Agenda item 7

For decision – 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 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. But 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 have explored what these platforms have to offer, informed by a discussion at the Community and Place Committee meeting on 6th August. This paper recommends Go Vocal to increase community participation and create more dynamic, inclusive engagement.

What is a Digital 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 around contributing to our decision making and enabling communities to make decisions and take action themselves.

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.

Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Residents stay updated via email or text	Residents give quick or detailed feedback - results are private unless shared	Residents publicly discuss and choose from options	Residents share and discuss their own ideas	Residents allocate funds to their favorite ideas or propose projects
Information	Surveys	Voting & Priorization	ideation	Comunity Proposals
Email & messaging	Paper forms (Form Sync)	Option Analysis	Mapping	Citizens' Assemblies
Follow	Polls	Document Annotation	Deliberation	Participatory Budgeting
Events				

Participation methods available with Go Vocal

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, social media 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 – and to support follow up to events such as Act to Adapt and the VAWG event - 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 survey, 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 challenges?

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.

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.

Significant staff time will be needed for onboarding and setting up the platform, but over the long term it will be more efficient because we will only be using one platform for all of our digital engagement, and it will streamline feeding in-person input into our results and reporting.

At the Community and Place meeting on 6th August, we discussed what a community engagement platform can do. The main takeaway from the discussion was that it would be useful to see some examples of different project types on the platform to better understand the value it could bring. We will share a live demo at the meeting to show how it could be used with upcoming FTC projects.

Following the discussion in the Community and Place Committee meeting, the options analysis below has been created to ensure we are getting all the features we are looking for at the best value.

For transparency, please note this analysis was co-created using AI. It has been fact-checked and edited where necessary. In addition to this options analysis, we have explored demos and examples of the different platforms – the analysis reflects our own experiences with these platforms.

Community Engagement Platform Options Analysis

After defining what we were looking for and narrowing down our options, we focused on Go Vocal as the one we found most promising. In early conversations with Go Vocal, we have negotiated a 30% discount offer on the first year, £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 then compared another two leading platforms that offer a similar range of features, Commonplace, and Delib Citizen Space.

Based on this evaluation, Go Vocal offers the best combination of comprehensive features, intuitive public interface, hybrid engagement support, and value for money at our scale.

Platform Comparison Overview Criteria	Go Vocal	Commonplace	Delib Citizen Space
Annual Cost Est.	£12,500-£15,000	£19,500-£27,500	£14,000-£34,000
Feature Breadth	Excellent	Good	Excellent
Public Ease of Use	Excellent	Excellent	Good
Hybrid Support	Very Good	Good	Good

Detailed Platform Analysis

Go Vocal

Strengths:
- Comprehensive toolbox - Surveys, idea walls, participatory budgeting, working groups, polls, co-creation workshops, and timeline discussions
- Excellent user experience: Clean, intuitive interface consistently praised by residents
- Strong hybrid features: Bulk import tools for offline responses, QR code generation, print-friendly versions
- Flexible participation: Anonymous and registered options, social login capabilities
- Multi-language support: Valuable for diverse communities
- Strong analytics: Detailed reporting and demographic insights
- WCAG 2.2 AA compliant with good customisation options which means it will be compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

Considerations:
- Newer to UK market (Belgian company) but growing rapidly
- Less UK local government-specific templates than competitors

Good for Councils wanting maximum feature variety and excellent resident experience.

Commonplace

Strengths:
- Hyper-local focus: Excellent map-based engagement, good for neighbourhood discussions
- UK heritage: Deep understanding of UK planning and local government needs
- Beautiful interface: Highly visual, social media-like experience
- Strong offline integration: Good tools for community events and door-to-door input
- Established UK client base: Proven track record with similar councils, and we have used its earlier iteration

Considerations:
- Limited participatory budgeting: Weaker on budget allocation features compared to competitors
- Less diverse engagement types: Primarily map-based and survey-focused
- Higher cost for advanced features: Premium tools may push beyond budget

Great for Councils prioritising spatial/planning engagement and local community building

Delib Citizen Space

Strengths:
- UK local government leader: Most established, used by 75% of UK councils
- Robust security and compliance: Excellent data protection and accessibility standards
- Professional admin interface: Comprehensive back-end tools for complex consultations
- Strong reporting: Advanced analytics and demographic breakdown
- Proven scalability: Handles large-scale consultations efficiently

Considerations:
- Higher cost: Typically at upper end of our budget range
- Steeper learning curve: More complex for both admins and residents
- Traditional interface: Less modern/engaging than competitors
- Limited visual engagement: More text-heavy, less interactive than alternatives

Good for councils with complex consultation needs and dedicated engagement teams, especially engaging around statutory requirements.

Implementation Considerations

Timeline
Go Vocal: 4-6 weeks typical onboarding
Commonplace: 6-8 weeks with customisation
Delib: 8-12 weeks (more complex setup)

Learning curve
Go Vocal: Gentle learning curve, intuitive admin panel
Commonplace: Moderate, visual interface helps

Delib: Steeper, may need additional training

Scaling to 10+ simultaneous consultations
All three platforms can handle this volume, but:
Go Vocal: Best project organisation tools
Commonplace: We may need higher tier pricing
Delib: Most robust for complex concurrent projects

The recommendation is to move forward with Go Vocal

Why Go Vocal is the best fit for Frome Town Council:

- Complete range of features: Only platform offering strong tools across ALL of our requirements (surveys, ideas sharing, working groups, participatory budgeting, etc.)
- Value for money: £10,500 (30% discount) for the first year as part of a value exchange, and £15,000 per year thereafter - best value of the three options compared
- Resident experience: Consistently rated highly for public user experience (for example, scoring 95/100 for accessibility on People Powered's platform ratings and 8/10 residents agreeing the platform in easy to use in their 2024 Impact Report), vital for creating an accessible and engaging space
- Hybrid engagement: Excellent offline response integration tools, essential for working in tandem with in-person engagement
- Quick deployment: Can meet a Q4 launch timeline with minimal stress
- Future-proofing: Strong development roadmap and growing UK presence, upcoming features include strengthening hybrid engagement capabilities (e.g. hybrid voting), advanced demographic sampling, and structured conversations that foster empathy and finding common ground

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Recommendations

1. Subject to due diligence, agree expenditure of £25k for the first 2 years for a digital platform provided by Go Vocal.
2. In year one, allocate £5k from the Marketing & Communications budget 800-7961 with the remaining £5.5k underwritten by the General Reserve subject to underspend at year end.
3. In year two, the annual subscription costs of £15k to be included in the annual revenue budget.
4. Delegate to the Marketing & Communications Manager Rachel Griffin, Engagement Lead Hannah Stopford and Marketing & Communications Assistant Miles Macey to complete due diligence and the onboarding process with an aim to launch the platform in Q4 of 2025.