

## **Annual Report of Lead Member for Communities, Housing and Culture**

Executive Member: Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts, Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture and, Equalities and Diversity  
Lead Officer: Chris Hall, Executive Director for Community Services  
Author: Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts, Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture and, Equalities and Diversity

### **1. Summary**

1.1 In this report you will see the extensive range of services within the above portfolio and what has been achieved over the past 12 months despite the challenges of the Financial Emergency. The different ways in which the Directorate has looked to both make the savings that have been set for it whilst continuing to provide the many services that residents expect and value. My personal thanks go to all the staff in the directorate who have helped continue to go above and beyond during this time and put the community and our services at the forefront.

### **2. Detail by Directorate area**

#### **2.1 Culture**

##### **2.11 Response to the Council's Financial Emergency**

In light of the Council's Financial Emergency, a series of savings proposals have been identified within Cultural Services. These proposals, approved by the Full Council in February 2024, will be implemented as part of the Council's General Fund Revenue Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan for 2024-25. Additional savings will also be realised following a needs analysis of Library services, which will shape the statutory offer.

##### **2.12 Detailed Savings and Preservation Efforts**

Further details on specific savings from each area within Cultural Services are provided in the sections below. This includes a summary of the efforts made by the team to preserve cultural assets in the community despite the financial challenges faced by the Council. These efforts include establishing alternative delivery models or funding sources, with the Cultural Directorate collaborating with local Town and Parish Councils to ensure the continued delivery of cultural services to the communities of Somerset, regardless of the Council's financial emergency.

## **2.13 Devolution and Alternative Funding Opportunities**

Existing dialogue with Yeovil Town Council regarding the Octagon Theatre and potential funding partnership arrangements presented opportunities to expand the discussion during Autumn – Winter 2023 around the potential for devolution of other cultural assets and services.

Following Somerset Council's budget-setting, and based on Yeovil Town Council's proposals, a Yeovil devolution programme was established late February 2024 to achieve transferral of the 'package' of agreed assets and services, with 'tranche 1' by 1<sup>st</sup> August 2024 – this was delivered in a rapid and ambitious 5-month timescale and involved over 100 council officers working collaboratively across multiple directorate / services. Lessons learned from the first devolution programme of this scale and complexity will help inform future devolution activity for the council.

In total, the Yeovil devolution programme will achieve the phased transfer of 11 services / assets. Tranche 1 has already resulted in the successful transfer of 30 permanent staff ('TUPE' transfer), 97 Casual staff and approx. 90 volunteers from Somerset Council to Yeovil Town Council.

Proactive and positive discussions are underway and on-going between Somerset Council, Taunton Town Council and other delivery partners regarding cultural assets and services in Taunton, i.e. Taunton Visitor Centre and the Taunton Brewhouse (Taunton Theatre Assoc.).

## **2.14 Cultural Strategy**

In 2022, Somerset received external funding from Arts Council England (ACE) to develop a comprehensive cultural strategy. This strategy is designed to set the cultural direction for Somerset as a whole, not just the Council. It provides clear objectives and a framework for the Council to deliver against, ensuring that arts and culture are integral to the region's development.

The strategy aims to:

- Voice the priorities of the community.
- Promote the cultural identity of Somerset.
- Embed arts and culture at the heart of the new Somerset Council's strategic plans.
- Raise awareness and promote the role of culture in enriching communities, improving quality of life, health, wellbeing, and the local economy for residents, visitors, and businesses.
- Establish and realize Somerset's potential as a cultural destination, protecting and unlocking opportunities for the creative sector that align with place-based priorities.

The project received financial contributions and full support from all five former Somerset councils. Initial background work and stakeholder/public consultations were conducted by external consultants between August 2022 and January 2023. However, the project was ultimately completed by the Council's Cultural Services team.

The strategy was approved by the Executive on 5th August 2024, along with recommendations for a new leadership and governance model in Somerset and an associated live delivery plan. This plan will be implemented within the new Localities, Partnerships, and Culture directorate, ensuring efficiencies and alignment with the Local Community Networks.

One of the first key tasks will be conducting a cultural audit across Somerset Council to identify existing cultural initiatives. Both external and internal partners and stakeholders will continue to be engaged as the strategy evolves. Future governance, partnership working, and stakeholder engagement arrangements will be developed, and implementation plans for the strategy will be agreed upon, delivered, and monitored.

The strategy emphasizes that it is owned by Somerset, not just the Council, and its vision and goals can only be realized through collaboration and partnerships. The intention is to work in an interconnected way across Somerset, collaborating with key external specialists and experienced creative and cultural partners, including the existing six National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs), accessing existing networks, and creating new interconnected working relationships.

## **2.15 Somerset Libraries**

The Library Service is statutory and provides free access to a wide range of digital and physical reading and study materials, information resources, and IT facilities. It also offers a variety of specialist resources, such as data-enabled iPads, blood pressure monitors, and activity trackers. Additionally, we deliver a wide range of targeted cultural, health, lifelong learning, digital inclusion, economic, and children's events and activities, both independently and in partnership, with 5,000 events delivered this year. This enables the Library Service to support the delivery of many council and partner services and outcomes. For example, 261 out of 1,000 customers who provided feedback reported various health improvements through using our services, such as low-impact mobility exercise sessions.

The service consists of:

- 32 libraries (19 in-house and 13 community-led partnerships)
- A mobile library service to rural communities
- A Home Library Service (which takes library services to the housebound in their own homes)
- Outreach and development services
- A Performing Arts Library
- Lead Authority for the LibrariesWest consortium (which supports 7 Local Authority Library Services in the Southwest)

Somerset Libraries have 1.1 million visitors per year and loan 1.5 million items annually. The mobile library serves 109 mainly rural communities, enabling 1,000 vulnerable customers to access our, and wider, council services (e.g. customer services online).

Our partners include the NHS, Public Health, SASP (Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership), Arts Council, Adult Social Care, Gamechangers, GoodNewsFoundation, SW Heritage, Libraries Connected, SWRLs, ABRI, Young Somerset, Police, various Parish and Town councils, DCMS (Department for Culture, Media and Sport), Children's Services, Friends of Somerset Libraries, and many more.

In 2023/24 the Service was delivered under budget. We also secured three funding deals for Shepton Mallet, Priorswood, and Ilminster libraries worth £28.5K per annum from the Parish or Town Council. Additionally, we received £53K of grant funding for online resources and various service development projects, with a further £60K of bids still awaiting outcomes. LibrariesWest continued to yield £300K of savings for Somerset Libraries this year. Further MTFP savings were proposed but are subject to a statutory process that is currently being undertaken: the needs analysis will be finished by the end of August, and we are developing the public consultation currently. Any savings identified and taken forward should start being delivered in the second half of the 2025-26 financial year.

This year, the Service has continued to deliver its statutory duties and 5,000 activities, partnerships, community events, and outreach initiatives. We have also developed further bespoke services, including low-impact mobility exercise sessions in libraries in partnership with SASP, several new partnerships and events to support employability and business start-ups, installing Seeing AI (which reads text and describes pictures or objects on all our loanable digital devices), a new Menopause collection offering help and support to women, interactive 3D virtual tours of our libraries and their resources, and expanded a number of existing offers, such as thermal imaging cameras and Gamechanger sessions. All of this was achieved using external funding and by working in partnership with local communities and other agencies. We worked with the Comms team to increase awareness of our offers, in response to member feedback, including being featured on local radio and TV.

Somerset Libraries were also highlighted in Baroness Sanderson's Independent Review of English Public Libraries.

[An independent review of English public libraries - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

This review features six examples/case studies from Somerset, covering community libraries, our health initiatives, our digital innovation, thermal camera loaning, and direct outcome stories from customers and frontline staff alike. No other English Library Service got more than three mentions, and most got none. We also had 11 named contributors listed, the highest for any individual Library Service.

## **2.16 Entertainment Venues/Theatres**

### **2.17 Taunton Brewhouse**

The Council owns the freehold for Taunton Brewhouse, which is operated by the Taunton Theatre Association (TTA) on the Council's behalf. As the largest theatre and arts centre in Taunton, it serves as a multi-purpose venue for professional arts organizations, community groups, schools, and businesses.

The current five-year funding agreement with the Council is in its final year and will not be renewed from April 2025 due to agreed Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) savings. The Council is working with TTA to explore future external funding opportunities, while the Strategic Asset Management team continues to address building maintenance matters.

The Brewhouse had a very successful year in 2023-24, with attendance now exceeding pre-Covid levels and an average capacity of over 70%.

## **2.18 The Octagon Theatre (Yeovil)**

The Octagon Theatre closed at the end of April 2023 to conduct survey works for a potential capital works programme. Officers are collaborating with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to secure a £10 million capital award for the theatre's development. Yeovil Town Council has also committed (in principle) £3.75 million.

Somerset Council will lead and manage the venue's development. Upon completion of the capital works, management of the Octagon Theatre will transfer to Yeovil Town Council, where it will operate as a "sister venue" to Westlands Entertainment Venue, which was devolved to Yeovil Town Council on 1st August 2024.

## **2.19 Westlands Entertainment Venue (Yeovil)**

Westlands Entertainment Venue is Somerset's premier entertainment and conference facility. It hosts hundreds of meetings annually, along with large conferences, banquets, balls, parties, and other non-ticket events, attracting tens of thousands of visitors.

While the Octagon Theatre is closed, many productions have moved to Westlands to retain their audience. The venue currently stages performances of comedy, live music, talks, and film screenings, selling around 50,000 tickets across 50 live performances and approximately 250 screenings.

On 1st August 2024, Westlands Entertainment Venue was devolved to Yeovil Town Council.

## **2.2 Cultural/Arts Development, Engagement and Outreach**

### **2.21 National Portfolio Organisation (NPO)**

The South of Somerset has been designated a 'priority place' by Arts Council England and granted National Portfolio Organisation status as of 1st April 2023. With £760K funding over three years from Arts Council England, the team is delivering a South Somerset Arts Strategy.

This programme aims to enrich the lives of residents, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, through creative arts activities. A wide range of projects and initiatives are planned for the next three years, supporting council priorities and engaging thousands of residents. These projects will involve local, regional, and national artists, freelancers, and arts organisations, benefiting the community and supporting the local economy.

The service also funds arts organisations, projects, and artists through the Open Grants Programme, designed to increase access to culture for Somerset's residents and address issues such as rural isolation, deprivation, poor mental health, and an ageing population. Between 2024-26, £50,000 in grants will be provided to independent artists and arts organisations in theatre, dance, music, and film through three programmes:

- **Creative Commissions Fund:** Supports Somerset artists and companies in innovating new ideas.

- **Creative Ideas Fund:** Takes activities into communities across South Somerset. 2024-25 recipients include Soap Soup Theatre, Bath Opera, and Chris Fogg Projects.
- **Support Grant Fund:** Provides two years of funding for organisations to deliver long-term cultural activities. 2024-26 recipients include Take Art, Somerset Film, SoundLab+, and Hot Poets.

Since April 2023, the programme has significantly increased opportunities for community engagement in arts and cultural activities. Monitoring data from April 2023 to March 2024 includes:

- **997** participation classes/workshops/sessions/shows
- **5,764** participants
- **12,306** participations
- **487** practitioners/facilitators
- **10,768** audience members
- **282** voluntary hours

The Arts Engagement & Outreach programme, run by The Octagon & Westlands, offers a variety of programmes that benefit health and wellbeing, enrich education, inspire young talent, celebrate local artists, and tell local stories. Activities range from educational programmes in 24 schools to health and wellbeing activities addressing issues like Parkinson's Disease, cancer, mental health challenges, and postnatal depression.

## **2.21 Music Hub**

The Octagon Theatre has been appointed by Arts Council England to lead the Music Hub for Dorset and Somerset from September 2024. This initiative is part of a national programme to provide high-quality music education for all children and young people.

The newly combined Music Hub will operate through Somerset Council's Octagon Theatre and will be one of 44 Hub Lead Organisations nationally. This collaboration will draw on the expertise of partners and stakeholders from existing music education hubs in each area, ensuring more young people can access musical and creative learning opportunities.

As a Hub Lead Organisation, The Octagon Theatre will secure approximately £1.46 million in funding from the Department for Education. This includes just under £1.1 million for coordinating music education and around £360,000 for new musical instruments, equipment, and technology tailored to the needs of children and young people, including those with special educational needs and disabilities.

This appointment is part of a major investment in a new generation of Music Hubs, supporting the Government's National Plan for Music Education. It aims to give all children and young people the opportunity to develop their musical interests and potentially pursue careers in the music industry.

## **2.22 Other Cultural Projects – activities delivered in 2023-24 included:**

### **Knife Angel (3rd – 30th April)**

- A sculpture that visited Taunton as part of a nationwide tour, aiming to raise awareness about the negative effects of violence and aggression.

- Delivered in partnership with Taunton Town Council (key funding partner), Stand Against Violence, and various external partners, with support from multiple internal Somerset Council departments.

### **2.23 Public Art Initiatives (since April 2023)**

- **Cotford St Luke:** Public art commission at the Primary School.
- **Taunton High Street Benches**
- **Castle Green in Taunton:** An Arts Taunton project.
- **Staplegrove Railway Bridge Public Art**
- **Public Art S106 Projects:** Commenting on planning applications with conditions involving Public Art.

## **3. Sport and Leisure (Centres, Facilities, Partnerships and Services)**

### **3.1 Leisure Contracts**

The leisure service manages 16 facilities operated by four different providers under three contracts and one lease. The team oversees these contracts and serves as the primary source of information on sport and leisure for Somerset Council. Our goal is to provide services that actively promote and improve the health and wellbeing of Somerset's communities.

#### **3.11 Leisure Projects**

Our team delivers a range of projects, from small tennis court refurbishments to the creation of multi-sport facilities using Section 106 funds. We apply for external funding, advise clubs and organizations, and collaborate with partners like the Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership (SASP) to achieve complementary outcomes.

#### **3.12 Leisure Financial Information**

Like many other areas, our leisure services have been impacted by the financial emergency. Last year, we proposed several savings options, including the removal of some legacy budgets and the decision to either close or devolve the sports facilities at Yeovil Recreation Centre. These facilities, the last managed in-house by the Council, have now been devolved to Yeovil Town Council, ensuring their future availability for the community.

#### **3.13 Key Achievements in the Last Year**

- Successfully secured over £500,000 in Swimming Pool Support Funding for several pools across Somerset, providing approximately £200,000 for revenue support to offset rising utility costs and around £300,000 for capital interventions to enhance energy efficiency.
- Created a new playing field with a football pitch, tennis court, and multi-use games area at Norton Fitzwarren using Section 106 funding.
- Refurbished tennis courts at Taunton Green, Vivary Park, and Yeovil Recreation Ground with approximately £160,000 in grant funding from the Lawn Tennis Association and additional match funding from Somerset Council.
- Refurbished tennis courts at Blackbrook Pavilion in Taunton.

- Acted as the client for decarbonisation projects in the West, liaising with operators SLM (Sports & Leisure Management) and Freedom regarding the impacts of these projects and loss of income claims.
- Successfully devolved the sports facilities at Yeovil Recreation Centre to Yeovil Town Council, ensuring their continued availability to the public.

### **3.14 Priorities for the Next Year**

- Complete the procurement process to appoint an operator for our leisure contract in the North, starting in October 2025 for a duration of 12 years.
- Develop a leisure strategy.
- Continue to strengthen relationships with our leisure operators and manage existing contracts.
- Enhance partnership working with organizations such as SASP.
- Deliver projects to create new or improve existing sports facilities using Section 106, CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) funds, and grant funding.

### **3.15 Tourism – Visitor Information Centres**

#### **3.16 Taunton Visitor Centre**

The council operates the Taunton Visitor Centre, but due to MTFP savings, it is currently funded by Taunton Town Council for the 2024-25 period. Discussions are ongoing about extending this funding agreement beyond April 2025. Meanwhile, the Market House has been approved for disposal as one of the council's assets.

A small, dedicated, and knowledgeable team continues to assist visitors daily, helping them find places to stay and eat, and providing extensive information on local events and attractions. The Taunton Visitor Centre welcomes over 50,000 visitors and locals each year.

#### **3.17 South Somerset Visitor Information Centre (Cartgate)**

This service closed on 31st March 2024, as per the approved MTFP saving. Despite efforts to include this service in the Council's Devolution programme, no solution was found to transfer it to another Town or Parish Council, or other suitable organisation. Remaining retail stock was transferred to Taunton Visitor Centre, and other equipment, fixtures, and fittings were relocated to other sites

### **3.18 Heritage and Museums**

#### **3.19 Heritage Services Overview**

Heritage services encompass assets of historical importance within the Council's remit, including arts, artefacts, and structures. The goals are to ensure:

- Somerset residents, visitors, and schools understand, experience, and enjoy the county's heritage.
- Somerset's heritage is protected, conserved, and enhanced.
- Somerset's heritage contributes to a sense of place, health and wellbeing, and the cultural economy.



### **3.2 South West Heritage Trust Responsibilities**

On behalf of Somerset Council, the SWHT delivers:

- Management of the Museum of Somerset and Somerset Rural Life Museum in accordance with agreements with the Heritage Lottery Fund.
- Heritage learning activities.
- Archaeological outreach and training projects.
- Exhibitions and events.
- Archive services.
- Local Studies Service.
- Archaeological and conservation advice.
- Heritage advice on agri-environment schemes.
- Consultations on heritage matters related to works proposed by statutory undertakers and agencies.
- Maintenance of a Somerset Historic Environment Record for the Council.
- Fulfilment of historic environment/heritage requirements of agreements between Somerset Council and developers.

#### **3.21 Statutory Responsibilities**

The SWHT discharges Somerset Council's statutory responsibilities under:

- The Treasure Act 1996.
- Statutory archive responsibilities.
- The Local Studies libraries, part of the statutory provision under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964.

#### **3.22 Additional Contracts/Arrangements**

- Legacy County Council dormant record storage.
- Registrars' records storage.
- Museum of South Somerset.

#### **3.23 Transfer Agreement**

The Transfer Agreement includes the transfer by the Council to the Trust of the 'Undertaking,' which comprises:

- The Museum of Somerset, Somerset Rural Life Museum, and the Somerset Brick and Tile Museum.
- The Archive and Local Studies Service.
- The Museums Service.
- The Historic Environment Service.
- The Somerset Heritage Centre, and any other premises mutually agreed between the parties.
- Historic land assets belonging to the Council, amounting to about 400 acres.

### 3.24 South West Heritage Trust Performance

The data shown here relates to the activity of the Trust in Somerset, which has been growing steadily since the COVID pandemic. Visitor numbers exceeded pre-pandemic figures in 2022 and have far exceeded these in 2022/23.

Year	Visitors to Sites	New Archive/Library Accessions	School Learning Sessions	Website Visits
2020-21	9,485	283	25	732,455
2021-22	55,005	359	388	923,230
2022-23	103,941	723	584	927,067

### 3.25 Contract Renewal

Somerset Council agreed to enter into a twenty-year partnership agreement with the Trust to ensure the continued delivery of heritage services for the people of Somerset until 2044 under the following terms:

- Contract value: £1,500,000 per annum to deliver statutory services.
- A contract review every five years to assess and adjust where necessary:
  - Service performance
  - Suitability of the arrangement
  - Service delivery scope
  - Core contract value
  - Or to bring the arrangement to an end.

Currently, contract negotiations are underway with the Trust to ensure the contract is in place before its expiry in October. There is further work to ensure the archaeological advice provided to the Planning team is fully encapsulated within the proposed contract.

In addition to the above funding agreement, Somerset Council has sought to work in partnership with the SWHT to improve services through alternative funding contracts. These contracts aim to build resilience into the Trust, enabling it to become self-sufficient and less reliant on the Council.

### 3.26 Ancestry Holdings (ancestry.com)

Under the Trust's direct supervision and on its premises, Ancestry will digitise the contents of 755 electoral registers for Somerset covering the period 1832-1960, comprising an estimated 15 million name entries. Ancestry will create electronic indexes of the data and make it publicly accessible on the Ancestry website on a subscription

basis, paying a royalty to the Trust. The data will be searchable by name, and researchers will also be able to view register images page by page.

For the Trust, this would create an income of £60,000 over ten years, with the records digitised for the Trust's use.

### **3.27 Major Acquisitions Over the Year**

Following formal valuation by the British Museum's Treasure Valuation Committee, the Trust acquired the Anglo-Saxon Cheddar Brooch, found near Cheddar in October 2020. This acquisition was made possible through successful bids to the Art Fund and the ACE/V&A Purchase Grant Fund.

The Trust is currently undertaking a major acquisition of a significant find of treasure in the area, with assistance from Somerset Council through funding provided by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The results will be announced in the coming months.

### **3.28 Funding Opportunity for Cultural Projects**

In March 2024, the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities now known as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government invited Somerset Council to apply for £5M in cultural funding for the Somerset East area. The application aligns with several frameworks and strategies, including the Levelling Up Fund Intervention Framework, the White Paper and Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Arts Council 2020-2030 strategy, and Somerset Council's corporate objectives and draft cultural vision and strategy.

From an initial list of 46 project ideas, 23 were shortlisted and further narrowed down to four key projects through consultations with various stakeholders. The final projects are:

1. **Lucky Chance (Frome):** Home to the theatre company Wise Children, this project aims to enhance accessibility and outdoor spaces, including making the building wheelchair accessible and improving the garden area.
2. **The Somerset Rural Life Museum (Glastonbury):** This project focuses on making the museum more accessible and inclusive, upgrading facilities, promoting active travel, and improving environmental performance. It will also create an outdoor education and events space.
3. **The Cheese and Grain (Frome):** Event Tec aims to boost the local music industry by providing training and employment opportunities, supporting local musicians and businesses, and enhancing the venue's facilities.
4. **Shepton Canvas (Shepton Mallet):** Building on previous successful heritage projects, this initiative includes property rejuvenation grants, public realm improvements, and the acquisition and renovation of the Amulet theatre for community use.

The application was submitted in early June, and the Council is awaiting a response from the Ministry

## **3.29 Regulatory & Operational Services**

### **3.3 Registration Services**

Registration services has had another successful year, with changes to their wedding formats, offering more flexibility for those couples that would like it. Also going into the autumn, they have implemented changes to the death registration process, which took time to prepare for, to ensure a successful implementation. The service in 2023/24 undertook the following volumes of work across the Somerset and North Somerset areas

- Births registered: 5835
- Deaths registered: 8692
- Ceremonies conducted: 3205
- Notice of Marriage/CP: 6064
- New British Citizens: 363

Performance against statutory targets improved in all areas, notably timeliness of registrations within statutory timescales and availability of customer appointments.

Overall customer satisfaction levels from our customer feedback forms were 4.9/5

The annual Registration service audit from the General Registration Office was also a success, with the service continuing to meet statutory KPI's.

### **3.31 Environmental Health**

It's been a positive year for the service, with the conclusion of some of the prosecution cases that teams had started pre vesting, showing clear commitment from the new teams to work through legacy cases. The team have started to show their new identify, aligning practices and polices where required, and working together on large scale activity, like Glastonbury Festival. Officers are also starting to work across boundaries for routine statutory work.

Prosecution/enforcement cases have included prosecution of a significant retailer for food hygiene offences which received a £640K fine, closure of a food business for significant failings and also prosecution of a landlord for significant housing contraventions.

In 23/24 over 4500 License applications have been processed and over 3000 food hygiene inspections have been undertaken. In addition over 15000 service request/ investigations have been dealt with across the whole spectrum of Environmental Health including issues such as nuisance complaints, housing standards issues, food hygiene concerns, environmental crime and other issues.

### **3.32 Unauthorised Occupation of Council Owned or Managed Land**

In March 2024, the task of handling unauthorised encampment enforcement for Regulatory Services was centralised under Mendip's Environment and Community Protection Team. The lead officer was tasked with formulating policies, establishing procedures, ensuring uniform enforcement throughout Somerset, overseeing ongoing

cases, collaborating with other teams to resolve issues, and communicating with leadership and elected members as necessary.

Part of the procedural responsibilities involved developing and collaborating with Avon and Somerset Police on a new operational protocol. This protocol aims to improve our cooperation in enforcing regulations against unauthorised encampments, allowing the police to issue welfare forms and informal eviction notices when high-risk or sensitive council owned or managed land is occupied outside regular working hours.

Between 8 January 2024 and 3 September 2024, the council experienced 101 occupations, 33 of which occurred at high-risk or sensitive sites. The initiative to centralise enforcement has enhanced the process, leading to engagement with travellers generally within 24 hours and issuance of a legal notice to vacate within 72 hours. This streamlined approach results in travellers vacating more quickly, thereby reducing tensions and negative impacts on local communities in addition to, lowering costs for the council associated with the unlawful disposal of controlled waste, damage to land, buildings and property.

### **3.33 Glastonbury Festival**

The EH and Licensing team delivered another successful Glastonbury Festival in 2024 with all relevant event management and safety plans approved before the event. Monitoring teams worked prior to and throughout the festival and with Glastonbury Festival to monitor compliance with a range of issues around licensing conditions, food safety, private water supplies, noise nuisance and health and safety.

### **3.34 Support to Agratas**

The Environmental Health team have been part of a cross-council response to the Agratas development. They have been working on environmental health planning matters and working with the company on submission of their Environmental Permit application which will be needed for the site to operate.

### **3.35 Port Services**

The Council's Port Service is continuing to deliver AIL components for the EDF Hinkley Point C Nuclear Build (HPC). EDF have a marine terminal within the port jurisdiction and the port service uses its pilots and infrastructure to deliver barges with vital build components. The number of barges is increasing as the build on site intensifies. Without the Council's Port Service these vital components would not be able to get to site as they are too big to bring down the road networks.

In addition, the Harbour Management Advisory Group has been established with both council members and co-opted members to look at developing business plans for the ports and harbours at Minehead, Watchet and Bridgwater to ensure the long-term viability of these assets.

### **3.36 Resort Services**

The Resorts service has had another successful year with beach wardens working at Burnham, Berrow and Brean to ensure public safety and efficient operation of these important tourist sites. Their safety interventions undertaken have kept incidents to a minimum and kept the beaches looking clean and tidy and meant that tourists and local

people have been able to enjoy our beaches throughout the summer months. In the main season the RNLI lifeguards have also been working to support our beach wardens to keep people safe at Burnham and Berrow.

### **3.37 Open Spaces**

The focus on the grounds and cleansing teams this year has been around aligning schedules and getting those schedules visible online. Teams are now working in themed areas and have been supporting teams across the whole of Somerset, much of the year has been about understanding what we have within the different teams and building the service from there.

Under difficult circumstances, Green Flags were retained in Wellington Park and Blenheim Park, Minehead. We thank Wellington Town Council and Minehead Town Council for their support in this. Green Flags were also retained in Victoria, Comeytrove and French Weir parks in Taunton. These parks are now Taunton Town Council run but maintained on their behalf by our open spaces team and local friends groups.

The other headline of the year in this area is around devolution. The teams have worked exceptionally hard to keep teams delivering under a period of uncertainty.

### **3.38 Bereavement Services**

There has been a steady use of services at both the crematoriums over the last year. In Yeovil over the last year there has been very insightful work carried out in terms of reducing gas usage, this work in addition to work with teams' structures and job roles has kept cost lower than expected given the increases in energy prices.

### **3.39 CCTV**

The service has focussed on adapting to being more stakeholder focussed, working to build relationships with the town and parish councils who now fund it. It's been a challenging year for the service, and there is still much to do, but the team are working hard to be able to deliver the service that is needed within the community.

## **4. Customer Services**

Customer Services provide the first point of contact for Somerset Council, as well as providing the Lifeline and Out of Hours services to our most vulnerable customers in emergencies. It has been a successful year over the last 12 months, winning the Southwest Contact Centre Forum award for Best Transformation 2023 and an International Genesys Award for Digital Innovation 2023 for our natural language BOT. For this award we were up against tough competition seeing off a range of private and public sector organisations from across the globe. The introduction of our Natural Language BOT on our single number 0300 123 2224, and the integration of our complex telephony architecture solution, which has over 65 lines has been a success ensuring a smooth and seamless pathway for customers. We also decommissioned after a year several old district and county telephony numbers which achieved a small but important financial saving. We were also proud to see the adoption of a new Customer Strategy for Somerset Council which sets out our commitment to customers and the culture the Council wants to promote.

Customer Services performance since vesting day has been strong, taking 686,388 calls over 2023/24 with an average handling time of 00:10:44 minutes. The Service dealt with over 1.2 million customer interactions across all customer channels including SMS messaging, contact us emails, social media, Face to Face and Chat Bots. Over the last 12 months the service has resolved 74.29% for telephony at the First point of Contact and 97.56% for Face to Face. A satisfaction rating of 85.87% for telephony was achieved and captured by customers completing a post interaction survey. Where we score less than we would have liked, we listen to the call/review the customer interaction and initiate improvement if required. We have also seen over 67,722 automated payments made by customers and 12,855 taken by Advisers. The introduction of automated payments into South, the last area to benefit from this functionality will provide customers the ability to do it for themselves and therefore drive efficiency and saving in the service. Our drive for Digital first also continues with a focus on the delivery of our channel management plan with the introduction of Chat bots, a revamped Contact Us page and Digital Messaging which saw an increase of 61% use and the Waste Service saw an increase of 11% shift from telephony to online in the last quarter of the year.

Customer Services have also worked tirelessly over and above, as part of Somerset Councils' Business Continuity response assisting with two major flooding incidents, as well as taking over 4,500 additional calls over a three-week period in the lead up to the General Election.

Over the last year we have seen the closure of County Hall reception in Taunton and the establishment of 32 Customer Access Points across the County – one for each Local Community Area. In these spaces we work with Partners including Citizens Advice to connect our customers to our service through the development and introduction of our Virtual Agent Link [VAL] using the Attend Anywhere software. This is where customers talk to Customer Service Advisers face to face virtually. A promotional video is available through the following link <https://youtu.be/nThz4ZqiTjo>. Further information is also found in the Members Briefing Sheet [2022-27-85 Member Information Sheet Video Assistant Link VAL 11 12 23.pdf](#). We have also had increasing success with VAL and seen the confidence of customers that have used it once, use it again. We are also working with other services to add this functionality to enable field officers to conduct business online.

Customer Services in 23/24 smoothly integrated Telephony and Face to Face provision in the East from Capita into Somerset Council as well as undertaking a review of Customer Access Points where there was inconsistent provision across the Council. This saw the conversion of four Customer Service Points to Customer Access Points, and with the removal of the Member Case Management System and additional income from Lifeline fees contributing to the financial emergency. Currently the service is heavily involved in the consolidation of the Revenue and Benefits system and planning for the return of Revenue and Benefits Customer Service Staff to the authority in 2025.

The Out of Hours service linked to Lifeline have also delivered a key project this year by improving the experience of customers wanting to access emergency Highways Out of Hours. The new arrangement, introduced on the 1st April 2024 saw customers being triaged and responded to by Lifeline/OOH staff rather than being directed to 101 where wait times and customer experience over the years has been lacking.

The Lifeline service took 300,455 calls over the last 12 months and although performance on calls answered within 60 seconds was 95.88% which is less than the 97% target, this is still exceptional performance from the team. In August 2024 the Service was independently inspected by the Tec Services Association (TSA) who reviewed the operational and response arrangements for the service. Overall the inspectors gave high praise for the service saying that the close integration between the Lifeline Service and Adult Social Care was 'sector leading' and that despite the challenge of combining three services into one under the new Unitary council the service's performance and achievement has been excellent.

Complaints over the year has tripled from 804 to 4020 with 54% being resolved within the 10 days target. We try extremely hard to deal with more complex complaints within 20 and have established mechanisms to ensure we keep customers informed as to what is happening. Referrals to the Ombudsman has been consistent and there has been much effort put into the service to ensure we learn from our customer interactions and feedback to drive service improvement and better outcomes. The Annual statutory Customer Feedback report which sets out the authority's overall performance with regards to complaints over the last 12 months, is about to be published and will provide the detail of volumes and our handling of complaints as well as the learning and improved secured as a result of the complaint. The Customer Experience Team has also introduced a single complaints policy for the authority and is currently reviewing the recent Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's new handling code which is placing a few more requirements on the Authority in terms of integrating a new remedy policy/guidance into the complaints policy as well as reviewing the Council managing unreasonable customer behaviour policy.

Membership of the Somerset Council Customer Panel was also revisited in 2024 to ensure residents from across the authority were able to shape and co-design our services as well as listen to what is important to them. The Customer Panel currently has 83 volunteers who, through testing and feedback, have helped shape the new Somerset Independence Plus website, helped review and re-launch our VAL service across our Customer Access Points and provided feedback regarding our digital first approach to Waste services.

## **5. Housing**

### **5.1 Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs**

- There is ongoing recruitment for the trades area to ensure we continue to meet target completion dates. Also, within the management team we are still undergoing recruitment for a Repairs Surveyor and a Maintenance Manager following these roles leaving the council. The vacancy for the Maintenance Manager in particular is causing a challenge and we have had one failed recruitment round already. We are now investigating options for putting in place interim agency provisions, as well as consideration of alternative permanent recruitment mechanisms.
- The most recent available data at the time of writing this report for repairs performance, July 2024, demonstrates on target performance for both emergency responsive repairs (100%) and non-emergency responsive repairs (96%).



- Implementation of the tasks within our Repairs Service Improvement Plan (RSIP) are being hampered by the recent loss of key staff, in particular the Maintenance Manager, as noted above.
- We continue to undertake void repairs to successfully meet our Lettable Standard. Procurement activities for external contractor support for void repairs are ongoing, with engaged tenants supporting the process.
- Our materials supply chain process continues to operate well overall, with regular review of the Core list and how we can leverage the contract to deliver further logistical efficiencies being progressed.

### **5.11 Property Safety Compliance**

- All property safety compliance checks and works continue to be undertaken. These include gas safety checks (LGSR's), water risk assessments and remedial works, electrical inspections (EICR's), asbestos surveys and re-inspections, fire risk assessment and remedial works, fire safety checks, lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works, and radon monitoring.
- Our Electrical Inspection testing programme continues as a focussed area of activity, with the latest data, July 2024, showing 96.17%. It should be noted that, as each month ends, there are more properties that would fall into non-compliance if testing (and any necessary works being undertaken) are not completed. These properties vary in number each month and therefore a 'straight line' increase in compliance will not be seen. Nevertheless, the ongoing programme of consumer unit replacements and contractor switches will facilitate an improvement in compliance during the financial year (see Capital Programme section below for further details).
- Procurement exercises for fire doors (currently out to tender), compartmentalisation, and fire safety works (following Fire Risk Assessment recommended actions) are being undertaken.
- Weekly compliance meetings, together with monthly reports to the Executive team, are ongoing to carefully monitor and manage housing property safety.
- We are recruiting for several vacant roles within the Property Safety Compliance team, including the Compliance Manager and specialist roles. Again, following one failed recruitment round, we are now investigating options for putting in place interim agency provisions, as well as consideration of alternative permanent recruitment mechanisms.

### **5.12 Capital Programme**

- Our Capital Programme team continues to deliver our electrical inspection testing programme (including both consumer unit replacement and contractor switches) using external contractors.
- The 2024/25 programme of kitchen and bathroom replacements is also progressing well, with the remaining two contractors meeting the required programme.
- We have a roofing programme on site which is progressing well.
- Procurement activities also continue, including review of required capital programme works needed to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS), incorporating our Retrofit aspiration.

- We are recruiting for vacant roles within the Capital Programme team, including for Contract Managers. We have recently successfully recruited two permanent Resident Liaison Officers.

### **5.13 HRA Asset Management**

- We have undertaken an inspection review of our properties that potentially contain Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC). Only one block has been identified requiring further investigations and this is being undertaken by a specialist consultant.
- The service continues to carry out energy surveys which are required to understand pathways to Zero Carbon and which low energy funding regime properties are best placed in. These surveys are influencing the capital investment programme.
- The annual review of the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and 30-year investment plan is underway.
- We are undertaking option appraisals for potential disposal of existing properties in the HRA which no longer serve as appropriate homes for our tenants.
- Stock condition surveys, and validation surveys (i.e. checking that works identified for programmes of replacement in the near future require the works to be undertaken now) are progressing, which enable us to prioritise those most in need of upgrading, smooth the programmes to improve our financial planning, reduce the number of remedial repairs required and meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard (DHS).
- We are recruiting for several vacant roles within the Asset Management team, including the Asset Manager. We have successfully recruited to the Housing Data Analyst role.

### **5.14 Housing Enabling**

Our Enabling Development team work with a range of affordable housing providers including the Councils own development team to increase the provision of affordable housing. The team continue to strive to overcome the barriers facing affordable housing delivery to ensure affordable housing proposals are integrated and built to deliver against housing need, creating safe, healthy homes and encouraging diverse and sustainable communities

### **5.15 Hinkley Point C**

The service continues to deliver the Hinkley Point C Housing Programme, working with partners to drive forward 11 key areas of work. This programme is providing new bed spaces in the district and support to vulnerable customers affected by the change in the housing market because of the uplift of workforce at HPC. The service has received circa £440k to start new projects and extend the delivery of some existing projects up to April 2025. A further Hinkley Housing Funding Strategy is currently being developed to take mitigation measures up to a new workforce peak that is currently predicted to occur 2029.

### **5.16 Housing Options**

- In 2023/2024, Somerset Council received 2713 homeless applications from households that are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Most of these

applications were from households living in the private rented sector and those living with family.

- In 2023/2024, the rate of successful preventions was 36%. This is a decrease on the year previous of 41%. The Councils ability to prevent homelessness has decreased year on year since 2018/2019. This is a national trend and is due mainly to the increased unaffordability of the private rented sector and the decreasing supply of social homes.
- In 2023/2024, the number of households that were owed the main housing duty increased substantially to 721 (up from 547 in 2022/2023, 432 in 2021/2022 and 352 in 2020/2021). This has had a big impact on the number of households in temporary accommodation. The unaffordability of private rented accommodation and the reduced supply of social housing means that its harder for the council to find new longer-term accommodation for these households.
- There is an over reliance of agency staff and an ongoing challenge in recruiting housing options officers. Since LGR there has been no overall Housing Options manager, and this has impacted on transformation priorities and ensuring consistency across area teams.
- Despite this the 4 area teams are working hard to deliver services. Shelter are working Somerset Council to identify service improvements and this work is scheduled to be completed in December 2024.

### 5.17 Temporary Accommodation, including B&B

The main challenge in our Housing Options & Homelessness Service is the increase in numbers of people we are placing in Temporary Accommodation across Somerset. Figures below are at 5 August 2024

East	TA total	30
	in B&B	18
	Families over 6 weeks in B&B	0
	No. of Homeless at Home	22
West	TA Total	143
	in B&B	75
	Families over 6 weeks in B&B	0
	No. of Homeless at Home	17
South	TA total	77
	in B&B	30
	Families over 6 weeks in B&B	0
	No. of Homeless at Home	18
North	TA total	34
	in B&B	9
	Families over 6 weeks in B&B	0
	No. of Homeless at Home	32
Displaced Persons	TA total	2

	in B&B	2
	Families over 6 weeks in B&B	0
	No. of Homeless at Home	0
Thrive 16+		
	TA total	11
	in B&B	1
	Families over 6 weeks in B&B	0
	No. of Homeless at Home	17
Total in TA		297
Total in B&B		135
Families in B&B over 6 weeks		0
Homeless at Home		106

B&B accommodation is not only expensive it is also unsuitable for customers, many of whom are vulnerable. In 23/24 we spent over £3.2m on B&B's; the forecast for 24/24 is £4m+. One challenge moving forwards will be in retaining a positive relationship with commercial B&B providers who are sometimes reluctant to accept bookings from the Council. Another challenge in this service area is recruiting and retaining permanent staff who can carry out good quality casework. This can help prevent homelessness and can avoid placing people into B&B accommodation.

### 5.18 Displaced People Service

We continue to support individuals and families who are moving to Somerset through planned resettlement routes and government mandated asylum dispersal plans.

The Service works with the following Government schemes:

1. Homes for Ukraine
2. Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme
3. Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy
4. United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme
5. Asylum Contingency
6. Asylum Dispersal

### 5.19 Homes for Ukraine

At the time of writing, 402 Ukrainians are living with Somerset Sponsors, 447 have returned to Ukraine or another country, 868 are renting a property locally and 61 have moved to another area in the UK. Over 1840 visas have been approved by the Home Office for Ukrainians to move to Somerset. The comprehensive support system created to deliver safety checks, universal support, wellbeing and integration into local communities continues through the Welcome Hub Network, Welfare Checks and Wellbeing Practitioners contracts. All contracts will be coming to end between March-July 2025. An evaluation of this work and consideration for a future model is underway.

## **5.2 Afghan Schemes (combined)**

90 Afghan individuals are living within Somerset in a mixture of accommodation types, including MoD property, private rentals and social housing. All the families have been welcomed and supported by a Service Resettlement Worker, registered for school places, GP practices, English language learning, benefits and other essential services for living in Somerset. The families will continue to be supported for 3 years and during this time bespoke integration support will be designed and delivered in partnership with their Resettlement Worker. We expect more Afghan families to arrive in 24/25 making use of further MoD properties and LAHF Round 3 properties that will be purchased (see below).

### **5.21 United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme**

The Council has not yet welcomed any individuals under the scheme, a local community sponsor welcomed a family in 2023, for which the Council offers its support. As a Council we have pledged to welcome a minimum of 5 families through Resettlement each year. This can be through any of the schemes. We hope to welcome families through UKRS in the foreseeable future.

### **5.22 Asylum Contingency**

We currently have one asylum contingency hotel in Somerset that has the capacity to house up to 230 individuals. The hotel is procured by Clearsprings Ready Homes and managed by a FineFair. Government has procured national providers to offer support to the residents via telephone. Local Somerset support is offered by a number of VCFSE organisations that go into the hotel, along with health professionals and education is provided in the local area for all children. There are two welcome hubs in the local area (Taunton and Bridgwater) which provide support to individuals. The hubs are staffed by the host organisation and the Council's Resettlement Teams.

### **5.23 Asylum Dispersal**

The asylum dispersal estate is procured by a Government Provider, Clearsprings Ready Homes. Clearsprings has actively procured properties in Somerset in the last year and as a result we have 130 live bedspaces across a number of locations, with a higher concentration of individuals in Bridgwater and 274 bedspaces in the pipeline awaiting approval, including 4 large sites of 50+ bedspaces. Accommodation plans for asylum dispersal will see the number of asylum seekers in Somerset grow over the next year. Individuals will be supported through the network of Somerset welcome hubs.

### **5.24 Somerset Refugee Housing Team**

The Service has a housing team which specialises in providing support to individuals who have been displaced, their role includes prevention, relief and main duty. The financial tools available to find local accommodation are varied, this ensures that wherever possible housing can be found in private or dedicated accommodation without impacting the social housing register.

## **5.25 Local Authority Housing Fund**

One such accommodation scheme is the LAHF which has prioritised the purchase of homes for individuals who have been displaced. In round 1 (23/24) this was Ukrainians and Afghan; 32 properties have been bought and all but 3 (at the time of writing) have been tenanted. In round 3 (24/25) the priority will continue with Afghans and include temporary accommodation. SC intends to purchase or build 13 properties.

## **5.26 Health for Displaced People**

The Service includes a Health Improvement Manager for Displaced People. This role coordinates partnership working across the Integrated Care System, acting as a centralised point for the health needs of asylum seekers and refugees; provides public health knowledge and guidance to the Displaced People Service, and will aim to improve the data and evidence for displaced people in Somerset through a Health Needs Analysis. In addition, resources are being created in co-production with Displaced People to ensure their voices are heard and so resources and commissioned services are relevant, culturally, and religiously sensitive, and reflective of their needs.

## **5.27 Households registered with Homefinder Somerset**

- There are currently just over 11,000 households registered with Homefinder Somerset.
- In the year to 31 March 2024 1,914 homes were let across Somerset.
- On average 130 households bid for every home advertised on Homefinder Somerset demonstrating the mismatch between the demand for and supply of social housing.
- There is a backlog of applications waiting to be assessed. This has been caused by the number of new and updated applications submitted – 8,720 between 1 January and 31 July. The backlog is being addressed as a priority and has been reduced from 3,400 and a wait of 16 weeks in April to 1,736 and a wait of 9 weeks as of 8 August.

## **5.28 Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)**

We continue to assist a wide range of people in the community who require disabled adaptations, financial assistance and advice with regards to essential repairs to their home, advice to improve the energy efficiency of their property, helpful tips to reduce fuel bills and grant funding to provide low carbon heating solutions and insulation, tackle hoarding and safeguard people from safety issues in their home.

We are seeing an increasing number of clients presenting with a range of complex needs, some multiple. Some of this can be attributed to the fallout from Covid where many vulnerable people became isolated and developed health conditions or were undiagnosed previously. The population of Somerset is also above the national average when it comes to an ageing population, particularly in rural areas.

In the last year;

- SIP have successfully completed 220 major Disabled Facilities Grants across all tenures. The adaptations range from simple bathroom adaptations to more extensive work such as extensions. DFG waiting times are down from 23 weeks to 19.8 weeks. This includes extensions some of which can take up to 2 years to complete. Removing extensions, waiting times are averaging 16 weeks which is the benchmark for the national average.
- The team have installed 175 straight run and curved stairlifts across all tenures.
- SIP have created a temporary role to deliver the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund programme (SHDF). The programme is worth £3 million and is actively working with the SW&T tenancy management team to retrofit much needed new low carbon heating solutions and insulation measures to 150 properties. The Project Officer has almost completed a pilot project at Dinhams in Ruishton. Much of the learning from HUGS 1 & 2 has been used in developing the SHDF pilot project.
- SIP will have successfully retrofitted 137 homes as part of the HUGS 2 scheme spending £2.4 million providing insulation and heating measures. Some of the measures include external wall insulation, new windows and doors, loft insulation and air source heat pumps. The completed project will aim to assist 400 owner occupiers from a total of £8.7 million secured as a grant from Central Government.
- The HUGS 2 scheme to date has saved £300k in household fuel bills. 137 properties have been reduced from an EPC of F to a C because of the works. The average cost per property is £12k.
- The Independent Living Officers who assist clients with acute mental health issues to reduce hoarding and undertake home safety checks have completed 92 cases for hoarding. This involves working with the client to clear the property and provide the client with a solution to ensure that they and their support network are able to prevent hoarding from recurring. The team received a record 175 referrals from the mental health teams, client's close family members and the community for hoarding support for individuals.
- SIP have received over 9,800 enquires this year, a record again on last year's total of 7,500 enquires.
- SIP has secured £500million from the UK Levelling Up Fund to assist households with energy retrofit measures and to work with the local colleges to provide new Energy Retrofit courses to develop the next generation of skilled surveyors. This is one of SIP's key goals in 2024/25 to upskill the local workforce in the green revolution.
- SIP are one of three Home Improvement Agencies in England who are taking part in a national pilot with Foundations, the Centre for Ageing Better, The Treasury and Central Government to develop a new Home Hub model. Home Hubs are a one-stop-shop service on all aspects of home repairs and adaptations, with support and signposting on everything from finding trusted tradespeople and identifying what work needs to be done, to how to finance repairs and improve energy efficiency. [Building effective local home improvement services: Good Home Hubs | Centre for Ageing Better \(ageing-better.org.uk\)](https://www.ageing-better.org.uk)

- The team have assisted 9,800 people with energy efficiency advice, saving a total of £1.7 million in household fuel bills to residents.
- SIP have been taking part in a pilot with the UK Energy Network to develop a tool to assist with measuring the impact of the installation of low carbon technology. The results help inform the priorities for national infrastructure upgrade for the electricity grid. The pilot has involved three Local Authorities, National Grid, Central Government and two world class universities.
- Team members have continued to work closely with our colleagues in Adult Social Care and Children's to deliver services, particularly development of the Somerset Independent Living Centres and assistive technology.

### **5.29 Leasehold Services**

- A Leasehold Specialist was appointed on 1 June 2024 to lead the housing leaseholder function within the Council. The role delivers statutory requirements set by Central Government, oversees a portfolio of c.500 residential properties and manages a customer facing team who work with vulnerable tenants and addresses a range of complex issues. The Council is legally responsible to provide this service, and the Leasehold Specialist must ensure the service complies with all regulations imposed, keeping the Council compliant and legally safe.
- The service was successful in securing an Injunction Order (a court order forcing a leaseholder to comply with the terms and conditions of their lease). The court ruled the leaseholder pay the Council's legal costs, in addition to damages and losses to the Council caused by the leaseholder's breach of lease.
- The service continues to deal with a spike in conveyancing matters; it is responsible for swift and efficient completion of LPE1 forms and notices.
- Annual Service Charges (2023-2024) were served on leaseholders and the Council saw an improvement on the revenue generated compared to more recent years.
- The service continues with business as usual; monitoring the generic email address where leaseholders and other internal / external parties direct leasehold enquiries. In addition to this work, the service deals with more complex cases such as: resolving disputes and breaches of lease; encroachment, lease extensions; Deeds of Variations; Buy Backs and serving Section 20 consultations on leaseholders before major works are undertaken at flat blocks where leasehold properties are located.

### **5.3 Tenancy/Estates & ASB**

- Throughout the year the Estates/Tenancy team have worked with only 50% of the team being permanent members of staff; with 4 temporary members of staff. This is a challenge in itself. I can report that the team have bonded well and support each other and are a hardworking team. Our temporary staff have remained stable and have now been with us for over 12 months. We are now looking to recruit permanently in the very near future and we hope that some of these temporary members of staff apply for permanent positions.
- Skip days have been successful and well utilised in all areas; and continue to be very popular with our tenants.



- The team are attempting to get processes and procedures set out, so that we have a consistent, strong and fair approach in all areas of our work. Due to other competing pressures this has not progressed as well as we would like; but we are committed to ensure our service area is as good as it can be.
- ASB incidents have been steady throughout the year, with less youth/gang crime than we have previously experienced. We are still having serious incidents occur which are time consuming when preparing legal paperwork and general neighbour nuisance. We have this year been more successful in getting some of these cases to agree to mediation.
- The team have noticed that there is a higher number of decants that we have been dealing with this year. Decanting someone from their home into temporary accommodation such as hotel or another property that is available. This takes up an enormous amount of officers time in searching for suitable accommodation; then arranging removals, ensuring basic furnishings are available. Once works have been completed on their home, we then support them to return back. We use emergency decants for serious ASB; damp and mould; if the property requires new kitchen, bathroom; or has been damaged due to fire or flood.

### **5.31 Housing Performance Team**

- It has been and continues to be an incredibly busy time for the team working on our governance, risk, tenant engagement, complaints and mandatory data returns, including Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs), LAHS and LADR.
- We responded to 88% of all stage 1 complaints within the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code in 2023/24, an increase from 73% the previous year.
- Just two complaints were escalated and accepted for investigation by the Housing Ombudsman during the year. We have received one determination from the Housing Ombudsman to date, in which they found we managed the resident's complaint well, and there has been no maladministration on our part. We await the Housing Ombudsman's findings on the second case.
- We successfully submitted all data returns on time for 2023/24, including for the first time, perception and transactional TSMs and a copy of our most recent Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code self-assessment.
- During the year we began a new focus on recording our performance against our sector peers (local authority landlords and ALMOs with less than 10,000 properties) through Housemark. We have started to record (albeit immature) benchmarking data and will continue to work on this in the new financial year to better provide our landlord performance data going forward.
- Our tenant engagement work continues with our core groups namely Tenants Strategic Group and Tenants' Action Group. Alongside these core groups subgroups for voids, grounds maintenance, mystery shopper, damp and mould, procurement, capital programme monitoring, Building Safety and Social fund have also taken place.
- This year saw the successful recruitment of our Tenants Strategic Group. 15 members were elected, and a celebration took place at Taunton Rugby Club to welcome them.
- We have increased the number of engaged tenants that we work with closely with and we currently work closely with 30 tenants.
- Two of our engaged tenants are on the Housing Resident Ombudsman Panel.

- The Chair of our Tenants Strategic Group is on the National Panel for Levelling up.
- During the year a few of our engaged tenants have attended the TPAS (tenant participation) conference and the ARCH conference to network. They have attended lots of training, including face-to face training from external trainers as well as visiting our newly built properties.
- Our Tenants Action Group have decided to scrutinise Capital Programme Communication, this is a large project and a couple of members are attending a scrutiny conference in Loughborough.
- We have changed the way in which we communicate with our tenants, the new comms team use digital methods to send regular newsletters and surveys. We also use text messages and e-mails to keep in contact with our tenants.
- Although we will remain a separate legal entity to Homes in Sedgemoor, we are collectively working with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams.
- TotalMobile for housing went live in 2023/24. This system gives repairs and maintenance staff the ability to upload their visits onto handheld devices so that they can see diaries, rent accounts and occupants whilst out in the field. Operatives can also update some information straight onto the housing system whilst in residents' homes.
- A new text messaging service (SMS) from our in-house system went live, allowing staff to send text messages to residents via the housing system and automatically recording what has been sent on the system at the same time.

### **5.32 Homes in Sedgemoor**

- The last 12 months have seen some of the most wide-ranging changes to the regulation of social housing for over a decade. In this context, the Homes in Sedgemoor (HiS) Board and Executive Team sought to ensure that the organisation was both ready for, and in a strong position to embrace the changes. These preparations included a very thorough external 'mock inspection' of HiS compliance with the new Consumer Standards, the results of which were very encouraging. We also submitted our first Complaint Handling Code self-assessment, which is now a statutory requirement of the Housing Ombudsman.
- HiS completed the inaugural return of the regulator's Tenant Satisfaction Measures for the period April 2023 to March 2024. These results place HiS above upper quartile performance for all except one measure. In a successful year of performance as defined by the requirements of the Management Agreement, income collection and customer satisfaction are just two highlights that place HiS among the very best performers in the sector.
- Strong joint working between HiS and the Somerset Council's 'in house' team continued with the development of a single Housing Revenue Account and alignment work continuing across key policies such as rent and service charges. Joint work on property safety has continued throughout the year and a new combined performance report is now presented to the Quarterly Partnership Meetings.

- The last 12 months have seen a continuation of the cost-of-living crisis that has affected our customers and colleagues for several years. HiS has continued to offer support where needed and is proud that both arrears and evictions remain at an incredibly low level. Our customers expect a high standard of service, and we have introduced two key service improvements for customers in the last 12 months, both of which aim to deliver a more convenient repairs service.
- The Board have continued their efforts to strengthen governance, holding 7 board meetings and 2 board away days. The Board commissioned an external review of its governance framework, and the findings were very positive with an action plan now in place for further improvement. The Board gratefully received regular updates on Somerset Council’s financial position and has welcomed the continual support and appreciation of council colleagues and elected members.
- Internally, the Board has continued to bolster relevant skills on the Board and recruited new board members with specific skills and experience in new home development and customer experience. The Board’s work has been supported by its Audit and Risk and the Sedgemoor Tenants’ Assurance committees, both of which have scrutinised and sought assurance from within the business.
- Finally, the last 12 months has seen good delivery on the HiS managed/Somerset Council-funded new home development programme with 66 additional homes provided (including 13 Local Authority Housing Fund acquisitions for displaced persons). These include the first homes that HiS has managed outside of the former Sedgemoor area, something that HiS is keen to continue. A further 41 homes are currently under construction.

## 6. Report Sign-Off

	Officer Name	Date Completed
Executive Director / Senior Manager	Chris Hall	12/09/24
Executive Lead Member	Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts	16/09/24