

**Minutes of the EXMOOR LCN – Economic Regeneration Subgroup
Held on Thursday 26 October
Via Microsoft Teams from 5.30pm – 7.00pm**

In attendance:

Cllr Stephen Pugsley (Chair)	Somerset Council
Cllr Mike Ellicott (Vice Chair)	Top of the Moor Rep
Cllr Frances Nicholson	Somerset Council
Julian Soltau	South of the Moor Rep
Jon Levenson	Top of the Moor Rep
Matthew Headley	Brendon Hills Rep
Nick Thwaites	Dulverton Town Council
Will Lock	Exmoor Young Voices
Dan James (Advisory)	Exmoor National Park Authority
Katherine Williams	Exmoor Hill Farming Network
Jeff Brown (Lead Officer)	Somerset Council
Sam Murrell (LCN Link Officer)	Somerset Council

1. Apologies

Andrew Bray, Beccy Brown

2. Introductions

The Chair welcomed everyone to the inaugural meeting. The main purpose was to determine what work has already taken place, where any gaps can be identified and how Somerset Council could potentially pull all the threads together in the coming months.

ENPA discussed recent work that has been undertaken that can feed into these discussions.

ENPA co-ordinated work on the Rural Enterprise Exmoor vision which included a large amount of research which was undertaken just before COVID-19. This provided some base-line data which has obviously changed and is a bit dated now but is the most recent information collated. It was looking into rural businesses and asked the following questions:-

- What are their needs?
- What are their challenges?
- What are their opportunities coming out of that research?

ENPA then worked very closely and had lots of engagement with individual businesses and business groups, etc to develop a kind of vision for Exmoor's economy.

The links to this work on the ENPA website can be found here:-

[Exmoor - Rural Enterprise Exmoor Vision \(exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk\)](https://exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk)

[Exmoor - Rural Enterprise Exmoor research \(exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk\)](http://exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk)

The main challenge identified in the report was around capacity and staffing. It was considered that an individual in a networking role who could point businesses towards funding or other economically advantageous opportunities would be a very good resource. (At some level this was already happening within the Hill farming network via Katherine Williams but it would be an expansion of that role into other business sectors).

The post would need to be funded, and there were various funding pots available but councils and other public bodies are not eligible to apply. It would need an imaginative solution working collaboratively with a business partner such as a CIC or charity to make the application. The main aim of the post would be to become more sustainable long-term and work on improving the local Exmoor economy.

Nick Thwaites reminded everyone that the business community also included the Town and Village High Street traders and other small retail businesses on Exmoor. It was also important not to forget the tourist economy and visitor experience.

ENPA had tried not to rely on the census information because this only picked up those businesses that were registered for VAT, PAYE or business rates and it was a wider remit than that. (The official statistics listed 600 businesses registered on Exmoor).

Dan James said that the ENPA report identified approximately 1300 businesses. It included people working from home or operating as mail order or online trading. They had tried to capture as much data as possible. They had looked in parish newsletters, newspapers, social media and online as well as examining the non-domestic rates data.

3. **Discussion Points:-**

- **What Somerset Council employment land and business units are available on Exmoor? What options are available for businesses who want to expand their premises?**

Cutcombe – Low specification, basic and low rents to encourage take-up. Variable rents to suit the business space. Starter units which some existing businesses have outgrown. No opportunity to expand in the current space so they are advised to relocate but they will then lose access to the agricultural sector they work in. It will also divert future economy away from Exmoor.

Diversification of existing farm buildings to serve businesses rather than built housing. Bring buildings into use. (ENPA would support as per their local plan).

Potential to re-develop existing brown field sites. Winsford Garage was sited as an option for possible re-development.

Hot-desking facilities / Hub locations – Dulverton School (promote existing facilities). Some potential customers are not aware of the offer.

Brushford business units were unaffordable – too high a specification and very expensive. Due to a change in agent, these have now been let, but lessons should be learnt from the length of time they were vacant.

- **What employment and training opportunities are available and how are these accessed?**

Somerset Council - Beccy Brown – Where can we signpost? How do we fill the gaps? How is it accessed?

West Somerset College – Expand the offer on employment and training/skilling opportunities. A limited curriculum at present.

Access to training (dropout rate from Bridgwater Taunton College (BTC) and Richard Huish (RH) is huge from Exmoor). This is partly because transport options are limited. This applies to adult training as much as young people.

Childcare – affordability and availability – can we encourage providers to start up or widen the existing offer? Limited access to childcare provision is a barrier to people returning to work or training.

Collective transport options to reduce costs. Encourage car-sharing or private transport operators to increase access to training, and or employment. Current offer is limited.

- **Digital Connectivity and mobile coverage**

Mystified about the providers, what they are doing and where? Digital connectivity is vitally important. Not consistent across the moor, or even in the same village sometimes.

A mapping exercise to be undertaken with Connecting Devon & Somerset (CD&S). It was suggested that for commercial reasons they will be reluctant to share.

A survey of each of the parishes? Could we ask them to participate to assist with mapping of Exmoor. Would be able to identify those that don't have coverage. Advertise widely – social media, parish newsletters, email, online.

Mobile coverage – some mobile providers are reluctant to come to Exmoor because it is not commercially viable. CD&S only come when government grants are available to subsidise their offer.

What do we do with the data once it's compiled? Who do we speak to after that? Openreach? – Providers are reluctant to make decisions.

Copper line terminated in 2025. Fibre is the option going forward. What happens after 2025 to those properties not served by fibre? Nick Thwaites said that Digital will be offered but is a more expensive alternative.

Star-link satellite link is fine providing no cloud cover or fog.

Will Lock reminded everyone that aside from digital connectivity, there is also a requirement for Utility connectivity following on from new build or new development. Gas, Water and Electricity all need to be considered when converting existing buildings especially agriculture out-buildings resulting in a change of use.

4. Who else needs to be here?

- Matt Barrow – Connecting Devon and Somerset (CD&S)
- Somerset Council – Economic Regeneration colleagues. Beccy Brown preferred due to her Exmoor connections.
- Emma Thomasson - Visit Exmoor (Tourism)

5. Recommendations to the Panel (SP)

- To look at funding opportunities which would enable the appointment of a Rural Business Enabler – (ENPA have already evaluated this work and drawn up a business specification).
- Business Users and space. Look at how the current units are marketed. Identify opportunities for existing businesses to expand. Promote the Dulverton hub as a hot-desking space.
- Employment Opportunities – identify the gaps and or barriers to employment and training, and evaluate how these can be overcome.
- Connectivity: Who has broadband / mobile connectivity and how is this delivered – satellite, fibre and or mobile phone providers. Undertake a parish survey to determine who has access to wi-fi and identify any gaps.

6. A.O.B. / Dates and Venues for meetings going forward

- To be determined – it was requested that these are held every other month between the main LCN meeting. A face-to-face meeting preferred, but with the option of joining online for those that have work commitments further afield.

7. Meeting closed at 6:50pm.

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