

## **Area North – Business Flood Recovery & Future Resilience Update**

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### **Purpose of the Report**

To update members on the progress of the programme of business support work in Area North

### **Public Interest**

SSDC believes in supporting innovative communities who seek to help themselves.

The severe flooding events in the winter of 2013-14 had a significant impact on communities in Area North; many businesses were affected by flooding, both directly and indirectly, followed by numerous road closures that continued for many months while necessary flood mitigation measures were put in place. This had a noticeable impact on passing and visiting trade and there was growing concern that customer habits would be lost and that the lower trading rate would threaten the survival of small businesses.

More than 100 local businesses benefitted from the business support grant scheme, funded through the Department of Business Innovation and Skills; SSDC Tourism Service increased marketing for the affected area to encourage footfall and to spread the message that Somerset was open for business. The reaction of the business community was to be stronger than before and to be better prepared if trade was disrupted again.

In early 2015, Area North Committee agreed funding for a continuing programme of support for businesses to work together, to make them and their local area more resilient in the future.

### **Recommendation**

That members note the report and comment on the progress of the local business support scheme and agree priorities for its next stage.

### **Background**

The severe flooding events in the winter of 2013-14 had a significant impact on communities across the Somerset Levels and Moors where many homes or businesses were flooded coupled with numerous road closures over many weeks. The subsequent repair and flood mitigation work in Somerset continues to cause lasting detrimental effect to local businesses; this is particular significance to tourism and hospitality businesses who suffered a second summer season with limited access for visitors.

The impact of the flooding to local businesses was compounded by prolonged road closures in 2015, allowing for much needed repair and flood resilience infrastructure work. Businesses suffered from lower than usual trading rates which highlighted the need to be better prepared and to look at different initiatives to attract trade in challenging circumstances. An allocation of funding from Area North was

agreed to commission additional manpower, to conduct face to face engagement with businesses in the area, to ascertain the issues they face and to identify opportunities for them to work together and strengthen their long term market position.

### **Supporting locally led marketing and business resilience**

In April 2014 SSDC received government funding via the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, to support the recovery of the business community. SSDC worked to distribute a business grants to 109 businesses and initiated complementary actions including an enhanced programme of tourism marketing and a contribution to the short term engagement of a Business Village Agent.

The subsequent road closures in 2015 threatened those businesses that rely on footfall, passing trade and visitors. To address an immediate issue facing businesses in Aller, Barrington and Hambridge, where road closures were most significant and prolonged, a promotion and marketing campaign was developed. News releases in local and countywide publications, radio and television interviews were used to encourage customers to continue visiting businesses in the area and to use alternative routes where necessary. The direct contact also allowed for improved communications between the authorities and businesses involved.

In considering broader issues, desk based research identified that there are over 250 businesses in Area North that could be said to contribute to the visitor economy, from hospitality to niche shopping, local producers, arts and crafts. A representative cross section was contacted either by phone or in person to discuss the legacy of the 2013/14 flooding and to identify with them initiatives that would strengthen the combined offer in future. Many local business communities recognise the need to be stronger than before so they are better prepared if trade was disrupted again; headline responses include attracting new customers (local, regional, national and beyond), using digital media to reach a wider customer base and promoting the **shared** offer within the area.

A consultation and networking event in March 2016 attracted 50 delegates; keynote speakers presented information on reaching the visitor market, future developments with the A303 and A378 and the importance of digital marketing. The event proved that there is an appetite for businesses to meet on an informal basis where links can develop between suppliers, producers, accommodation providers, caterers and local attractions.

A programme of digital marketing workshops, designed to suit the needs of the participants, attracted almost 150 attendances; businesses have already reported increased custom as a direct result.

### **Promotion and Marketing**

Provisional conversations by phone and in person were conducted to establish what issues they face in terms of self-promotion, marketing etc and support needs. Light touch assessment of the on line presence of these businesses helped to identify what might help them to improve their image. Using criteria such as design, ease of navigation, professional film and photography as a base for criteria, it was established that about 75% could do better.

For customer-facing websites promoting tourism, leisure and retail this affects not only the individual businesses but also impressions of the overall area as a destination with quality products and services.

Three short videos were commissioned, targeting differing market sectors; family, cultural/heritage and natural advocates. These will be made freely available to enterprises to add to their websites and social media. They all bear the "Discover South Somerset" logo and will link back to the SSDC tourism offer and feature on the Discover website.

## **Royal Bath and West Show 2016**

We invited 16 businesses to share a pavilion at the Bath and West Show, presented as “Somerset Levels and More...” The businesses demonstrated some of the high quality produce and craftsmanship of the area. A fixed building pavilion was rented at discounted rate of £2,000 and £1,500 was recouped in exhibitor rental. Our co-ordination and subsidy meant that these small businesses could exhibit at the Bath and West, whereas the cost would usually prohibit their participation. Very positive response was received from the businesses:

- Combined sales at event and follow-up after were £13,831
- They recognised that there was increased footfall to their businesses following the event
- They enjoyed the opportunity to link-up with fellow exhibitors.
- They increased contacts on their mailing list
- Had more social media followers as a direct result

## **Signage**

Area Development (North) currently offers grant funding towards signage that supports the visitor economy; a number of applications for funding for brown signs have stalled as they don't fall within the criteria as set by SCC. However, successful applications include four multi-business boards, village entrance signage, a village green sign marking an historic occasion, business signage and location markers. The scheme still attracts interest and currently has two applications pending.

## **The River Parrett Trail**

The 'River Parrett Trail' (RPT) is a 50 mile route using the public rights of way network. It was first created in the late 1990's by South Somerset District Council and has for many years been maintained by Somerset County Council. The central purpose of the trail is to provide a platform for businesses – for food and drink, accommodation and craft, with the associated educational and health benefits.

Funding from the remainder of the BIS business support grant scheme has been ring fenced and allocated towards a renewed marketing and support scheme for the Trail and the businesses along its length, with particular focus on those in South Somerset.

A review of the current state of the River Parrett Trail has been commissioned. This has looked at the physical condition of the trail, accessibility, range of businesses, attractions and events and current levels of promotion. This will inform a project brief that will require additional manpower for its delivery, either directly employed or externally contracted.

## **Next Steps**

Video and photographic material is available to businesses for use on their own websites. Working towards spring 2017, we want to develop a programme that encourages businesses to put into practice the social networking training they've received and to use the visual material we can provide.

Working with an identified selection of local publications we want to offer a subsidy to small businesses. To give this programme a focus, we would like to take a themed approach and negotiate with the publications to submit editorial that will draw attention to the advertisements.

Networking events - These offer an opportunity to bring businesses together to meet each other. Following the pattern of the previous event, the second networking event in February 2017 welcomed David Warburton, MP in his role as chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Small and Micro

Business. As a result of the event, supply chains and global export have been identified as priority areas for future discussion.

## **Financial Implications**

Continuing business support initiatives and the marketing project for the River Parrett Trail will be funded from the remainder of the Business Innovation and Skills Business Support Fund.

An allocation of £51,500 has been agreed for an 18 to 24 month programme of business support and an allocation of £60,000 agreed to deliver a programme of improved access and marketing initiatives of an important economic 'corridor' within Somerset, the River Parrett Trail. The project will work closely with the local business network along the route to develop a series of linked marketing initiatives fit for the digital age and geared towards the needs of visitors and residents.

Financial contribution from SSDC will not be required.

## **Council Plan Implications**

To promote a strong economy with thriving urban and rural businesses we will:

- Work with businesses and use our assets to grow our economy.
- Capitalise on our high quality culture, leisure and tourism opportunities to bring people to South Somerset.

## **Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications**

Business resilience will help to prepare and adapt to climate change.

## **Equality and Diversity Implications**

Business engagement can help promote better physical and virtual access for customers; promotes benefits for certain groups such as young apprentices and helps address the barriers faced by small businesses working in remote areas

## **Background Papers**

- River Parrett Trail Review 2016
  - Business Flood Recovery Programme, Allocation of Flood Recovery Grant
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