

Jennifer Trotman welcomed everyone and explained the new phase for STF – 10 Host organisations will take it in turns to organise one event every 6 months, with the email bulletins being provided by a consultant. She thanked Matt Day who is leaving the Forum.

Matt thanked Jennifer and the rest of the Steering Group for their work and support. A Coordination Group from the Host organisations has now replaced the Steering Group.

Gerry Lewis and Liz Schofield from Dulverton Town Council were the first to speak. There have been two rounds of Participatory Budgeting in Dulverton over the past couple of years – Dulverton is one of 12 pilot schemes nationally. The first round of £15k came from 4 Councils, public agencies and Magna Housing. Lots of different community groups ‘bid’ at an event for funding for their projects, and the participants voted for the most deserving. A second round took place with another £10k. [More details here...](#)

The Town Council would like more control over parking. They have been leasing the car parks in the town from West Somerset Council (the owners) for the past 17 years, however the term has always been just for one year. They would like a much longer lease, or to purchase the car parks, or be granted them. Car parking enforcement is currently done by a private company based outside the county on behalf of WSC. This has caused some problems with insensitive application of fines.

There are nine different grass cutting contractors in the town, some coming quite a distance; there must be a better, more efficient way of managing this? DTC are currently looking at how the contracts could be merged, however it is a difficult area when large organisations like the County Council are involved.

(Following the event, Dulverton’s Clerk kindly sent me more details; To be honest, although somewhat frustrating, the issue is not as great in Dulverton as many other Town/ Parish Councils as there are few areas of grass which are the responsibility of other or higher authorities; and what there are tend to be comparatively small, e.g. grass verges etc.

Having a Parish Lengthsman enables us to target those areas, as they arise, which are in need of attention, (particularly when complaints are received from residents). The cost therefore is reasonably low at £6.278 hourly. We do not liaise with the relative authorities, but simply get on with the job. If they turn up to carry out the work at a later day, so be it.

Most appear to have long term contracts with outside contractors, which they appear unwilling or unable to change. The cost of undertaking this work last year amounted to around £525.00.

Ultimately members would like to have formal arrangements involving all parties concerned, and are actively pursuing an agreement with West Somerset Council with regards the transfer of assets of the car parks in exchange for taking over various responsibilities including grass cutting.)

Questions – how many people are involved in these initiatives? Difficult to pin down, but there are 10 Town Councillors and a Clerk in the [Council](#). We have Full Council meetings and 5 Sub-Committees, including a Localism Sub-Committee. The Council owns or manages 24 different assets. Dulverton is quite an active place – there are many groups and societies, the Dulverton Voice free paper and a litter picking group.

- What's the involvement of Housing Associations? Magna are the main HA – they have 364 homes across Exmoor. 12 homes were recently built in Dulverton. Somerton representatives were surprised at the lack of development pressure – this must be due to being inside a National Park.

- What's the broadband speed like? You can get up to 6mb download. Corinne Matthews pointed out that the Connecting Devon and Somerset campaign is currently bringing superfast broadband to Somerset town. Gerry thinks rural broadband is twice as expensive to the user as urban.

Graham Sizer, Minehead Chamber spoke about the Community Right to Bid, part of the Localism Bill. Minehead Development Trust (of which Graham is a board member) was created with the intention of taking on the Old Hospital - a collection of Grade II Listed buildings of various ages in a key position on the town's main street. There are 40-50 rooms on the ground floor alone; 3 floors in total. Intention is to create a multi-purpose community centre with visitor information service and workspace for startup businesses. Would also link through to the town's Blenheim Gardens.

Initially the Dev Trust was kick-started by an award of £6k by Somerset Towns Forum to fund consultancy which helped them develop their aims and governance – they are now have charitable status and are a Company Ltd by Guarantee. They won a Communitybuilders grant of £50k to fund a Feasibility Study. They have been talking with the owners, the NHS, since the start.

The Coalition Government's Localism drive sounded great – 'giving power back to the community'. Lots of talk around asset transfer too. So the Trust were quite confident. However, Primary Care Trust buildings like the Old Hospital have been handed over to a new body in Whitehall – NHS Property Services Company – or 'PropCo' and put onto the market. The Trust responded by registering the site as an asset of Community value with the Local

Authority (under the [Right to Bid](#) this gives a 6 month moratorium for community groups to prepare their bid).

The building needs £800k of renovations, plus there are lots of covenants and restrictions. PropCo want £1m for it. This is over the top and commercial developers think so too.

So is the Right to Bid a useful tool? Not in Graham's opinion – if a landowner inflates the price beyond what is reasonable there's still no sale, it just delays things for 6 months. In the meantime the Taxpayer is funding security costs of £100k pa, plus essential maintenance costs as the building is deteriorating.

Questions – who built it and have they any influence still or covenants on usage? The Luttrell family built the Hospital but no covenants that restrict usage.

- how much has the process cost to date? Around £100k, paid for by grants and fundraising. The Trust is confident of gaining support from the Heritage Lottery Fund if the owner wanted to sell to them.

Statement from John Richards, Watchet Chamber – he sympathised with the Trust's position, but thought the Right to Bid had some use in 'flushing out' landowners – so that sales of assets with a community value didn't happen without local people knowing.

Statement from Ian Neale, Somerton Town Council – Somerset County Council reneged on an asset transfer to STC of a piece of land. SCC are trying to 'sweat its assets' and is not interested in giving things away for little or no profit.

[STF visited Minehead and the Old Hospital project in 2012...](#)

Charles Wood and Gerlinde Rambauser, Vision4Frome then spoke about the Cheese & Grain building in Frome. It's a key building in the town, used as a venue for music and other performances, as well as for markets and by community groups. It was also a, possibly the, catalyst for the formation of the group of concerned locals who became Independents for Frome, the current administration of the Town with 10 out of the 17 Councillors. Many people were concerned by the way the previous Council was trying to influence the running of the Cheese & Grain.

It is owned by Mendip District Council, with Frome Town Council having a 100 year lease. A Trust was formed to run the building, and FTC sub-leased part of the building to the Cheese and Grain Charity, The charity was not eligible to apply to the Lottery's Rebuilding Communities fund, as the building is not located in a deprived part of town. However, it was granted £30 000 by the Community Builders Fund to conduct a detailed feasibility study.

Based on the findings of the study, FTC has raised a Public Works Loan of £500k to pay for essential repairs, renovation and modifications. While a large chunk of the money is being spend on the FTC controlled part of the building, the remainder will enhance the multi-

functionality of the building including creating 4 meeting rooms, creating a better bar and Café area, and a startup hub for small businesses of which the Frome area has many. The plan is to be totally self-sufficient once the refurbishment is completed. Currently the Cheese and Grain generates about 75% of the income to meet the running costs of the community facility. The remaining 25% of the costs were met by a series of £35,000 SLAs p.a. by FTC. The agreement between the Cheese and Grain Charity and FTC is, for FTC to stop the SLA in April 2014 and use this money to repay the Public Works Loan.

This arrangement must be seen in the wider context of regenerating the town centre. The decision by the Town Council to use the services of an experienced funding consultant has attracted new funding streams for a range of projects which had been identified as a priority in the Frome Community Plan, which was generated by Vision for Frome.

Questions – how many can the hall hold? Around 850, depending on the type of event. The Farmers Market has 32 tables.

- has your MP helped at all? No, not even when the Town Council was a Lib Dem administration.

Statement from Charles Wood – there is such a lot happening in the town at the moment, including the Frome Supermarket events (2 street markets and a Flea market combining on Sundays), the Neighbourhood Plan, taking on management of open spaces, converting a former MDC-owned public convenience into a kiosk style art gallery/venue and cafe, a town centre public realm improvement scheme, plans for the Saxonvale development with 2 opposing groups and the town at large being consulted, and quite a few more. There is a real will by many people to make these things happen and add value to the town.

Thanks to all delegates and speakers.

Matt Day

Somerset Towns Forum

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