

## Somerset Towns Forum event, Fenny Castle, 12<sup>th</sup> Dec 2012

### Notes

Speakers had around ten minutes each.

**Charles Wood, Vision for Frome** – Frome's Community Plan is very much alive, with the Town Council using it to inform their work plan. The challenge now is that the projects from the Community Plan the Town Council are progressing need funding (in a difficult financial climate); how do we fund these key projects? Mendip District Council (MDC) under funding pressure; Frome Town Council has made good progress and has more capacity to progress things with new staff, but like other Town Councils has a 4 year tenure so must plan for short-term as well as medium; Somerset County Council is involved in the town on Highways issues.

Question from Dave Mitton, Wellington Town Council - is there much development in Frome? If so have Section 106 (s106) and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding been explored?

The new Frome Medical Practice has produced some s106 which V4F and the Town Council are progressing with MDC.

Neil Howlett took up status of s106s for Frome with MDC. MDC now employ a dedicated s106 Officer and have proposed a protocol for consultation with parish/town councils on the content of s106 agreements, and monitoring them locally so s106 funds are better targeted according to local wishes and agreements implemented.

Proposal for Saxonvale and likely new supermarket in town centre expected, with associated s106/CIL and New Homes Bonus but not on table yet.

Question - New Homes Bonus (NHB) – how much has MDC got and how are you going to spend it?

Not sure, but New Homes Bonus is a concern as MDC want 60% of all NHB for themselves.

Comment - not much real difference in what pro- and anti- supermarket groups in Frome want (one wants food-only supermarket, other wants non-food too).

Comment – Roger noticed that larger towns suffer from the political tenure issue. SSDC have instigated discussions about funding from new devs. How to take people with you regards upping the precept. Martock employ a fundraiser. £100k income in 2 years with a part-time Officer.

**Roger House, Priory Community Association & Saturday Produce Market** – in the town centre; Castle Green complete, more events planned, Museum renovation, more boats using the river Tone. Saturday Produce Market struggling. Taunton Town Centre Company fallen out with local traders; narrowly failed to get 2<sup>nd</sup> term as Business Improvement District (at referendum). Town Centre Partnership using empty shops to promote events. No Xmas lights until Cllr K Durden stepped in.

Key issue for Roger is that Taunton is unparished (the only unparished area of Somerset). Roger is trying to link together existing organisations in the areas outside of the town centre to work better together, lobby for more investment and ultimately to become Parishes. Finance is odd – precept for

old Taunton Town is £2.80 for band D, decided by Exec. but frozen by Govt. He has tried to get clarification on where this money spent.

Comment by Dave Mitton, also Chair of SALC (Somerset Association of Local Councils) – Taunton Deane's political leadership took a political decision at Local Government Re-organisation in 1974 that Taunton should be unparished. It is now the only unparished area in the County and cannot raise a precept. The area's funding is frozen. Two options to become parished – 10% of local population need to request a referendum or Taunton Deane could carry out a governance review to introduce parishing. The town could be covered by one local council like Weston Super Mare or split into a number of separate parishes. Taunton has two of the most deprived wards.

Discussion on Precepts – Govt is capping Local Authorities' (LA) Council Tax rises. But show what comms get for Precept i.e. perception. Don't use % rise but £/week i.e. 'a coffee/pint a week to get regular gully clearing/street cleaning'.

Comment – Neighbourhood Planning could be a route to get what they want; can create a Neighbourhood Forum in non-parished areas if 21 people sign up for it. Planning Authority (TDBC) have a statutory minimum they have to provide to NP groups/Forums (see STF's report on last event on website). However this will create expenses for the LA so they may not be keen to support it...

**Liz Spurgeon, Aster Communities** – Matt will email out her document. Moving to a neighbourhood Budget instead of grants. £16k per area, decided by panel of 10 residents (voted in?). Follows the Neighbourhood approach of the past couple of years. Money can be spent on community projects (inc events, carnivals, youth work etc). Tenant Forums ceasing.

Q – any Aster homes in West Somerset? Mainly Mendip, see map in document.

**Neil Howlett, Frome & District Chamber of Commerce** – a lot of economic activity happening in the town. FTC employing a Econ Dev & Regen Manager – a success so far. Benchmarking taking place to get evidence of town centre vitality and shoppers needs. Using that and new database to work out churn rates. Happy to share the results with other towns. Noting Charles had mentioned short-termism – Neil had looked into history and 3 strategic projects for the town were identified in the 1980's and still 'live'. Frome SuperMarkets Days – 2000 people attending, coming from wide area (as far as Salisbury & Gloucester). Roads closed (Sunday). 170+ stalls. Great success. A good example of MDC and FTC working with private organisations – they were developing that as a joint venture for next year.

Bridge repairs by Mendip – example of contractor not doing work; Neil emailed photos of problem, got sorted.

The standard in contracts for street cleaning are set by Zones and Grades. The Zones should be on maps. Grades are set by a [DEFRA Code](#) which has photographs illustrating the standards required. ; Communities can ensure contractors are kept to those standards if they know what they are. Neil has publicised how to complain in Frome. DEFRA Code;

<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/quality/local/litter/code/documents/cop-litter.pdf>

Parking & civil enforcement – issue of new enforcement staff giving tickets in areas they have no powers as not on SCC map of parking areas- Parking regulation is defined by Parking Orders which defines restrictions by reference to maps. These are available on the SCC website;

<http://www.somerset.gov.uk/irj/public/services/directory/service?rid=/wpccontent/Sites/SCC/Web%20Pages/Services/Services/Environment/Mendip%20parking%20and%20waiting%20restrictions>

Frome ‘Independence Day’ event – Nigel Dowdney from Norfolk gave a good session on creating a Buy Local network – see <http://www.buylocalnorfolk.co.uk/>

Session on sharing information between communities on how to challenge planning apps useful.

Comment – why are SCC paying £20k of Tesco’s planning costs in Bridgwater? They own the land, they want to bring development forwards quickly.

‘Towards a 21<sup>st</sup> century Agora’ by Urban Pollinators – recommended reading;

<http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/wp-content/plugins/downloads-manager/upload/C21%20agora.pdf>

**John Richards, Watchet Chamber** – lots of group activity in the town but can’t work together. Money and willingness. Not enough people doing things. Chamber has 65 members, but a real struggle to get them engaged/working on anything outside their business. 2<sup>nd</sup> problem – get nothing from WSC; aware they are in big trouble but do waste money. Not good at s106 funding.

Comment by Roger Powell - Are we talking about a structural problem of having district councils who cover both towns and large rural areas? Discussion followed on the missed unitary opportunity.

**Graham Sizer, Minehead Chamber** – just come from West Somerset Council financial crisis meeting; WSC need to save 35% of rev budget. Worst scenario was going down to 10 staff! Minehead Visioning Group set up 3 years ago, has brought in £0.25m and matched by s106 funding from a supermarket. Taken on a Visioning Manager to coordinate progress and deliver certain key projects. Looking at a BID. Dev Trust and Chamber working well. WSC Officers have helped to make this progress, would be a shame to go to a commissioning authority/virtual authority.

WSC situation (where a Govt Minister has suggested an option that will massively change service delivery) brings into question the whole Localism agenda – Town Councils should be given more say in these decisions – they know best what the community want. But Govt says one thing and does another.

**Roger Powell, Martock Parish Council & Community Partnership** – do we play with devolving of non-statutory services? Or do we have no choice if we want to keep a certain quality of life?

In Youth services they decided to create a cluster of 6 parishes, employing youth workers and deploying them where needed. With a prof support org. Working well BUT has to be locally funded in the long term.

Street cleaning, gully clearing, potholes – SCC sucking back to absolute minimum. i.e. safety not good quality, so we have to provide it ourselves. Model for these kind of services is – SCC and SSDC can provide the infrastructure/eqpt, Martock can provide people (i.e. pay them). They have a man who

is cleaning streets using SSDC-provided equipment and finding potholes and updating details via a SCC mobile device direct to Atkins.

To answer the question of “why are we paying twice for these services”? Answer is “that’s the way it is”.

**Jackie Swabey, Martock Parish Council** - Job Club in Martock – JobCentrePlus advisor time with each jobseeker is reducing, and jobseekers having issues with complexities of the work programme. So Martock now has its own Job Club with 1 part-time staff and volunteers, funded mainly by grants found by fundraiser, some from MPC. Helped 8 people into work so far since Sept. The issue is where is the continuation funding coming from? – will have to precept in the longer term. They meet in youth centre so free. People really are looking for work...plus mothers of jobseekers attend to help them. Building confidence, free use of internet, interview skills, CV writing, appearance advice.

**Mike Taylor, Axbridge Town Council** – is Axbridge big enough to take on these extra services? Population 2000. Mgmt of these services will be a big issue unless they get more capacity i.e. staff. Same faces seen. Now its falling to volunteers; some are also Town Cllrs. Created a Community Partnership to try and move the bigger issues forward, inc traffic improvements. It’s working well re liaison and moving things forward but capacity as issue.

Comment from Charles Wood – At SCC consultation - small towns and villages wanting playing fields, youth worker support for clubs etc, but Frome has these facilities already and is seeking different/more youth services - need funding for other active groups e.g. ROUTES drop-in centre rather than just those well established e.g. YMCA. Need more covered community spaces for young people to congregate safely, both inside and outdoors.

Comment from Roger Powell – 10 years ago Martock had 15 Cllrs, £60k budget and just a graveyard; now still has 15 Cllrs but 8 employees and £0.5m budget. Capacity can be built. Having staff allows extra services to be delivered but comes at a cost (and with 8 staff they have a HR need now).

**Dorothy Anne Bryant, Vision for Frome & Friends of the River Frome** – good news, 5 years ago an old path by the river was a mess, playpark disintegrating. Friends of River Frome lobbied for a linear park (reflected in V4F-produced Community Plan) to improve the river and be better for wildlife. Area has improved immensely. TC got ownership of the play area from MDC to make this happen. Sustrans cyclepath in development. BMX track is buzzing! FoRF have regular litterpicks.

Comment - A great example of people taking ownership. Much less antisocial behaviour now its ‘cared for’.

**Dave Mitton, Wellington Town Council** – the Town Council didn’t seem to ‘lead’ until they got involved in the MCTI. Regards youth services, they have a different solution; a CIC was setup, SCC seedcorn money, provides the service. Will need to get funding from various sources to continue. Has a building (owned by SCC, given temporary use to get service working); half of it to be let to get income.

Wellington Chamber (only 40 members) changed to Wellington Business Association, and new Chair – will look outwards beyond retailers.

Comment from Neil Howlett – Biz Assoc/Chambers need strong leaders, need to do things. Not a single model for Chambers – all towns different with different needs/targets. The Somerset Chamber tends to suck in the larger biz and then the town chambers get the smaller bizs only. Som Chamber organised a useful towns-focussed event a year ago then nothing since.

Comment by John Richards - he used adverts on the Watchet website to get people to become Chamber members

Comment by Graham Sizer – Minehead started doing something – the Information Centre – and has drawn in new members since that opened.

Dave Mitton – Wellington is working on its Neighbourhood Plan and at the same time developing its Parish Plan which was based on a Vision document which was prepared a few years ago.

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Thanks to all delegates for such a lively and useful discussion.

Matt Day

Somerset Towns Forum

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