

## **Annual Report of the Leader of the Council – 2019/20**

Cabinet Member(s): Cllr David Fothergill, Leader of the Council

Division and Local Member(s): All

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### **1. Summary**

**1.1** I would first like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt thanks to Cabinet, Scrutiny, council members, officers and the Council's partners for their great work over the past twelve months. I particularly want to thank the voluntary and community sector for their fantastic contribution to Somerset and of course to our residents, businesses and communities, everyone working together to improve lives for Somerset and especially during the Coronavirus response.

This report covers the past financial year, so Coronavirus only touches on our services towards the end of that timescale, but what a response our staff, our teams and our services have provided. Truly humbling.

During my time as Leader, one thing that has become increasingly clear is the need to continue to work better with key strategic partners, other councils, health colleagues and with our many friends and colleagues in the voluntary and charity sector.

Improving lives is what this Council, and those we work with, is all about. Somerset is at its best when working together and that is something we all want to develop.

### **1.2 Our Vision - Improving Lives**

Somerset County Council has continued to work towards its high level Vision in delivering a county where the public, private and voluntary sectors all work together to raise expectations and to improve the lives of our residents; where we invest in prevention; we build resilience to improve our communities; and we raise business confidence to boost job prospects throughout our county. Over the course of the year we have further developed our approach to improve the health

and wellbeing of our residents, our children, our vulnerable adults, and that too is at the heart of what we do.

Our Vision has continued to set ambitions for the Council and our partners. It sets priorities and principles that underpin our own decisions and seeks to influence the decisions of our partners.

### **1.3 Our Business Plan – Delivering Outcomes That Support Our Vision**

Our Council Business Plan was launched in June 2018 and explains how Somerset County Council will play its part towards the Vision. Beneath each strategic outcome sit four key priorities and a range of service activities. These service activities were refreshed in May 2019 to ensure that they reflected the progress already made against the Vision and to add new areas to target. By lining up these activities, priorities and strategic outcomes with the Vision we were able plan ahead, monitor progress, prioritise investment and ensure that we continued to work within our financial means.

## **2. Key achievements in delivering our Business Plan throughout the year**

### **2.1 Improved health and wellbeing with more people living healthy and independent lives for longer**

In September Somerset's Home First social care and health initiative celebrated its second birthday. Developed jointly between the Adult Social Care Team, our Hospitals in Taunton and Yeovil and working closely with the county's care providers we have been able to reduce hospital stays by offering patients the opportunity to complete their therapy out of the hospital with tailored help from professionals. Since its launch more than 5,000 people have been helped by Home First; saving over 50,000 bed days and reducing permanent placements in care homes by more than 10 per cent.

This meant we were better prepared than many other authorities to deal with the Coronavirus challenge. I pay tribute to the foresight and strategic planning of our leadership team and their managers, staff, and our key partners in this initiative which I have no doubt has significantly helped Somerset through the crisis.

In October Somerset's Public Health Nursing Team were accredited with the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) standard 3 highlighting the excellent standards and provision. A great achievement and the team now have their sights even higher, aiming to achieve gold, the highest UNICEF standard awarded.

## **2.2 A County Infrastructure that drives productivity, supports economic prosperity and sustainable public services**

The organisation's finances ended the year in a robust position. In April 2019 we had positive feedback from our Peer Challenge Review around our financial controls. Additionally, following recognition in September of improved finance from auditors, the council was given an improved rating. The auditors were satisfied that sufficient progress had been made and were reassured by the higher levels of reserves. This improvement was evidenced by the Revenue budget outturn for 2019/20 with a £6.4m underspend. Furthermore the Medium Term Financial Plan was approved by Council in February with a balanced budget for 2020/21 and boosted reserves to a level that is considered reasonable and in line with a Council our size.

Our Highways and Transport team have seen some great success this year. Starting in June with the improved junctions on key roads in Yeovil coming to completion on time and on budget.

The new link road in Bridgwater was opened in December, named by the people of Bridgwater as Squibbers Way. The £18.4m project had a number of technical innovations including the Somerset Bridge, the longest single span bridge in Somerset at 52m, on-site recycling and specialist machinery reducing the amount required to go landfill by 97%. This innovation was award-winning, the Council and their work with Whitemountain and AECOM receiving both the 2020 South West Chartered Institution of Highways & Transportation (CIHT) Innovation Award and the Infrastructure South West Award at the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) Social Impact Awards 2020.

The M5 Junction 25 upgrade outside Taunton progressed well with key milestones hit this year, in February the new bridge beams were lifted into place for the new Blackbrook Bridge. The scheme is projected to improve journey times, reduce congestion, improve Park & Ride journey time reliability and create a more attractive gateway to Taunton, Yeovil and the A303.

The new school year heralded in a number of achievements in Somerset. In September we reported £17m of school projects completed, creating more than 500 school places. These included the new £8.5m Hazlebrook Campus at Selworthy School and the new Nerrols Primary School, both in Taunton.

In October the completion of a £300,000 extension and IT upgrade was completed at Milborne Port School in South Somerset increasing their roll from 180 to 210 and giving the school a state-of-the-art learning space.

The end of 2019 also saw the start of a seven class expansion for Willowdown Primary School in Bridgwater including up to date IT and modern facilities.

For secondary schools in Somerset the start of 2020 saw the £8m expansion of Bridgwater College Academy completed creating an additional 300 places. And the £7m expansion of Bishop Fox's in Taunton is also progressing well.

Our fleet of five low-emission buses also hit the roads in September along a number of school routes. Each were equipped with Euro 6 engines – the most environmentally friendly diesel engines currently available.

We have also been investing in enterprise centres in Cathedral Park, Wells and Sandy's Moor in Wiveliscombe to support small businesses and boost local economies whilst providing opportunities for growth, development and employment.

### **2.3 Safe, vibrant and well-balanced communities able to enjoy and benefit from the natural environment**

We started the year with the launch of a new dedicated volunteering website (<https://volunteering.somerset.gov.uk>) making it easier than ever to find volunteering roles in the Council. We set a target of reaching 300 volunteering enquiries by the end of March and at the end of February we had already had 338 without including those that services had received directly. Again this stood us in good stead to deal with the Coronavirus and helped our outstanding voluntary sector play a huge part in helping their own communities.

Somerset County Council, Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group and Avon & Somerset Constabulary developed and published new partnership arrangements for safeguarding children at the end of September. And, the Children's Trust Board merged with the Safeguarding Children Board to form a Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership which built on the existing strengths within the relationships between partner agencies.

### **2.4 Fairer life chances and opportunity for all**

In April last year we welcomed almost 200 public health nursing staff to Somerset County Council. Staff made up of Health Visitors, School Nurses, Assistant Practitioners and Administrative Support continue to work with local communities and deliver the healthy child programme offering support to all families from pregnancy right through to adulthood.

This year we have also reaffirmed our commitment to apprentices in Somerset. In August Somerset County Council started offering support to local businesses keen to take on an apprentice following rule changes allowing 'levy transfers'. This was followed by Somerset County Council signing the UNISON Apprenticeship Charter underlining its commitment to make sure apprentices get high quality

training, appropriate support, supervision and pay. Currently Apprentice numbers across the authority sit at 288. Developments continue to improve Young People Strategy initiatives and ensure the authority is attractive proposition.

## **2.5 Meeting the Council's challenges: sustainability, quality and focus**

During the year we also started our trail-blazing use of robots in classrooms. The County Council invested £145,000 in 50 robots which schools and colleges are able to request to support children who can't be in school. These AV1 robots take the place of the child in class letting them see, hear and contribute to lessons from their home or hospital bed. These robots are already supporting 25 children across all key stages from 4 to 18 years old.

## **3. New Challenges**

### **3.1 Climate Change**

In February 2019 Somerset County Council declared a climate emergency and resolved to work with District Councils, business partners, communities and individuals towards carbon neutrality by 2030. This year we have seen the publication of a climate Framework produced by all five local authorities to start this work.

In January we held the Climate Emergency Business Summit where representatives from over 100 businesses came together to look at ways the business community can help with this goal. In February Somerset County Council announced the creation of a £1m climate change fund for green initiatives in the County and agreed a motion to plant a tree for every baby born in Somerset next year. This is an area that has been delayed due to Coronavirus and it is important that we regain pace and momentum behind the framework.

### **3.2 One Somerset**

Following an independent report commissioned by Somerset County Council and all four district councils it was clear that change was needed to improve the way local government is run in Somerset. In February as Leader of the council, I took the formal decision to write to Robert Jenrick MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ask him to allow us to submit a business case supporting the adoption of a Unitary authority in Somerset. Since then we have begun the process of talking to residents and businesses across the county to get their views, and published the business case for a new single council for

Somerset. This work is ongoing and subject to Council support will lead to formal engagement and consultation through the summer and early autumn.

### **3.3 SEND Inspection**

In March Somerset was visited by Inspectors from OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) and the CQC (Care Quality Commission) to assess our support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities and their families (SEND). The report identified significant weaknesses in the provision of SEND Services. Highlighted areas had already been identified by senior leaders through self-evaluation and work has already begun to address these. Inspectors identified nine key areas where improvement is urgently required and the next step is to draft a joint Written Statement of Action for approval for Ofsted and the CQC, to outline how these will be addressed. There will be far more detail on these proposals coming forward, but as the inspection began in March it should be highlighted within this report too.

### **3.4 Covid19 Response**

One of the greatest challenges we have faced this year is in responding to the Coronavirus pandemic. It has been a sad and difficult time for many but I can say with confidence that Somerset County Council has shown strength and innovation in adapting to meet the needs of Somerset residents. Our technology has kept things running through lockdown and we have worked tirelessly with our partners to ensure that the most vulnerable people of our communities have been kept safe. There have been many areas of successful work; setting up a single contact number Coronavirus helpline, arranging contact for those most vulnerable residents and working completely digitally to name but a few. Our next step will be looking at recovery and how we can best support Somerset people and businesses.

## **4. Background Papers**

- 4.1** Background papers are available upon request from the Corporate Planning and Performance Team via 01823359895 or [Performance@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:Performance@somerset.gov.uk)