

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

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Local Member(s) and Division: N/A

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1. Summary/link to the County Plan

- 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 focuses 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. Key Activities and Achievements

2.1. Economic Development

Somerset's future economic prosperity is a key priority for SCC. We are committed to securing this prosperity by creating the conditions for clean and inclusive growth in the county and by prioritising activities that sustainably raise the productivity of Somerset's economy. SCC plays a key role in establishing the future economic strategy for Somerset and influencing regional and national strategies to Somerset's advantage, not least so that funds from Government and other sources can be leveraged into the county to realise our economic ambitions. SCC is commissioning a range of activities that deliver on our strategic priorities including innovation centres linked to Somerset's key clean growth sectors, the rollout of superfast broadband and digital infrastructure and small business support including our programme of investment in enterprise centres in market

towns in the county. In addition, we are commissioning and co-ordinating a range of activities to ensure that the Somerset workforce is equipped with skills for the future and to assist employment opportunities for young people and less advantaged individuals.

2.1.1 Somerset Recovery and Growth Plan

Over the past year SCC has worked with the 4 Somerset District Councils, the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (HotSW LEP) and other partners to develop an economic recovery and growth plan to respond to the economic impacts of Covid-19 and our approach to longer term growth. All Somerset local authorities have endorsed the plan, with SCC's Cabinet providing approval in January 2021. The plan is a framework for collaborative action to support individual businesses, hard hit sectors and individuals directly affected by the economic downturn. Examples have included the re-focusing of Business Rates Retention Pilot funds for business support, recovery of the visitor economy and assistance for unemployed people. The plan also focuses upon longer term opportunities that are important to Somerset's future economic prosperity. These include the delivery of the Gravity site where SCC is working closely with the developer, Government, Sedgemoor District Council and the LEP to attract investment to this unique and economically significant site.

2.1.2 Understanding the Economic Impacts of Covid-19

Since April 2020 SCC has led local analysis of the economic impacts of Covid-19. Data is available on [Somerset Trends](#). It has been used to inform response and recovery activities by SCC and partners. This intelligence has been presented regularly, both internally and externally, raising the profile of SCC's economic research and intelligence work. A survey of the economic impacts of Covid-19 (as well as the UK's exit from the EU) was carried out in Spring 2021, receiving 1,300 responses from Somerset businesses. The findings have been used to inform response work (including support work around redundancies, recruitment and skills) as well as recovery planning, most notably the [Somerset Recovery and Growth Plan](#). Another survey will be undertaken within the next 12 months.

2.1.3 Employment and Skills

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

- [Step-Up Somerset](#) - a one-stop-shop for individuals seeking information on employment and skills support across Somerset.
- Skill-Up Somerset – An Apprenticeship and Skills Advisory Service supporting people and businesses of Somerset. Since its creation in 2019, the service has supported over 400 individuals, 500 businesses and enabled 300+ skill-starts
- A Response to Redundancy Framework from which taskforces were stood up to respond to significant redundancy announcements such

as Oscar Mayer and Debenhams.

2.1.3.1

Employment and Skills Hubs in Somerset West and Taunton, Sedgemoor and South Somerset. These are complimented by a number of Youth Hubs, supporting young people who are Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET). We are working with a range of employers and sector representatives to support businesses with recruitment and supply challenges. Activities include a Somerset Needs You campaign for the Tourism and Hospitality sector, a virtual Apprenticeship and Jobs Fair in June 2021 and an extension to the annual Somerset Careers Fair to advertise current vacancies virtually. SCC, on behalf of training providers across the South West, has secured £1.8m of funding from the DfE to deliver Technical Skills Bootcamps. These give people the opportunity to build specific-sector skills and fast track to an interview with a local employer.

2.1.3.2

During the pandemic the [Education Business Partnership](#) (EBP) has led on the young people's response for employment issues and directly supported people through Covid-19 impacts. The EBP has delivered a virtual work experience programme which will extend into the autumn through live broadcasts; and talent academies continue to be delivered virtually.

2.1.3.3

Two European Social Fund applications by SCC have been approved and moved into delivery during the past year:

- [SomersetWorks](#) is a £1.126m programme providing opportunities for those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and young people still in school years 11 to 13. It supports young people back into education or employment. SomersetWorks has received 800 referrals in the past year and 200 young people have been enrolled onto the project.
- Somerset 'Skills for Growth' was approved in February 2021. The £3.060m project is focused on up-skilling employee's working across Somerset, both in SCC and other organisations
- SCC has been acting as a Gateway for the creation and filling of public sector vacancies via the DWP Kickstart Scheme which provides funded work experience for young people on Universal Credit. We have coordinated and encouraged take up of this programme across Somerset public sector organisations and its supply chain and offer placements as an employer. During the first year SCC has made 28 appointments and we currently have a further 17 vacant placements.

2.1.3.4

SCC co-ordinated Somerset's bid to the Government for support through the Community Renewal Fund (CRF). CRF is a UK wide competitive funding process designed to support skills development, employability, business support and cultural initiatives. A locally prioritized list of schemes, consistent with the priorities in the Somerset recovery and growth plan,

was submitted to Government in June 2021 and in November 2021 confirmation was received that eight projects amounting to £3.6 million of CRF funding have been approved. All project activity is to be delivered by 30 June 2022.

2.1.4 Aerospace/iAero Centre

The iAero centre in Yeovil is a project led by SCC with funds secured from the LEP and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). It will support the growth of the aerospace sector and associated high-value design supply chains in Somerset by offering high-quality office, light industrial and collaboration space as well as innovation support services. Construction of the centre completed in February 2021 with fit-out due to complete in November 2021. Recruitment of a Centre Manager is underway, and plans are in place for the procurement of an innovation support service, which will commence delivery March 2022.

2.1.5 Supporting Businesses and the Local Economy

Our network of [Enterprise Centres continues to grow and](#) support new-start and growing small businesses across rural Somerset. Demand and occupancy rates have remained high despite the impacts of Covid-19 on small businesses. In addition to the existing centres, SCC has made significant progress extending the network. Construction of a new centre at Bruton funded via the Getting Building Fund and ERDF was completed in summer 2021. ERDF funding for an enterprise centre on SCC owned land in Chard was confirmed in August 2021 and a planning application has been submitted. Funds have also been secured via the Glastonbury Town Deal to adapt the Beckery Day Centre into an enterprise hub.

2.1.5.1 In June 2021 SCC's Cabinet approved a £6 million Somerset economic recovery fund. This fund is assisting businesses and individuals who have not been able to benefit from the Government's Covid-19 financial support measures and supports longer-term recovery of the local economy post the pandemic. Initial schemes include a restart and recovery fund to provide support to 'anchor' businesses and organisations including those in the visitor economy, a grants scheme for rural services businesses, a care sector business support programme, financial support for self-employed people and a grant fund to assist young people and those from less advantaged communities return to work.

2.1.6 A303/A358

In terms of other wider activities to support the growth of our economy we continue to give active support for the improvement of the A303 and A358 to create a second strategic route to the Southwest which will benefit the national and local economy and reduce the distance travelled for thousands of vehicles a day compared to the alternative M4/M5 corridor.

2.1.6.1 A303 Sparkford to Ilchester: Following granting of the Development Consent Order by the Secretary of State for Transport this year for the

three-mile section of the A303 between Sparkford and Ilchester, National Highways has now completed the detailed design and recently commenced construction. The project will take around two years to complete.

2.1.6.2 A358 Taunton to Southfields: Following announcement of the preferred route in 2019 and allocation of funding by the Department for Transport, National Highways has entered a £328 million contract with Taylor Woodrow Plus to design and build the scheme which involves upgrading the 8.5-mile section of the A358 between Southfields Roundabout on the A303 and the M5 at Taunton to a high-quality dual carriageway. Statutory consultation on the scheme this autumn will inform the final scheme that is developed for submission to the Planning Inspectorate for a Development Consent Order in 2022.

2.1.6.3 Further Improvements to the A303: As a member of the Peninsula Transport Sub-National Transport Body, we have urged the Government to confirm funding allocations and construction programme to improve the remaining sections of the route to dual carriageway standard to help realise the full economic potential of the South West.

2.1.7 Superfast Broadband - Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS)
The CDS programme delivers Superfast Broadband to households and businesses in hard-to-reach areas where commercial operators' planned rollout does not reach. The CDS programme has delivered superfast broadband to over 300,000 premises. During 2020 CDS conducted a procurement exercise to extend further superfast broadband delivery to premises across the County with speeds under 30 Mbps which were not in commercial plans. During 2021 suppliers have been mobilising and securing resources to design and build the infrastructure over the coming years. Initial design work has been undertaken and some areas are now commencing build. Build is due to continue through until December 2024.

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

2.1.8 Somerset Digital Innovation Centre
SCC is leading the development of the Somerset Digital Innovation Centre at Firepool in Taunton which will provide high-quality business accommodation and specialist innovation services for digital economy businesses. The centre will build on local strengths in the digital economy, and the presence of the UK Hydrographic Office in Taunton. In February

2021 planning approval was given for the centre. Funding has been secured from the LEP and ERDF, with works on site due to commence this autumn.

2.2 Hinkley Point C (HPC) and Securing the Legacy

The HPC project has continued to achieve its construction targets despite the challenges imposed by Covid-19 - the project is regarded as a national exemplar of maintaining construction activity during the pandemic. It has not been without impact, however, with the operational date for Unit 1 being moved to 2026, and Unit 2 to 2027.

2.2.1 Workforce Uplift

Over the last year, the Joint Local Authorities have been working closely together to understand the impact of a required increase in the HPC workforce. During the year, there have been Member briefings and EDF ran public engagement activity and utilised the three HPC Fora run by EDF in their engagement efforts. The Joint Councils resurrected the Somerset Nuclear Energy Group whose membership is across the four Local Authorities as an opportunity to keep lead Members and Leaders up to date on the changes, and potential decisions that will need to be made. The discussions continue, though it is hoped to conclude the process over the next few months.

2.2.1.2 The workforce on site as of August 2021 stood at 6300 with a peak of 8600 expected in late 2022/early 2023. There are two major work groups on site at present - the remaining civils workforce, and the incoming Mechanical, Engineering and Heating/Ventilation workforce, resulting in the need for additional workers.

2.2.2 Mitigation

Corridor improvements, travel behaviour (The Bridgwater Way) and road safety activities have continued during the year. Hinkley Tourism Action Partnership (HTAP) has been active in continuing to support the recovery plan for the leisure and tourism industry, and the Quantock Hills AONB Service is delivering a part Lottery/ HPC funded Landscape Character Action Plan in areas affected by the HPC project. Public Rights of Way activity has incorporated the improvement of infrastructure including new easy to use gates. Monitoring of the archaeological post excavation programme is nearing completion with specialist input being integrated into the main report, and the public realm programme is focussed on a project to enable interpretation of the landscape around Bridgwater and how it links back to the Brick kiln site and the industrial heritage of the town.

2.2.3 Economic Benefit

Direct spend within the region continues to increase and by July 2021 had

exceeded the target of £1.5 billion over the construction period and stood at £3.5 billion. 22,000 people in Britain are working on the project, 800 apprentices have trained and £123million of community investment has been delivered to date.

2.2.4 National Grid Hinkley Point C Connection Project

The project has had significant progress in the stages affecting Somerset during the year. Notable and visible changes can now be observed with traditional lattice towers beginning to be removed in favour of underground cabling or new T-Pylons.

2.3 Planning

We have made significant steps forward in re-establishing SCC's planning service in the past year, with all planning officer roles within the service area filled, as well as supporting the future of the team through the employment of a Graduate Planner and Planning Degree Apprentice. The arrangements that we have in place with Hampshire County Councils for support with planning casework and policy support are continuing in the interim whilst the new team is mobilised and the backlog resolved.

2.3.1 Planning Policy

With regard to our plan-making work, we are reviewing the Somerset Waste Plan by updating our Waste Needs Assessment, and by producing our Local Aggregates Assessment and Authority Monitoring Report (to cover 2017-2019) with the support of consultants, as these will be essential to assist with the plan review process.

2.3.2 Planning Development Management

Within the last year SCC has supported Somerset Waste Partnership and its operators with revised ways of working, to ensure that household waste collections were not compromised during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have processed planning permissions and enabled the delivery of several primary and Special Educational Needs schools as well as minerals extraction schemes. SCC has also granted consents for waste matters to enable various golf courses to physically change their landscape and improve their offer. All this was done in the face of changing technologies, as we adapted our ways of working and decision making to overcome the Covid-19 challenge.

2.3.3 Ecology

The Somerset Ecological Service (traded arm of the SCC's ecological advice function) has faced significant challenges, following changes to advice from Natural England in August 2020 following the release of European case law. Nutrient (phosphate) loading on watercourses that feed into the Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) sites that make up the Somerset Levels and Moors RAMSAR site, is now a consideration for new development proposals, and generated significant extra workload. We are

actively working with all of the local authorities across Somerset to draft a strategy to support the delivery of development and the level of collaboration in this work has been exceptional.

2.4 Waste (The Somerset Waste Partnership)

Despite an incredibly challenging year – changing collection contractor whilst coping with the ongoing impacts of Covid and a national Driver shortage, in 2020/21 Somerset Waste Partnership (SWP) recycled or reused 137,146 tonnes of material. An impressive 97.8% of this stayed in the UK (99.4% of all plastic). This is the equivalent of taking 47,000 cars off the road for a year or planting 738,200 trees. SWP also rolled out the first two phases of Recycle More each phase added about 100 tonnes of recycling each week. A survey found an overwhelming public support – 84% of respondents prefer it to their previous service. As well as nearly all our recycling staying in the UK, all Somerset’s non-recyclable kerbside waste (and most non-recyclable waste from recycling centres) goes to the Viridor Resource Recovery Centre at Avonmouth where it is turned into heat and electricity. In 2021/22 we expect to pilot an electric refuse vehicle, install photovoltaic panels at our two highest energy using depots, continue to explore how we can recycle even more plastic, help schools to recycle more, continue with our successful Schools Against Waste programme, focus on increasing reuse and explore how we can enable every flat/communal property to recycle food waste.

2.4.1 **Headline Figures** - Last year Somerset Waste Partnership (SWP) recycled or reused 137,146 tonnes of material. An impressive 97.8% of this stayed in the UK (99.4% of all plastic). This is the equivalent of taking 47,000 cars off the road for a year or planting 738,200 trees. Our recycling rate of 52.4% puts us in the top fifth of authorities.

2.4.2 **Recycle More** – We successfully delivered the first phase of Recycle More to Mendip residents in 2020/21 despite the pandemic. This meant 55,000 households could recycle extra materials weekly - notably plastic pots, tubs and trays. It is delivering on average more than 100 extra tonnes of recycling each week. A survey found an overwhelming level of public support – 84% of respondents prefer it to their previous service.

2.4.3 **Decarbonising SWP Operations** - The new fleet of 140 vehicles are 30% more carbon efficient than their predecessors. SWP trialled an electric refuse vehicle and developed a business case for the installation of photovoltaic panels at two depots.

2.4.4 **Energy from Waste (EfW)** – All Somerset’s non-recyclable kerbside waste (and most non-recyclable waste from recycling centres) goes to the Viridor Resource Recovery Centre at Avonmouth where it is turned into heat and electricity. Some of the electricity and heat generated will power a new

plastics reprocessing plant on site.

2.4.5 Covid-19 Impacts – Mobilising the new collection contract was made much more challenging by the pandemic. Nearing the end of the 2020-21 financial year we saw major impacts from the national driver shortage and the reliability of services suffered as a result.

2.4.5.1 Despite recycling centres being closed during the early stages of the pandemic, when we reopened our 16 sites, we avoided the restrictive 'visit by appointment' systems introduced elsewhere. HWRC visitor numbers were understandably down in comparison to the previous year by 280,000 (18%) but we saw similar recycling performances with all sites achieving between 61% to 73%.

2.4.6 Schools Against Waste (SAW) – The programme continued to engage with the county's primary schools through the Carymoor Environmental Trust. Over 160 schools have now been visited physically or virtually reaching around 37,750 children.

2.4.7 Climate Change/influencing Strategies - SWP responded to four major national consultations that will shape the waste/resource landscape in the UK for decades.

2.4.7.1 SWP led the 'Waste and Resources' workstream in the joint Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy. SWP progressed an initiative to improve recycling in public sector buildings, updated our developer guidance to drive more recycling in flats, provided a compost bin offer that has helped more than 900 people to home compost, and revamped our trail-blazing work that shows the public clearly what happens to the recycling SWP collects; www.somersetwaste.gov.uk/recycling-tracker/

2.5 Trading Standards

SCC continues to be a partner in the innovative and highly successful joint Trading Standards service with partners in Devon. In January 2021 SCC's Cabinet approved the continuation of the partnership for a further 10 years and its' expansion to include Plymouth City Council as well as Somerset, Devon and Torbay. This will enable us to sustain the service over this period and enable us to cumulatively realise additional financial savings in this and the following two financial years through efficiencies as opposed to service changes. Current priority areas set out in the strategic plan for the service include: tackling scams, addressing doorstep crime and rogue trading, combatting age restricted products and addressing animal disease. In addition, intervention is being increased around used motor car sales, private letting accommodation and food allergens. Data for

2019/20 shows that over the last year the service carried out 869 interventions supporting scam victims. The estimated total detriment value for scams was £33,400,000 and the average estimated detriment value per person was £34,000. The service continues to be nationally recognised as a model of good practice. In the past year the joint service has been a winner of the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) regulatory excellence business support award and of the Chartered Trading Standards Institute award for best national trading standards project as a result of its work to address mental health in farming.

2.6 Heritage

I continue to serve as a member of the South-West Heritage Trust Board. The Trust fulfils heritage service responsibilities previously carried out by SCC (comprising the Archives and Local Studies, Museums and Historic Environment Services) and Devon County Council (comprising the Archives and Local Studies Services).

2.6.1 Somerset Museums Service

The SWHT manages the Somerset Museums service. National restrictions have had an inevitable impact on visitor numbers across all of its sites, however there was a significant increase in visits to the Trust's online resources. Despite the restrictions and periods of enforced closure, the Museums Service remained central to the creation and delivery of the Trust's public programme including the staging of a number of temporary exhibitions and events.

2.6.2 Collections Care

After over a decade of indexing work by staff and volunteers a series of online indexes to Somerset archive sources was launched. These contain 228,000 index entries, including 80,000 relating to workhouse admissions and discharges and 62,000 relating to cases dealt with by Quarter Sessions: <https://somerset-cat.swheritage.org.uk/indexes>

2.6.3 Moving Forward – a Strategy for 2021 – 2025

Learning from the impacts of Covid-19 the Trust has developed a new Strategy and 5-year business plan to ensure that the Trust is well placed to respond to the post-covid world to continue to deliver its vision and ambitions, focusing on three major outcomes:

- **Supporting People and Communities:**
- **Protecting Our Heritage:**
- **Making an Impact:** The Trust will be enterprising, innovative and influential, and stand up for the heritage of Devon and Somerset.

2.7 Somerset Libraries - Development

Pre-Covid, Libraries were focused on embedding the outcomes of the

Libraries Redesign programme, including a new library operations structure; a new Outreach service; 13 community library partnerships and an asset improvement programme to help create a sustainable libraries physical network. These themes continue to be developed but we have also identified the following areas as key priorities for the coming year:

- Health & Wellbeing (Early Years/Mental wellbeing),
- Economic Growth (Employability support) and
- Strengthening Communities (Digital and social isolation).

A wide range of projects are currently in hand with key partner services, whilst increasing programming activity aimed at maximising the use of library physical spaces and growing an online community of library users that has flourished in the past 12-18 months. Further, we are gathering feedback and data via the [Your Library Is Listening survey](#) and other engagement events to help shape longer term aspirations based on the evidence of need.

2.7.1 Covid-19 - Throughout the pandemic, the Library service has provided a vital resource to those most vulnerable in our communities. Since 12th April 2021 all libraries started to reopen for browsing including those managed through Community Library Partnerships. During lockdown the Home Library Service offered a doorstep service and the mobile library provided a limited service. Library staff contacted over 7000 vulnerable library users as part of a 'Stay in Touch' campaign.

2.7.1.1 Working with Good Things Foundation and Taunton YMCA smartphones, data plans and digital skills training have been provided to 40 people in temporary homeless accommodation in November 2020. Also following a successful pilot in 2020, ipads are being made available at all libraries to borrow with priority being given to users looking for employment.

2.7.2 Post Lockdown - Since reopening in April 2021 physical loans have increased by 110% and e-audio loans have increased 221%. A new e-book platform was introduced combining e-book and e-audio collections offering 40% more content.

2.7.3 The Summer Reading Challenge - In 2020 the Challenge was delivered online and engaged just over 1,000 children. 2021 saw a return to the more usual delivery from libraries with a nature themed Wild World Heroes range of activities. 4343 children signed up for these activities

2.7.4 We have also been busy with a number of Building Projects – Street Community Library and Shepton Mallet library were fully refurbished during 2020/21 and work on Minehead library redevelopment has started with a view to early summer 2022. Other property work has included decarbonisation improvements at Yeovil Library.

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

The Somerset County Council Flood and Water Management Team is the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) as defined by the Flood and Water Management Act (2010) and the Flood Risk Regulations (2009). As the LLFA, the team is required to develop strategies to tackle local flood risks involving flooding from surface water and 'ordinary watercourses', for example ditches, rhynes, and streams, groundwater, canals, lakes and small reservoirs. The team also undertakes a statutory consultee role providing technical advice on surface water drainage to local planning authorities on major developments (10 dwellings or more) and also investigate significant local flooding incidents and publish the results of such investigations.

2.8.1 Increase in Volumes

The Lead Local Flood Authority is a statutory consultee for 'Major' planning applications on flood risk and drainage matters. The team has dealt with around 800 planning consultations in the last 12 months compared to just 100 when the duty was established in 2015.

2.8.2 Section 19 Investigations

On 28th June 2021, South Somerset experienced an extreme weather event resulting in many areas of Chard and the surrounding villages and communities being severely impacted. As a result the LLFA launched a flood investigation, in accordance with Section 19 of the Flood and Water Management Act (2010). The Section 19 investigation will identify the relevant risk management authorities and determine if they have exercised or plan to exercise their functions appropriately and will also outline potential options for flood mitigation, alleviation, and resilience activities.

2.9 Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA)

I have continued to serve as Chair of Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA). The SRA gives Somerset extra flood protection and greater resilience. 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.

The SRA has five workstreams, reflecting the priorities of Somerset's 20 Year Flood Action Plan. Information on all workstreams is available on the [SRA](#) website, particularly in the Annual Report 2020-21.

Schemes are led by the SRA partners. Funding comes from either the SRA's Local Partner Funding (council tax and Internal Drainage Board contributions) or the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise

Partnership's Growth Deal Fund, or sometimes both.

2.9.1 Dredging and River Management

Over the last year, SRA funded activities have included dredging 1.37 miles of the River Parrett, making dozens of improvements to water level control structures in the Westmoor Raised Water Level Area near Kingsbury Episcopi, designing a new flow station for the Parrett in Langport, and raising banks and creating new environmental features as part of the River Sowey-King's Sedgemoor Drain Enhancements Scheme (Phase One).

2.9.1.1 Other initiatives have helped to slow the flow of water down from upper and mid catchments to vulnerable areas. Recent activities have included pond restorations and the creation of swales and leaky woody dams, and land management measures such as grassland slitting and subsoiling and the planting of post-maize cover crops. A new Trees for Water Action Fund led to trees and hedges being planted at 23 sites. The SRA has continued to part-fund the Adapting the Levels project on the Somerset Levels and Moors, and elements of the Riverlands project in Porlock Vale. Both are concerned with the water-related impacts of climate change, flooding and drought.

2.9.2 Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS)

The SRA has been funding the production of Somerset-specific guidance for Sustainable Drainage Systems or SUDS, and major drainage improvement works have been carried out along the A39 in Carhampton and wide-ranging flood risk reduction projects continued in Beckington and Rode near Frome.

2.9.3 Priorities for the Next 12 Months

- The SRA is currently funding approximately £9m of projects across Somerset. As SRA Chair I will ensure SRA partners maintain momentum in delivering these projects on behalf of the residents of Somerset.
- In the next 12 months the SRA will complete a review of Somerset's 20 Year Flood action Plan and publish a new plan in September 2022.
- I will also 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.

2.10 Registration Services

The service operates under strict legal governance in partnership with the General Register Office and Home Office. In an average year it will facilitate registrations for around 8,000 deaths, 7,000 births and 3,500 marriage or civil partnership ceremonies across Somerset and North Somerset (as well as Bristol based births). The service is also responsible for conducting citizenship ceremonies for new British citizens and issuing

historical certificates for all life events. Disruption as a result of the pandemic has been enormous, however recovery is now well under way. In addition to reacting to forthcoming changes in legislation which is hoped will modernise the way services can be provided, a key focus for the coming year will be to work with partners to rebuild the local ceremony industry and ensure Somerset continues to be an attractive location for wedding tourism.

2.10.1 Legislative Changes

Legislation to modernise marriage registrations came into effect in May 2021. This made way for the electronic registration of all marriages including the addition of the couples' mothers' (or other parent) details. This was a significant change for the service, implemented quickly at a challenging time. In addition to internal training and introduction of new processes, virtual training courses were provided to all clergy.

2.10.1.1 Other emergency changes in legislation have afforded us the opportunity to offer marriage and civil partnership ceremonies outdoors within the grounds of licensed venues.

2.10.1.2 The Coronavirus Act continues to facilitate opportunity to complete death registrations over the telephone rather than face to face.

2.10.2 Website

The Somerset Wedding Service website has greatly increased its focus as a portal for customer self-service and essential information. There were 47,039 active users from Oct 20 to Sept 21, an average 3900 per month - up from 29,473 (monthly average 2450) in previous 12 months

2.11 Civil Contingencies

The purpose of the Somerset Local Authorities Civil Contingencies Partnership (SLACCP) is to promote resilience and preparedness across the five Somerset Local Authorities and in the wider community. The Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) works on behalf of all five authorities to develop and maintain emergency plans and procedures, create and deliver emergency training and exercises and to support robust business continuity planning so that essential services are maintained in any environment or extreme event. During emergencies, the CCU provides strategic and tactical advice to the Gold officers, coordinates provision of situational awareness and maintains the link with the multi-agency emergency responders.

2.11.1 Partnership Plans

Recently refreshed SLACCP plans include the Generic response and recovery plan; Heat Health Watch Plan; Operation London Bridge

framework and Evacuation and Shelter plan.

2.11.2 Business Continuity

The SCC Business Continuity Management Group operated between Autumn 2020 and April 2021 and restarted in July due to increasing pressures. SCC business continuity plans held up well during the pandemic with praise from the Southwest Audit Partnership report in summer 2021.

2.11.3 Training and Exercising

Emergency preparedness training is another priority including duty officer refresher sessions, rest centre management training and nuclear awareness. The Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) carried out a series of training and exercises for the partnership including delivery of a multi-agency concurrent events exercise in November 2020, a strategic exercise for the Local Outbreak Management Plan (LOMP) in autumn 2020 and a test of the revised LOMP in June 2021. We've also carried out a statutory test of the Hinkley Point Off-Site Plan involving four modules and over 250 participants.

2.11.4 Community Resilience

The Somerset Prepared partnership promotes and supports community resilience for Parish and Town Councils and community groups via advice, guidance, grants, the Somerset Prepared website and the annual community resilience conference. This year's event was held on-line as a series of webinars, videos and training throughout October.

2.11.5 Incidents and Covid-19

The CCU supports SCC business continuity, engages with the multi-agency response via the Avon and Somerset Local Resilience Forum and supports Public Health by sourcing Covid test sites and chairing the Somerset Death Management Group.

2.12 Scientific Services

Somerset Scientific Services (SSS) supply first class UKAS (UK Accreditation Service) accredited water and air quality (traffic monitoring) analytical testing services to Somerset County Council and on an income generating basis to other County and local District enforcement authorities, Government Agencies, National and local companies and the general public throughout the South West. SSS had a very successful 2020-21 trading year despite all the major disruptions associated with the pandemic. It' client base and income streams has grown (including a contract to monitor air quality in Ulster) and the reputation of the service within the industry to offer first-class analytical testing services and

sought-after scientific advice remains extremely high. During the pandemic, SSS continued to monitor air quality for District Councils, giving an insight into the effects of lockdown on pollution levels.

2.13 Climate Emergency

2.13.1 Climate Emergency Strategy

Following SCC's Full Council's declaration of a 'Climate Emergency' in recognition of the scale and urgency of the global challenge from Climate Change, it was agreed to work with the four Somerset District Councils to develop a shared Strategy to identify ways towards making the county of Somerset 'carbon neutral' by 2030.

The focus of the developed Strategy is not only to decarbonise the county, but also to have a Somerset which is prepared for, and resilient to, the impacts of Climate Change.

As we approach a year since the Climate Emergency Strategy's adoption, we are now in the process of reviewing our progress towards the outcomes detailed in the Strategy. This exercise will capture which actions have been undertaken, what progress has been made and where greater action or urgency is required in order to meet the Strategy Goals.

2.13.2 Electric Vehicle Strategy

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During Autumn 2020, the 5 Somerset Councils agreed to jointly fund the development of an Electric Vehicle (EV) Strategy for Somerset.

2.13.2.1 The EV Strategy describes how the use of conventional fuelled petrol and diesel vehicles must transition to 'Zero Emission' electric vehicles, in line with national policy, as well as setting out the opportunities and challenges that this will bring as we look to decarbonise transport across Somerset to help tackle the climate emergency. We are now working through the recommendations to implement the aims of the strategy including enabling residents to charge their EV's in residential areas.

2.13.3 Climate Emergency Community Fund

In February 2020, the Leader of the Council, announced a £1m fund available for city, town and parish councils to support climate change initiatives within Somerset. Councils were encouraged to apply for funding to support work in their communities to deliver projects that reduced carbon emissions, reduced consumption, raised community awareness of climate change issues or increased resilience to the impacts of climate change.

2.13.3.1 The Climate Emergency Community Fund launched in September 2020 received 137 applications from 123 city, town & parish councils with bids

totalling over £3.5m. Due to this very high demand, an additional £0.5m was announced by the Leader in May 2021 to support the Fund. These monies have so far enabled a total of 44 projects to be awarded funding to date, amounting to £980,354.49.

2.13.4 Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund

Somerset County Council has been awarded £4,053,211 through the Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund that will fund projects across a number of Council owned buildings. The work will include the installation of heat pumps, replacing windows with double glazing, upgrading building insulation, improving building ventilation systems and installing solar panels.

2.13.5 Defra Treescapes Fund £187K

Over the Summer of 2021, SCC led a bid to the Defra Local Authority Treescapes Fund (LATF) which aims to increase tree planting and natural regeneration in local communities. The bid, with support from the 4 Somerset District councils was successful in securing £187k.

This funding will allow the planting of over 1,800 trees across a variety of settings across Somerset including 160 school sites, 400 trees planted in urban areas around Sedgemoor and over 1,000 trees planted on farmland, hedgerows and other settings to replace some of the trees lost to ash die back.

2.13.6 Climate Emergency Website

Information about the Climate Emergency Strategy for Somerset and many of the exciting projects and programmes that are underway or planned can be found on our website. I would urge everyone to familiarise yourselves with the strategy to understand the part you can play in delivering our ambitious goals and see the exciting range of projects that are already taking place across Somerset [Climate Emergency \(somerset.gov.uk\)](https://www.somerset.gov.uk/climate-emergency)

2.14 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a designated exceptional landscape the distinctive character and natural beauty of which are precious enough to be safeguarded in the national interest. AONBs are protected and enhanced for nature, people, business and culture.

AONB teams are responsible for the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the respective protected landscapes and encouraging the quiet enjoyment of the countryside whilst having regard for the interests of those who live and work there.

There are four AONBs that fall within the administrative boundary of Somerset; Cranborne Chase AONB, Blackdown Hills AONB, Mendip Hills AONB and Quantock Hills AONB, the latter two being 'hosted' by Somerset County Council.

2.14.1 Farming in Protected Landscapes

One of the more significant initiatives for AONB services this year was the commencement of the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) scheme. It will deliver funding through the AONBs to support farmers, particularly upland farmers (75% of whom live and work in Protected Landscapes) to make improvements to the natural environment, cultural heritage and public access on their land.

2.14.2 Mendip Hills AONB

The Mendip Hills AONB comprises 198sq kms of environmentally important land from the Somerset Levels to the lakes of Chew Valley and Blagdon.

The last twelve 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.

Upon lifting of the national restrictions, automatic visitor counters recorded 60,000 passes between 21 May and 4 July 2021 at one site, this compares to just under 6,000 passes during the same time period 5 years ago.

2.14.3 Green Recovery Challenge Fund

The Somerset AONBs, led by the Mendip Hills AONB, have secured £248,900 from the Government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund and National Lottery Heritage Fund to deliver the 'Level Up' project. The project will work across the three AONBs, along strategically important nature recovery networks, to deliver pre-determined projects during 2021/22 that will enhance connections for wildlife and transitional habitats between the Hills and the Levels.

2.14.4 Quantock Hills AONB

Designated in 1956 the Quantock Hills became the first area in England to be confirmed as an AONB on the 1st January 1957. The hills run from the Vale of Taunton Deane in the south, for about 15 miles (24 km) to the north-west, ending at Kilve and West Quantoxhead on the coast of the Bristol Channel.

Covid-19 restrictions have had a significant impact on various elements of the Quantock Hills AONB Team's work, particularly outdoor activities with volunteers and other groups. During lockdown, the team were particularly keen to support the vulnerable people in our communities, while promoting the "stay at home" message during the time of restrictions.

2.14.4.1 The Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme

Despite the issues with national restrictions, the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme (QLPS), the Heritage Lottery funded projects programme, has been working on a range of projects from historic

heritage assessments and small digs to rights of way enhancement, Quantock inspired murals in Priorswood and on-site information boards. They are running a photo competition until next March regarding people in the Quantocks – village life, people and working life.

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

3. Background papers

- 3.1. [Somerset Recovery and Growth Plan](#)
- 3.2. [Somerset Rivers Authority Annual Report 2020-21 - Somerset Rivers Authority](#)
- 3.3. Climate Emergency Strategy - [Climate Emergency \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)
- 3.4. [Appendix A - Somerset EV Charging Strategy.pdf \(somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk\)](#)