms such as Go Vocal and Commonplace have grown their offer to encompass offering all or many of these functions and more on one platform. They are designed for people to be able to find engagement opportunities relevant to them, and subscribe to updates to stay in the loop, offering greater transparency and clarity over the entire course of a project.

This broad toolbox would give us the freedom to mix-and-match how we engage, creating engagement that is better tailored to each project, and work more closely with partner organisations.

Since the availability of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT in 2023, these platforms have implemented features that support a hybrid engagement strategy such as transcribing and sorting handwritten responses from in-person engagement or spoken responses in meetings and conversations. AI features also include the ability to quickly generate summaries of responses, to check in mid-project, and advanced analysis for deeper understanding.

It can't be overstated that a digital platform is supplementary to and not in place of face-to-face engagement. This work, as identified in preliminary data from Who Reads What, is particularly valued by the community, enshrining the views of under-served, unasked communities and those who are digitally excluded. These tools are designed to be able to incorporate those conversations into the wider digital engagement.

What are the drawbacks?

While a couple of features can be used anonymously, such as surveys, any platform would require people to sign up and log in. This would mean asking people upfront to share their name and email address with us the first time they use the platform. We would need clear communication around this to ensure trust. It would also be beneficial to launch with engagement around something that a lot of people are passionate about, to motivate people to complete the sign-up process.

There are benefits to having a sign-up process. FTC can customise the details we ask for, for example we could ask people which ward they live in which would then mean they're shown things that are specific to their area. We can ask for demographic information on sign-up, which could help us see if there are groups we're not reaching, and could be used for sortition in the case of a Citizens Assembly. People can also delete their own responses, data and account if they wish to.

These platforms are also relatively untested at town and parish council level, with most local government clients being county or borough councils serving populations of over 100,000. This presents an opportunity for FTC to lead the way in the town and parish sector through an ambitious, wider engagement strategy. As more councils adopt these platforms, benchmarking opportunities may emerge. However, this also makes the challenges harder to anticipate. At present, most people are not used to engaging with us in this way, and it will require significant effort to bring the community on board.

The cost varies between platform with an average range around £15k-£30k. In early conversations we have negotiated a 30% discount offer on the first year with one platform, £10,500 for the first year and £15,000 thereafter, as part of a value exchange to help inform their future offer to town councils.

We'll allocate time at the meeting for discussion which will be based around these themes:

1. What would you want to see to make a community engagement platform worth investing in and using?
2. What are your concerns about investing in and using a platform like this?
3. If we were to launch a new platform, we would like to bring people in with a big discussion - something that is relevant to a lot of people and sparks passionate ideas and opinions. What could this be?

Next steps

Following the discussion, we will explore whether the platforms we're looking at meet the needs and wants expressed and address any concerns raised. An update will be brought to a future council meeting.