

Discovery Report

Public Square | Frome Town Council

Year One 2019

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Background

Many people are working to improve local decision making and citizen participation, but this innovative work is often dispersed in different projects, authorities and disciplines. It therefore can't realise its full potential to bring about system change.

Public Square is a two-year action research programme that responds to this by investigating what is needed to improve participation as a system. In its first year, Public Square is working with a small number of councils to understand the challenges and opportunities around meaningful citizen participation in decision making and develop, pilot and share innovative approaches.

[Frome Town Council](#) (FTC) is one of those councils. It has gained a reputation in the past five years of being an exemplar of participation in decision making, with an agile approach to achieving that goal. Although, the council has taken a fairly traditional approach in measuring impact and outcomes of engagement projects, with a focus on discussion and little written evaluation.

Context in Frome

A concern for the Public Square project is finding conclusions and practices that can reasonably be generalised beyond the pilot councils. Although the first cohort of pilot councils will be too small to draw solid conclusions from that will scale across contexts, we note here some potentially relevant background information and discuss briefly at the end of this document places where that context appears particularly significant, and where lessons learned may be more broadly applicable.

Structure and politics

Frome Town Council is a parish council inside a two-tier council area, being within Mendip District Council and Somerset County Council. This means that different functions can be carried out by three different bodies - with parish council duties being constrained to a few areas (FTC highlights its responsibility for parks and open space, and community events). In addition to power to raise and spend money on specific purposes, the parish council can lobby higher levels of government - as Frome's website puts it: "*[t]he Town Council acts as a consultee and lobbying force with both the County and District Councils, putting forward the wishes and needs of the local community.*" A key strategy for the Council has been to take an assisting and enabling role in order to create an environment that allows other organisations to be successful for the benefit of the town.

Frome Town Council is currently run by Independents for Frome (IfF)¹, who represent all seats (and have run the council since 2011) - this is an explicitly non party-political group, with a “*non-confrontational way of working and a participatory approach to democracy*” that has inspired 15-20 other parish and town councils so far.² The story of the inception and success of IfF has been documented by former council leader Peter MacFadyen in a book, Flatpack Democracy.³ There aren't readily available statistics on turnout in town and parish councils, but the 2011 and 2015 elections Frome Town Council elections had a turnout of around 56% and 62% respectively, strikingly high compared to the usual turnout in local elections for principal authorities of between 30 and 40%.⁴ In 2019 the turnout for Frome was around 36%, closer to this figure. One aspect of IfF's approach of significance here is their ethos of representing the community and acting for it, or acting in partnership with community groups. In total 25% of the total expenditure of FTC goes directly to 'not for profit' community groups.

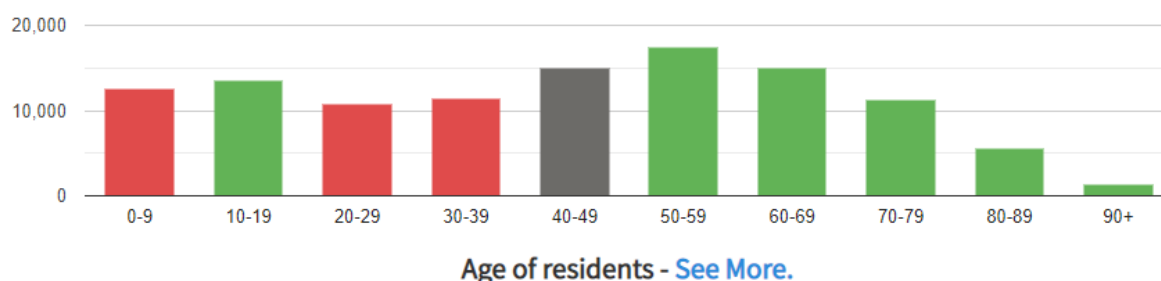
Budget

The annual FTC budget is around £1,340,000 in total (approx. £50 a head, but finance is derived from Council Tax). This is difficult to put in comparative perspective, but it represents the equivalent of 8% of Mendip District Council's budget. The budget for Mendip is above average - coming in 67 of 201 (at the bottom of the top third) for non metropolitan districts.

Demographics

Whilst it's a “small town”, the population of 27,345 is the fourth largest in Somerset. The town profile shows the change in population over time was typical of Somerset, while it also has the highest population density of a Town in Somerset.

Mendip's [age distribution](#) shows a slightly larger number of over 50s and a lower number of 20-39s than the population as a whole.



¹ <https://iffrome.org.uk/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jun/12/how-to-take-over-your-town-the-inside-story-of-a-local-revolution>

³ <https://www.flatpackdemocracy.co.uk/>

⁴ <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8060/CBP-8060.pdf>

The Town Profile shows that Frome's population is younger than that of Somerset, but still older than the national average and that Frome's ethnicity distribution is similarly in line with Somerset, which is more 'White British' [than the population as a whole](#).

Migration

Mendip had a small positive intake (351) in 2017. The Frome [Town Profile](#) explores further: *"Much of the net inflow of internal migrants came from neighbouring BaNES. However, Mendip had the largest net flow OUT amongst 16-24 year-olds of any district in Somerset, with Bristol the largest net beneficiary. With Frome's proximity to BaNES and Bristol, it is likely that such a population flow, especially amongst those of student age, would be evident in Frome."*

Technology Use

Facebook is used as a place to discuss local issues, with several relatively well-used groups, such as [Keep Frome Local](#), [Spotted Frome](#), and the [Frome Town Council](#) page. The council also run a [Twitter account](#) but don't experience much engagement from people in the area - a significant part of the audience is made up of people from elsewhere with an interest in democracy and participation. The [council website](#) is hosted externally and uses Wordpress. The officers have made use of cheap and free general purpose tools, such as SurveyMonkey, but there hasn't been a lot of experimentation with digital tools that are specifically civically focused.

Public Square in Frome

The focus of our work in Frome is the [People's Budget](#) programme. FTC has been experimenting with participatory budgeting in some form since 2012⁵, with varying approaches. It has been seen as one way to build community and engage residents - a key principle of Independents for Frome. Over time, FTC have varied the programme in a number of ways: it has funded both projects delivered by community groups and by the council, and the funding has been decided by online and paper voting (with the voting done at an event, or at the voter's convenience over a longer period of time), and with a number of different themes - parks, events, and improving the town as a whole.

Most recently the People's Budget programme for 2018/19 made £35,000 available from the council's budget for community events and projects, voted on by residents. £25,000 of this budget was used for events, with voting by the community taking place at a special 'People's Budget Panel' event. £10,000 was allocated to one of three

⁵ <https://www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Agenda-Item-8-Appendix-8.1-Participatory-Budgeting.pdf>

projects, decided upon in the Town Vote, with voting for all residents over the age of 10 open for a month on the council website, by phone or in person. The Town Vote projects in 2018 were contentious, and provoked lots of debate and participation. One area of critique was that it was not clear to most residents where the projects to be voted on came from, and they were seen by some as frivolous.

2019 will be the third Town Vote, and the aspiration is to get real, meaningful, bottom up ideas for the projects by focusing the programme on idea generation and deliberation before the vote.

Our Goals

The primary purpose of this project is to explore ways to improve citizen participation in decision making at the local level in Frome, using the People's Budget Town Vote as a focus. As an action research project, our approach is to work with the council in the following ways:

- **Research:** Use a variety of research approaches to understand the context in which participation is happening in Frome.
- **Prototype:** Prototype, and support the council in prototyping ways that Frome residents can more actively participate in generating the ideas to be voted on in the Town Vote, focusing on quick wins and signposting longer term solutions.
- **Evaluate:** Evaluate those prototype approaches from the point of view of residents and council stakeholders, with a few simple and specific target outcomes.
- **Share our approach:** Document and share our user research work, findings, prototypes and other outputs openly in order to gather wider input and feedback, and so others can learn from this work.

We've defined six research questions driving our work in Year One of Public Square. With reference to Frome, these were:

Q1: From the participants' perspective, what defines meaningful and worthwhile participation in the context of the Town Vote?

Q2: What are the barriers they face to meaningful participation?

Q3: What's the current workflow for idea generation and evaluation with respect to the Town Vote?

Q4: What are the barriers and enabling factors within the council to meaningful citizen participation?

Q5: What are the organisational requirements around any new process?

Q6: How can the stakeholders' views and experiences inform people who wish to implement meaningful and worthwhile participatory processes in this or similar contexts?

What We've Done

We approached the discovery phase of this work from several different angles:

- 1. Desk research.** Developing an understanding of the context in Frome, particularly around the Town Vote, by reviewing existing documentation and resources, particularly around the history and ambition of the programme. Getting a wider perspective on similar work and the way in which it is framed by reviewing academic and grey literature from the field of democratic participation.
- 2. Remote and in person interviews.** Learning about the way engagement is done in Frome by speaking with the council team about past projects, the current state of the Town Vote, its online and offline elements, and in particular the discussions around improving it.
- 3. Technical discovery.** Reviewing the technical context and the tools used previously in the programme.
- 4. Action research.** Working with FTC officers to design and deliver the Town Vote element of the People's Budget for 2019. We'll touch on this work in this report, but it will be described in more detail in the prototyping report.

What We've Learned

From the participants' perspective, what defines meaningful and worthwhile participation in the context of the Town Vote?

- The time, effort and planning needed to participate in the People's Budget needs to be justified by the outcome for participants - and experience shows that relatively few people will attend a day or half day voting event.
- For some people in Frome, there is meaning in civic participation in itself. They will participate consistently but experience fatigue in the face of ongoing engagement.
- For others, the provenance and content of the decision is important - is there a problem to be solved? Is it one the community cares about? Are the options being presented on their merit?

As a small council working in an agile way to try different ways to engage people in democratic processes, FTC hasn't had the resources to collect structured evaluation data on what has made participation in the People's Budget programme meaningful and worthwhile to people who have participated. However, as the programme elements have changed - notably in what the theme of the budget is, and how people are invited to participate, the level of participation has varied quite significantly. On the rationale that people will only participate if they judge it to be meaningful and worthwhile, the levels of participation at different times may give some guidance as to what influences that decision.

As the programme has evolved, there have been various opportunities offered for residents to participate - one that has been fairly constant has been the opportunity to vote on a final shortlist of projects. The level of commitment needed to vote has varied considerably, with some versions of the programme allowing online and paper voting over a period of weeks, and others requiring in-person attendance at a voting event.

The lowest level of voting was seen in 2017 in the events part of the programme - around 0.25% of the town population voted. In this iteration of the programme, voting was a whole day, in-person commitment that required pre-registration and the proposals were for a varied set of events run by community groups. Feedback from the day suggested it was too long, there were too many projects, there was not enough information provided about the budgets for each project, and the charisma of the person pitching influenced the vote.

The highest level of voting was also in 2017 - around 4% of the population voted in the Town Vote element of the programme, which concerned what to do about the toilets in a park in the town, which were closed due to vandalism. In this case, votes could be cast online or on paper. The vote in this case was emotive, and residents were ‘engaged in meaningful debate about how budgets in Frome are spent’.

In 2018, the Town Vote element of the programme again allowed online and paper votes, and the options to be voted on were a town orchard, a dog poo powered light, and water slide. Fewer people voted (less than 3% of the population), and there was critique that it was unclear where the projects to be voted on had originated, and that the projects were frivolous. In the online voting process, where some demographic information was collected, teenagers and young adults were under-represented across both votes, but in the 2018 vote this under-representation of teenagers and young adults was more significant.

Age range	2017 Town Vote	2018 Town Vote
0–12	1.1%	0.5%
13–18	4.8%	0.8%
19–24	3.0%	1.6%
25–34	15.5%	7.0%
35–44	25.9%	22.6%
45–54	16.6%	23.0%
55–64	14.1%	23.0%
65–74	14.8%	16.9%
75+	4.4%	4.7%

This suggests two conclusions. The first is that the amount of time, effort and planning needed for participation is a significant factor. This was also an issue for the community organisations involved in the version of the programme where organisations applied for community grants which were then voted on by residents. The second year of this model had only one application as the promotion required from the community groups was too time consuming given the uncertainty over the grant. This finding aligns with research done by the Center for Civic Design in the US around voting in national elections:

“At dozens of points between learning that there is an election coming up to actually getting a ballot in hand, voters face hurdles and hindrances that, if the scales of trade

offs are weighted against taking part, people drop out of voting. [...] We think that what they're really asking is something like, What is important enough about this election for me to invest time and energy? What will happen in this election that will affect me and people I'm close to so much that I should do whatever it takes to vote? They're asking, Is it worth the effort?"⁶

The second conclusion is that regardless of the ease of voting (which was about the same in 2017 and 2018), people need a relevant purpose to participate (as described in a paper by Suzana Valentine⁷) and that the 2017 vote was more successful in this respect.

In 2013, the council undertook a project, Participate Frome⁸, focused on participation across the board. One of the observations made in this project was that there were around 200 people who regularly attended events and meetings and many of those people were reporting fatigue. For these people democratic and civic participation is the relevant purpose in itself that makes the use of their time meaningful. For others this is not enough.

Perhaps the questions about what was to be done about the toilets in Victoria Park felt relevant to more people than a choice between three different projects because it is directly addressing an existing problem - the decision posed is slightly more deliberative as well as participative in the sense that it offers people a chance in "*reaching a shared practical judgement*."⁹ It's clear that a decision needs to be made about the toilets, it's not clear that a choice between three very different projects *needs* to be made, outside the context of the programme, except in the abstract sense that decisions about the overall budget for FTC need to be made.

The question of the 'sweet spot' of constructive deliberative engagement around issues of significance is one with wider resonance. The councillors and officers we spoke to referenced the challenge of striking a balance between the desire for consensus and cohesion and allowing for the expression of genuine tensions and decisions. On the other end of the spectrum from risking 'token' engagement around uncontroversial projects, it was noted that a lot of the discussion on social media around the council was 'venting' and reacting against decisions or prospective decisions. The question was posed: *'How do you engage people when there's nothing to oppose?'*

⁶ <https://medium.com/civic-designing/the-epic-journey-of-american-voters-ed07bd0e6c57>

⁷ As discussed in <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Meaningful-participation-from-the-participants'-Valentine/0e9d6ebfe2ac10b8f2de427a7c5b6d11c27bfb40>

⁸ <https://www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/your-community/community-projects/participate-frome/>

⁹ David Owen and Graham Smith, "Survey Article: Deliberation, Democracy, and the Systemic Turn," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 23 (2) (2015): 228.

It is worth finally noting that the number of participants voting is obviously not the whole story in terms of participation in the programme, and there have been some examples in the programme of significant participation at a much smaller scale, such as the individual who came forward to offer specific design skills to help deliver the orchard project that won the 2018 vote.

What are the barriers they face to meaningful participation?

- Potential lack of awareness of opportunities to participate, although the council has made creative efforts to share them.
- A multi-tier council arrangement presents a barrier as it's unclear how responsibilities are divided up among the different tiers of local government.
- A sense in the more deprived areas of the town of exclusion - that the participation opportunities are 'not for us'.
- Social risk in some forms of participation in a small community e.g. being identified with a project idea that doesn't get many votes.

One of the first barriers to any form of democratic participation is that the person who might participate needs to know that there is an opportunity, or create that opportunity themselves. The Centre for Civic Design notes that in the US, even for national elections, potential voters met hurdles in basic information access - getting information about what's on the ballot, and when and where elections are held in plain language.¹⁰

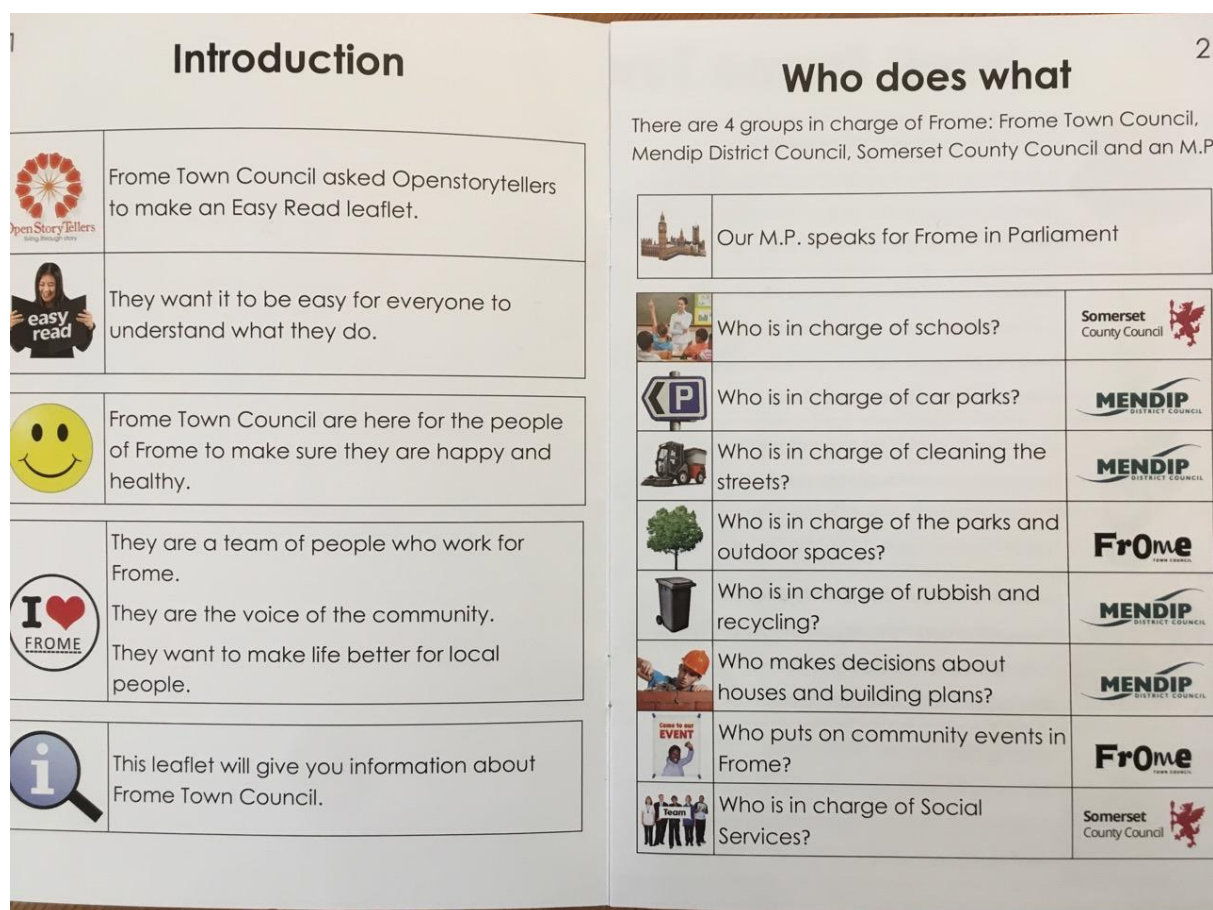
FTC is unusual for a parish level council in that it employs a Marketing and Communications Manager, whose role explicitly includes communication around the People's Budget and other participation opportunities. She and other officers for the council will use whatever set of media seems appropriate in order to communicate opportunities:

- There's a free newspaper for the town, the Frome Times.
- Flyers from the council have been delivered accompanying it to every house in Frome.
- There's also a paid newspaper, the Frome Standard.
- Posters are put up around the town.
- Social media use (as described in the background section of this document).
- A mailing list for the council with around 600 people signed up to it.

¹⁰ <https://medium.com/civic-designing/the-epic-journey-of-american-voters-ed07bd0e6c57>

- A set of 16 community notice boards across Frome, which are updated by 'noticeboard ambassadors'.

As a parish council in an area with a two tier council, a key specific challenge for participation in general in decision making can be simply in people understanding what each level of the council is responsible for, with respect to the issues that people care about. This has been something FTC have tried to address directly, working with [Open Storytellers](#), a charity that works to enrich and empower the lives of people who have learning disabilities and autism, to produce a simple clear leaflet explaining who is responsible for what, distributed in the Frome Times to every address in town.



In several interviews, the issue was raised that despite the emphasis within the council on participation and giving people permission to start new initiatives, with advice and support from the council, there are areas in Frome, such as the estates on the edge of town, where people feel that nobody cares about them, that the centre of town gets all the attention, and that improvements made, and the public image of the town, are not for their benefit.

In terms of the council's role, there's a tension between 'advertising' the community and exacerbating the feeling in some sections of the community that the attractive image being presented is 'not for us', and feeling excluded.

One of our interviewees also expressed that it felt like there was an element of social risk in earlier versions of participatory budgeting in Frome, in that groups were encouraged to make applications for money from the budget which were then submitted to an online vote. This is worth considering specifically as we think about getting ideas from the community - whether there's a risk of social embarrassment if people don't vote for a particular idea.

What's the current workflow for idea generation and evaluation with respect to the Town Vote?

- Ideas for the Town Vote have originated in the community, but their provenance has not always been clear. The public process for both the Town Vote and Events has started with a shortlist of ideas.
- Evaluation has mainly been in the form of papers taken to council, and the minuted discussions on them.

The Town Vote element of the People's Budget has previously run in 2017 and 2018. In 2017 the voting concerned what to do with the public toilets in Victoria Park. Detailed information was given to residents about the trade-offs presented in the vote.¹¹ In 2018, councillors prepared a shortlist of 3 projects to vote on "*originating from ideas from residents*"¹², projects that "*as a council we 'would like to do' but that didn't have budget allocated.*"¹³ In both cases, the origins in the community of the ideas put forward to the vote was not clearly communicated. Both years incorporated online and in person voting - and in both years, SurveyMonkey was used for the online voting. In 2017, voting was open for 17 days and in 2018, for 30 days.

The other element of the People's Budget in these years has been the Events part. In 2018, this was £25k fund, with up to £10k allocated per project. The council prepared a shortlist of seven projects to vote on. Applicants were asked to explain their project in a

¹¹ <https://www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Things-to-think-about.pdf>

¹² <https://www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Agenda-Item-8-Appendix-8.1-Participatory-Budgeting.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Agenda-item-7-For-decision-Participatory-Budgeting-in-2019-20.pdf>

one minute film each. 70% of the overall vote came from a single, in-person, half-day voting event. 120 people registered to vote, but only 71 actually did (~0.3% of town population). Attendees were given a booklet showing the project budgets, were shown the project videos, and were given a chance to ask questions of the applicants. The remaining 30% of the overall vote came from 300 Year Eight pupils who voted as part of the Make It Happen Youth Conference, the week before.

In the last two years, the programme has been primarily delivered by two officers - the Marketing and Communication Manager and Community Development Manager, with delegated authority from the council.

There hasn't been a big emphasis on written evaluation of the programme - evaluations has been mainly in the form of papers written by the officers to go to council meetings and the discussion on those papers in the meetings, which is minuted.

What are the barriers and enabling factors within the council to meaningful citizen participation?

Enabling factors:

- Sense of place, ability to raise and spend money locally.
- Culture of change and experimentation, contributed to by small scale, and distancing from national politics.
- Informality in meetings, plain language in communications.
- Commitment to community participation, fast feedback loops in terms of changing physical space.
- Close work with community groups.
- Specific efforts to engage younger people.

Barriers:

- Limited and contended time on the part of officers who deliver the programme.
- Difficulty of balancing roles and effort from residents, councillors, officers.
- Tensions around the relationships between representative and participatory democracy.
- Competing opportunities for participation, lack of clarity on how they fit together.

Enabling factors

The relatively small administrative area covered by FTC supports meaningful participation in several different ways. There's significant overlap between the administrative area covered by FTC, and the place that most people would identify as where they live (unlike, for example, Calderdale). FTC has a sense of place, and the ability to raise money (via the precept) that will be visibly spent locally in that place. The small scale of the council also means that as an officer or councillor, it's possible to find the right people to get involved in a question because you already know them and their concerns. It also enables councillors and officers to pilot ideas informally with members of the community.

The influx of independent councillors with a mandate to do things differently, perhaps combined with the relatively low stakes of a parish council, has enabled a culture of experimentation in terms of democratic participation. The two councillors we spoke to both referenced an attempt to convene a randomly selected set of residents as part of the process of developing a neighbourhood plan. 200 people were invited, but only 10 people came. This was viewed by both as part of the process of learning what works. One mentioned political tribalism as a barrier to working in a different way when they first became a councillor - it's possible that the distancing of the council from national party politics as independent councillors were elected, and then re-elected to office is a significant factor contributing to a culture that is more willing to try things and discard them if they don't work.

The council has championed informality in meetings and communications¹⁴. Often in meetings, councillors aren't on stage, but sit on tables with members of the public (sometimes with facilitators employed to help people be heard), enabling people to speak on an equal footing. They've also focused on using plain English in written communications, trying to move away from jargon that makes it harder to participate.

The fact that the council have demonstrated a commitment to working with the public, both through community groups and individually, has created a virtuous circle that breeds trust. They've delivered on this commitment in multiple ways - one strategic focus they've had as a council with relatively little statutory powers is on acquiring open spaces in the town, and working with community groups to develop them, on the principle that a visible change in physical space breeds trust.

Alongside the focus on physical space, there has been a recognition of the role of local organisations, along with a substantial effort to support and empower them. This has happened both through direct grants, and the provision of staff time to help groups

¹⁴ <https://madedifferently.wordpress.com/programme/how-to-break-free-from-our-grisly-meetings-culture/>

function more effectively, and attract their own grant funding from elsewhere. Staff time has been used to set up new groups, and to formalise governance and fundraising approaches. Community development work in Frome has been based on an Asset-Based Community Development model^{15 16}, focused on supporting and coordinating community members to come together to create the changes they want to see in their community. Tactically, this means going to where people are already - at the school gates or public events like the circus or carnival. One of the assets created by this work overall is a database of around 220 community groups working in the area.

In sum, these efforts have resulted in an environment where some third sector organisations have moved from crisis to stability and many people now feel that if they want to start something they have 'permission' to do so.

In terms of the People's Budget programme itself, the overall ethos of FTC has been reflected - previous Town Vote and Events projects have been delivered with a combination of money and time from council officers, organised community groups and individual volunteers. There have also been specific, organised efforts to involve young people in the People's Vote programme, for example in 2017, when 300 year 8 pupils were given the opportunity to take part in the Town Vote during the Make It Happen Youth Conference.¹⁷

Barriers

Meaningful participation generates work:

- To define what the outputs and outcomes of a particular engagement will be.
- To make people aware of the opportunity to participate, and clearly define and communicate what impact their participation will have.
- To support their participation.
- To make sure that that potential impact is delivered on.

One of the key challenges of the project is to develop a programme that supports meaningful participation, but doesn't make disproportionate demands on the time of any of the key participants - council officers, council staff, and members of the public. It can be hard to get this balance right - a previous experiment made in Frome was to use public panels on specific topics to identify concerns, test imaginative and interesting solutions and make recommendations to the Council, leading to projects to be undertaken by the Town Council staff and the creation of partnerships with community organisations. Ultimately this experiment was discontinued after a year as it was difficult for the council to deliver projects at the rate that ideas were generated by the panels.

¹⁵ <https://madedifferently.wordpress.com/notes/engaging-the-community/>

¹⁶ <https://www.nurtureddevelopment.org/asset-based-community-development/>

¹⁷ www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/make-it-happen-youth-conference/

Delegating authority to officers gives them autonomy to deliver results but may mean that councillors feel 'out of the loop' at key points.

There are also tensions between working with community groups and broader inclusion of individuals. In previous versions of the programme, there's been a risk of it becoming a popularity contest, as well-organised groups are able to dominate the process.

In addition to overall capacity, there's a tension between nimbleness and planning in the approach taken by officers. A relatively light amount of planning does allow them to react quickly to changes in circumstances is useful in the ability to take advantage of external events, for example. However, it does limit the capacity to execute complex projects that require more preparation.

In the context of a council that has made a public commitment to participation in decision making that's been implemented across multiple projects, and offers some deep engagement opportunities, there are some questions about how a relatively small participatory budgeting programme fits into that wider picture, and how meaningful the opportunities for participation it represents are. There's a risk of participation fatigue if it's not articulated how the different opportunities to participate relate to one another. There's a need to focus options to participate on people they will be relevant to - being offered a choice (especially if repeatedly) has a cost in itself. Having and keeping this kind of clarity is difficult in the face of the regular election cycle, with councillors and political outlook potentially changing at each election.

Another contributing factor is that the budget for the People's Budget programme overall is relatively small in the context of the overall FTC budget of around £1.3 million, in 2018 it was £35,000 - around 2.5%. Additionally, the kind of creative council initiatives that have featured in the programme have been drawn in sharper contrast to the wider picture, the more there are bigger issues in the town, culminating in the debate around the 'frivolity' of the Town Vote options in 2018 - e.g. 'a water slide in the age of austerity!'

Within the council, the programme has been driven more by the effects of the process (strengthening the democratic process, building community) than the effects of the project that the money is spent on, both for the councillors who have sponsored it and for the officers who deliver it. It is possible that this focus has sometimes been to the detriment of the programme, in that the budgetary choices posed have not been critical to either councillors or citizens. If the main goals of the programme from the point of view of the councillors and officers is to strengthen community and build participation, rather than to solve particular problems, there's a risk that there's no feeling of a commonly held question of practical judgement to be resolved, which may erode the sense of meaningfulness.

The sharing of responsibilities with other tiers of local government has been a source of friction in FTC's attempt to work flexibly with citizens in the context of the programme. There's a need for FTC to coordinate with these other layers of government. This has caused friction due to their more rule-based approach. In some cases, it has meant that Frome hasn't been able to deliver on projects that were to be chosen by the wider public. In 2017 FTC were due to take over the running of two local parks, and were planning to give local residents the opportunity to vote on improvements. However, the parks didn't come into FTC ownership until August 2018.

Through the history of the participatory budgeting programme, there have been debates amongst councillors on the merits of representative versus direct democracy. Initially, there was scepticism, even amongst the independent councillors. Members of the public wrote to the council, saying that they'd elected them to make spending decisions. This tension between increased public participation and the role of elected representatives is one we've seen repeatedly.

Finally, there are technical constraints in terms of FTC's ability to use civic participation software. They don't have a large budget around the programme, and their hosting company doesn't support Linux, which limits their ability to use open-source civic tech. This hasn't had a huge impact, as they've made use of free or cheap generic tools such as SurveyMonkey to implement the online element of the vote, but these can be clunky in practice.

What are the organisational requirements around any new process?

- The Town Vote must be delivered in October, within the constraints on officers' time.
- Ideas to be voted on need to come from the community, and in particular from less heard voices.

As mentioned previously, officers' time is one of the main costs of the programme, so a key requirement is that the work needed to support the Town Vote can be done along with their other work commitments. The Town Vote process has to be deliverable in the time frame of a vote in October, within their existing time commitments.

In terms of the projects selected, speed and visibility of delivery are key requirements on the principle that people feel more positively about having participated if they can see the tangible results in a relatively fast feedback loop, so projects should be deliverable within a year by the council or someone they employ and be in line with the Town Council's aims of improving people's wellbeing, prosperity and or environment.

From the officers' point of view, any new process needs to be designed to further the goals of the programme. The output of the Town Vote is a decision on how to spend £10,000 each year, but the outcomes, in terms of overall results and impact include:

- The generation of a wider set of project ideas that might be achieved by other means
- Better knowledge for officers and councillors of people's wants/needs
- Building connection to other parts of the community less heard currently
- Organisational capacity building and learning
- Increased social capital
- Greater knowledge and awareness of the council for citizens

Given previous concerns about the provenance of the projects to be voted on, the key aspiration is to get ideas from the community, and in particular from less heard voices.

How can the stakeholders' views and experiences inform people who wish to implement meaningful and worthwhile participatory processes in this or similar contexts?

'Easy wins':

- Plain language, multiple communication channels
- Informal, equal meetings
- Fast feedback loop, visible results

Valuable, but requires greater commitment or context specific:

- Focus on, and funding for community groups
- Culture of experimentation
- Ability to raise and spend very locally

Broadly applicable challenges:

- Capacity, dependencies on other organisations
- Offering value to less well heard communities
- Tension between representational and participative democracy

Some of the approaches taken in Frome that encourage meaningful participation seem relatively easy to adopt in similar contexts:

- The use of plain language and multiple channels (offline and online) when communicating
- Informal meetings where people in different roles are treated equally
- To aim for fast feedback loops where people who participate see visible results from their participation quickly

Others are more closely tied into the specifics of the context in which Frome Town Council are operating, or take a greater organisational commitment:

- The model of setting up, funding and enabling groups outside the council was driven by an explicit recognition of the position of FTC in which reduced budgets for local government would mean that services would no longer come from the District and County government¹⁸
- The culture of willingness to experiment, which seems related to the depoliticised environment and the influx of energy from the new independent councillors
- The small administrative area, mapping onto an area people identify as where they live, and the ability to raise and spend money very locally is an enabler of fast, visible feedback loops

Similarly, some of the challenges are general:

- The ability to deliver results from participation being hampered by organisational capacity and interdependencies between layers of government
- The challenge of giving less heard communities meaningful participation in decisions that affect them
- The tensions between representational and participatory democracy

At least one seems more specific:

- The challenge of making a small participatory budgeting programme meaningful in the context of a wider culture of participation

¹⁸ <https://madedifferently.wordpress.com/notes/the-plums-easy-wins-to-change-your-councils-focus/>

Next Steps

Our next steps are to work with the Frome Town Council team to design and implement the Town Vote for 2019.

Our prototypes will be a variety of online and in-person elements, including digital tools, facilitation methods, and participatory budgeting techniques. These interventions have been selected based on our Discovery phase research and the co-design of the process alongside the Frome Town Council team. We describe them in more detail in our prototyping report.

We will use these prototypes at various points in the Town Vote process, always ensuring that the focus remains on empowering the council team and meeting the user needs for an open and fair participatory budgeting process.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Discovery interview prompts

The council:

Existing ways Frome Town Council works with communities

- What are the goals of these activities?
- What has been achieved as a result of this work?
- How is the council able to put citizen input to use?
- What challenges and barriers are faced for doing this well?
- How are activities viewed within the council?
- How viewed within the wider community?

Council communications and transparency

- How do you communicate currently?
- How do you work in a transparent way?

Scrutiny arrangements in the council

The community:

Community activity:

- Active community groups in the town?
- State of volunteering locally?
- Is there a strong sense of place?
- Neighbourhood planning?
- Community asset transfers?
- Social media use?

Other local stakeholders:

- Are the other activities to latch onto?
- Does the council have strong working relationships with other groups?

Regarding:

- The district and county council.
- Stakeholders such as the police.
- Local community or civil society groups
- Local media

The PB Process:

What are the aims of the process?

- What makes this something meaningful for participants?
- How will it be different to the last process?

What were prior experiences of PB like?

- Within the council?
- For communities?

What resources are available for this work?

- Staff, financial, and other opportunities

What restrictions are there on how PB funds can be spent?