

Agenda item 6

For decision – Business case for Town Centre Co-ordinator

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Summary

The purpose of this report is to present a business case for the appointment of a Town Centre Coordinator to help address the priorities set out in the approved Council Plan 2025- 27 and Work Programme for 2025/26. Earlier in January, Council agreed to establish this post and a budget in principle. It is for this committee to consider that business case and decide whether to recruit the proposed post.

Background

Frome Town Centre is a vital community and business asset that requires a dedicated plan and management to thrive. Town centres are changing fast across the country both in their role and how they are managed. Frome is no exception.

The approved Council Plan 2025-27 and 2025/26 Work Programme make clear that within the current Council objectives, making the town centre cleaner, more attractive, safer and more welcoming is a priority. Key outcomes are identified as:

- The preparation of an action plan to tackle immediate concerns within the town centre
- A cleaner more visually appealing town centre with better waste management and increased recycling
- A reduced number of vacant shops
- Increased visitor and resident footfall to support our local businesses and foster a more vibrant local economy

The 2025/26 Work Programme also proposes to appoint a half-time Town Centre Officer with a responsibility to take this work forward.

The need for this appointment was discussed at Council as early as July 2023. The report highlighted amongst other things the need to develop strong business and community relationships and provide a quick response to key issues that had affected the experience of residents and visitors including but not limited to, anti-social behaviour, litter and empty properties.

Since then, a dedicated Town Centre Ranger under the supervision of the Environment Manager has been working to address day-to-day cleanliness and maintenance issues and has helped to deliver public realm improvements. A report on mechanising some of the street cleansing work is also on this agenda.

Further discussion was held around ongoing challenges at Council meetings through 2024 including:

- A desire for more events to generate more footfall (Council meeting 21 February 2024)
- Fly-posting and graffiti removal (Council meeting 13 March 2024)
- The need for better commercial waste management and recycling (Council meeting 12 June 2024). Currently, the fragmentation of commercial waste collection arrangements means that there are parts of the town centre where commercial bins are unsightly, and a solution needs to be found that improves the appearance of the central area. There are also no recycling facilities on the street which means that waste of all kinds finds its way into the standard black bins.

Opportunities have been highlighted at Council meetings too including:

- the trend towards pop-up shops that could make use of empty properties
- the potential to further develop the markets
- the introduction of a banking hub
- the potential to create a more vibrant cultural destination in the 'Frome Riverside' area around the Cheese & Grain
- the potential to make better use of community spaces such as the Library
- the opportunity for the business community to generate funding for projects through a Business Improvement District

Proposals for asset and service devolution to help realise some of this potential are set out in the Council's adopted Frome Devolution Prospectus.

Proposal

Employ a Town Centre Coordinator reporting to the Economic Development & Regeneration Manager. It is proposed that the main responsibilities would be to:

1. Engage town centre stakeholders including business and community representatives, agencies and service providers and develop an Action Plan that addresses the appearance and vibrancy of the Town Centre
2. Coordinate relevant town centre projects that are identified in the Action Plan
3. Explore the potential to establish a Business Improvement District and other funding opportunities
4. Work with the business community to address the fragmentation of commercial waste collection arrangements and improve recycling facilities
5. Respond to challenges and opportunities as they arise and coordinate appropriate action

Benefits

1. Better engagement of town centre stakeholders
2. Better coordination of town centre initiatives
3. Improved appearance of the town centre
4. Increased footfall and economic activity
5. Reduced costs for ad-hoc maintenance and cleanup

6. Improved perception of Frome, attracting greater footfall
7. Increased economic activity and potentially higher business rates revenue for Somerset Council

Costs

Salary: Making a comparison with the responsibilities of other staff, the proposal is that this post would be on a salary level SCP21-24 with a starting salary at SCP21 although that is subject to a job evaluation exercise as with all new posts. At the last Council meeting, councillors agreed to a half time (18.5 hrs per week) post and an annual budget of £33k which would need to cover the gross cost to FTC of not only pay but also the initial set up cost of resources needed by the postholder e.g. PPE, laptop etc.

There is headroom within the agreed budget to increase the hours and the benefit of this would be to enable the postholder to achieve more. 3 days per week at SCP 21 (2024/25 rates) is a salary of £19k pa (£32k pro rata) and a potential total salary cost to FTC of approximately £27k including Ers NI & pension and a National Joint Councils salary revision for 2025/26.

Equipment and resources: £5k initial setup (funded from the £33k budget for this post for 2025/26)

Operational budget allocated in 25/26 work programme:

- to bring businesses together to address commercial waste - £10k
- capital items to improve the public realm - £20k

Risks and Mitigation

Budget constraints: Seek additional funding through grants or business improvement district schemes

Resistance to change: Engage stakeholders early and communicate benefits clearly

Implementation Timeline

Month 1-2: Recruitment and onboarding

Month 3-4: Initial assessment and strategy development

Month 5-6: Implementation of quick wins

Month 7-12: Long-term project rollout and evaluation

Permanent v Fixed Term Contract

This is a demanding post. A fixed term contract of say 3 years would enable the next administration to evaluate the success of this post and decide whether to continue. However, it is considered that a permanent contract is likely to improve the prospects of a successful recruitment exercise.

Conclusions

A Town Centre Coordinator would be a valuable asset in addressing Frome's current challenges and unlocking the full potential of the town centre. There are clear benefits in terms of improvements in the appearance of the town centre, an improved experience for residents and visitors and ultimately increased economic activity. A permanent contract would be beneficial as a way of improving our prospects of a successful recruitment exercise.

Recommendations

1. Approve the recruitment of a permanent Town Centre Coordinator working 3 days per week on an expected starting salary of SCP21 (£32k pro rata) subject to job evaluation
2. Delegate authority to the Executive Assistant to undertake a job evaluation exercise to determine the final salary level
3. Delegate to the Deputy Town Clerk to draft the job description and to recruit the post as soon as possible.