

Somerset County Council

County Council 5 May 2021

Annual Report of the Cabinet Member for Resources

Cabinet Member: Cllr Mandy Chilcott - Cabinet Member - Resources

Division and Local Member: All

Lead Officers:

Jason Vaughan - Director of Finance,

Chris Squire - -Director of HR and OD,

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1. Summary/link to the County Plan

- 1.1** This report highlights the key activities and achievements of the past year within my areas of responsibility.

I could not let this moment pass without acknowledging what an exceptional year it has been for Somerset County Council and its communities.

Throughout the report you will read that the entire council – every single member of staff has been affected in some way by the pandemic, whether in a work or personal capacity.

In March last year there was an overnight change that was rapid and seamless, that saw staff from offices and various locations make the move to home working. There were many organisations that did not manage to do this and its been a real strength of our authority that we were able to put in place the training, support and technology to achieve this.

I cannot thank the staff enough for everything that they have done. They have come forward with ideas and initiatives to help ensure the County Council has been able to respond. I've seen some real advances in how we engage with our partner organisations and residents including ever closer working with our colleagues in health and social care.

Staff have been deployed across all areas working inside and outside of the organisation. This has helped us work with and support individuals,

communities, schools and businesses. It has helped set up vaccination centres, source and deliver PPE and deliver mass testing and so much more.

I am immensely proud and grateful that so many have stepped up, often doing work that is entirely new to them. This includes not only our staff, but our communities and voluntary sector. Working together, all have supported each other to ensure that the Somerset has continued to provide the essential services that our residents need and many depend upon.

The areas covered within the report underpin much of the work of the Council, providing advice to and supporting frontline services. This has helped to deliver the Councils priorities whilst continuing to manage our finances and resources effectively.

2. Key Achievements and Activities

2.1 Statement of Accounts

Grant Thornton have signed off the 2019/20 Statement of Accounts and provided an unqualified audit opinion. Like in the majority of the councils, the process was delayed because of the impact of Covid-19 and the increased assurance work that auditors are required to carry out nationally with respect to pensions and asset valuations.

The final outturn showed an underspend of £6.4m on the Revenue Budget and £1.3m on the Capital Budget for the year.

As part of the audit function, Grant Thornton are required to make a value for money judgement based upon the Councils arrangement to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. They have issued an unqualified value for money conclusion for 19/20. This is the best level of opinion that the Council can receive and is a further improvement on the previous years' judgement. This reflects the continued strengthening of our financial management arrangements and financial resilience.

Work has started on the 2020/21 Statement of Accounts and these will be published by the end of July 2021 in accordance with new statutory timetable.

2.2 2021/22 Budget

A progressive and balanced budget for 2021/22 was approved in February 2020. This included a £19.15m increase towards services for our most vulnerable residents increasing both the adult and childrens services budgets,

as well as creating a new £10.8m Emergency Fund for activities to help combat Covid-19.

There is also an ambitious capital program that invests £73.9m in new capital projects including:

- £17.2m for schools including SEND provisions
- £1.1m for early years
- £5.9m for Climate Change linked schemes
- £2.2m highways small improvement/safety schemes
- £8m traffic signals upgrade.

The Director of Finance's Report and Advice on the robustness of the budget and adequacy of reserves and balances concluded that the estimates for 2021/22 were robust and the budget lawful and that levels of general and earmarked reserves were adequate and reasonable in meeting the Council's risk.

2.3 Covid-19

The Finance team has been overseeing the financial controls of just under £75m of Covid-19 funding received this year to ensure that all spending meets the criteria set by central Government. The team has made changes to how they work with debtors to ensure that those affected by Covid-19 can amend their payment schedules accordingly. The team also made 112,271 creditor payments totalling £752,173,898 many of them early to support businesses through the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.4 Financial Reporting

Despite the impacts of Covid-19 the monthly revenue budget and quarterly capital monitoring to Scrutiny Place and Cabinet has continued throughout the year. The format of the reports has continued to evolve, and further improvements are planned for 2021/22.

2.5 CIPFA – Financial Management Code

Work has been undertaken to publicise, embed, and comply with the Financial Management Code. This was developed by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) in the context of increasing concerns about

the financial resilience and sustainability of local authorities and to support good practice in financial management and to assist local authorities in demonstrating their financial sustainability. A self-assessment will be completed early in the new financial year and reported to the Audit Committee along with any actions needed to improve our compliance with the code.

2.6 Internal Audit

Throughout this financial year the Chief Internal Auditor (CIA) role has been held by the South West Audit Partnership (SWAP) on behalf of the Council. The Director of Finance and the Chief Internal Auditor have liaised frequently to review progress against audit plans, previous audit action plans and to consider any fraud or irregularity instances. In addition, the CIA has attended the Council's Governance Board regularly to update them on internal audit progress and consider appropriate changes to the audit plan and most recently to develop the audit plan for next year. Attendance at the Governance Board has provided useful insight for the CIA to be aware of current and emerging challenges that might influence the audit work programme.

The CIA retains authority to act independently and has access to relevant officers and members to carry out audit duties as appropriate, including reporting independently to the Audit Committee and attending the Senior Leadership Team meetings.

2.7 Audit Committee

The Finance Team have ensured a robust work programme has been in place to enable effective governance reporting. This has included regular updates from SWAP on internal audit reports and their audit plan for the year and also from our external auditors, Grant Thornton on their work on the Statement of Accounts including their Value for Money assessment.

2.8 Risk Management

During 2020/21, in my role as both Cabinet Member and the Council's Risk Champion, we continue to work to raise the understanding that risk management is a vital management discipline and is a key part of our governance framework. I continue to oversee, with the help of the Audit

Committee through their constructive challenge and ideas, the assurance and compliance with the Council's risk management business procedures. Covid-19 has had a significant impact upon the council and its risks management processes have proved to be robust.

2.9 Financial Services

The appointment of Jason Vaughan to the permanent Director of Finance role and a number of vacancies has led the service to review the senior Finance Leadership Team. Donna Parham was appointed as Deputy S151 Officer & Head of Corporate Finance in March 2020, Ben Bryant was appointed to the role of Strategic Manager – Finance Systems in Governance in September 2020 and Chris Evans joined the Council in January 2021 as Strategic Manger – Finance Business Partnering. There have been a number of changes at Service Manager level with Paul Griffin being appointed as Chief Accountant, Rebecca Hall as Service Manger- Financial Planning & Reporting and Steve Rose as Service Manager Exchequer. All of the senior roles within the Finance Team are now filled with permanent staff.

3 Corporate Property

3.1 Supporting the COVID emergency response

3.1.1 As with other service areas, the work of the Corporate Property function was dominated by the Council's response to the Coronavirus emergency during 2020, and the service has continued to support the council's response during the first part of 2021. During the initial phase of the pandemic, officers from the Property team worked alongside colleagues in Adult Social Care to secure and adapt two 'nightingale' care home sites in Yeovil and Wellington, as well as a range of other emergency placement solutions. The Property function were heavily involved in establishing the Council's warehouse for PPE distribution to the care sector - since the start of the pandemic, more than 11 million items of PPE have been issued from the warehouse and the operation remains ongoing. During the winter of 2020-21 Property staff supported work to refurbish and fit-out six 'lateral flow' mass-testing sites around the county, and key members of the team were redeployed to support this project and the vaccination programme.

3.1.2 Within Corporate Property, the Facilities Management service has perhaps felt the greatest impact from the pandemic. In the early part of 2020, the FM team worked with public health colleagues and our cleaning contractor (Glen Cleaning) to introduce enhanced infection control measures across the council's buildings as the virus started to spread in the UK. During the first lockdown period, FM and Property Maintenance Group staff continued to work to keep our buildings safe and secure before rising to the huge challenge of implementing new 'COVID secure' standards across the estate to support services to re-open safely. Over 70 COVID secure risk assessments have been carried out and are being constantly updated, and hundreds of plastic screens and sanitiser points were installed during May and June last year. The FM team also played a key role in supporting staff to work from home through the distribution of chairs and other office equipment. Keeping up with changing COVID secure guidance and social distancing rules continues to be a huge challenge for our Facilities staff as we support the re-opening of our frontline services.

3.2 Completion of the Corporate Landlord programme

The final tranche of properties transferred to the full control of the Corporate Property team in April 2020, and the Corporate Landlord model is now firmly established across the Council. The approach is delivering significant benefits already; premises management is being carried out in a more efficient and effective way, compliance has improved and the net cost of operating the estate has reduced. Projects like the forthcoming refurbishment of Minehead Library are benefitting from a centrally co-ordinated approach to property development and the new approach is being well-received by services (the appointment of a new Programme Manager role during 2020 has been key to this improvement). The corporate property function has responded to the changing accommodation requirements of the council, working with services to provide accommodation for the Family Safeguarding and the Family Drugs and Alcohol Courts teams, for example. The significant support provided to enable services to safely re-open following the first lockdown period is a good example of how the corporate landlord approach can be highly effective.

3.3 Sustainability and the Climate Emergency Strategy

The Property team has made a significant contribution to the development of the Climate Emergency Strategy, in particular through a lead role in the energy workstream. Going forward the service will play a key role in implementing the strategy by leading on work to de-carbonise the council's

property estate over the next decade. To achieve this objective the team are currently leading projects for low carbon buildings for Minehead library and a new primary school at Comeytrove, Taunton, as well as taking forward potential de-carbonisation schemes at a further 11 sites. Over £4m of Public Sector Decarbonisation funding has provisionally been secured by the team following a very competitive bidding process. The service is also leading on projects and strategies to utilise the Council's land and buildings to generate clean energy.

3.4 County Hall campus and new ways of working

- 3.4.1 2020 saw the completion of the A Block refurbishment project - on time and on budget in spite of the challenges presented by coronavirus. The project is delivering benefits ahead of business case assumptions, in particular by creating surplus space which is now licenced to the Somerset NHS Foundation Trust, generating a significant income stream. Over 80% of teams based in the County Hall campus were re-located during the summer of 2020 as part of the occupation of A Block and to free up surplus space in B Block - a huge challenge for the County Hall project team with the vast majority of staff working from home.
- 3.4.2 The pandemic has accelerated a trend towards 'hybrid' ways of working with virtual meetings and working from home now standard working practice for office-based staff. These new ways of working will drive further changes to the County Hall campus and other office accommodation as we emerge from the pandemic, and the Property function is working alongside colleagues in HR and service areas to ensure our office accommodation supports new working arrangements in a safe and COVID secure way.

3.5 Major Projects

- 3.5.1 Maintaining the delivery of major projects through the Covid-19 pandemic was a huge challenge for the Major Projects team. Difficulties in materials supplies from March to August 2020 resulted in a number of programme challenges, as did the number of Covid positive tests within contractor workforces during the winter of 2020-21. During the period covered by this report 10 major projects were completed with a further 9 due for completion in 2021/22.

Projects completed during 2020 & Q1	Completion date
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2021:	
Wiveliscombe Enterprise Centre	20/03/2020
Taunton County Hall - A Block Refurb	25/06/2020
Ilchester Little Marsh Replacement Nursery	31/07/2020
Wells Enterprise Centre	03/08/2020
Willowdown Expansion	11/09/2020
Taunton, Bishop Fox's Expansion	12/11/2020
Highbridge Children's Centre	07/12/2020
iAero Augusta Westland project, Yeovil	11/02/2021
SEIC 3 Innovation Centre, Bridgwater	25/02/2021
Somerton New Primary School	23/02/2021

Projects currently underway:	Est. completion date
Polden Bower Special School, Bridgwater	13/05/2021
Bruton Enterprise Centre	14/06/2021
Yeovil Fiveways School Expansion	30/07/2021
Holway Centre PRU Refurbishment, Taunton	30/07/2021
Holway Primary Extension, Taunton	27/10/2021
Fairmead School Expansion, Yeovil	30/08/2021
Sky College Expansion, Taunton	10/12/2021
Minehead Library Refurbishment	01/12/2021
Chard Enterprise Centre	14/03/2022
Somerset Digital Innovation Centre, Taunton	TBC
Comeytrowe Primary School, Taunton	TBC
Wells Blue School	05/10/2022

3.5.2 Over and above the core business of project delivery, the Major Projects team have also worked with contractors on a range of social value and environmental objectives. A number of projects - including the delivery of a 6th form centre at Hazelbrook Special School, and the transformation of a care home garden in Bridgwater, were delivered by contractors at no cost, and contractors also worked with local community partners on other social value initiatives. Both the 3rd Somerset Energy Innovation Centre building in Bridgwater and the iAero project in Yeovil were awarded the BREEAM excellent certificate for sustainability.

3.6 Property Maintenance & Facilities Management

- 3.6.1 As with Major Projects, keeping the County Council's maintenance programmes on track was a significant challenge during 2020. Nonetheless, the most comprehensive condition survey programme in recent years was completed during the year - a total of over 270 buildings surveyed across the schools and non-schools estate. Nearly 50 school maintenance projects were completed, with further major works to replace the roof of Highbridge Family Centre and a range of other investments in the maintenance of non-school property. The Property Maintenance Group continued to maintain over 4,600 components across the non-schools estate, carrying out or overseeing nearly 2,500 planned and reactive maintenance jobs, servicing and inspection activities and minor projects. The in-sourcing of the Property Maintenance team continues to deliver good value, in particular for smaller maintenance and refurbishment projects which are being delivered in a far more cost-effective way.
- 3.6.2 Whilst the work of the Facilities Management team has been dominated by their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some progress has been made in consolidating the benefits of the corporate landlord model during the year. Compliance with statutory premises management responsibilities continues to improve, and progress has been made with a number of corporate contracts during the year. The team have led the County Council's contribution to an initiative to collaborate on waste and recycling across all local authority sites in Somerset.

3.7 Finance, policies and systems

- 3.7.1 The Estates team have generated over £6m of capital receipts during the 2020/21 financial year through a range of strategic asset disposals. Significant lease and licence transactions were successfully negotiated in 2020; with EDF for the Somerset Energy Innovation Centre campus, and with the Somerset NHS Foundation Trust for space at County Hall. A total of seven S106 agreements to secure education contributions have been concluded in the year to date, with a further fourteen at various stages of discussion or drafting, with a total potential value of over £15m. In addition, the agreement of Community Infrastructure Levy contributions to planned new schools in Taunton (securing a further £15m) was a major achievement in the year. Improvements to the database used to manage developer contributions for education will continue with a major upgrade during 2021.
- 3.7.2 Work to develop property policies and to procure a replacement Asset Management System was delayed during 2020 because of the COVID-19 response. The Corporate Property Asset Management Plan will now be

brought forward for agreement in 2021, followed by a programme of policy revisions. A procurement process is underway for a new Asset Management System to replace the Council's Atrium database, but the timescales for this project have been delayed by the redeployment of key staff to support ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic.

3.8 Group structure and workforce

The Corporate Property Group has seen some significant changes to workforce during the course of 2020, with a number of key appointments to posts, some of which have been vacant for some time. Two staff restructures have been completed as part of agreed financial savings plans, with the required reduction in staff achieved with no compulsory redundancies. Between November 2019 and January 2021, the average age of the Corporate Property Workforce has fallen by over 2 years, and the percentage of women employed in the group has increased. With excellent support from the council's Human Resources function, the team have been raising the profile of professional property roles and career paths, through website and social media channels as well as engagement in recruitment events. These include a graduate Property & Construction 'Bootcamp' event hosted by the University of the West of England in the autumn of 2020, and a number of successful social media campaigns. Looking ahead, we will be investing in training and development for a number of key staff over the next year, including a recent Graduate Trainee Estates Surveyor appointment. The vacancy rate has reduced significantly, and at the time of writing all professional and technical vacancies are filled or undergoing the first round of recruitment.

4. Procurement

The past year has been an unusual year in many respects, and this extended to the activities supported by the Commercial and Procurement team. In 2019 the total value of goods and services procured through the team was c£240m, and for 2021 the pipeline shows a value of c£390m of goods and services to be procured. These are the levels of activity we would usually expect, however during 2020 this reduced to c£35m. This was not directly due to the impact of COVID-19, more that few large value contracts expired in year, the one large value contract awarded in 2020 was for the Highways Major Structures framework.

This does not mean the team was quiet, the value of a contract does not necessarily reflect the work involved, and the volume of contracts remained high.

Efforts were also focused on Service Planning, improving our documents and processes, including updating the Contract Procedure Rules and Standing Orders and producing detailed guidance for commissioners and procurement officers in achieving social value from procurements. The commercial team remained busy, not least supporting the COVID-19 supplier relief activities and rolling out contract management training across the Council.

Outside of the 'day job' the team played a vital role in securing PPE, particularly in the early weeks and months of the pandemic. Essentially establishing a new logistics chain, they worked to ensure the provision of PPE to a diverse range of recipients across Somerset including Domiciliary Care providers, micro providers, Residential Homes, Children's Services and the provision of PPE packs for all Schools and Early Years in the autumn, with the support of colleagues in other departments. The team's efforts meant that at no time did the County ever run short of PPE despite an initially volatile and fluid market. The team harnessed the innovation of local suppliers, such as working closely with gin makers to turn their operations over to producing hand sanitiser (including making sure the right licensing was in place), with carrier bag makers to produce aprons and also worked with smaller businesses to contribute to the PPE effort. At the commencement of the pandemic 1% of PPE was produced in the UK, this is now 70% so the market is more stable and reliable, as such these activities have now been stepped down.

More recently members of the team have been redeployed to work in the community to project manage vaccination hubs, lateral flow testing sites and also providing contact tracing.

5. Human Resources and Organisational Development

The work of the HR & Organisational has been dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic, through 2020-21. From the first call for staff to work at home, through to the redeployment of staff, health & wellbeing, policy & guidance, support for individuals & teams and staff communications, the HR-OD team has been at the heart of Somerset County Council's response. This work was recognised by the Public Sector People Management Association, when it asked Chris Squire, Director of HR-OD, to present Somerset's work at its annual conference in September.

The immediate focus of the team in March & April was to ensure that staff felt as secure as possible whilst working from home and that managers & teams adapted to their new working environments. This included guaranteeing contractual pay for parents when faced with home-schooling their children,

working with staff to ensure they had the kit they needed to work effectively from home, running home-working seminars, management training and providing advice on furlough. The team worked highly effectively with its partners, including trade-unions, headteachers and NHS colleagues throughout this period,

The redeployment of staff has been a key part of our pandemic response. In the first wave, the HR-OD team collected the details of over 1,000 staff who offered to step into different roles, leading to the redeployment of 211 employees into areas including care homes, distribution of office and personal protective equipment and registration services. Since December, the team has been working with partners on the redeployment of staff to support the Covid testing, tracing & vaccination programmes.

There has been a comprehensive and creative health & wellbeing programme, to support staff during the pandemic. A monthly calendar of events has included activity challenges (such as 'Walk this May', and the 'Tour de Somerset'), opportunities for staff to connect (including Virtual Kitchens and Take 10: Call a Colleague), webinars, mindfulness sessions, financial advice and help with mental wellbeing. A member of the team has also been running the SCC Quiz, bringing together hundreds of colleagues from across the council on a Thursday evening ("Best bit of lockdown has been Clive's quiz. Brings a great sense of camaraderie. Has enabled me to interact within my team socially more frequently")

The team ran a staff survey in June-July, to check on how staff were getting on. The response was fantastic, with quotes including:

- "I think the County Council's response has been outstanding, something we should be very proud of";
- "Everyone I have spoke to has commented positively about SCC";
- "Having come from an authority where none of this kind of stuff is available to staff, it's been very helpful, and I love that SCC do this for their staff";
- "I think SCC have been amazing, my partner's experience with work hasn't been as good, and it was nice to be able to say how good SCC have been as both providers to the community and to their staff. Very proud of SCC."

Of course, the work of the team hasn't just been about the pandemic; HR services including recruitment, HR advice and training were moved online and continue to operate and innovate. Achievements and highlights include:

- The continued success of our apprenticeship programme. In December, the number of staff studying for apprenticeship qualifications reached over 300, including those studying for social worker degree apprenticeships. We also started to use our ability to support small providers with our apprenticeship levy and have 'passported' c £160,000 to help over 30 of their staff study for apprenticeship qualifications;
- We have promoted the new Kickstart programme to managers, enabling over 50 opportunities for young people receiving universal credit to access work experience with us;
- Continued innovation in recruitment, with significant success seen in our social media campaigns. The team received a 'Highly Commended' award at a national conference, for its work recruiting into SCC's contact centre. The team reported a net increase of 30 children's social care social workers in the 12-months to November 2020;
- A new programme of 'Staff Appreciation', where staff can post messages of thanks and praise, together with the ability to download a thank-you card to send. This also included seasonal greetings cards during December (over 1,000 downloaded)
- The continued popularity of our Wellbeing programmes. During December, for example, the Working Well sharepoint site received nearly 13,000 visits and wellbeing articles were viewed over 6,000 times;
- Effective partnership work with NHS colleagues, including SCC chairing the Somerset system workforce board. This has realised tangible benefits, including agreement to start a nursing degree programme in Somerset and the recent allocation of over £500k to support occupational health & mental wellbeing for small health & care providers.

I thank the Human Resources & Organisational Development for the hugely positive role they play in the lives of staff at Somerset County Council and our residents.

5.1 Health, Safety & Wellbeing

The work of the Health & Safety team has also been dominated by the response to the pandemic. There have been constant changes and developments to government guidance and the team has worked extremely closely and effectively with colleagues in Property and maintained schools to

ensure that working environments are as Covid-secure as possible. Other highlights include;

- Approval to purchase lone-worker protection devices, to support colleagues who work on their own in potentially difficult & risky environments. This follows a project working in partnership with services areas and ICT;
- There has been no enforcement action taken by either the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) or the Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service (DSFRS) against SCC or any of its Maintained Schools;
- Corporate & Maintained Schools' Audits have been postponed due to the pandemic and will be rescheduled for 2021-22
- The team are fully committed to supporting the COVID 19 vaccination programme by providing support to the SCC Project Managers at the various vaccination centres throughout Somerset. Similarly, the team is looking to how it supports Covid-19 testing in schools.

Thank you to the Health & Safety team for helping to keep our working environments as safe as they can be and for working so positively with staff across the organisation.

6. Legal Services

The Covid situation brought new challenges to Legal Services this year.

During the first lockdown, the Court Service were struggling with business continuity, so they asked for help with a number of usual Court functions, including organising and facilitating Court hearings and accommodating the attendance of parties in County Hall to enable them to participate in virtual hearings.

At the time, the number of interim hearings rose on almost all child care cases as the Court could not finalise cases fairly without the parties being present. The Courts have re-opened, but the backlog caused by the initial shutdown has had a significant impact on caseloads as new matters continue to arise whilst the Courts are now also pushing to list final hearings on the older matters. The new Family Drug and Alcohol Court has gone live and Legal Services have dedicated staff to support this initiative.

The Property and Conveyancing team have undertaken various property transactions emanating from the Covid response which have included the

leasing in of various premises for the housing and care of individuals in need of respite care upon discharge from hospital, letting of SCC premises for the purposes of a Nightingale court and the progression of disposal of land for potential burial space. This is in addition to the business as usual services such as carrying out the property matters to facilitate the academisation of various School sites, disposals of land for the provision of capital receipts and planning and highways matters.

The Commercial and Litigation team have been working hard to support the pandemic response in addition to their business as usual work including:

- A successful challenge of a decision of the department for education which would have caused significant disruption to the council's schools strategy in South Somerset
- Providing advice to a range of service areas and support functions re access to public places and workplaces during the coronavirus pandemic
- Supporting commercial negotiations with a number of key suppliers to provide contractual flexibility in response to the pandemic while ensuring value for money
- Providing advice and support to public health on the implementation of a procedure to allow the council to direct the closure of premises, events and outdoor places where necessary to control the virus
- Providing a new streamlined procedure for executing contracts electronically which allowed services to continue to operate effectively during home-working

The most experienced solicitor in the small Adult Social Care team has retired this past year, earlier than planned as she did not enjoy remote working. This has given a development opportunity to another member of staff to move to the team, but it has caused capacity issues until more experience can be developed.

Throughout the pandemic, some members of Legal Services staff have been in the office to assist with the preparation of documentation for Court hearings and to process documents in respect of land transactions. The Council's seal has continued to be applied to relevant documents throughout the past year.

Legal Services continues to 'grow our own' lawyers, currently 3 members of staff are training to qualify as Solicitors.

I would like to thank all Legal Services staff for their hard work this past year and for their endeavours in rising to every challenge that the pandemic has thrown at them.

7. Democratic Services

7.1 Supporting the Council's democratic arrangements

The Democratic Services team continues to deliver a range of good quality services direct to the public together with internal governance, member training and support to the Council, Members and officers. The team also supports strategic partnership activity and provides direct support to lead Members such as the Leader of the Council, the Chair of the Council, the Cabinet, Opposition Group Leader, Chairs of committees, the Council's committees, the Chief Executive, the Senior Leadership Team and key partnership arrangements.

The team administers and undertakes the annual review of the Members' Scheme of Allowances which includes providing host authority services for the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel (which advises the Council, Mendip District Council and Somerset West and Taunton Council. During 2020/21, the team has led on a significant review of the Members Scheme of Allowances, including improvements regarding parental and carer's allowances. As the host authority, the team has also supported reviews for Somerset West & Taunton and Mendip councils.

The team is managed by the Council's Monitoring Officer who is also responsible for the Council's governance framework and for promoting and ensuring compliance with the Council's standards of conduct for Members and Officers.

2020/21 has seen the team face and address a number of challenges as part of providing critical support towards the emergency democratic arrangements throughout the Covid 19 pandemic, governance support, establishing and supporting regular member briefings regarding the emergency response, elected member support on a one to one basis, establishing new ways of working including virtual school admissions appeals hearings and ongoing support for the civic office.

The team's work to supporting the Council's response to the Covid 19 pandemic has also included the creation and ongoing support towards the Somerset Covid 19 Engagement Board which brings together key partners.

7.2 Virtual meetings and Members ICT

In response to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on local democracy, in early April 2020 the Secretary of State for MHCLG agreed regulations which provided new powers for local authorities to hold public meetings virtually by

using video or telephone conferencing technology. These regulations are due to expire in May 2021, although local government continues to lobby for their extension.

The Council has embraced these new powers and the Democratic Services Team has been running all Committee meetings virtually since May 2020. The Democratic Services Team alongside ICT colleagues have provided members with appropriate training, support and equipment to ensure full member participation. Meetings have been run utilising existing hardware and software, building on previous work to reduce travel and contribute positively to the Climate Emergency Strategy and new ways of working.

High profile Full Council meetings have been live broadcast via YouTube and improvements delivered to enhance the participation experience for both elected members and members of the public. Work continues on the development of hybrid meeting solutions during 2021, pending improvements with the Covid 19 pandemic situation, together with appropriate legislation and technical solutions to support their implementation.

7.3 Scrutiny Review and improvement work

The Scrutiny review report, with the assistance of the Centre for Public Scrutiny, was agreed by Full Council in January 2020. The final report included 11 recommendations for implementation, and these are taken forward by the Council's Scrutiny Officer and Deputy Scrutiny Officer. An update on progress was reported to the 3 Scrutiny Committees and Full Council in November 2020. Whilst some progress has been made, unsurprisingly the full implementation has been impacted by the pandemic, however work continues to ensure all recommendations are implemented by the end of March 2021. This includes a further suite of bespoke Scrutiny training for all Members, especially targeting those with current Scrutiny responsibilities, over the coming months.

7.4 Civic Office

The team provides direct support for organising and hosting a number of high profile civic and ceremonial functions and events (including royal household visits) on behalf of the Lord Lieutenant of Somerset (covering the historic county of Somerset), the High Sheriff and the Chair of Council (including the Chair's Awards and Somerset Day celebrations). These have understandably been reduced during 2020 and into 2021, however the team supported the

successful visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to the county in December. Support has also been provided to the Chair of Council, who prior to Christmas 2020 made a socially distanced presentation to an elderly resident of Martock, who had done a considerable amount of work for the community during the pandemic.

7.5 School Admissions, Exclusion Reviews and Transport Appeal Hearings

The team manages the Council's legal requirements for convening and administering over 400 appeal hearings per annum involving parents, guardians and school / academy representatives. Since April 2020 all School Admission Appeals, Exclusion Reviews and Transport Appeal Hearings have been held virtually, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and in order to meet revised legislative requirements. This has been a significant undertaking and the Democratic Services team has responded excellently to this. The regulations that enable these new ways of working are currently in place until September 2021, however there is the possibility that the option of a virtual / hybrid arrangement will be made available beyond this date.

7.6 Governance

We continue to ensure that the Council's governance framework, Constitution and Schemes of Delegation remain fit for purpose and meet legal requirements. The Monitoring Officer and the Democratic Services team directly support the Governance Board and the Constitution & Standards Committee to ensure key governance policies and processes meet business needs and legislative requirements. The Monitoring Officer in conjunction with the Section 151 Officer complete the Annual Governance Statement and supports the assurance work of the Audit Committee.

To assist with governance awareness and compliance, a Members' Portal is in place whereby members can access all relevant information to their role online. There is also governance guidance on the Council's intranet and training available for officers relating to decision making, risk management, impact assessments and member development.

7.7 Strategic Partnerships

The Democratic Services Team provides a wide range of Administering Authority governance support to a number of key strategic partnerships.

Heart of the South West (HotSW) Joint Committee - the partnership of the 19 Devon and Somerset Councils, working alongside the Local Enterprise

Partnership (LEP) to take forward the work of the Heart of the South West Joint Committee. This work aims to maximise the ability of the partnership to lever in further investment and responsibilities from Government to improve productivity and growth across the HotSW area.

Peninsula sub-national transport body – a partnership of the five transport authorities covering the south west peninsula, working to develop a regional transport strategy for the area to access funding and improvements for strategic transport priorities e.g. road and rail.

Somerset Waste Board – the partnership of the County Council and all Somerset district councils to manage the contracts for the delivery of an integrated waste management and recycling service and support strategic waste policy development. Governance support also includes managing the forward programmes of work, as well as providing governance and administrative support to the Board and the joint waste scrutiny panel.

Somerset Rivers Authority – the partnership of the County Council, district councils and Internal Drainage Boards. Governance support also includes providing governance and administrative support to the SRA scrutiny panel.

Somerset Health & Well-Being Board – this partnership board brings together partners who plan and commission services for health and social care and develops the Health and Well-Being Strategy. Work during 2020 has included a review of the Board's Constitution and membership to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Panel – The Panel is part of the national arrangements for Police governance. It scrutinises and keeps regular checks and balances on the performance and activities of the Police and Crime Commissioner and handles complaints affecting her conduct. There needs to be a constructive relationship between the Commissioner and the Panel and an appropriate level of challenge and support. This requires appropriate officer support and Democratic Services provides the principal support to the Panel on behalf of the Council (which is the Host Authority on behalf of all the councils in the police force area). A timely flow of information makes the Panel's Scrutiny function more effective and a good working relationship between Democratic Services and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner is key to this.