

Agenda item 8

For decision – Report on Frome Funding Landscape Research, Grant Making Pilots and Next Steps

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Summary (incl. recommendations)

This report feeds back on the work undertaken to explore the funding and grant making landscape in Frome and ways to maximise external investment in the town. Rather than endorsing the creation of an externally-managed, community-led funding organisation, this work champions Frome Town Council working collaboratively with partners to develop strategic proposals to attract transformative funding. We will continue to develop our support for local organisations and recommend a continuation of successful participatory grant making pilots.

1. Ringfence £10k of 26/27 grants budget to use for potential match funding in a project proposal that results from strategic partnership working on known gaps or priorities.
2. Repeat Young People’s Participatory Grant Making programme in 26/27 including improvements to the process that emerge from evaluation.
3. Reconvene the Grant Advisory Panel for the next round of FTC Community Grants including improvements to the process that emerge from evaluation.

These measures will boost capacity for local organisations and maximise impact and equitability of the distribution of funds in Frome.

Background

This time last year FTC undertook work to better understand the funding landscape in Frome and explore opportunities to increase investment in projects that benefit the town. There were a number of motivating factors: knowledge that VCFSE (Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise) sectors locally, and nationally, are facing funding and delivery challenges; recent secondary data from the [Picture of Frome](#) work that indicated Frome attracts significantly lower funding than comparable local towns; conversations with local people involved in community led funding structures such as Hackney Giving (<https://www.hackneygiving.org.uk/>) and Islington Giving (<https://islingtongiving.org.uk/>) that led to suggestions a ‘Frome Fund’ could be a good model; and an interest in developing a Participatory Grant Making programme, sparked by an open Expression of Interest for a National Lottery partnership (<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/funding-programmes/you-decide>).

Therefore, as a council we decided to undertake this work:

1. Funding Needs Assessment

Conduct a detailed mapping exercise with community organisations that rely on grants and with other local bodies managing their own grant schemes. This will establish a clear understanding of funding needs and gaps in grant provision.

2. External Funding Opportunities

Undertake a scoping study to identify external funding sources that could be leveraged to benefit Frome's community projects and Town Council work.

3. Pilot Participatory Grant Making

Experiment with participatory grant-making using a portion of the existing Community Grants budget. There will be a focus on underrepresented groups, such as young people, by co-designing a grants model that includes them in decision-making. We commissioned an external provider, Locality, to support with the first two elements and managed the Participatory Grant Making pilots ourselves. A small working group of FTC staff and some Grants Committee councillors met throughout the work to input and shape it.

Findings and recommendations

Part 1: Funding Landscape Research

This research considered four different perspectives

- Local VCFSE sector
- Local funders
- National funders
- National landscape

[The full report, which can be read on the website at Appendix 8.1](#), contains a lot of detail on each element and has useful information for community organisations and local funders. It will be available on our website. There was a deeper dive into the secondary data and as expected, there was more nuance to the picture painted of the external investment Frome receives. However, it supported our understanding that Frome's VCFSE organisations, despite strong community energy, face a tightening funding landscape as well as other pressures such as increase in demand and complexity of work, difficulty in retaining volunteers and trustees, and lack of suitable venues.

There were some 'quick wins' we might undertake in terms of improvement to our support package for community organisations, such as developing a local funders network, better sharing of data and intelligence, and supporting groups to improve their approaches to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, a vital criterion to successful fundraising. There is also scope to use the My Frome platform to better connect groups and involve them in decisions about support offers such as training and focused projects. These recommendations fit with our commitment in the upcoming work programme to "Build capacity, adaptability and resilience In our local VCFSE (Voluntary Community Faith and Social Enterprise) sector."

In the context of increasing investment in the town, the overriding message from the work was that 'funding should enable what matters most to the people in Frome, not define it.' National funders are increasingly prioritising projects and work that

can demonstrate long-term, community-led goals and collaborative partnership approaches. Frome is not always top of the list for funders when going by data alone, but we are well placed to move further towards the strategic, proactive partnerships that are favoured by those organisations interested in transformational investment. With this in mind the ‘funding maximisation’ element of the work evolved to become an exploration into the approach to Strategic Partnership working that we might define and develop, rather than a mapping exercise to highlight what funds are out there.

Part 2: Strategic Partnership working

Frome Town Council is known for the enabling and convening role it plays in the town and we lean towards collaborative partnership widely in our work. We are well positioned to enhance a strategic approach to these partnerships in order to co-design proposals that address known issues or gaps, rather than fit work to chase funding as it becomes available.

This part of the research consisted of an internal workshop with a mix of staff and councillors. The workshop looked at examples of best practice from other towns or cities, an exploration of current approaches in Frome and generation of ideas for formalising an approach. [The key takeaways were summarised in a short report which can be read on the website at Appendix 8.2](#), and include:

- **Adopt a convening role:** Proactively bring partners together around clearly defined challenges rather than waiting for opportunities to emerge.
- **Start with shared priorities:** Focus collective effort on a small number of strategic issues where partnership working can deliver visible impact.
- **Embed co-design:** Involve VCSE organisations, residents and people with lived experience early in shaping responses.
- **Enable participation from smaller organisations:** Provide accessible routes into partnership activity so that grassroots groups can contribute meaningfully.
- **Leverage council assets intentionally:** Use land, buildings, data, officer capacity and political influence to strengthen funding bids and delivery partnerships.
- **Commit seed investment where appropriate:** Targeted council funding can act as a catalyst for larger external investment.
- **Share intelligence openly:** Improved data-sharing can support better coordination and strengthen collective understanding of local need.

This final part of the work further confirms the emerging indication that, rather than taking funding decisions out of the council into something like a ‘Frome Fund’ or ‘Frome Giving’ community led model, we would better serve the town by harnessing FTC’s power as an enabling council to convene and coordinate the partnerships that will attract meaningful investment. This work was anticipated in the aim agreed in the Council Plan and the work programme to: “Shape a strategic approach to supporting local projects that fill identified gaps in provision and attract grant funding.”

There are suitable themes and gaps prioritised in our Council Plan that would lend themselves to honing this strategic approach. As we explore and refine these across our teams, we recommend ringfencing a small portion of this year’s Grants budget to act as match funding for a possible partnership proposal, in order to add weight to wider fundraising efforts.

Part 3: Participatory Grant Making Pilots

YOU (Young Opinions Unite)

Melody Hunter Evans, our Children and Young People's Officer, took a lead on the delivery of a participatory grant making pilot and [a full report on the process can be read on the website at Appendix 8.3.](#)

Offers for Young People in Frome have consistently been raised as a priority for our town and channeling the voice of young people is an area of focus for Frome Town Council. This pilot put young people in the driving seat of decision making around funding the projects that serve them. Year 8 children were targeted as this age group (12-13) is often cited as lacking in provision. Melody worked in partnership with schools with Year 8s to ensure, through a series of assemblies and workshops, all children in this age group had a chance to input into the priority areas for funding. A smaller panel then came together to design every aspect of the grants programme from the name of the fund to the application process, funding pot amounts, decision making systems, scoring and applicant interviews. They often made choices that came as a surprise, highlighting the importance of avoiding assumptions when working with different age groups.

The panel came together on 10 February to interview shortlisted applicants, and they made some tough decisions together. Projects that received funding included a mental health drop-in service, a youth club on a farm setting, an event for Frome Pride and a free swimming offer for 4-6 years olds. A full list can be found in Melody's report.

Highly positive feedback has been received from the young people involved in this work as well as the applicants. Staff input was high in terms of time, although as a pilot we were setting things up for the first time – a repeat programme would be expediated by the processes having become established, especially in terms of collaboration with the schools. There were other small tweaks emerging from evaluation that will build on the impact of this work.

Grants Advisory Panel Pilot

The FTC Community Grants Programme ran concurrently with the Young People's Pilot (so that applicants could make the choice about which fund would better suit their proposals). As part of our participatory explorations, we convened a residents advisory panel. Emily Osler, our Community Engagement Officer, took a lead on delivering this pilot.

Emily recruited a panel of eight residents with a broad mix of lived experience of a variety of perspectives, either as previous grant applicants or those living with or with understanding of various protected characteristics. They undertook a short training process and then scored the grant applications when they came in using the same model as the Grants Committee members. They came together with Grants Committee representatives to share scores, make comments and discuss possible questions for applicants that were recorded and shared along with the Councillors questions. While they were not given final decision-making powers, their comments and scores were of value to the overall decision-making process and bringing fresh insight to the consideration of applications.

The success of the pilot was unfortunately impacted by the unprecedentedly high number of grant applications for the recent round. This meant that we could not reasonably expect each panel member to score every application – and although every application was scored by at least one member, the fluctuations meant that their averaged scoring was too unreliable to be included alongside the Committee’s scores in when it came to the final stage.

Despite this, there were huge benefits to introducing an advisory panel, including an appreciation of the intent to improve our approach to equality and inclusion, and feedback from the process was hugely positive. Evaluation from participants indicates ways to build on this process to ensure meaningful influence in future iterations and add robustness to FTC’s decision making. The panel have also made suggestions for improvement on the FTC grant making process more generally, and these have been considered in a review of the grants in the accompanying paper.

Both these pilots have demonstrated the benefits in involving residents in decision making processes at various stages, and the learnings throughout can inform and improve next iterations.

Consultation and feedback

- Evaluation of the Participatory Grant Making Pilots ongoing
- Consultation with VCFSE sector through research and workshops
- Future Com org networking and partnerships

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

- Shape a strategic approach to supporting local projects that fill identified gaps in provision and attract grant funding.
- Improve the impact and reach of the FTC Grants Programme through alignment with council priorities, tracking funding distribution, measuring residents reached, and identifying areas of greatest impact.
- Ensure children and young people are meaningfully involved in local decision making, including through a participatory grant-making project.

Financial and Risk Implications

- Risk that partnerships do not result in successful funding proposals (ringfenced match funding could be fed back into total Grants pot). This would be mitigated by skilled facilitation and bringing in bid writing expertise at the right moment (as written into current work programme)

Legal / HR Implications

- None

Equalities Implications

- Improved by this work. The Advisory panel include members with experience of protected characteristics.

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

- None

Health and Safety Implications

- None

Background Papers

- Locality reports
- Picture of Frome

Report Sign-Off

Hannah Stopford 19/03/26

Peter Wheelhouse, Acting Town Clerk 19/03/26

Recommendations

1. Ringfence £10k of 26/27 grants budget to use for potential match funding in a project proposal that results from strategic partnership working on known gaps or priorities.
2. Repeat Young People's Participatory Grant Making programme in 26/27 including improvements to the process that emerge from evaluation.
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