

Agenda item 6

For update and decision – An update on the first year of the Key Centre and recommendations for next steps

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Summary (incl. recommendations)

The Key Centre and Cabin have been under FTC ownership for one year now. This report gives an update on how the first year has run from the perspective of Facilities Management, Centre Co-ordination, Business Management and Community Engagement. There is an outline for the approach going forward and a recommendation to adopt the adapted objectives and to extend the contracts of key staff: The Key Centre Coordinator and Key Centre Cleaner. This year's budget has made provision for the salaries of these posts for a full year.

Background

The Key Centre was originally opened in 2007 and served as a thriving community centre and Sure Start family centre and children's nursery. Several years later, diminished funding and other changes led to a decline in services and community use, and the building remained underused and neglected for many years. Last year, FTC agreed to acquire the freehold as part of Somerset Council's Devolution programme, 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.' (Council [report](#) of that year).

As outlined in the Devolution Prospectus, 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 of the building is earmarked for a huge new housing development, thus increasing the future demand for services and infrastructure significantly.

It was transferred to FTC just over a year ago. There was agreement at the February 2025 council meeting that we would adopt a 'test-and-learn' approach for the first year, using insights gained to establish a longer-term model. This paper sets out those learnings and developments and recommended model going forwards.

Working objectives for 2025/2026 agreed at August 2025 Council [meeting](#):

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 (a working group rather than a formal 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).

The work programme for 2026/2027 specifies an aim to “develop a thriving community space at the Key Centre and Cabin, increasing occupancy by 50%”.

Facilities Management

The Key Centre structure is in good overall condition due in part to its relatively young age but also the type of materials used in its construction. Built with a specific use in mind the layout suits its current occupants well. Focus since September has been primarily on ensuring statutory compliance is up to date and the heating and hot water system is operating at its optimal efficiency. Next steps are to investigate increasing the capacity of the solar array in order to reduce utility costs. The centre has had a redecoration, and the cabin has had its leaking roof repaired and painted.

Centre Coordination

Sarah Walton, our Key Centre Co-ordinator, was appointed in May 2025. She is the front desk welcome at the Centre and liaises with users, co-ordinates bookings and handles enquiries. Especially in this test and learn year, Sarah has been responsible for building a comprehensive set of policies and procedures for safe and sustainable use of the centre by organisations and residents. She works closely with the Facilities Manager, the Centre Cleaner, various contractors and colleagues in the Communities, Communications and Business Teams to co-ordinate all aspects of the running and promotion of the centre and is much in demand throughout the day. In October last year, it was agreed to increase her hours from 4 hours per day to 6. We have also appointed a regular cleaner, Tina, who is a local resident with strong links to the Centre and the neighbouring school and takes on extra out-of-hours stewarding duties for the Centre.

Alternative models for staffing the centre in open hours were considered such as partnering with community organisations to share responsibility in exchange for room use. However, the coordination required to deliver that kind of model would negate the saving in FTC staff time – and we would lose the oversight and care that one co-ordinator brings to the offer. Sarah is the first point of contact at the Key Centre, and she is building trusted relationships with the community and organisations that allow for relational, meaningful signposting and connections. This is the social capital and connectivity that is so central the Early Help and Prevention offer.

In the first few months of opening, there was much to be done to get the building up to scratch for community use. Bookings and income from rentals have been steadily rising and the types of users are increasingly varied. These now include: School Nurse, Food at Five, Frome Birth

Talk counselling, Purple Elephant Small Steps and Tea and Toasties, Voices Family Law, Baptist Church, ARK Veterans, Froglife Dementia group, Campfire Club for teens, Frome Learning Partnership – to name a few. See a current timetable [here](#). We undertook an externally commissioned Room Rate Benchmarking process to ensure [rates](#) are fair for both community and business bookings. The Marketing and Communications team have provided support with promotion, aligning webpages and creating a WhatsApp channel for focused comms around KC activity.

In this test and learn year and where offers fill a known gap that is reflected in our Council Aims, we have offered room use for free for certain projects or organisations. Currently, a small office space on the nursery side of the building is being shared as a co-working space by Frome Birth Talk, Purple Elephant and the Pod. This has enabled direct signposting and strong relational working with these key organisations.

[Appendix 6.1, which can be viewed on the website here](#), shows income and occupancy rates over the course of the year and indicates good progress here, far exceeding the aim to increase occupancy by 50%. It should be noted that percentage occupancy is quite a hard measure to define – these figures include all bookable spaces and within a 9am – 5pm timeframe so does not include any out-of-hours booking.

Percentage of hours hired at the Key Centre Monday - Friday 9am-5pm		
June 2025	November 2025	March 2026
2.34%	11.35%	22.94%
booked hours, out of a total of 1056 bookable hours	booked hours, out of a total of 960 bookable hours	booked hours, out of a total of 1056 bookable hours
0%	1.72%	5.59%
of which were staff bookings	of which were staff bookings	of which were staff bookings

Community Engagement

Engagement Officer Liz Stone has played a key role in linking the Key Centre with the wider community and building strategic relationships with stakeholders and residents. Early in our ownership, and before the building was ready for wider use, Liz held engagement events in Tower View park which offered residents a chance to share memories of the centre and hopes for the future. A strong theme was about opportunities to come together as a community, with people of all ages sharing stories about activities on Tower View, celebrating Bonfire Night, street parties and roaming far and wide across the estate and surrounding fields. In October 2025, a hugely successful bonfire night event created a link with the past and an opportunity to work closely with the school and invite families into the space. The school has a small number of pupils on roll and a strong community, many of whom are from the GRT (Gypsy Roma Traveller) community. This event was well attended and acted as a signal that things were changing at the centre and that local residents were going to be central to owning and informing the offer.

The Winter Pop Up café in December and January, funded by a significant Warm Spaces grant and led by Terrestrial, played a huge part in broadening the reach and bringing visitors from further afield to enjoy the space alongside local residents. This project ran alongside a SALC funded partnership project that brought the ‘unexpected’ to town here. The ‘Mount

Intergalactic Postal Service' agents connected isolated local households with café visitors; cartoon characters celebrating diversity designed by the school children appeared on the fences outside. A full report on that project can be found at [Appendix 6.2 and can be viewed on the website here](#). While the nursery rooms remain available as a 'meanwhile' space, we have partnered with other organisations to continue the drop-in café format in a timetabled way, and these offers have a more focused popularity with local residents and provide a benefit in signposting and connection.

Long out of action due to an awkward structural issue, the cabin building in the Community Garden has recently been repaired and is ready for use by organisations. In anticipation of this, Liz has been working with local residents to build a network of garden participants and caretakers to bring the outdoor space up to standard. The cabin will now be available to rent by groups, and offers an alternative, nature-based setting for activities. Veg is planted, access improved for wheelchair users with plans in hand to make some raised beds. The gardeners are hoping for enough produce to host an Autumn evening for the wider community complete with home grown soup.

In May we held a 'Listening Fortnight' at the Centre, asking four key questions to understand what is valued here, and to influence the shaping of the offer going forwards. As well as talking to users, this engagement was brought out to the community through door knocking and pop-up events. An inaugural and informal working group of residents and stakeholders came together in April to look at the vision and objectives, and to further shape future plans. The working group want to support the Key Centre to be a 'place for all ages and interests to share in'. They have agreed to meet twice a year and to support the capture of wider community voice at larger scale events twice a year e.g. Summer and Bonfire night. Results of this engagement work will feed into future plans, see [Appendix 6.3 which can be viewed on the website here](#).

As these structures embed, and use of the building continues to increase, Liz will step away from focused engagement here as she moves onto other projects but will continue to support at arm's length. The Key Centre is also, and will continue to be, strongly supported by our wider teams. In particular Melody, our Children and Young People's Project Officer, and Emma the Connect Somerset Champion both link services and organisations with the centre and raise the profile of the community space amongst voluntary and statutory groups.

Nursery

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.

At Council in [August 2025](#), it was agreed to put out to tender the opportunity for an independent provider to lease this space to provide a children's nursery. This will provide an income, fill an important gap for local families and enhance the community offer for the centre and the people that use this space. Various complications around peripheral land ownership have delayed the preparation of the tender, but the invitation to tender is now out in [public](#)

with a closing date of **14th July** and interviews to be held mid-August. Somerset Council's Education Places team are supporting us with their expertise in this process.

Finances

Key Centre first year			
Facilities Management		£80,066.52	
	This includes key costs as follows:		
	Utilities – Electricity	£8193.42	
	Utilities – Water and Sewage	£1648.04	
	Waste	£2046.24	
	Rates (estimated awaiting assessment)	£15000	
	Internet incl. Initial Set up		
	Statutory Compliance (incl. repairs and remedials)	£1186	
	Decorating	£3095.98	
		£6904.61	
Activities	Consumables and events costs	£348.78	
Income	Room rental income		£13009.91
TOTAL		£80,415.30	£13009.91
Staff HOURS	Centre Co-ordinator	1240 hours	
	Facilities Management (Sept 2025 start)	72	
	Communities Management	192	
	Cleaner	192	
	Stewards	88	
	(includes a one-off block of steward time April and May to allow Sarah to complete work on policies)		

Key Centre projected annual Income and Expenditure			
Facilities Management	General maintenance and running costs	£36519	
	Other key costs as follows *:		
	Utilities – Electricity	£6145	
	Utilities – Water and Sewage	£1236	
	Waste	£2050	
	Rates	£11250	
	Internet incl. Initial Set up	£1186	
	Statutory Compliance	£2250	
	Insurance	£700	
Activities	Consumables and events costs	£2000	
Income	Room rental income (KC and Cabin)		£21000
	Nursery rental income (part year 2027)		£9000
TOTAL		£63,336	£30,000
Staff HOURS	Centre Co-ordinator	1560 hours	
	Facilities Management	423	
	Communities Management	96	
	Cleaner	312	
	Stewards	120	

*These rates include a partial split for the nursery tenant as earliest they will move in is Jan 2027. Future years will see a bigger split of costs.

As we have known from the start, the Key Centre is unlikely to come in as completely cost neutral, but the rental income goes some way to mitigating the associated expenses. The first year has been the costliest in terms of bringing the building into a good state of repair and achieving compliance, while building rental income. There is scope for grant funding investment in the future either directly or via associated community organisation partners. An application to the upcoming [Queens Trust fund](#) for example could add capacity here. The real drive is the community value and the outcomes for prevention, resilience and building social capital.

Performance against objectives summary

To honour the history and heritage of the Key Centre as a local intergenerational community hub.	Engagement work has celebrated a shared history and created opportunities to collate photos, memories and bring in community from the neighbourhood and the school as a priority.
To codesign the offer here with local community and other stakeholders and create opportunities for the wider community to help shape its future offer.	Ongoing. Continual liaison with users and residents, responding to anecdotal feedback as well as formal mechanisms such as 'listening fortnight'.
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.	A working group has been established and is set to continue.
To build social capital and connectivity in this neighbourhood, enabling the delivery of early help and preventative services.	Increasing variety in offers hosted at the Key Centre, both of statutory and early help services and of more casual, connecting and network-building community offers.
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).	Increasing rental income will be further improved by availability of the cabin to rent and a nursery tenant installed from January 2027 onwards. More work to do be done regarding exploration of potential grant funding and more innovative funding streams, especially with VCFSE partners to demonstrate collaboration and unlock funding unavailable to Local Authorities.
Council aim for 2026/2027: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a thriving Community Space • Increase occupancy by 50% 	We are ahead of schedule in achieving these aims by March 2027. Feedback shows us that people already view the Centre as a 'thriving community space'. We have already exceeded the aim of increasing occupancy by 50%.

Proposals for next steps

Much has been accomplished in the first short year. We look to build on that work under this now tried and tested structure and recommend retaining the current staff associated with the building – Sarah the Co-ordinator and Tina the Cleaner – by extending their contracts by three years until June 2029.

The vision and objectives for the Key Centre have been adapted with community input as follows:

1. To honour the heritage and history of the Key Centre as an intergenerational community hub.
2. To be a place where the community and other stakeholders can make things happen and shape what's on offer.
3. To build connections with partners and within the Frome community to make it easy for people to access the services and activities they need in good time.
4. To continue to work towards a financially robust business model, maximising rental income and identifying alternative funding streams such as grants.

The engagement work outlined in this report highlights some areas for development of the offer going forwards such as:

- A focus on offers for older people and non-families.
- Creative and social offers such as arts and crafts groups and leisure activities.
- Welcome events for new residents, especially those from new housing developments nearby

We will continue to work closely with our stakeholders both hyper-local and town (or county) wide. Engagement is not 'finished' – we will continue to embed opportunities for people to feed in ideas or lead on their own.

We encourage everyone to join us for a celebration of the successes of the centre's first year, at the intergenerational Play Day event planned for **Wednesday 5 August**.

Other options considered	Alternatives to centre co-ordination such as partnering with VCFSE groups as outlined in report.
Key considerations for the Council	As above
Consultation and feedback	Extensive engagement events with community, focused Listening Fortnight, working group
Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan	Develop a thriving community space at the Key Centre, increasing occupancy by 50%.
Financial and Risk Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of loss of income from reduced rentals. • Risk of no provider coming forward for the nursery. • Risk of unexpected maintenance costs. These are referred to in our risk register and mitigated by:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment in good coordination and marketing support. • Liaising with SC and possible stakeholders, with back-up suggestions for alternative use of the nursery space. • The building is insured and good Facilities Management mitigates any surprises.
Legal / HR Implications	Commercial lease for nursery space (working with solicitors). HR implications for employment of 2 staff.
Equalities Implications	Widening reach of services and making them more easily accessible should improve impact on equalities.
Community Safety Implications	Lone working policy and procedure in place. Out of hours steward policy developed.
Climate Change and Sustainability Implications	Building has recently had investment into efficient energy system. Growing space supports environmental action and offers space for green groups.
Health and Safety Implications	As per managing a building. Facilities Manager has put in place compliance and procedures to address Health and Safety responsibilities.
Constitutional Requirements	
Background Papers	See links in paper
Report Sign-Off	Peter Wheelhouse, Town Clerk, 02/06/26

<p>Recommendations</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Approve the updated objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To honour the heritage and history of the Key Centre as an intergenerational community hub. • To be a place where the community and other stakeholders can make things happen and shape what's on offer. • To build connections with partners and within the Frome community to make it easy for people to access the services and activities they need in good time. • To continue to work towards a financially robust business model, maximising rental income and identifying alternative funding streams such as grants. 2. Approve the extension of the contracts of the Key Centre Co-ordinator and Key Centre Cleaner to June 2029
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