

Somerset County Council

County Council Meeting

5<sup>th</sup> May 2021

## **Annual Report of the Leader of the Council – 2020/21**

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

Division and Local Member(s): All

Lead Officer: Pat Flaherty - Chief Executive

Authors – cross directorate – approved by Cllr Fothergill

### **1. Summary**

**1.1** This has truly been an exceptional year and any review of the past year has to start with a heartfelt thanks to Cabinet, our Scrutiny Committees, all Council Members, our fantastic staff, and all the Council's partners for their individual and collective outstanding work over the past 12 months. I also want to thank the voluntary and community sector for their contributions and, of course, all our residents, businesses and communities. It has been humbling to see everyone working together to respond to a devastating global pandemic and to improve lives for the people of Somerset.

There are four statistics which demonstrate just how involved the Council has been in supporting our residents.

First – Our Public Health Team has managed over 1,700 COVID outbreaks and situations, saving lives across our county.

Second – we helped support those who needed it most by providing or delivering 500,000 meals or food into our communities over the past year. Achieved with enormous contributions from partners and the voluntary sector.

Third – our contact centre has made an outstanding 70,000 phone calls to check on those shielding, to arrange help and support or to make vaccination bookings to help out the NHS.

Fourth – we have supported our care providers and schools by spending millions of pounds to secure more than 11m pieces of personal protection equipment (PPE).

Four areas that show the breadth of support that this Council has provided and the key role it has played throughout the pandemic. At the same time, the

Council has continued to provide those vital services and so many rely on and this report details some of that activity and reviews the positive outcomes that have been delivered.

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

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

Our Vision has continued to set challenging ambitions for the Council and how we work with our partners. It sets priorities and principles that underpin our own decisions and sets out what our partners can expect of us.

This report covers the past financial year and sets out some of the authority's achievements over this time against the key priorities in the Somerset County Council Business Plan.

## **2. Key achievements in delivering our Business Plan**

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

Our Adult Social Care Service (ASC) has been one of the great success stories of the pandemic, with Covid-19 driving more (and even stronger) collaboration with partners, digital innovation of services, and the breaking down of former organisational differences. The service has undergone significant transformation and formed increasingly close links with partners across health and the community and voluntary sector, to deliver the kind of care and support services that people both want and need.

The service prides itself on effective partnership working, an example being the excellent relationship with Somerset's Integrated Care System (ICS). As a sign of the trust and confidence that the NHS has in Somerset County Council, it has appointed our own Chief Executive as the ICS Chair and our own Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development chairs the ICS

People Board. This is also testament to our position as system leaders across health and care.

Some of the remarkable work that has taken place this year, includes:

**Community Connect** - working with communities to promote independence and improve lives. Social care, health and voluntary organisations work together to address social care needs at the very earliest stage. Community and Village Agents, part-funded by the Council, work closely with our social work teams to help people find solutions that allow people to live as independently as possible in their own homes and communities. This service has been praised for its 'innovative approach to care' by the Social Care Institute of Excellence.

**Digital Innovation** – The Council's Occupational Therapists have been using new technology to conduct assessments remotely, and a new self-assessment website has been developed so that people can assess their own needs for equipment to help them stay independent. Somerset County Council was the first council in the UK to trial Teams Live Events, and this was first piloted by Adult Social Care as a way to keep in touch with both staff and care providers. Increased use of digital services has resulted in 63% of calls relating to adult social care are resolved or signposted at first contact, avoiding formal packages of care and reduced demand. Somerset County Council has also been praised by Microsoft as a result of its innovative use of Teams, and several of the functions currently available on Teams are there as a result of requests put in by SCC staff.

**Intermediate Care** – another trail-blazing partnership which sees social care join forces with partners in the care provider market, health, and the community and voluntary sector to prevent unnecessary hospital admissions and help people get better at home. This service has proven so successful that it's being used to shape national policy and has been hailed as one of the best in the UK by the highly regarded expert Professor John Bolton.

**Open Mental Health** – SCC has supported our NHS and VCSE partners in building an alliance of organisations working together to help people live a full life by enabling access to specialist mental health services, housing support, debt and employment advice, volunteering opportunities, community activities and exercise. This NHS/VCSE alliance has been shortlisted for a prestigious national award. The partnership helped stand up [Mindline](#), a 24/7 support line which has been taking 3000 calls per month.

**Proud to Care Somerset** – strengthening links with care providers and partners such as Visit Somerset and Community Council for Somerset, working

together to not only boost recruitment, but also raise awareness about the value and importance of social care. In 2019/20 Somerset's vacancy rate dropped to 6%<sup>1</sup> - lower than both the national rate (7.3%) and the regional rate for the South West (6.7%).

**Supporting care providers** – during the pandemic the service has strengthened relationships with care providers, supporting them with increased funding from the outset, sourcing PPE during national shortages, stepping up 7-day support through its care sector cell, and establishing a 'bank' of staff available to support our NHS colleagues in a crisis. We were the first Council in the South West (SW) to sign up to Unison's Stop the Spread pledge in 2020, and we reaffirmed that commitment in 2021 on top of committing to an additional £10m for ASC services.

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

The Authority's focus on good financial management has continued during 2020/21 including the management of 15 different Covid funding streams and the various reporting and audit requirements around them. Our latest budget monitoring reports shows that we have continued to maintain our tight financial control and we are forecasting an underspend of £6.6m for the year. This will be third year in a row that that authority has managed to come in under-budget, demonstrating financial robustness and resilience. This has been recognised by Grant Thornton, our external auditors, who have increased their Value for Money assessment of the council to the highest level possible. It is worth noting that they recently completed their work on the 2019/20 statement of accounts and have issued an "Unqualified" audit opinion.

The Somerset Economic Growth and Recovery Plan was developed in partnership and has been endorsed by all Somerset Councils. A pipeline of potential schemes developed with partners including businesses and the Local Enterprise Partnership means that we are ready for future opportunities, including the Levelling-Up Fund and Community Renewal Fund. We have also supported businesses affected by the pandemic and those who people who have sadly been made redundant.

Creating conditions for economic growth continues to be the focus for the Economic and Community Infrastructure Directorate. I am delighted to have seen the completion of construction work on the iAero Centre in Yeovil which will support innovation and collaboration in the aerospace supply chain. The

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<sup>1</sup> According to 2020 Skills for Care data: [My local area \(skillsforcare.org.uk\)](https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk)

building is set to open later in 2021. There was the completion of the Somerset Energy Innovation Centre Building 3 which was handed over in March 2021 and for which tenants have already been identified as well as the opening of the Wiveliscombe and Wells Enterprise centres with a strong take up of space with 90% and 70% occupancy rates respectively. Construction work for Bruton Enterprise Centre commenced earlier this year, and is on track for an autumn opening, while the planned Digital Innovation Centre at the Firepool site in Taunton received planning approval in February.

With partners including the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership, Bristol University, This is Gravity, Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton district councils, and the industry body Nuclear SW, we submitted, to the UKAEA in March, an expression of interest in hosting a nuclear fusion demonstrator plant in Somerset. Fusion will play a key role in decarbonising future UK energy supplies. The demonstrator provides a huge opportunity for Somerset to capitalise on the county's prominent position in technology and innovation.

The Highways and Transport team has had an impressive year despite the obvious challenges affecting working conditions. Having accessed external funding, the team has been forging ahead with the work of ensuring the infrastructure is in place to support the recovery of the county's economy through several multi-million pound projects either nearing completion or underway. Following on from the successful completion of the award-winning Squibbers' Way bridge project in Bridgwater, I'm delighted to confirm that the £19million upgrade of Junction 25 of the M5 – so important to Somerset - remains on time and on budget, and has also netted awards. In March 2021 the team won three of the five accolades at the Chartered Institute of Highways and Transport South West Awards - Project of the Year and the Collaboration Award, along with an Innovation Award. They also came second in the Sustainability category for their work using a Transport Decarbonisation Tool. The team are also proud that through strong business continuity planning and tireless efforts of the crews on the ground they've continued the crucial work of maintaining the highway network despite the impact of Covid, including repairing 17,947 carriageway potholes during 2020/21, only slightly fewer than 18,450 in the previous year before the pandemic.

Through the Somerset Waste Partnership we continue to improve our services to meet the environmental targets and in particular to help our residents minimise waste and increase recycling, with the first phase of the Recycle More service, which enables more plastics to be recycled at the kerbside being rolled out in Mendip. We have had overwhelming support from our residents

and communities for this important initiative and will roll it out elsewhere over the coming months.

The Libraries Service has continued to implement the largest redesign in its history to create a thriving, dynamic service whilst adapting to the challenges posed by the pandemic, moving many of its services and activities online increasing the extent and breadth of their collections of e-resources. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank those who run our Community Library Partnerships for giving a new lease of life to their local provision. 13 of our 32 libraries are now run by our community partners. In the past 12 months the Registration Service has dealt with a level of continuous change to legislation and processes all areas of the service. It has been encouraging that the service has had a very positive response from customers, helping to boost staff morale in very challenging circumstances.

Despite significant pressures from Covid-19, the Passenger Transport service continued to meet all requests for transport from the NHS and social care ensuring all were Covid secure, stepping in to make sure that vital patient transport was maintained throughout. The Service also arranged for additional public and demand responsive transport to help people to get to their vaccination appointments as well as supporting Somerset's NHS Patient Transport provider with discharges of patients from our two Foundation Trust hospitals.

The Council has continued to modernise its property estate to supports the needs of its services and the County, including modernising County Hall with the improvements to A block were completed in Summer 2020.

### **Investment in education infrastructure**

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

In October, the completion of a £300,000 extension and IT upgrade was completed at Milborne Port School in South Somerset increasing places and giving the school a state-of-the-art learning space. The end of 2020 also saw the start of a seven-class expansion for Willowdown Academy Primary School in Bridgwater including up to date IT and modern facilities.

The new King Ina Church of England Academy opened last month (March 2021) thanks for £7.3m investment to accommodate up to 420 pupils and 52 early years children. For secondary schools in Somerset the start of 2020 saw the completion of the £8m expansion of Bridgwater College Academy and £7m expansion of Bishop Fox's in Taunton completed in October 2020, creating two brand new state of the art buildings – a teaching block including 12 classrooms and four IT suites as well as a dedicated theatre and activity studio.

Polden Bower, a new £23m special school in Bridgwater which will cater for 160 students with complex needs in Somerset is taking shape. Somerset County Council has secure in excess of £60m of capital investment in order to improve and expand its specialist provision and ensure more children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) can have their needs met close to home in high quality facilities.

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

### **Response to Covid-19**

The public sector as a whole has battled on the front line against Covid-19. Somerset County Council has worked side-by-side with partners, communities and voluntary organisations throughout the pandemic to protect the health of our public and ensure that the most vulnerable people within our communities have been kept safe and well. We have made over 1,000 people available for redeployment to help protect those shielding, manage testing centres, contact tracing and outbreak management and to support the NHS with the largest ever vaccination programme that has delivered over 400,000 vaccinations since December 2020.

**Our Public Health team** has played a critical role and has worked tirelessly to design and deliver essential Covid-19 services, demonstrating strong local leadership and decision making in line with our Local Outbreak Management Plan, to keep infection rates among the lowest in the country and keep people safe. This has been achieved through support to hundreds of workplaces, care homes, schools and households with outbreaks to minimise the spread. During the last year we have managed over 1,700 incidents with more than 20,000 cases being detected within our County boundaries. Somerset was an early pioneer for local contact tracing increasing the number of contacts made based on local insight and helping to reduce spread of the virus. Community

testing has been stood up to identify asymptomatic cases that would not be identified through national testing arrangements.

SCC was quick to recognise the importance of care staff by providing a £3m uplift for our care providers at the start of the pandemic and continuing to support care home stability by helping them to maintain staffing levels. We have worked closer than ever before with health colleagues to manage pressures in hospital and care settings, placing social workers in accident and emergency departments to reduce admissions and by providing a seamless transition as possible of people back into 'designated' community settings. We've mobilised pop-up care homes at the peaks of the pandemic, sourced and provided over 11 million pieces of PPE and supported settings with infection control measures and advice so they could continue to stay open for visitors. Technology innovations have kept them connected while a new app was developed by our own teams to support the NHS by revolutionising the way spare beds are tracked. Throughout the pandemic over 700 micro-providers have supported over 5000 people with care and support each week.

Our children's teams have supported all schools to ensure they could stay open, coordinating transport, providing emergency PPE and distributing over 850 DfE devices and 50 SCC devices to enable young people to access virtual learning. Extra funds have been made available to provide families with free school meals and support during lockdown, multi-agency hubs have been established to support vulnerable children who have had to self-isolate and over 220 staff have been trained to support pupil health and wellbeing.

To ensure our residents did not go hungry the Somerset food resilience taskforce working with village agents, District Councils, Foodbanks, Fareshare and community groups was established. The response was incredible with 500,000 food items and frozen meals for immediate use and distribution, as well as supporting the development of new community pantries and larders to help communities have longer term sustainable solutions in place.

We have also provided funding to ensure all schools in Somerset were able to provide vouchers for children who are entitled to Free School Meals over Christmas, February Half-Term and Easter, as well as additional funding so that more families and children in need of support could receive help. Anyone who has received food support has been made aware of the network of wrap-around support that is available, from prescription deliveries and help with transport, to financial advice and mental health support.

The communication effort required by this pandemic was huge in order to provide clear and timely advice to the council, partners, residents, businesses



on how to deal with the pandemic and access support. The response by the council included a new Covid-19 website, social media campaign, Your Somerset Newspaper, leaflets, press, radio and TV messaging as well as a number of informative, timely and accessible news-style videos filmed by ex BBC veteran reporter Clinton Rogers.

We've been proactive in tackling economic impacts of Covid-19, launching Step Up Somerset, an online employment and skills resource to support those seeking employment, delivering digital and technical skills bootcamps and running two successful applications for the Kickstart Scheme, offering over 100 work placements in public sector organisations to young people in Somerset.

We have robust plans in place to provide resilience in our ongoing response and management of the virus and are developing Recovery plans alongside key partners and informed by a targeted Joint Strategic Needs Assessment that focuses on understanding the impacts and needs of those most vulnerable in our communities.

### **Climate Change**

There are many references to the environment and climate change throughout this report – from Recycle More through to decarbonising our buildings, promotion and provision of public transport through to the way we have enabled staff to work from home and cut emissions and pollutants as a consequence of fewer commuter miles. It all demonstrates the importance and priority of climate change within this Council. In the end, all our services contribute in one way or another to tackle climate change and that is something to be applauded. There is one significant development that warrants further explanation - the Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy. This Strategy aims to develop new ideas and approaches to tackle Climate Change following the Council's declaration of a Climate Emergency in 2019. Experts from academia, industry, climate activism, Somerset local authorities and significant public consultation helped shape the strategy. High-level action plans were drawn up and during 2020 a £1 million Somerset Climate Emergency Community Fund was created to encourage innovative community projects that share the Council's vision of working towards a climate resilient Somerset. More than 136 applications were submitted and 40 projects across Somerset were awarded grant funding. Amongst the projects benefitting from the fund are those promoting cycling and walking, improving energy efficiency and 'rewilding' projects. This is a huge effort but clearly was hindered by the ongoing pandemic and will be further prioritised over the coming 12 months.

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

### **Apprenticeships**

Somerset County Council has an apprenticeship levy of approximately £1m a year and through this funding we have been able to support 211 apprentices, both new recruits and current staff, to qualify since 2017. We currently support 280 apprentices across the authority in a variety of job roles from Civil Engineer to Social Work and Solicitors to Data Analysts. This is both across our apprenticeship recruitment and our culture of upskilling current staff to continue their professional development. In the last 12 months, we have invested in 153 apprenticeships throughout SCC and our maintained schools and have supported 87 staff to complete apprenticeships.

In the last year, we have also used our apprenticeship levy to support 20 small employers throughout Somerset, totalling £170,000, to recruit apprentices into their workforce – this has been possible through the apprenticeship levy transfer programme, where larger organisations can share a portion of their funding with SME's who otherwise would not be able to offer apprenticeships.

To develop our programme further we are also engaged with the Local Government Association (LGA) to take part in an apprenticeship MOT where our programme will be assessed and points for development shared. Our apprentices are also involved in national events, most recently we have been represented by 6 apprentices at the LGA Apprentice of the Year Challenge.

We are working with sen.se and learning disability charity Mencap to create opportunities for people with a learning disability, a learning difficulty or autism. The accessible apprenticeships will be 'Customer Service Level 2' and will last for up to 18 months.

### **Kickstart**

We are also participating in the Kickstart Scheme, a government initiative to create job placements for young people aged 16 to 24 who are currently on Universal Credit and at risk of long-term unemployment. Somerset County Council has joined forces with local employers to offer six-month work placements through this scheme, with a variety of roles available that could lead to permanent jobs in rewarding vocations.

### **Children's Services**

Since Ofsted's last major inspection of Children's Services in 2017 we have been on an improvement journey. Our recent self-assessment, using

independent external experts, and submitted to Ofsted concludes that our performance meets the criteria which Ofsted use for a "good" rating.

Unlike many areas, Children's Services now has a permanent senior management, with highly experienced leaders, covering all aspects of children's services.

### **Children's Social Care**

Despite Covid-19, the 'Family Solutions Somerset' approach was launched in 2020 and is working in partnership through the Family Safeguarding Model and the Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) to support parents to tackle health and wellbeing issues impacting on their ability to parent well.

These approaches require a confident and strength-based social work practice based on good relationships with families. This has included:

- Proportionate and effective responses and intervention as unintrusive as possible and is always in the child's best interests.
- Interventions that are focused on children's and family's needs, designed with families.
- Providing advice and guidance, directing parents to early help
- Reducing the need for child protection interventions except in the most serious cases.
- Ensuring that schools and other settings have reliable advice and support on Covid-19.
- Managing increased referrals caused by Covid-19 impacts.

The Family Intervention Service was launched in January 2020 and is proving to be a great success. It provides a flexible, specialist county-wide service joining up established edge-of-care and complex family needs services with a Rapid Response service at weekends to ensure seamless support.

In September 2019, Social Workers in Schools launched in Somerset, a ground-breaking initiative to place social workers in schools to help keep children safe from exploitation.

The creativity shown by all partners during the Covid pandemic to meet the needs of children should be commended. An example of this creativity was the Outdoor Education Centres which during Covid were re-purposed to support Children Looked After and families needing respite. The adaptability of staff has been highly praised and plans are in place to continue aspects of the offer as the centres return to their statement of purpose.

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic Health Visitors have had to make significant changes to the way they work to ensure they continue to deliver the core contacts while maintaining the safety of families and staff. The Breastfeeding service has delivered a mixture of face to face and virtual visits, prioritising safeguarding concerns, and worked extremely hard to maintain the same level of delivery which is a testament to their hard work and dedication.

### **SEND improvement**

Our multi-partner SEND improvement programme is delivering our Written Statement of Action (WSOA) approved in late 2020 in response to the Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) and the CQC (Care Quality Commission) inspection earlier that year. We acknowledge that there is far more to do in this area and working with our key partner the NHS, we are both committed to do all that is needed. Accepting improvement was necessary and urgent, it was therefore encouraging that after the first monitoring meeting with the Department of Education and NHS England Regional Advisors in March 2021, the overall assessment was: “despite the disruption caused by Covid, the local area has made sound progress.”

Through more parents and young people getting involved to help shape services, families are able to see how their feedback is influencing SEND improvements – and decision-makers are gaining greater understanding of what’s important to them. Early progress has seen the following key improvements:

1. Increasing the capacity of the SEND Casework Team and the SENDIAS (Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support) to ensure education, health and care plans are produced in a timely manner.
2. More parents and children are signing up to help in the design of improved services.
3. Relaunch of Early Help Processes in Schools which ensures families and schools know where and how they can access the right support to need their SEND needs.
4. Launched a pilot app which provides peer support for young people experiencing mental health difficulties.
5. Mental Health support teams are now working in pilot areas across Somerset to support schools and pupils with emotional health and wellbeing as part of a Mental Health Trail Blazer project.

## **Crewkerne and Ilminster Schools transformation**

Following ten years of review, engagement and consultation activity, Cabinet approved proposals last month (March 2021) for a major change in the delivery of education in the Crewkerne and Ilminster area which will see the area's current three-tier school system become a two-tier system from September 2022. The Council has found significant additional resources to support the remodelling of schools and addressing outstanding repair issues.

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

Covid-19 has arguably been the single biggest challenge this Council has ever faced, and I am honored by how we stepped up to the task. Every service has done its part and even though infection levels are low right now, we must not lose our grip on the situation. This is why the Somerset Health Protection Board, Multi-agency Recovery Coordination Group and in-house Recovery Board have been created, to map out what we can expect in the future and plan accordingly. I also want to congratulate our teams and partners who had the foresight to begin creating an economic recovery plan very early on in the pandemic to help our economy and business to deal with the impacts being felt, and help keep people in jobs and create new ones.

We have not stood still. We are looking to the future of public services in Somerset so that they are as effective and efficient as possible. We are also pursuing a bid to create a single unitary authority for Somerset – One Somerset – which will lay the foundations for the future by giving Somerset a stronger voice for all its residents, reducing waste and duplication, and offering huge opportunities to transform whilst devolving additional responsibilities to local communities. The Government's consultation on our proposal and an alternative bid by Somerset's four District Councils has just finished and we await the Secretary of State's decision in July.

It is pleasing to note the approval and support One Somerset has gained from key strategic partners across Somerset and beyond.

We have continued to develop our services and ensure the right conditions are in place to deliver high quality services, alongside our Covid response. During the last year the council delivered numerous ICT and digital projects to enable our council and our Councillors to continue their vital role; delivering new ways of working that have kept services operating and supported digital inclusion within communities. New online services have been built for and with customers which are easy to use and give 24/7 access. Report a Fault on the Highway and Adult Social Care Financial Eligibility Calculator are two

examples currently being launched. Online registration and bookings for our care providers to gain access to coronavirus vaccinations, virtual police and crime panels and our main coronavirus information pages have been viewed more than 460,000 times since the lockdown began.

Microsoft Teams has been used by the workforce to deliver outstanding resilience and collaboration with an average of 3,200 members of staff using Office 365 each day. Virtual meetings and digital collaboration platforms have been established across our partner network and have enabled secure information sharing, online appeals and decision making. We are rightly proud of our digital innovations which have been delivered at unprecedented pace to directly support our response to the pandemic which included a new track and trace system to capture and manage Covid-19 outbreaks in schools, care homes and workplaces. Access to devices for our most vulnerable has also been supported through several projects including, provision of laptops to children for online learning, loan of tablets through our libraries to support job seekers and devices to support our care leavers.

Our award-winning Contact Centre continues to provide excellent customer service alongside meeting Covid-19 demand. For example, average wait times for safeguarding calls remain under 20 seconds and satisfaction with the service remains at 92%. Our Commissioning for the Future initiative is focused on stronger collaboration and is aided by our Co-Labs programme which brings together commissioners and their partners to 'join up our approaches and services for our citizens. A good example of this in 2020 has been our work with the Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group on the Somerset Integrated Care System.

Like most of our staff, HR & OD have been focused on providing services such as Hearings and other formal HR processes, training and development to staff in a virtual environment as well as focusing on redeploying staff to Covid-19 roles such as PPE delivery, Covid testing and project management for mass vaccination sites. Our Behaviour and Culture Programme has continued to focus on 'New Ways of Working'. A hybrid future will enable our workforce to collaborate, work remotely and access office space when needed. Support for their health and wellbeing needs has been and will continue to be a priority along with ensuring our policies and guidance support the organisation in this transformation.

Over the past year, we have delivered 15 virtual Staff Question and Answer (Q&A) sessions. Between 650 and 1,500 people have attended each session, held via Microsoft Teams. The sessions provide a vital opportunity for staff to put questions directly to the Chief Executive, Pat Flaherty and members of the

Council's Senior Leadership Team. For those who can't attend the live events, recordings of the sessions are available on the internal Staff Q&A SharePoint site, along with all the questions asked. Two of the most successful Staff Q&A events were held in November, with 1,200 people on the call and over 100 questions posted in the live chat and in January this year we had a record-breaking 1,500 people attending with over 200 questions asked.

This report demonstrates the abilities, aptitude and dedication of our staff and as Leader of the Council I again want to pay tribute to all those involved. The collective willingness to do all that was necessary to Improve Lives is apparent in every section of this report. Of course we couldn't have done it without the help and support of our key partners and our amazing voluntary sector and I extend my thanks to all sectors for working so hard over such an unexpected and unprecedented year.

### **3. Background Papers**

- 3.1** Background papers are available upon request from the Corporate Planning and Performance Team via 01823 359895 or [Performance@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:Performance@somerset.gov.uk)