

Annual Report of the Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Planning and Community Infrastructure

Cabinet Member: Cllr D Hall - Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Planning and Community Infrastructure

Division and Local Member: N/A

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1. Summary

- 1.1.** I will use this report to set out progress and achievements from the last year in the services that fall under my Cabinet responsibilities for Economic Development, Planning and Community Infrastructure as well as looking forward to what the next year has in store.
- 1.2.** This report focusses on the key highlights from this service area from the past year. Beyond this it is also important to recognise the importance of on-going service activity and the tremendous contributions our staff make to businesses and communities.

2. Economic Development, Planning and Community Infrastructure – the last 12 months

2.1 Economic Development

Economic prosperity and growth are key drivers of health and wellbeing within the county. Somerset businesses also face significant difficulties in the current economic climate and in responding to the longer-term challenges linked to productivity, workforce skills and transition to a carbon neutral economy.

2.1.1 Heart of the South West Local Industrial Strategy (LIS)

- SCC worked closely with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and local authority partners to develop the Heart of the South West Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) which is now being published by the LEP.
- In June, as a response to the emerging Covid-19 situation, with the input of partners including SCC, the Heart of the South West LEP also launched [The Route Map to Recovery](#) which builds on the aims and

opportunities set out in the LIS, and with Clean and Inclusive Growth a central theme in re-growing the economy.

2.1.2 The Somerset Local Economic Assessment (LEA)

- SCC has a statutory duty to maintain a LEA for the county. It provides an evidence base to shape policy and strategy, as well as project development and bids for funding.
- These were previously standalone documents but Somerset's LEA now takes the form of a dedicated website called [Somerset Trends](#) which went live in January 2020.
- In April 2020, in response to Covid-19 a section of the website was created to host regularly updated intelligence for the economic impacts of the crisis.

2.1.3 Understanding the Economic Impacts of Covid-19

- Initially, given little official data we worked very closely with our business representative organisations to understand what their members were telling them. We continue this work alongside our district partners.
- As the crisis has evolved, we have been able to draw upon official economic and labour market data, data on Covid-19 related Government employment and business support schemes, and our own survey research, to maintain an evolving evidence base to support response and recovery activities. This is hosted on Somerset Trends.
- Separately we helped commission economic forecasting work by Oxford Economics on behalf of South West Councils, which was published in July 2020, a summary of which can also be found on Somerset Trends.

2.1.4 Somerset Business Survey – Economic Impacts of Covid-19

- August 2020, we undertook a very large survey of businesses in Somerset on the economic impacts, including both challenges and opportunities, of Covid-19. It received more than 1,300 responses from business across all industry types and all areas of the county.
- The findings are being used to inform response work (including support work around redundancies and recruitment) as well as recovery planning, most notably the [Somerset Recovery and Growth Plan](#)

2.1.5 Employment and Skills

Funding was allocated from the Business Rates Retention Pilot to provide a set of interventions directly in response to the labour market impacts of Covid-19 to provide support to individuals directly impacted. Interventions include:

- [Step Up Somerset](#) a one-stop-shop for individuals seeking information on employment and skills support across Somerset.
- With Somerset Libraries - rolling out a Device Loan Scheme so individuals can borrow a tablet (with internet access) to support job

search, applications/interviews and up/re-skilling. This is currently being piloted across key towns in Somerset, and if successful, will be extended with funding provisionally secured from a private sector sponsor.

- A Response to Redundancy Framework has been developed which will see a taskforce stood up when significant redundancy announcements are made. The taskforce will coordinate support to the business.
- Employment and Skills Hubs are being rolled out across Somerset to provide a physical location for the delivery of the Step-Up Somerset services along with those on offer from our key partners. These services are currently being delivered virtually and will be rolled out as soon as physical spaces can be re-opened.
- We are working with employers who are continuing to create employment opportunities (such as the Skills for Nuclear Coordinator, HPC Jobs Service and the NHS Workforce Planning Team) to ensure those seeking work are signposted to these opportunities and individuals are able to access training for the skills needed for the opportunities.

2.1.5.1 To support young people, the [Education Business Partnership](#) (EBP) moved all operations online providing ongoing support to schools and directly to young people. The EBP has delivered a virtual work experience programme which will extend into the autumn through live broadcasts; the schools Careers Fair will be moving online on 10 November; and talent academies continue to be delivered virtually. Employers have embraced this new approach and are very engaged.

2.1.5.2 The EBP continues to work closely with the HotSW Careers Hub and Enterprise Advisor Network. All Somerset Secondary and Special Schools are now part of the Careers Hub and/or Enterprise Advisor Network (EAN). Local employers are being recruited to be Enterprise Advisors, ensuring that business can influence-careers delivery and help schools make meaningful employer links.

2.1.5.3 SCC has led on the development of two collaborative proposals and submitted applications to the European Social Fund in 2019. The first of these [SomersetWorks](#) is a £1.126m programme of activity to provide support and opportunities for those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and young people still in school years 11 to 13. The programme builds on existing good practice and will support these young people either back into education or directly into employment. The programme started in September 2020 and will end in March 2023.

2.1.5.4 The second application “Skills for the Workforce” (expected to be contracted in the Autumn) is a £4.156m programme to upskill those in employment across Somerset to support their career progression or to move into alternative employment. An element of this programme will be aimed at upskilling those employed by Somerset County Council. It will also provide a further 2 years of funding for the Somerset Skill Up Service.

The DWP has recently launched its work experience for young people Kickstart Scheme. Somerset County Council will coordinate and encourage take up of this programme across Somerset and offer placements as an employer.

2.1.6. Aerospace/iAero Centre

Somerset is at the centre of the UK’s rotorcraft sector, linked to the presence of Leonardo Helicopters and significant parts of its supply chain in the county. SCC, working closely with industry and the LEP is delivering the iAero Centre in Yeovil. Construction is due for completion at the end of 2020. This will be followed by a fit out and mobilisation period with the Centre expected to open by July 2021.

2.1.6.1 iAero will provide 2,400 square metres of high-quality office, workshop and collaboration space and specialist business support services to support the local aerospace supply chain’s ongoing competitiveness in a global market. The scheme is being funded by SCC and £6.9 million of grants secured from the European Regional Development Fund and the Local Enterprise Partnership’s Growth Deal, with further investment currently being finalised via the Government’s Getting Building Fund to support the Centre’s fit out.

2.1.7 Supporting Businesses and the Local Economy

Our network of [Enterprise Centres](#) supports new-start and growing small businesses across rural Somerset. Occupancy rates have remained high. In addition to the five existing centres, SCC has made significant progress extending this network over the past year in areas of unmet need. Construction of new centres at Wells and Wiveliscombe funded via the Growth Deal and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) sources were completed in summer 2020 and demand for space in both is strong despite the current economic climate. Funding for the office element of a further centre, to be developed on land in SCC’s ownership at Bruton, has been secured via ERDF and funds for accompanying light industrial space are being secured via the Government’s “Getting Building Fund”. Finally, we are also working closely with MHCLG to finalise an agreement for ERDF funding for an enterprise centre on SCC owned land in Chard.

2.1.7.1 In December 2018 Somerset local authorities were successful in securing agreement from Government to operate a Business Rates Retention pilot in 2019/20. As part of this pilot an economic growth and prosperity fund has been established. The pilot will provide funding to invest in a programme

of activity overseen by the Somerset Growth Board and spanning 2019/20 and 2020/21. Activity to be funded through the pilot includes business start-up and growth support, work to strengthen local business networks and foster innovation and promote apprenticeships and skills development. The pilot has been revised in light of the economic impact of Covid-19 to include additional employment and skills measures and support for the tourism sector.

2.1.8 A303/A358

Over the past eighteen months, the A303 Stonehenge and Sparkford to Ilchester proposals have been examined by a panel of independent inspectors appointed by the Planning Inspectorate. The Secretary of State for Transport is now expected to make decisions on the schemes in November. We continue to give clear support for the schemes and have urged the Secretary of State to make sure the consenting process allows outstanding detailed matters to be addressed, and that the schemes are approved at the earliest opportunity.

2.1.8.1 Highways England (HE) announced the preferred route for the A358 Taunton to Southfields scheme on 27th June 2019. HE's work to develop the more detailed proposals for the proposed layout and local road connections is expected to commence later this year. We continue to work with our Local Authority partners to keep the pressure on Government to deliver the three A303/A358 schemes that have currently been allocated funding and to ensure further funds are allocated for the remaining sections in the next Road Investment Strategy period from 2020.

2.1.9 Superfast Broadband - Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS)

Broadband connectivity continues to be a priority for businesses and residents in Somerset. As a reminder, the CDS programme is an intervention programme designed to deliver Superfast Broadband to households and businesses in hard to reach areas where the commercial operators' planned rollout would not reach. The CDS programme has delivered superfast broadband to 298,900 premises. Circa £6 million of returned subsidy from the BT Openreach contract is being used to deliver full fibre to circa 2000 premises across Devon and Somerset.

2.1.9.1 Within the National Parks, infrastructure built by Airband Community Internet Ltd (AB) is providing access to a 30 Mbps service to approximately 5,000 hard to reach properties in Exmoor and Dartmoor.

2.1.9.2 AB continues to build, providing superfast coverage in Lot 4 (North Devon). Following a contract change the remaining premises will be part of a fibre delivery. Civil engineering build of this nature is complex and Covid-19 restrictions have not made matters any easier. However, AB is working to meet the programme delivery targets. CDS will continue to work with AB to support delivery of this important infrastructure.

2.1.9.3 Five of the Phase 2 contracts were terminated in September 2019 and a settlement was reached with Gigaclear as a result. CDS is currently working closely with BDUK on a re-procurement process which was launched in February 2020. Final bids from qualified bidders were received late summer and it is currently expected is that contract(s) will be awarded in December 2020.

2.1.9.4 CDS secured £1 million of funding from the Heart of the South West LEP Digital Extension Fund. This will support the Mobile Booster Project which will provide vouchers for a signal booster to help businesses and residents with poor indoor 4G coverage. The project aims to support up to 1,250 beneficiaries over the next 2 years with around 65% expected to be businesses.

2.1.9.5 CDS has commissioned a refresh of the Local Broadband Plan (LBP) which identifies priorities and actions for the CDS Collaboration's Digital Strategy over the next few years. The updated strategy sets out projects and interventions which may be pursued as CDS works in line with government and HotSW strategy moving towards improved and gigabit capability.

2.1.10 Taunton Digital Innovation Centre

We have made significant progress in the past year with plans to develop an innovation centre in Taunton, focused on digital business opportunities and working with the UK Hydrographic Office as a Taunton based world leader in marine geospatial data. We are in the process of finalising investment from the European Regional Development Fund and the Government's Getting Building Fund for the centre and are working with Somerset West and Taunton District Council to secure its location with the town centre Firepool regeneration site.

2.2 Hinkley Point C (HPC) and Securing the Legacy

2.2.1 It has been a year of change and achievements for the HPC project. As with all activity this reporting year, the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on the project, focusing energy on those areas where progress was key, including the 2 nuclear islands, common raft, turbine towers and tunnelling activity. The nature of the project means it continues to offer the County Council area and wider region, benefits to the economy and communities. This is set against the need to ensure mitigation of any negative impacts from the development.

2.2.1.1 The use of the jetty for bringing material to site has continued. During the reporting period strengthening works commenced on Combwich Wharf to allow large loads to be brought in by sea more efficiently and unloaded safely.

- 2.2.1.2** Three tunnel boring machines were delivered to site via barge and then road. They are now in place and tunnelling under the Bristol Channel for the station's water outfall and intake systems. The tunnels will be lined with a total of 38,000 concrete segments that are cast at a facility in Avonmouth, operating 24/7, casting one segment every 10 minutes. To enable the tunnel heads to be constructed, the seabed needs to be dredged. Prior to dredging, comprehensive sampling of the mud is taking place. The tunnels should be completed by 2023.
- 2.2.1.3** In the early part of 2021, we learned that there is a need for an increase in the size of the workforce on site beyond the 5,600 originally assumed. The focus of our preliminary discussions since then has been to understand the planning and legal implications of an increase in the workforce. Some initial discussions have taken place about the assumptions, methodology and data to underpin the assessment process. It is important these technical discussions take place before any consideration of the impacts of an increase in the workforce and how they might be determined in planning terms.
- 2.2.1.4** The HPC project contributes towards the draft Climate Emergency Strategy as an exemplar clean energy, low carbon energy generator. Hinkley Point C (HPC) plays a vital role in meeting the UK's Net Zero target, by providing a steady supply of power to the grid and 7% of the UK's current electricity requirements.
- 2.2.1.5** Transition towards the Mechanical Electrical and Heating (MEH) phase is commencing. This impacts the approaches to workforce development by increasing the volume of some existing initiatives and creating new local arrangements. The project focuses efforts on all stages of the workforce development pipeline including the Inspire Education Programme for school-age young people, Young HPC for those not old enough to work, but considering the project for employment (1447 registrations) and 644 apprentices on the project so far, against a target of 1000. The HPC Job Service actively places people into roles and advertises vacancies for partner organisations.
- 2.2.1.6** In response to the specific demands of the project Altrad, Balfour Beatty Bailey, Cavendish Nuclear and Doosan Babcock joined forces to form the MEH Joint Venture. This will work across the Hinkley Point C site to integrate and coordinate the delivery of the all main MEH, cabling and associated support services on the project.
- 2.2.1.7** The two HPC accommodation campuses are operational and achieving good occupation levels. They are operated by HOST who are providing hundreds of career opportunities for local people.

A travel demand and behaviour change project continues to be delivered in

2.2.1.8 Bridgwater by SCC to encourage and support people of all ages to walk or cycle instead of travelling by car. A number of walking and cycling and safety improvements have also been delivered by SCC in the last year, most notably improved crossing facilities at the Quantock Road Roundabout.

2.2.1.9 Direct spend within the region continues to increase and by July 2020, had exceeded the target of £1.5 billion over the construction period and stood at £1.67 billion. The Somerset Community Foundation holds an overall mitigation fund value of £12.8 million and have awarded an additional £1.6m to a range of projects since last year's report, bringing the total to £3.6m across 136 grants.

2.2.1.10 Hinkley Tourism Action Partnership (HTAP) has been active in supporting the recovery plan for the leisure and tourism industry. Virtual events have been held which have helped local businesses with marketing and planning and worked with HPC on the Hinkley Leisure website for workers which encourages them to explore and enjoy Somerset.

2.2.1.11 In January 2020 the Quantock Hills AONB Service was informed that its bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund to support development and delivery of a Landscape Character Action Plan in areas affected by the HPC project had been successful. Outputs from the project span creating hedgerows, planting of orchard trees, woodlands being brought back into management, native trees and meadow species planted and heritage features being restored.

2.2.1.12 Public rights of way work has also incorporated the improvement of infrastructure including new easy to use gates that are popular with people with mobility issues. Work is taking place to create a coastal bridleway following discussions with landowners around Stogursey, and the creation of other coastal non-motorised user opportunities.

2.2.1.13 Work is being done to preserve the historic heritage of areas affected by the HPC project. Public realm works have been completed at Cannington Footbridge, and the Heritage Trust worked with the AONB team on its Heritage Lottery Funds Landscape scheme.

2.2.1.14 The Hinkley Strategic Delivery Forum (HSDF) continues to meet and its objective is to deliver the greatest opportunity and benefit for Somerset and the wider South West, and deal with the challenges that we identify. A focus this year has been "Sustaining the HPC Legacy".

2.2.1.15 The New Nuclear Local Authorities Group continues to meet and Somerset is engaging with Suffolk County Council in their work preparing for the Sizewell C nuclear new build.

National Grid Hinkley Point C Connection Project

2.2.2 The project involves the construction of a new high voltage electricity connection from Bridgwater in Somerset, to Seabank near Avonmouth and will connect new sources of power, including Hinkley Point C. The construction works are well underway, which has inevitably had an impact on our landscape and highway network.

2.2.2.1 In accordance with the Section 106 agreement, National Grid enter their third year of STEM subject support for local schools and training for adults on any government benefits to enable them to access employment in construction and highways roles

Planning Policy, Control and Enforcement (Minerals)

2.3

2.3.1 We have made significant steps forward in re-establishing SCC's planning service in the past year. Previously the capacity of the service was affected by a number of "hard to recruit" vacancies. This situation has now been resolved and in September 2020 we reached a position where all posts in the service were filled. It is pleasing that in addition to the recruitment of qualified and experienced staff we are planning for the future through the employment of a Graduate Planner and Planning Degree Apprentice. The arrangements that we have in place with Devon and Hampshire County Councils for support with planning casework and policy support are continuing in the interim whilst the new team is mobilised.

2.3.1.1 SCC has statutory responsibilities to maintain and regularly review local plans for minerals and waste across Somerset and for the determination of planning applications relating to these matters and our own developments. Work is continuing to review the Somerset Waste Plan; the focus in the past year has been on updating our future Waste Needs Assessment. We are also in the process of producing our Local Aggregates Assessment and Annual Monitoring Report (to cover 2017-2019) with the support of consultants, as these will be essential to assist with the plan review process.

2.3.1.2 Within the last year SCC has continued to process planning applications, as well as supporting Somerset Waste Partnership and its operators with amended ways of working, to ensure that household waste collections were not compromised, during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have consented several primary and SEND school proposals; an amendment and an extension to Bowdens Quarry; and granted waste consents to support various Golf Courses physically change their landscape and improve their offer. In July 2020 SCC's regulation committee met for the first time online and has functioned successfully in this format, including provisions for applicants, residents and other stakeholders to make representations to committee meetings about applications under consideration.

2.3.1.3 The Somerset Ecological Service (traded arm of the SCC’s ecological advice function) has significantly grown its external income generation and continues to grow its business client base, whilst meeting its Service Level Agreement (SLA) responsibilities to all of Somerset’s District Councils, and an in-house advisory function. The change to advice from Natural England following recent case law means that these workloads are likely to grow as we assess nutrient loading on watercourses as a result of development. As a result, we are reviewing the SLAs and level of staff within the team to accommodate the additional requests for our time.

Waste

2.4 **Headline Figures** - Last year, from recycling sites and the kerbside, SWP recycled 135,421 tonnes of material. 90% of this material stays in the UK and 51% in Somerset, including all food and garden waste. This prevented 67,573 tonnes of carbon being released into the atmosphere, which means SWP are still independently ranked as a national ‘high-flyer’ for carbon saving in Eunomia’s National Carbon Index. Our recycling rate increased slightly to 52.86%.

2.4.1

2.4.2 **Recycle More** – We are in the process of introducing the biggest change to recycling into the county for a decade. [Recycle More](#) is to be introduced to approximately 260,000 households over 18 months, delivering environmental benefits and savings for all partners. Launched in Mendip at the end of October, it added new materials – notably plastic pots, tubs and trays – to weekly kerbside collections, allowing rubbish collections to move to being three-weekly. A major service change accompanied by behaviour change communications that aims to reduce rubbish by 15% and increase Somerset’s recycling rate to 60% by 2023.

2.4.3 **Energy from Waste (EfW)** – We have completed the move away from landfill, with all of Somerset’s non-recyclable kerbside waste now going to the new Viridor Resource Recovery Centre at Avonmouth, where it is turned into heat and electricity – enough to power 84,000 homes. Non-recyclable waste at our recycling centres is separated into that which can go through the EfW plant and the smaller proportion which can’t. Some of the electricity and heat will soon go to power a new plastics reprocessing plant at Avonmouth, with the rest of the electricity available to the National Grid.

2.4.4 **Mobilisation of a Major Collection Contract** - SWP’s new contract with SUEZ started at the end of March. Successfully making this switch in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic represents a major challenge successfully met. In doing so we welcomed a fleet of 140 new vehicles which are 30% more carbon efficient than their predecessors. The vehicles can store more material – cutting down on ‘trips to tip’ miles. The latest in-cab technology including GPS and constantly updated route maps is helping crews be more

efficient and collections more reliable. The contract with SUEZ includes a substantial commitment to social value, for example crew receiving dementia awareness training. We will be looking at other aspects of this as the roll-out of Recycle More continues.

2.4.5 Coping with Covid-19 - This coincided with the move to the new collection contract. Although there was disruption to the Garden Waste, assisted and bulky collections; weekly recycling and fortnightly rubbish collections were maintained throughout despite big increases in quantities of some materials. For example, we picked up around 4,000 more tonnes of food waste, cardboard and glass in April -June 2020 compared to the same time the previous year. Textile collections were paused as the market for materials collapsed but have since been reintroduced – though only for wearable clothes and shoes. The Covid-19 period saw considerable public support for crews.

2.4.5.1 Recycling sites closed during the height of the Covid-19 restrictions and SWP managed the successful phased reopening of them, requiring substantial site changes and work on the frontline with Viridor, as well as supporting communications. That this happened without major incident or disruption was a major achievement.

2.4.6 Recycling Centres - Charges at the two former community recycling centres (Dulverton and Crewkerne) were removed on 1st April 2020. The revised opening hours and days, with extra hours available in the summer at most sites, continues to work well. The popularity of being able to recycle plastic pots, tubs and trays (PTT) at Recycling Centres continues to grow, with 286 tonnes of plastic, including the previously accepted bottles and these new lightweight materials being recycled in 2019/20, having risen by 92 tonnes (47%) from the previous financial year. 41 tonnes of Tetra Paks and other cartons were also recycled from our HWRCs in the same period – with both the cartons and PTT all recycled in the UK.

2.4.7 Slim My Waste, Feed My Face - This behaviour change campaign was launched in February. Before it was cut short by Covid-19, it had reached around 80% of the county and saw food waste increase by around a third in the areas it had reached, with thousands more food waste containers ordered.

2.4.8 Growing Social Media - We have seen considerable growth in our social media following, with Facebook following increasing by around a third in the space three months. We are working to enhance the digital content available through our platforms. The "SORTED" e-Zine has well over 10,000 subscribers and continues to grow and we partnered with the fire service on communications around parking issues during the Covid-10 period.

Schools Against Waste - The programme has continued to engage with

2.4.9 the county's primary schools through the Carymoor Environmental Trust. More than 150 schools have now been visited, reaching 33,000 school children in assemblies and 12,500 in "Reduce, Reuse and Recycle" workshops. All Mendip primary schools are being offered virtual assemblies and workshops in support of Recycle More.

2.4.10 **Beyond the Kerb** - Our trail-blazing initiative to show what happens to the recycling SWP collects has been refreshed for 2019/20 and publicised as part of our commitment to transparency

2.4.11 **Digital Customer Services** – A new Customer Relationship Management system launched in February allowing residents to do more online, 24/7, including report missed collections, order containers, log feedback, book clinical and bulky collections. Approximately 50% of requests for containers are now made online and well over 10,000 people have already created accounts with SWP.

2.4.11.1 SWP has taken over garden waste payments for Mendip and will be taking on payments for all districts. We are now preparing to move to a rolling sign-up for Garden Waste collections which will be a big step forward.

2.4.12 **Climate Change** - SWP leads the 'Waste and Resources' workstream in the cross-authority Climate Emergency Strategy. In this role we are pushing forward various initiatives such as improvements to public sector waste procurement, the Somerset pledge against preventable plastics and support for the projects such as Refill and promoting composting (our subsidised compost bin offer attracted well over 300 orders and counting).

2.4.13 **National Influence on Strategies** – SWP continues to engage at a national level to influence the direction of travel, with the most far-reaching set of waste policy changes in a generation being expected. A second set of national consultations is expected in Spring 2021 (delayed by Covid-19).

Trading Standards

2.5 SCC continues to be a partner in the innovative and highly successful joint Trading Standards service for Somerset, Devon and Torbay. As Cabinet Lead, I sit on the review panel for the joint service. The service has continued to operate to a high standard in the past year, meeting its key performance indicators and targets. In recognition of this the partnership was shortlisted in the Best Service Delivery category for the Local Government Chronicle 2020 awards.

2.5.1.2 Looking forward, we are in the process of negotiating the integration of Plymouth City Council into the partnership which will further strengthen the resilience of the joint service and enable further efficiencies to be delivered on behalf of the partners. Alongside this it is intended to extend the service

agreement between the partners that has underpinned the joint service model for a further 10 years from 1 April 2021.

Heritage

I continue to serve as a member of the South West Heritage Trust Board.

2.6

In recognition of the service provided by the Heritage Trust since their inception in 2014, the Cabinet, at their meeting on 10th June approved the awarding of a further 5-year Grant Agreement, which came into effect on 1st November 2019. The new Grant is broadly along the same terms as the previous arrangement but with the annual funding capped at the 2018/19 levels for the duration of the agreement.

2.6.1

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on many of the services delivered by the South West Heritage Trust. All public facing facilities; the Museum of Somerset, the Rural Life Museum, the Brick and Tile Museum and the Heritage Centre all closed to the public on the 18 March 2020 and did not reopen until the first two weeks of August. Upon reopening, timed online ticketing now manages the flows and all public areas have been made accessible, including the museum cafes and shops. The Trust's Learning Team again began to offer school-based workshop sessions on 21st September.

2.6.1.2

During Covid-19 related site closures, work continued apace. The Digital Delivery Group oversaw a very successful programme of activity to continue to promote Somerset's rich heritage. Core activities including collections-based workshop sessions and curatorial work and design work for future exhibitions have all continued.

2.6.1.3

The prolonged closure of sites and the lack of public visitors has had an inevitable impact on the Trust's ability to generate income, which will undoubtedly put severe pressure on the Trust's finances going forward. Discussions with Somerset County Council commissioners are ongoing to consider the financial and other issues impacting the Trust as a result of the pandemic.

2.6.1.4

Somerset Libraries - Development

2.7

Workshops and Resources for Business - In 2019, the *Glass Box* in Taunton Library hosted various workshops aimed at businesses and start-ups, helping to strengthen the reputation of this space as a hub for enterprise and innovation. A workshop was held for a wide range of support agencies, NHS staff & care home managers to consider how new technology could improve the quality of life for vulnerable people.

2.7.1

Training for Staff at Musgrove Park Hospital re: E-resources

In November 2019, some key staff at Musgrove Park Hospital received

2.7.2 training to help them make patients aware of Somerset Libraries e-resources such as downloadable books, audiobooks, magazines – helping to improve the quality of life for people in hospital or at home recovering.

2.7.2.1 During lockdown staff contacted over 3,000 vulnerable customers by telephone. An overwhelmingly positive response was received as a result of these calls. Staff provided a variety of support over the phone, helping people set up online memberships, accessing the libraries online offer, or signposting to support elsewhere (Somerset Sight, Citizen’s Advice, etc.)

2.7.3 **Launch of New Collection re: Children’s Mental Health** - Somerset Libraries was part of a national launch of a new “Books on Prescription” collection aimed at Children’s mental health. “Books on Prescription” are self-help books, chosen by health professionals and endorsed by those living with the relevant health condition. This latest collection is targeted at children in Key Stage 2, and addresses topics that include how to stay mentally healthy, dealing with worries and emotions, and dealing with tough times e.g. bereavement or trauma.

2.7.4 **Social Media** - Our first ever Facebook Live quiz was held in celebration of World Book Night, on the 23rd April, attracting attention from local media. A new Podcast channel called [Library Cast](#) has been created on YouTube, so far 20 podcasts have been recorded with local authors and poets and partner services. The service now supports e-Magazines and e-Newspapers and 28 social media channels across Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. Since March 2020 activity has grown rapidly, and usage continues to be considerably higher than before the pandemic. Videos available on YouTube, cover health and wellbeing, story times and rhyme times. Engagement has increased by over 200%.

2.7.5 **Summer Reading Challenge**
In response to Covid-19, Somerset Libraries’ annual [Summer Reading Challenge](#) this year went digital. With a new website, reading challenges, games and activities for children to take part in online, 1,165 children were signed up by parents in Somerset to take part in the challenge. Part of our “Big Digital” Summer programme this year was the South West Libraries’ Summer Online events. Working in collaboration with ASCEL (Association of Senior Children’s and Education Librarians), Authors Aloud and 12 different library authorities across the South West.

2.7.6 **BookStart** - We have worked with a range of local family support organisations to provide books to vulnerable families across West Somerset through our book-gifting programme. Over 150 packs were distributed with each pack containing a selection of books, an educational/development toy or game and information leaflets on where to get local advice and support.

Community Library Partnerships (CLPs) - The CLPs achieved a solid level of stability, with several starting to show a marked improvement on performance indicators. Notable first year achievements include:

2.7.7

- Continuation of a good range of events and activities
- Dedicated teams of volunteers providing support for library staff or providing library services fully
- Library staff adapting to significant changes and embracing new ways of working
- Many CLPs already managing to increase their opening hours through use of volunteers
- Many CLPs seeing good increases in usage numbers and numbers of those engaging with services offered

Libraries Volunteering Offer - Somerset Libraries' volunteering offer attracted an increasingly healthy number of volunteers across nearly all libraries during 2019/20 with a total of more than 600 volunteers delivering over 12,000 volunteer hours.

2.7.8

Roles range from support with library activities through to digital volunteers, Summer Reading Challenge and a number of students applied to volunteer in a library as part of their Duke of Edinburgh award. Volunteers range from school age to retirement age. Contact with volunteers has been sustained through the year and some are now returning to welcome customers back into their library.

2.7.8.1

LibrariesWest (LW)

During the Covid-19 emergency, the LW systems team supported 7 Authorities with closing down and reopening libraries across the LW region. The team redesigned the [Libraries West](#) website to create a revamped public facing website tailored to customers' needs during the pandemic and beyond.

2.7.9

Flood and Water Management – Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA)

2.8

Since March 2020, Covid-19 has significantly impacted on the LLFA's ability to undertake some of its normal activities, for example undertaking site visits and progressing schemes and studies. This has also impacted on our partners, consultants and contractor programmes and our own delivery. Following announcements and updated Covid-19 risk assessments in July the team were able to resume site visits on a priority basis.

2.8.1

The Environment Agency published its new [National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy](#) in September 2020. We are awaiting LLFA guidance on the strategy to support comprehensive update of our existing Local Flood Risk Management Strategy in 21/22.

2.8.2

As Local Lead Flood Authority, SCC acts as a consultee to our Local Planning

2.8.3 Authorities on the flood risk and surface water drainage aspect of major planning applications. Demand has steadily increased since the duty was created in April 2015, rising from an anticipated 200 applications a year in 2015 to over 650 applications in 19/20. Covid-19 had an initial impact on the statutory planning service in the early weeks of lockdown but resumed quickly with similar levels of demand on our resource. It has not been possible to meet developers onsite, but most meetings have been held more than effectively online.

2.8.4 This year the team has provided feedback on the Mendip Strategic Flood Risk Assessment and Local Plan (part 2) as well as Somerset West and Taunton's Local Plan 2040 (Issues and Options) report. More broadly we have commented on the implications of the Government's Planning Reform White Paper on the role of the LLFA and took part in a national survey to inform the update of the Non-Statutory Technical Standards for the Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS).

2.8.1.4 The service has successfully bid for Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) funding to deliver SuDS themed projects that will further enhance our planning related service. This includes the development of new local SuDS guidance to support the delivery of high-quality SuDS by developers. We are currently organising a follow up workshop with all stakeholders hopefully by the end of 2020 to showcase the work done to date and obtain comments. The workshop will help the project identify next steps around adoption of the guidance.

2.8.1.5 Work continues to create showcase SuDS sites through our EU funded project, Sponge 2020. Sponge funding was used for the Coal Orchard development to enhance the SuDS provision. Sponge is 40% match funded by the SRA. Using SRA funding we are taking the lessons from Sponge into a project looking at how we can utilise SuDS in the highway whilst not compromising our duties for highway maintenance. The LLFA and Somerset West and Taunton Area Highways Office have been scoping candidate sites to develop design proposals for a trial.

2.8.1.6 SRA funding has been used to undertake a Surface Water Management Plan (SWMP) for Yeovil. The SWMP forms part of a local evidence base for future decision making around potential flood alleviation measures, maintenance regimes, development planning and infrastructure provision. Further integrated flood studies in Chard and Ilminster are being undertaken and are due to be delivered by the end of this financial year.

Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA)

I have continued to serve as Chair of Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA), having been elected for a two-year period at the June 2019 SRA Board meeting.

2.9

The SRA gives Somerset extra flood protection and greater resilience.

2.9.1

Partners in the SRA are Somerset County Council, the four district councils of Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West & Taunton, and South Somerset, the Axe Brue and Parrett Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs), the Environment Agency, Natural England and the Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee. Numerous other organisations are involved with the SRA at different levels and in different ways.

2.9.2

The SRA funds programmes of work across Somerset and major projects, that advance the aims of Somerset's 20 Year Flood Action Plan. This Plan was drawn up during the devastating floods of 2013-14. The SRA has five workstreams, reflecting the priorities of the Flood Action Plan.

2.9.3

Schemes are led by the SRA partners. Funding comes from either the SRA's Local Partner Funding (council tax, Internal Drainage Board contributions) or the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership's Growth Deal Fund or sometimes both.

2.9.4

The five workstreams are:

- Dredging and River Management
- Land Management including Natural Flood Management
- Urban Water Management

2.9.5

- Resilient Infrastructure
- Building Local Resilience

Information on all workstreams are available on the [SRA](#) website, particularly in the [Annual Report 2019-20](#) which is available as a downloadable PDF in either full or summary versions.

Priorities for the Next 12 Months

2.9.6

- SRA partners will complete the final elements of the £13.049m Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership Growth Deal funded 'Somerset Flooding' project. Completion of further pioneer dredging on the River Parrett and Phase 1 of river channel enhancements to the River Sowey/Kings Sedgemoor Drain will be the final elements of this project.
- Review and update Somerset's 20 Year Flood action Plan. The original plan was produced in 2014.
- I will continue to press local MPs and government ministers to see the necessary provisions made so that the SRA can become established in law with the powers to raise its own funding and continue to deliver an extra level of flood risk protection and resilience.
- SRA partners will continue to deliver an extensive programme of projects and activities that will give the people of Somerset an additional level of flood risk protection and resilience.

Registration Services

Births, Deaths and Notices of Marriage or Civil Partnership

2.10 Over 15,500 individual customer appointments have taken place in Somerset and North Somerset Registration Offices between November 2019 and October 2020 including over 5,000 birth registrations, over 8,000 death related appointments and in the region of 1,500 Notices of Marriage or Civil Partnerships.

2.10.1

Covid-19 has caused particular pressures for the Registration Service, with ceremonies cancelled and restrictions on how births and deaths could be registered. Despite these challenges the service responded incredibly well, continuing to flex and adjust to enable this critical service to be delivered. At the end of March 2020, the General Register Office (GRO) confirmed a temporary change to death registration legislation which had a significant impact upon the service and the way in which we are permitted to register deaths. The change allowed death registrations to be taken over the telephone and was the first change to the legislation since 1837. Although challenging initially, this allowed us to continue to offer death registrations in a timely manner for our customers during a very difficult and worrying period. The amendment is valid for a maximum of 2 years but is under review during this time and will be revoked if no longer deemed necessary.

2.10.1.1

Legislative Changes

2.10.2 On 16th October 2020 the Registers of Births and Deaths Bill 2019/2020 received its second reading in Parliament. This is a Private Members bill and appertains to the keeping and maintenance of birth and death registers. If/when it reaches Royal Assent there may be some impact to the service largely focusing how registrations are recorded and subsequent records maintained.

2.10.2

Marriage and Civil Partnerships

2.10.2.1 Legislative changes to marriage law that have been planned for some time will be delayed until 2021. The change will see the implementation of a schedule system and will include the mother's name to the marriage registration process (as well as father's name). It will also create an electronic record for all marriages replacing the existing paper registers currently used by registrars and the clergy. There will be implications for how ceremonies will be delivered, staff training and storage of the then historic registers from all Registration Offices and Places of Worship to consider before the commencement date.

2.10.2.1

On 28th June 2020 The Law Commission began a 2-year review of Marriage Law which includes a review of where couples can legally marry and who can carry out the marriage, along with the processes involved in pre-ceremony. The service had planned to raise the profile of Somerset

2.10.2.2 weddings with attendance at large events during 2020 sponsored by a number of our venues, this has been postponed to 2021.

Implementation of Opposite Sex Civil Partnerships began in December 2019. Couples were able to give Notice of Intent from 2 December with the first unions taking place after the statutory 28 day waiting period on 31st December. Since the implementation date we have had around 60 Opposite Sex Civil Partnerships take place across Somerset and North Somerset.

2.10.2.3

Medical Examiner Service (ME)

The introduction of the ME service is in progress across the country following the release of findings from the Shipman Report. The ME service will introduce a new level of review whereby all non-coronial deaths, initially in acute care hospitals, will be subject to ME scrutiny, the aim is to provide clarity for bereaved families and improve patient safety. Ultimately, it is also intended to encompass all deaths including those which occur in the community. NHS England, who are responsible for the implementation, indicated that a comprehensive system should be in place by April 2020, clearly the Covid-19 situation has had an impact but there is a strong push now for implementation to progress. New arrangements have been introduced on a non-statutory basis; in Somerset this was launched on 1st October 2020. This is a national NHS initiative and statutory status is due to be introduced in Spring 2021.

2.10.3

Shared Working with Other Authorities

The service is considering investigating further shared working models with neighbouring authorities following the successful introduction of cross-authority birth declaration registrations with Bristol in the later part of 2019. The current monthly average stands at around 100 births registered by declaration from this authority by our North Somerset team.

2.10.4

General Register Office (GRO)

This past year has seen the GRO focus upon performance nationally. Over the past few months, we have worked to improve engagement with our stakeholders, particularly our Bereavement Services, to raise awareness of statutory timescales relating to the death registration process. The service continues to work with the GRO to achieve Public Protection and Counter Fraud standards.

2.10.5

Social Media Presence

The total Facebook post reach for this reporting period was over 157,678 and has increased significantly in recent months. Covid-19 has caused a spike in social media communication directly from customers in relation to ceremony status updates. The number of customers using the direct messaging function has also increased and the team have worked incredibly hard to keep our customers updated and informed. Our Instagram followers have more than doubled since last year and the [Somerset Wedding](#) website

2.10.6

continues to be a well-used resource, with a 28% increase in new users and a 17% increase in page views for the period November 2019 to September 2020.

Improving the Customer Journey

A few months ago, work began to create an online payment function for customers to enable them to pay for services (mainly ceremony payments), seamlessly and without direct contact with our offices. We are now close to completion and should be able to go live early in 2021.

2.10.6

Once the online payment function is live, we will develop plans to launch an online ceremony planner for couples to use. This will enable customers with booked ceremonies to manage their ceremony choices virtually. The online planner will give customers an improved channel for communication and will improve how ceremony staff access ceremony information. A review of our customer feedback mechanism is planned for the coming year.

2.10.6.1

Many of our offices are now co-located within other Somerset County Council buildings and many also share space with other services where possible. Consideration will be given over the next period to the re-location of our Burnham-on-Sea office into another premises. Although already relocated, our Minehead office will feature in the library renovation plans for this year. Another move will be the Chard office which will be part of the Chard Regeneration Scheme.

2.10.6.2

Civil Contingencies

Governance

The Somerset Local Authorities Civil Contingencies Partnership (SLACCP) continues to serve the 5 local authorities of Somerset.

2.11

Policy, Contingency Planning and Response

2.11.1

The Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) continues to maintain a suite of emergency response plans and supporting capabilities. During 2020, several SLACCP plans were refreshed and reissued:

2.11.2

- the generic response and recovery plan for all five Somerset local authorities
- the Somerset Flood Guidance
- the Major Accident Hazard Pipeline Plan
- the Hinkley Point Off-Site Plan
- Heath Health Watch Plan
- the SCC Operation London Bridge framework

Following changes to the statutory regulations for nuclear sites in 2019, the CCU undertook significant work in relation to the redetermination of the Detailed Emergency Planning Zone (DEPZ) around Hinkley Point B. After a public engagement exercise with communities in the DEPZ, the 3.5km radius

2.11.2.1 for all current protective actions remained largely unchanged but additional public information is provided to residents of the DEPZ through an annual calendar. During 2021, it will be necessary to re-issue the Potassium Iodate tablets to the residents of the DEPZ and to plan and deliver a statutory test of the Off-Site Plan before September 2021.

2.11.2.2 Business continuity planning continues to be a priority. The SCC Corporate Continuity Business plan was activated in March 2020 as part of the response to Covid-19 and SCC services held up very well under the challenge. From April to August 2020, the CCU coordinated collection of regular business continuity situation reports from all SCC services to inform the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT). From September 2020, the focus shifted to refreshing business continuity plans ahead of winter challenges including Covid-19, winter pressures and EU Exit impacts.

Training and Exercising

2.11.3 Training continues to be a priority. E-learning and workshop courses for Strategic, Tactical and Operational Roles have been developed and delivered across the partnership. In March 2020, CCU arranged for the Emergency Planning College to deliver a strategic training workshop for senior managers from all five local authorities. Planned classroom sessions for capability training have been converted to webinars and during October 2020, the CCU delivered three sessions of evacuation and shelter training online plus a duty officer role refresher session.

Multi-Agency Planning

2.11.4 The local authorities continue to be key partners supporting the Avon and Somerset Local Resilience Forum, Local Health Resilience Partnership, Somerset Health and Social Care Emergency Planning Group and Somerset Health Protection Forum.

Community Resilience

2.11.5 We continue to promote and support community resilience through the Somerset Prepared Partnership, providing advice, guidance and small grant support to Parish and Town Councils and community groups. This includes individual support for communities, the [Somerset Prepared](#) website and an annual multi-agency community resilience event, now in its third year. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, this year's event was a series of webinars, videos and on-line training delivered over three days in October.

2.11.5.1 The CCU continues to maintain two schemes through which communities can work with the local authorities in an emergency: Community Places of Safety; and Emergency Community Contacts. These schemes have over 100 registrations each. During the Covid-19 national lockdown in spring 2020, the usual rest centres and places of safety in community buildings were not accessible and people were not allowed to stay overnight with friends or family. That would have been a problem in the event of emergency

evacuations so CCU developed links with local hotels, holiday camps and bed and breakfasts and gained agreement from the accommodation provider that they would take in any residents who needed to be evacuated from their homes.

Incidents

2.11.6 Since February 2020, CCU staff have been very involved with Covid-19. The CCU set up an SCC Incident Room in March 2020 which ran until August. It restarted in September as the SCC Business Continuity Management Group. CCU staff also participated in response and recovery cells plus the Tactical Coordination Groups both at Somerset level and in the Avon and Somerset Local Resilience Forum and provided advice and support to Strategic Officers.

2.11.6.1 CCU staff have assisted Public Health by identifying potential sites for Covid-19 testing centres. This includes the Regional Testing Centre at Taunton Racecourse, locations for Mobile Testing Units at various sites across the county and, in autumn 2020, Local Testing Sites. CCU now chairs the Somerset Death Management Group which brings together representatives from cemeteries and crematoria, Registration Services, hospitals and the Coroner.

As well as the Covid-19 response activities, the CCU continues to maintain a 24/7 on call duty officer. Fortunately, there have been no other significant emergencies incidents during Covid-19.

Scientific Services

2.11.6.2 Somerset Scientific Services had a very successful 2019-2020 trading year generating more income than expenditure. The reputation of the service within the industry and within its client base to offer a first-class analytical testing services and sought-after scientific advice remains high. Our services continue to be used throughout Somerset and the South-West, and we also routinely do work for clients in the Midlands and even the highlands of Scotland.

2.12

2.12.1

Generation of income, especially from the private sector is always a key focus of the service and the implementation of a marketing strategy and use of social media sites continues to show benefits, for example the number of clients spending more than £1,000 pa now stands at 60 an increase of 30% on previous years.

2.12.2

Results from the customer feedback survey continue to be very positive. Our overall approval rating is just over 9.6 out of 10, with no respondents giving a score of less than 8. 100% of respondents stated they would use the service again and would recommend Somerset Scientific Services to other users. 27% of respondents have been first time customers.

2.12.3

Potential clients have been targeted through a combination of social media, paid Google advertising and direct marketing. These include local authorities and district councils, asbestos removal firms, building contractors, surveyors, architects, estate agents, holiday park operators, farmers, National Trust properties as well as domestic water and asbestos clients.

2.12.4

Website use is continuing at a steady pace. Over 2000 new users have visited the site over the past year. Users are coming from a balance of referrals, direct links, paid advertising, social media and organic search results. This will inform the ongoing marketing strategy, with a renewed focus on Search Engine Optimisation techniques.

2.12.5

The service achieved successful accreditation by the national inspection body (UKAS) again this year and feedback from our annual inspection visit was very complimentary. Performance in external proficiency testing schemes confirm that Scientific Services are within the top classifications.

2.12.6

As with most internal SCC departments and private sector clients, major changes to income streams were experienced with the onset of the pandemic. The laboratory was forced to close at the end of March, but it was possible to quickly reopen the laboratories through social distancing measures. As a result, income levels over the second quarter have

2.12.7

encouragingly returned to close to target figures set before the pandemic. The income forecasts for quarters 3 and 4 are promising and it is hoped that some of the losses from April and May will be recouped.

Climate Change

I am updating you on Climate Change because for part of the year I was the lead member for this area of work. However, Climate Change has now moved into Councillor Paul's portfolio and next year this will be included in her annual report.

2.13

2.13.1

At SCC's Full Council in February 2019, a motion was carried to declare a 'Climate Emergency' in recognition of the scale and urgency of the global challenge from Climate Change. It was also resolved to develop a Strategy to identify ways towards making the county of Somerset 'carbon neutral' by 2030.

2.13.1.1

All 4 Somerset District Councils subsequently passed similar resolutions either recognising or declaring Climate Emergencies. Whilst the individual declarations differed in detail, all aspired to achieving carbon neutrality, to identifying adaptation and mitigation measures which could arrest negative impacts on our climate and reduce carbon emissions released into the atmosphere.

2.13.1.2 It was agreed to develop a cross-authority, county-wide strategy to achieve our aims and to find ways to work in partnership with other public sector organisations, businesses, our communities and industry experts to bring together a coherent and effective strategy and action plan.

Robust governance was put in place to steer the development of the strategy including a cross-authority Task and Finish group of Members and a dedicated group of Cabinet Members and Portfolio Holders to oversee its development.

2.13.1.3

Experts from the field of academia, industry, climate activism and subject matter experts from across the Somerset Local Authorities worked together to develop the scope of a high-level Framework document. It described how we planned to approach this work and identified the key areas of focus to help members of the public understand the scale of the challenge set by the ambitious targets within the 'Climate Emergency' and to inform the resulting Strategy and local Action Plans

2.13.1.4

2.13.1.5 The Framework document identified a number of key themes and proposed actions and an initial planned direction of travel for the Strategy alongside a number of discreet yet interdependent workstreams to deliver the aims of the strategy made up of local authority and industry experts.

Strategy Development

2.13.1.6 Following comprehensive public consultation on the Framework document, work began on shaping the Strategy based on the feedback received and analysis of the changes required for Somerset to become carbon neutral and increase our resilience to the risks posed by Climate Change at a local level.

2.13.2 To utilise the knowledge available within the County, a wide range of partners with sector expertise were invited to inform and lead several workstreams within the Strategy along with input and review from a number of key organisations with Climate Change and sustainability sector intelligence and expertise. Further guidance was also taken from academics at Exeter University and experts from Somerset Climate Action Network (SCAN).

2.13.2.1 A joint, cross-authority Scrutiny Task & Finish (T&F) Group comprising nominated members from each of the 5 Local Authorities was set up in 2019 to oversee development of the Strategy and to provide guidance to the Strategic Management Group of Officers responsible for bringing the Strategy together.

With support and guidance from a range of organisations and individuals with sector knowledge, the Strategy was developed to:

- provide an **evidence base**, setting out how our climate is changing and the challenges and opportunities we face,
- provide the beginnings of a **policy framework**, outlining our goals and ambitions for tackling Climate Change here in Somerset, and
- inform a high-level **action plan**, setting out the critical actions needed to deliver our goals, enabling us all to adapt and thrive in the future.

2.13.2.2 **The Focus of the Strategy**

The Climate Emergency Strategy for Somerset is built around 3 goals:

- Goal 1: To decarbonise Local Authorities, the wider public sector estates and reduce our carbon footprint.
- Goal 2: To work towards making Somerset a Carbon Neutral County by 2030.
- Goal 3: To have a Somerset which is prepared for, and resilient to, the impacts of Climate Change.

2.13.3 Work was undertaken to understand where Somerset’s carbon emissions are generated, and to begin to understand our wider carbon consumption, identifying nine sectors which are impacted by Climate Change and have a major impact upon our ambition to become a carbon neutral County by 2030. The nine sectors are:

1. Energy
2. Transport
3. Built Environment
4. Business, Industry and Supply Chains
5. Natural Environment
6. Farming and Food
7. Water
8. Waste and Resources
9. Communications

2.13.3.1 Specialists from the Local Authorities and partner organisation led work on each of the nine themes or sectors, analysing and prioritising current and future issues, considering local and UK Government policy implications, analysing opportunities and challenges each would face in achieving our Goals and identifying a series of actions needed to minimise emissions and build resilience within each area of work.

2.13.3.2 The Strategy outlines a wide range of objectives and outcomes that each sector will need to deliver in order to cut emissions and to adapt and build our County’s resilience to the adverse impacts of Climate Change in the immediate, medium and longer term.

A summary of the opportunities and benefits and barriers and challenges in each of the sectors are documented within the main body of the Strategy, with more detailed analysis within respective sectoral documents that are

appended to the main Full Strategy document.

2.13.3.3 In order to ensure accessibility to the general public a much shorter 'Summary' Strategy Document was also developed.

Action Plans

Initial high-level Action Plans have been created setting out a list of actions which will be required to start us on the journey to carbon neutrality.

2.13.3.4

Adoption

2.13.3.5 The Strategy is now being taken through each of the Somerset Councils' democratic pathways to the following timescales (note dates were correct at the date of publishing, but each Council's website should be checked for updates). The intention is for the Somerset-wide Strategy to have been adopted by each of the Councils by the end of-November 2020.

	SWT	MDC	SCC	SSDC	SDC	
2.13.4	Scrutiny	14 th Oct	19 th Oct	14th Oct	3 rd Nov	16 th Nov
2.13.5	District Executive / Cabinet	20 st Oct	2 nd Nov	9th Nov	5 th Nov	25 th Nov
	Full Council	26th Oct	9th Nov	18th Nov	19th Nov	25th Nov

Brexit

SCC continues to follow Government guidance on planning for Brexit. SCC set up a dedicated Brexit Team which has worked closely with Districts to produce a combined risk register and develop a communications and engagement plan to promote EU Settled Status and support SCC services with their preparation.

2.14 Subsequently, EU Transition planning has been managed as business as usual through the Civil Contingencies Unit. During 2020, regular contact has been maintained with the Brexit Lead Officers in the Somerset Districts and surrounding authorities and the HotSW Economic Resilience and Opportunities Group. Covid-19 has made the promotion of EU Settled Status more complicated but in September 2020, SCC was successful in a bid to the Home Office for funding to support vulnerable people to apply for EU Settled Status. SCC has been awarded £68,634.00 for the delivery of practical support to vulnerable or at-risk EU, EEA and Swiss citizens and their family members to help them make their EU Settlement Scheme application. The main delivery partner is Diversity Voice who will be engaging with the vulnerable residents. The grant includes some funding toward engagement with employers

2.14.1

2.14.2

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Mendip Hills AONB

It has been a record-breaking year for the Mendip Hills AONB Unit. Over 5,500 hours of volunteer hours were recorded, over 280m of drystone wall were repaired, 3 scheduled monuments secured and over 500 hectares of land improved for wildlife. £12,500 in grants were awarded from the Mendip Hills Fund. 15 new volunteer rangers were selected and over 2,000 people attended or events and walks.

2.15

The last six months have been a period of extremes for the service. The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in the Mendip Hills AONB experiencing both the quietest and busiest ever periods. From the start of lock-down the AONB Unit maintained essential visits to the car parks for visitor safety and kept a record of the number of vehicles at each site.

2.15.1

As restrictions were lifted, we saw a dramatic rise:

Number of cars, comparing 27/3/20 vs 16/5/20 (Bank Holiday Monday)

2.15.1.2

- **Blackmoor Reserve, Charterhouse**
 - 0 vs 31 (Full with cars blocked in)
- **Black Rock Gate, Cheddar Gorge**
 - 3 vs 100+
- **Burrington Combe top to bottom**
 - 6 vs 60+ (Many on the verge at the top)

2.15.1.3

Automatic visitor counters recorded 60,000 passes between 21st May and 4th July at one site, between 21st May and 10th July there were 12,706 passes through Black Down Ellick Entrance - this compares to just under 6,000 passes during the same time period 5 years ago.

Cheddar Gorge has been subject to regular anti-social driving behaviour. Local people and organisations are becoming increasingly concerned and are looking to address immediate issues and long-term solutions. The AONB Unit is now coordinating the short, medium and long-term actions of the Cheddar Vision Group to address.

2.15.1.4

The AONB's 35 volunteer rangers are now continuing with their site visits. They have played a vital role in the delivery of the aims of the Unit and again demonstrate why it is so important to have informed, skilled, motivated volunteers within the local community as they report issues to us and then spread advice and guidance as ambassadors through their own local networks.

2.15.1.5

In partnership with the Quantock Hills AONB, Blackdown Hills AONB and the Somerset Wildlife Trust, a £500k Nature Connections project has commenced to improve people's health and well-being with access to these nationally important landscapes.

2.15.1.6

The service has continued to contribute to and shape the government's proposals for the future of protected landscapes.

2.15.1.7

The focus of the service is now on nature recovery and visitor economy recovery. A Nature Recovery Plan is being prepared for the area supported by bids to undertake work on the ground. To ensure a sustainable recovery of the local visitor economy the Unit are preparing and submitting bids to help ensure the Mendip Hills remain a wild land ready for adventure. The National Grid have awarded the AONB £20k to baseline how many people currently visit the Mendip Hills AONB.

2.15.1.8

Quantock Hills AONB

Covid-19 restrictions have had a significant impact on various elements of the Quantock Hills AONB Team's work, particularly outdoor activities with

2.15.1.9

volunteers and other groups. During lockdown, we were particularly keen to support the vulnerable people in our communities, while promoting the "stay at home" message during the time of restrictions.

Alongside direct contact video messages were posted by team members on social media and produced a fortnightly Lockdown Newsletter (covering the Blackdown Hills AONB), which was extremely well received.

2.15.2

From the start of lockdown there was an increase in the amount of both large-scale and small-scale fly-tipping. A member of the team worked closely with the Somerset Waste Partnership Fly Tipping working group to tackle this issue.

The AONB has continued to benefit from grant funding from the Greater Quantock Landscape Development Fund (GQLDF), funded by EDF, including:

2.15.2.1

- 2.2km of new native species hedgerow and paid for the traditional management of a further 3.8km
- 207 orchard trees planted
- Restoration of 2,400m² of ponds

2.15.2.2

- 11 Ha new wildflower meadows
- 1,100 new native trees planted.

2.15.2.3

The four-year Somerset AONBs Nature and Wellbeing pilot project, funded by Public Health Somerset, was completed with a final report at the end of August this year – it's success has led to the bigger more in-depth Somerset Nature Connections partnership project that started a week later in early September.

The Nature and Wellbeing project was able to connect some of the people likely to benefit the most in Somerset with the health and wellbeing benefits of high-quality natural environments in the county.

The Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme

2.15.2.4

Confirmation of the successful £1.9m National Lottery Heritage Fund bid came in January 2020. The Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme (QLPS) is a £2.6m programme with 23 projects to be delivered over five years. It will be delivering projects under the Quantock Landscape Character Action Plan (LCAP) which has been designed to meet AONB Management Plan objectives and Defra themes. The scheme will be delivering across a project area twice that of the AONB, so the scheme will be delivering both inside and beyond the AONB boundary under its three core themes:

2.15.2.5

- Inspire - engage people in understanding the landscape and its cultural influences and work with communities to understand pressures and opportunities into the future.

2.15.3

- Live - undertake physical works to conserve and enhance the landscape and heritage assets of the Quantock Hills.
- Learn - increase knowledge of the Quantock Hills and the role of the estates in the formation of its landscapes.

For more information visit the [Quantock Hills Landscape Partnership Scheme website](#)

Environmental Land Management (ELMS) Trials

The AONB launched its work on helping Defra design the new ELM scheme at a meeting at Fyne Court on 11th February this year, with Quantock land managers and farmers attending alongside other stakeholders and interested bodies. The new Defra scheme will entirely replace the current support for farming/land management i.e. Basic Payment and Countryside Stewardship. The Quantock Hills AONB (as part of a wider multi-AONB initiative) are one of a number of bodies across the country running Defra-funded "Tests and Trials" to co-develop with farmers and practitioners the different elements of a new scheme.

2.15.4

Financial Management

Strong financial management throughout the year has ensured we have been able to continue delivering this varied range of services within budget in what continues to be a very challenging financial environment.

3.

