
Annual report of the lead member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets

Executive Member: Councillor Ros Wyke, Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets

Local Member(s) and Division: All

Lead Officers: Paul Hickson, Service Director of Economy and Planning; Oliver Woodhams, Service Director of Strategic Asset Management

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1. Summary

1.1. This report is the annual report for the Executive Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, covering the 2023/24 financial year. It describes the activity and achievements of services across the Economic Development, Planning and Assets portfolio during Somerset Council's first year of operation.

1.2. The report is structured around nine key areas of work within the Economic Development, Planning and Assets portfolio. Many of these areas are delivered by teams across the services working jointly, with each other and services across the council:

- Section A – Gravity Enterprise Zone (pg. 3);
- Section B – Hinkley Point C and National Grid (pg. 4);
- Section C – Major Projects & Regeneration (pg. 5);
- Section D – Planning (pg. 11);
- Section E – Economic Development (pg. 16);
- Section F – Building Control (pg. 21);
- Section G – Trading Standards (pg. 22);
- Section H – Commercial Investments (pg. 23);
- Section I – Asset Management, Estates and Asset Valuation (pg. 24);

- Section J – Building Maintenance, Compliance, Energy & Facilities Management (pg. 29).

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. The Council notes the progress made to achieve Council Plan priorities across the services within the Economic Development, Planning and Assets portfolio.
- 2.2. The Council welcomes the progress made to integrate these services and to ensure joined up working across functions since the formation of Somerset Council.

3. Background and context

- 3.1. This report covers the first year of Somerset Council, immediately following the bringing together of separate teams from across the five legacy councils on 1st April 2023. Prior to vesting day, services within this portfolio comprised of five separate planning functions, five asset management and estates teams, five economic development / regeneration functions, and separate facilities management teams operating a range of in-house and outsourced delivery models. The building control function operated on a shared service model across three of the legacy district councils with a separate service in the former South Somerset District Council. Predecessor councils operated a number of separate specialist major projects teams and a wide variety of approaches to the management of major construction projects, economic development workspace and regeneration schemes. The district councils each had a separate portfolio of commercial investments; alongside these commercial property portfolios Somerset Council inherited a very broad and diverse range of c. 1,300 leased and operational property assets on vesting day.
- 3.2. Maintaining business continuity and progressing Council Plan priorities whilst integrating services, processes and systems has been a major challenge in this first year, as it has for services in other portfolios. Services have made progress in establishing single systems and governance frameworks. Whilst the planning function continues to work within five separate local plans and associated area governance, work has started to integrate five planning systems and processes and to develop a single local plan for Somerset. Significant work has been undertaken within planning to begin aligning processes, procedures and staff across technical teams, business support and back-office support staff across the 5 (former) teams, 6 legacy operating systems and planning ICT systems. The building control function has been fully integrated, new consolidated governance

arrangements for the programme of regeneration projects have been implemented; commercial investments are overseen by a single Property and Investment Executive sub-committee and outside of the investment property portfolio, asset management is overseen by the council's Asset Management Group. A number of services within the portfolio have undergone management restructures and, at the time of writing, restructuring continues at lower levels to integrate teams in the Strategic Asset Management and Planning departments. Three of the five previous facilities management and compliance functions have been fully integrated, with integration of the remaining legacy teams well underway – these and other asset management functions are operating from Somerset Council's newly established Civica property asset management system. Crucially, progress across a very broad and diverse programme of major projects, construction and maintenance programmes has been sustained, as well as critical day-to-day functions across the portfolio – development control, building control, support to businesses, building safety and compliance, and the collection of rental income.

- 3.3. As is the case in other portfolios, addressing the council's financial emergency has been a further challenge for our Economic Development, Planning and Asset Management teams. Services within the portfolio have successfully delivered a total of £1.5m (6.7% of base budget) of revenue savings during 2023/24 and are anticipated to underspend by a further £0.6m. Including the reduction in staffing costs anticipated from the Strategic Asset Management LGR restructure process, a further £2.9m (13.3% of base budget) of revenue savings have been identified and agreed across the portfolio for delivery in 2024/25, as part of efforts to balance the current year budget. The Strategic Asset Management department will play a further major role in achieving financial balance over the 2024/25 and 2025/26 financial years through a significant programme of asset sales - across the commercial investment portfolio, our non-operational property, and through the rationalisation and disposal of operational property. Mobilising these programmes in response to the financial emergency has been a significant challenge for our estates team during the year. Delivering economic growth and housing development through the Economy and Planning teams – particularly through nationally significant investments like the Gravity Enterprise Zone and Hinkley Point C projects – will support Somerset Council's financial sustainability into future years.

4. Activity and achievements

A - Gravity Enterprise Zone

- 4.1. In February 2024 Agratas, the subsidiary of Tata Sons, announced that its £4bn EV battery manufacturing facility will be located at the Gravity Enterprise Zone site near Bridgwater. The news was a culmination of a several years of Somerset Council, and its predecessors, working jointly with This Is Gravity Limited and Central Government to land this opportunity in the UK. The facility, when fully operational will play a significant role in the UK's ambition to be a key player in this emerging industrial sector linked to the transition to net zero. It will also be critical to the future transformation of Somerset's economy, employing c. 4,000 people and creating many more opportunities locally and regionally.
- 4.2. The Council will play its role in implementing this investment by investing retained business rates from the Enterprise Zone to fund site infrastructure, active travel and measures to enhance skills and opportunity for local people to access the jobs created. A Gravity Locality Investment Plan is currently being finalised for this. The Council has successfully engaged with Government departments to develop a solution that will allow Somerset Council to invest in the Enterprise Zone via the business rates mechanism without a negative impact on its finances.
- 4.3. Gravity was selected by Agratas because of its readiness for development, with the Gravity Local Development Order (LDO) approved by Sedgemoor District Council one of the key enablers for this. There are a number of different consents and approvals, both through the LDO and in some cases requiring new planning applications, required in a short space of time to enable the ambitions timetable for the Agratas advanced manufacturing facility. The Council is therefore forming a dedicated planning team to respond to this. The planning implications of the project also cross over many other areas of the Council so the team is devising new and agile ways of quickly responding to these requirements, drawing on learning from the past and on-going experiences of supporting other major projects such as Hinkley C and the national grid upgrade. The team is currently dealing with applications relating to land drainage, the new replacement 37 Club leisure facility, and village enhancements. The main compliance applications for the factory are expected within a few months and an application for the storage of hazardous substances has already been received. In addition to this, further applications relating to new infrastructure related to transport, energy and water will also be submitted. There are likely to be further occupiers announced for the rest of the site in the future.

B - Hinkley Point C (HPC) and National Grid

- 4.4. During 2023, work began between EDF and the Council on the likely impacts of a further workforce uplift, taking worker numbers from 8,600 to a likely 12,000.

The current worker number is around 11,000, meaning impacts are already being felt, but likewise, increased local employment and spend is also occurring. The process by which we assess the impact is work in progress and will continue into the first half of the next financial year. There is an imperative to ensure the Council achieves suitable mitigation, particularly regarding accommodation impacts. The process has been complicated by EDF's announcement in January 2023 that the project has schedule slippage, moving the Unit 1 date from 2027 to approximately 2030/2031. EDF Energy is proposing to make some material (and non-material) changes to the Development Consent Order (DCO) for the HPC project. As a DCO, any material changes will need to be authorised by the Secretary of State. EDF Energy expect to submit proposals to the Secretary of State in spring 2025. This is likely to result in a Public Examination, which would begin by autumn 2025. The changes that EDF will be seeking approval for are as follows:

- Removing the need to install an Acoustic Fish Deterrent (AFD);
- Ecological mitigation to counter potential loss of fish stocks from not having an AFD;
- Change the agreed Interim Spent Fuel Store from a wet store to a dry store, with consequential increase in building dimensions;
- Replacement of Access Control Building with a new Equipment Storage Building;
- A relocated/re-designed Meteorological Mast (outside of approved parameters);
- To retain the existing temporary electricity substation as a permanent feature to supply electricity to HPA / HPB stations; and
- 4 new storage structures to house sluice gates and lifting beams, which will be used during outages.

4.5. As part of the process under the Planning Act 2008, EDF Energy held a public consultation exercise on these proposals in January and February 2024. The Council submitted a detailed response following engagement with members.

4.6. The Hinkley Point C Connection Project is a collaboration between National Grid, South Gloucestershire Council, Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council and Somerset Council to build new lines and capacity to take electricity produced at HPC from Hinkley to National Grid's Seabank sub-station near Avonmouth. This project is currently proceeding on schedule. Officers from the Joint Councils meet monthly with National Grid on progress, further consents to discharge under the Development Consent Order, to agree appropriate landscaping works, monitor works traffic movements and potential highways disruption, and to assist National

Grid to discharge their corporate social responsibilities to communities affected by the on-going works.

C - Major Projects and Regeneration

4.7. Across the services within the Economic Development, Planning and Assets portfolio a wide range of major projects and regeneration programmes are being delivered. The Council is responsible for in excess of £100 million of regeneration funds secured from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) through various Levelling Up funding mechanisms. Outside of our regeneration programmes the Strategic Asset Management team works with Children's Services and other client departments to deliver major construction projects and programmes, as well as investment in the decarbonisation of Somerset Council's operational estate. The Planning and Economic Development teams also support major infrastructure projects being delivered by external partner organisations. The achievements set out in this section have been delivered by a number of different teams across planning, regeneration, estates and construction project management functions working together to secure funding and develop and deliver projects.

4.8. **Bridgwater and Glastonbury Town Deals.** Bridgwater and Glastonbury are among the Government's 101 Towns Deal Fund towns. £23.2million of Government funds are allocated for Bridgwater through the Deal for eleven projects, ranging from unlocking growth to cultural improvements and diversifying what the town centre has to offer. The largest single project, 'The Celebration Mile', will deliver an enhanced pedestrian environment in the Eastover area of the town, with a further section next to the Angel Place Shopping Centre and will connecting the Northgate Yard leisure complex with the rest of the town centre. Following the granting of planning permission, a contractor has now been appointed and construction is due to commence in May 2024. The regeneration of Bridgwater docks is one of the key Bridgwater Town Deal projects and will rejuvenate this area by improving the public realm, restoring historic assets, provision of new visitor and permanent moorings, and new commercial opportunities to support leisure and tourist activities. There will also be a new active travel route that will link the river to the docks and then onwards to the town centre. Following a consultation event was held in December 2023, design work and further technical studies are being undertaken to inform the works needed. Work is well underway at the Engine Room project to deliver IT/media training space.

4.9. Glastonbury secured £23.6million for eleven projects within the town by March 2026. Most builds will happen in 2024 and 2025. Last year significant enabling work including planning permissions, consents and supporting match funding applications were undertaken across these schemes. The first part of a new path network at Tor Leisure has been completed and a second path at Beckery is due to be delivered in Summer 2024. Working in partnership is important to the programme and we have now linked with the Open University on a Glastonbury Learning Hub website and Somerset Chamber of Commerce on a new Somerset Supply Chain Portal. Other key initiatives include:

- Provision of business and community spaces in three heritage buildings
- Clean energy and active travel initiatives
- A food & regenerative farming centre
- Improved heritage at Glastonbury Abbey and Bride's Mound
- New Sport & Leisure and Health & Wellbeing hubs.

4.10. **Bridgwater Levelling Up Fund 2 (LUF2).** LUF2 grant funding of £19.7million has been secured to regenerate the former Bridgwater Hospital, a significant Grade 2 building which has become dilapidated over recent years. The building will be converted into a Training Academy for Health and Social Care, bringing back into use a significant town centre site and delivering wider benefits such as increasing town centre footfall, plus training for people to work in health and social care. Staff within the Assets team have successfully acquired and secured the hospital site, and design work is well underway for its redevelopment into an integrated state of the art training facility. Good progress is being made to put effective governance in place to achieve the necessary partnership working for delivery and outcomes. There will also be a satellite site in Minehead, supporting training delivery in the west of Somerset, which is expected to be complete in October 2024. Revenue funding has been secured this year through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to identify skills gaps across the sector and develop training in response. The training will be tested at the Minehead site once operational in anticipation of the main site becoming operational in 2026. Construction and ongoing site security will challenge the delivery teams as this project progresses on from the design phase.

4.11. **Yeovil Refresh (Future High Street Fund [FHSF]).** Yeovil Refresh was launched in 2018 with the aim of re-designing and re-developing the town centre so that the local economy could grow and flourish over the coming years. Ambitious plans funded by £9.75million of FHSF from Government include:

- a new public amphitheatre at the Triangle
- an integrated transport system

- Public realm improvements to Middle Street, including paving, widened footpaths, new street furniture, lighting and ornamental planting and blue badge parking bays.
- Complementary initiatives with Love Yeovil and Yeovil Artspace to provide events and activities to encourage visitors and animate the town.

4.12. The majority of public realm works are on target to complete in April this year and as expected the Triangle works will finish by August. The active travel schemes work will continue until the end of December 2024. DLUHC has provisionally confirmed a Project Adjustment Request (PAR) to extend the FHSF to the end of March 2025. This means that £5million of funding will be reallocated to provide residential accommodation for young professionals, key workers and student apprentices, over retail at three key locations, plus the acquisition of a major town centre redevelopment site. Although the premises will initially be demolished to form a temporary ‘meanwhile’ use, it will then be redeveloped in accordance with master planning work. This master planning work started in March, funded by Homes England and a scoping study report was produced, which will, subject to more Homes England funding, be the basis for wider consultation with businesses, the community and stakeholders to produce a mixed-use redevelopment vision for Yeovil town centre.

4.13. **Transforming Taunton including Future High Street Fund.** Funding of £35million from different sources has been allocated to deliver a programme of regeneration projects in and around Taunton Town Centre. This includes £13.96million from the Future High Streets Fund and £2.8million for Bus Service Improvements. Projects being delivered as part of the programme include Coal Orchard, Firepool, a new transport hub, active travel cycling schemes and various town centre improvements. FHSF is enabling the ambition to create a flourishing, distinctive and greener town by putting the River Tone at the heart of Taunton. At Firepool, drainage and levels work were completed in 2023. Work is scheduled to begin on developing the Northern Boulevard public realm this April. Procurement will begin shortly to deliver the Southern Boulevard part of the site, which includes Wessex Water delivering sewage improvements. Regeneration and Asset Management teams are working together to support the sale and development of the Firepool site, as well as the residential elements of the Coal Orchard development. Economic conditions have made it difficult to lease the commercial units in the Coal Orchard development, and the strategy for this site is being reviewed by the estates team.

4.14. **Toneworks & Tonedale Mill - Levelling Up Fund 3 (LUF3).** In November 2023 the Council was provisionally offered £19.9million for ‘*A Vision for Tonedale*’.

Officers across regeneration, planning and strategic asset management are involved in this complex project and the Council is in discussion with DLUHC to enable a formal offer to be received and allow the associated projects at Tonedale Mill and Toneworks to proceed. This will regenerate nationally significant industrial heritage at risk assets in Wellington and provide socio-economic levelling-up outcomes. In addition, in the region of £200,000 has been secured from Historic England for urgent repair works at Tonedale and roof re-instatement at Toneworks. In February 2024, the Council served a Section 54 (planning) Urgent Works Notice on the owners of Tonedale Mill to protect the building known as Block B. Discussions are underway with the owner to establish whether they are capable of carrying out the protective works or if they will need to be completed by the Council in default.

4.15. **Chard – High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) & Chard Enterprise Centre.** Historic England provided £1 million for the Chard HSHAZ, which was match-funded from a former South Somerset legacy budget. The project finished in March 2024 and delivered public realm improvements with 2,500 sqm of new paving, new seating and street furniture and improvements to waters rills, which are a famous feature of Chard. Nine historic shopfront and building improvement grant projects were completed. Community engagement included Heritage Open Days, Heritage Walks, the Carnival, Street Market and a Chard Revealed photo exhibition, which attracted over 500 visitors. Also in Chard, 9 Fore Street (Manor Court) is a grade 1 listed building which is on Historic England’s Heritage at Risk register. In 2023, with funding from Historic England, it was purchased by the Council to save and restore the building. It has been leased to Somerset Building Preservation Trust (SBPT) to secure funding to undertake restoration to bring the building back into a viable end use. The Strategic Asset Management estates team is currently leading work with SBPT and an external partner which we hope will result in significant external investment into the site.

4.16. Construction of the Chard enterprise centre was completed in summer 2023 providing both light industrial “grow on” spaces and 10 start-up offices at a project cost of £4.2M including £1.7M investment from the European Regional Development Fund. The centre space is already 80% occupied.



4.17. **Saxonvale, Frome.** Following a Judicial Review judgement which ruled against the former Mendip District Council planning approval of a proposed development by Acorn Group in October 2023, officers from the Strategic Asset Management team have been working with external advisors and Frome Town Council to review options for the development of this long-derelict site in the centre of Frome. Proposals from two potential developers (Acorn Group and Mayday Saxonvale) will be evaluated against other options. Subject to the resolution of outstanding planning matters and viability / funding appraisals by both potential developers – and the impact of any pre-election period - a decision on a preferred option for the site is anticipated in summer 2024. Councillors will be aware that this is a very sensitive, emotionally-charged site; all parties are working alongside community representatives to try to make progress - the worst possible outcome for the site would be for it to be left undeveloped for years to come.

4.18. **Firepool Centre for Digital Innovation, Taunton.** Construction of the Firepool Centre for Digital Innovation (FCDI) was completed in June 2023. The Council secured £7.3m of external funding including European Regional Development Fund, Getting Building Fund and Growth Deal funds. £3.6m investment was made by the County Council prior to the creation of the unitary council. Construction on the multiple level site with abnormal ground conditions and problematic boundaries was very challenging but was completed within budget in July 2023.



The internal fit out phase is nearing completion, and the Centre will open to tenants in May 2024. FCDI offers office suites, co-working, collaboration and event space over four floors. It is owned

and operated by the Council, with a contracted wrap-around innovation and business support service for tenants and users. The Centre has hosted a number of successful events from September 2024, including a cyber security conference hosted by the SW Cyber Resilience Centre, the SW Infrastructure Partnership's annual conference, a Great South West Board meeting and a Tech South West AI network evening.

4.19. Wellington Railway Station. Work continues with Network Rail and West of England Developments (WoED) to deliver the new station for Wellington. A planning committee date of 1 May 2024 is being targeted for the WoED application for 200 homes and the access road to the planned station. The station will be a separate application by Network Rail in the coming months. Recently a viability challenge was made by WoED and Officers are working through the implications of this in order to keep the project 'on track'. A notable negotiated element has been the inclusion of a Station Square, to create a sense of welcome for those arriving by train. Officers are working with WoED and Wellington Town Council to design the square with a view to WTC taking on responsibility for management and maintenance once built. It is possible the Square will accommodate the reclaimed Pyramidion from the Wellington Monument. The railway station is planned to open in June 2026.

4.20. Bridgwater Tidal Barrier. This is a strategic flood defence scheme that will provide long term protection to Bridgwater and the surrounding area, including key businesses and the M5 and mainline railway strategic transport links. Detailed design work has progressed over the last 12 months and the Full Business Case for the scheme has been submitted to DEFRA/Treasury. It is anticipated that construction will commence before the end of 2024. Early pre-construction works have taken place, and the Council has discharged a number of conditions relating to the temporary access track and landscaping matters. It is also considering planning applications for fish and eel improvement works on the River Tone and River Parrett that require some additional land outside of the original Transport and Works Act Order. The Council continues to secure partnership funding for the scheme through either planning agreements or Community Infrastructure Levy, and our estates team are supporting access and early enablement design

4.21. Children's Residential Programme. The Strategic Asset Management team played a major role in supporting Somerset Council's award-winning Homes and Horizons partnership delivering family-sized homes for children as part of a new model of care for Somerset's most vulnerable young people. Building on work in 2022/23, the last year has seen significant progress in acquiring and refurbishing homes, as well as supporting the homes that are operational through

maintenance and facilities management of these new council-owned assets. The fifth home was handed over for occupation in May 2023; site construction works are well advanced for the sixth home and the two final homes in the current programme are at design / procurement stages. To supplement the main homes, additional self-contained annexes and 'pod' accommodation have been ordered for installation at 3 of the homes. Site works to provide a linked educational facility located at the former Misterton First School are well advanced with a scheduled hand over date of May 2024. Close working between teams across the asset management department, clients in Children's Services, and our Homes and Horizons provider team has delivered £2.3m worth of investment in various assets across the programme during 2023/24.

4.22. **School construction projects, site acquisition and developer**

contributions. Delivering major education construction projects also requires close working between Strategic Asset Management, Planning and Children's Services teams. The standout project in the 2023/24 education construction programme has been the new 14-class primary school at Orchard Grove, Taunton – an £11.5m investment to create Somerset's first net-zero school to Passivhaus design standards (only the 3rd such school in the South West region). Following on from site acquisition and planning consent early in 2023, construction on site commenced in May 2023 and the school is on track to open for pupils in September 2024. The council's estates, construction and architecture specialists have also supported the delivery of the expansion of Merriott Primary school (£0.5m investment in a new classroom completed in November 2023), the construction of a satellite SEND facility in Wellington for Selworthy school (due to open in September 2024), a net-zero Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) base at St. Dunstan's, Glastonbury (£1.5m investment completed in summer 2023) as well as 26 further spatial analysis, feasibility and scheme design reports to support education projects and place planning. This work ensures that the council meets its statutory duty to provide sufficient school places, as well as supporting children with special educational needs or disabilities to be educated locally in appropriate settings.

4.23. Ensuring developers contribute to education construction projects caused by additional housing development is a long term, complex process managed jointly by the council's Assets, Education and Planning functions. During the last year, officers in the assets and planning teams have supported the acquisition of a school site associated with new housing development in Wells, with work ongoing to acquire a primary school site to serve the Staplegrove development in Taunton, funded through the Homes England Housing Infrastructure Fund. Across the year specialist officers in the Assets team responded to 71 housing pre-

applications/full and outline applications across the whole of Somerset, 50 of which recommended that education contributions should be secured. Two S106 agreements for education contributions were agreed and signed, one for early years and one for SEND funding. We have invoiced for £2.4m of contributions from 5 existing S106 agreements where the housing completions and occupations triggered payments.

4.24. Estate decarbonisation and other major construction projects. Building upon the earlier achievements of the predecessor councils, a programme of major projects to decarbonise Somerset Council's operational estate has continued through 2023/24 in support of Somerset's Climate Emergency Strategy and the pledge to decarbonise local authority operations by 2030. The last 12 months has seen a particular focus on Leisure Centres - Goldenstones, Westlands and Wincanton Leisure Centres in the south of the county are all scheduled to complete in April 2024, and works to decarbonise Wellington Leisure Centre and the Alcombe Centre facility in Minehead (a nursery and children's centre) are also well underway. With a total programme cost of £8.7m (of which £4.1m has been externally funded from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme), these initiatives will realise combined annual carbon savings of c. 650 tCO₂e and reduce energy consumption by c. 3,450,000 kwh per year. All decarbonisation projects will replace gas fired boilers with electric air source heat pumps supplemented with a blend of other energy improvement measures including LED lighting, building fabric upgrades, improved ventilation systems incorporating heat recovery technology and onsite solar electricity generation. Other projects (outside of the schools, regeneration and estate decarbonisation programmes) progressed during 2023/24 include the refurbishment of Wellington Library - a major refurbishment scheme which started on site in September 2023; alterations to Broughton House in Taunton delivered in summer 2023 to enable the relocation of council training services from Dillington House, and design work for the construction of a new externally-funded visitor centre at Ham Hill country park.

D - Planning

4.25. Establishment of Strategic Planning Committee and Area Planning Committees. Following the adoption of the Constitution for Somerset Council in February 2023, four area committees and the Strategic Planning Committee were established and have been up and running since May 2023. As agreed by Full Council in February 2023, we are reviewing Planning Committee Terms of Reference and delegations following our initial experience as a new Council. The proposed changes will be reported to Full Council on 22 May 2024. This review

has been undertaken in consultation with the Chairs and Vice Chairs of the Planning Committees and senior officers from Planning, Legal and Democratic Services. The review and proposed amendments have been informed by an all member survey and responses to questionnaires distributed to all members, officers and members of the public attending one of the Planning Committees during the first six months of this year.

4.26. Development Management. The Council consulted between 31 January 2024 and 13 March 2024 on updates to the local validation checklists for the West Area and Mineral and Waste proposals. Comments are currently being analysed with a view to adopting the updated lists for use by planning applicants, agents, developers etc for the submission of planning applications in these areas. A revised fees and charges schedule has been drafted and is due to be adopted for use from 1 May 2024. Significant work has been undertaken by officers to enable a simplified approach to charging to be introduced. This means that for some planning charges (e.g. pre-app/PPA), the Council as well as securing costs for planning advice, other disciplines including highways, ecology and the lead local flood authority have been integrated to offer a comprehensive service. Now that we are one Planning Authority, performance statistics for decision making are being considered as a single entry for district planning matters (combining the former 4 Districts) and an entry for minerals and waste matters. The performance of local authorities in determining applications is measured nationally and reported quarterly to DLUHC. The Government has set targets for the determination of planning applications as follows:

- Determine 65% of major applications within 13 weeks (or 16 weeks in the case of EIA development). Currently achieving 88.9%;
- Determine 75% of minor applications within eight weeks. Currently achieving 87.9%;
- Determine 85% of other applications within eight weeks. Currently achieving 94.5%

4.27. The planning service is currently exceeding these targets for 2024/25 despite the challenges of recruitment and retention. It should be noted however, that there is a reliance on agency staff to maintain these levels of achievement. For Minerals and Waste applications, the targets are the same as set out above and the team is currently achieving 100%. Amongst all the 'business as usual' minerals and waste applications officers have been progressing with two sizeable applications that would provide significant additional reserves of Carboniferous Limestone (Westdown) and Silurian Andesite (Moons Hill) if permission is granted.

4.28. The Council consulted between 31 January 2024 and 13 March 2024 on updates to the local validation checklists for the West Area and Mineral and Waste proposals. Comments are currently being analysed with a view to adopting the updated lists for use by planning applicants, agents, developers etc for the submission of planning applications in these areas. A revised fees and charges schedule has been drafted and is due to be adopted for use from 1 May 2024. Significant work has been undertaken by officers to enable a simplified approach to charging to be introduced. This means that for some planning charges (e.g. pre-app/PPA), the Council as well as securing costs for planning advice, other disciplines including highways, ecology and the lead local flood authority have been integrated to offer a comprehensive service. Technical support teams are leading the way on the integration of planning services across the former teams/geographic areas, dynamically deploying staff across the numerous teams as required to ensure service delivery is not compromised. This will ensure that the registration and validation of planning submissions is undertaken in a timely manner.

4.29. In Autumn 2023, it was announced by the Urban Design Group that the Somerset West & Taunton Districtwide Design Guide SPD had won the National Urban Design Award 2023 (Design Code category)

4.30. **Somerset Local Plan.** The October 2023 Executive approved the Local Development Scheme (LDS). The LDS sets out the timetable for the Somerset Local Plan, and the Minerals and Waste Plan reviews. The Planning and Transport Policy Sub-Committee of the Executive was established at that same meeting to oversee and monitor progress against the LDS. Following public consultation, the October Executive also adopted the Statement of Community Involvement. This sets out how and when Somerset Council will engage the community and stakeholders on planning policy documents and planning proposals and outlines how and at what stages consultation will be carried out. The Council's Plan-It Newsletter informs residents and businesses and has been created to improve local engagement in planning policy. The 5th Edition was published in March 2024. Early evidence gathering for the Local Plan has been progressing. The following pieces of work have been externally commissioned:

- Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment
- Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Level 1
- Local Housing Needs Assessment
- The next three commissions are at the brief drafting and procurement stages:
- Economic Development Needs Assessment
- Open Space, Built Sports and Playing Pitch Assessment

- Landscape Character Assessment
- In house progress has been made on:
- Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report
- Role and Function of Settlements
- Town Centre Health Checks
- Custom and Self Build
- Work on the Spatial Portrait has also commenced which will then lead into visioning work for the Local Plan.

4.31. The Council was successful in its bid for £85,000 through the Government's PropTech Innovation Fund which will deliver a "Placemaker" digital tool which will enable landowners and developers as part of the local plan process to submit sites for development. This will save the Council significant time in assessing those sites for their suitability. It will also be used to develop a Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) module in the tool for site assessments to determine the suitability and priority of off-site land parcels to deliver BNG in-line with strategic priorities.

4.32. **Minerals and Waste Plans.** Somerset Council has been undertaking initial assessments of both the adopted Minerals Plan and Waste Core Strategy to understand which policies may be out of date and whether the policies in the plan continue to be effective in addressing the specific local issues that are identified the plan. The Minerals Plan review has been undertaken using the Planning Advisory Service toolkit for plan reviews. This initial work is now subject to external peer review and an inception meeting for this review is scheduled for mid-April. The Waste Plan review has commenced, and the Waste Need Assessment is complete. There is also a requirement for a Waste Movement Assessment to be completed, which will establish Waste Flows/Duty to Co-operate with neighbouring Authorities and other parties (commenced March 2024). Both plan reviews will be subject to external peer review.

4.33. **Minerals and Waste Policy.** The latest edition of the Somerset Local Aggregate Assessment [Somerset LAA - Eighth Edition \(to 2022\).pdf](#) was published in December 2023. Work has begun to collate data from Somerset quarry operators as part of the four-year national Aggregate Monitoring Survey. This collects data on aggregate sales, inter-regional flows and permitted reserves and will be used to inform the next Somerset Local Aggregate Assessment, the South West Aggregate Working Party Report for 2023 and the national Aggregate Minerals Survey Report. The Council submitted a response to the government consultation on proposals for an updated and consolidated policy on managing radioactive substances and nuclear decommissioning. The Government is analysing the feedback and is expected to publish a response imminently. The

results of are keenly anticipated as it may shape our dealings with the three stations that we have in Somerset. Planning Officers are working closely with officers in the Civil Contingencies on EDF's proposals to decommission Hinkley Point B station. EDF is expected to undertake a second consultation on its proposed decommissioning project in late spring followed by an application to the Office of Nuclear Regulation (ONR) for consent under the Nuclear Reactors (Environmental Impact Assessment for Decommissioning) Regulations (EIADR) in summer 2024. The Council will be able to make representations to EDF and to ONR.

4.34. Mendip Local Plan (Part II Limited Update). Work has progressed to comply with the Court order to update the Mendip Local Plan and public consultation on the proposed site allocations commenced for 6 weeks on 28 February 2024 until 12 April 2024. The report sets out the Council's approach to the review of site options and identifies housing allocations to meet the requirement for 505 dwellings. [Mendip Local Plan Part II Limited Update - Regulation 18 - Somerset Council - Citizen Space](#)

4.35. Neighbourhood Planning. The Council has continued to provide advice and assistance to neighbourhood planning across Somerset. This has included support and direct assistance at the early stages of plan preparation as well as the statutory requirements relating to submission, examination and referendum. In the last year neighbourhood plans have been made for Ruishton and Thornfalcon and Wells. These now form part of the statutory development plan for these areas. Another Neighbourhood Plan for Puriton, has recently completed its examination and Kingston St Mary is going to referendum on 2 May 2024.

4.36. Phosphates mitigation. In December 2023, the Council was awarded capital funding of £9.6m via the Local Nutrient Mitigation Fund to increase the supply of phosphate mitigation projects to unlock impacted developments. This funding will help pump-prime nutrient neutrality interventions within the river catchment area of the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar site and ultimately secure the release of homes in Somerset held up by the phosphates issue. An Interim Delivery Strategy has been approved by the Strategic Planning Committee and phosphate mitigation projects will be progressed to increase the supply of phosphate credits to unlock further developments. The Council continues to support delivery of Third Party credit schemes helping unlock further developments. The Strategic Asset Management estates team is working with the planning team to review options for the use of council land for phosphates mitigation.

4.37. **Biodiversity Net Gain guidance.** Officers from across planning, ecology, environment, legal and assets have worked closely over the last nine months to prepare the Council for the national implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). This has included alignment with work on phosphates, Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and wider Council objectives and aspirations. The Council consulted on and adopted its own BNG Guidance Note and planning validation requirements. Officers and members have been trained and internal processes set up in time for initial BNG implementation in February. The [BNG webpage](#) contains further information. This has paid dividends in terms of readiness the major changes in how planning applications are validated and determined and preparations have continued for implementation with small development sites from 2 April 2024. Work now turns to optimising BNG delivery in Somerset. Officers are working to launch a call for sites in May seeking landowner interest in bringing forward BNG and phosphate mitigation schemes in Somerset and enabling prioritisation of schemes for securing through S106 legal agreements. We continue to explore wider opportunities for use of Council land for our own developments as well as enabling other development and potentially enabling income generation opportunities.

4.38. **Taunton Garden Town.** Governance arrangements for Taunton Garden Town have been established with the Advisory Board continuing to meet quarterly. Community/ Stakeholder and Developer Forums are also being set up. During 2023 the Board contributed to work on taking a stewardship approach to the long-term management and maintenance of new community assets with particular emphasis on the Orchard Grove (Comeytrove) site, the production of a series of placemaking principles, emerging development schemes on two major Garden Town sites, a Garden Town workstream review and gap assessment against garden community principles and a review of future work areas. Other areas of work activity in connection with the Garden Town during 23/24 have included:

- Work to explore the potential for the creation of a network of mobility hubs across Taunton, with particular emphasis upon hubs being delivered through current development proposals or on opportunity sites including Monkton Heathfield phase 2 (Langaller Park). This has also included working with officers in Highways and Transport delivering the mobility hub proposals through the Bus Service Improvement Plan, one of which is proposed at Taunton Bus Station.
- Staplegrove Housing Infrastructure Fund- achieving an extension of funding availability to 31 December 2024 and updated funding agreement with Homes England. The funding is to unlock the delivery of development

through the provision of infrastructure. Officers from the planning and estates teams continue to work to enable the drawdown of funding.

- The commissioning of a Taunton Waterways Strategy which will include planning guidance for town centre brownfield sites adjacent to the River Tone.
- Progressing major Garden Town allocation sites through planning towards delivery.

4.39. **Placemaking Principles.** In July 2023, [Somerset Council adopted a series of guiding principles](#) to inform our overall approach to transport planning and development planning challenges and opportunities. At the same time, we committed to consult on and subsequently adopt a series of placemaking principles for movement as a material planning consideration. In autumn 2023 we consulted on [Creating Places for People](#), setting out our draft placemaking principles for movement. The idea of the principles is to steer new development in Somerset towards creating attractive and high-quality environments which are inclusive and accessible for all. Through the consultation, we received over 1,000 responses across all formats. Work analysing responses has been progressing, including working with Active Travel England on their Local Plan pilot to understand how best to adapt in response to comments and progress these into a final document with guidance on how to implement them.

E - Economic Development

4.40. **LEP integration.** In August 2023, the Government confirmed that it would cease its sponsorship and core funding of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) from April 2024 and that LEP functions would be integrated into upper-tier Local Authorities. The Council has subsequently worked with Devon, Plymouth and Torbay Councils to develop, as required by Government, an integration plan for LEP assets and functions. This plan has been endorsed by the Government, the LEP Board and all four authorities and Government funding was confirmed to Somerset Council in March 2024 to support delivery of the transferred functions in 2024/25. In line with Government expectations the Council is convening a Somerset Economic Growth Board local businesses and economic stakeholders have a voice in decisions affecting future of the economy and will be developing a Somerset Economic Prosperity Strategy, building on the LEP's strategic economic plan and previous strategies of the local authorities. The intention is for this strategy to be adopted this autumn. Collaborative work with Devon, Plymouth City Council and Torbay Councils is continuing, including the joint commissioning of the Government funded Growth Hub providing support for businesses across the Heart of the South West area.

4.41. **UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund.** The Council is the Lead Authority for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) in Somerset and 2023/24 has seen significant progress with management and implementation of these Funds. 13 projects with a total value of £2.9 million UKSPF are now delivering activity across the Fund's priorities of community and place, local business and people and skills. Examples of UKSPF funding include:

- **Screen Somerset** - funding is enabling the Council to pilot a 'film office' for Somerset, known as Screen Somerset. Screen Somerset is encouraging and facilitating filming in the County in recognition of the investment it can bring into the local economy - in the short-term as productions and crew spend money while in the area and in the longer-term through screen tourism. Screen Somerset is part of Creative England's Filming in England Partnership and works closely with Highways and Property Services to manage enquiries and requests, and provides local knowledge and contacts to increase the likelihood of productions to locate in the county. In December, Screen Somerset was represented at a national event in London, promoting the county as a film and TV location to an audience of international producers and location managers. A dedicated web page has been established somerset.gov.uk/filming including a growing online location database showcasing potential locations in the county including Council and privately owned assets. In the last six months, Screen Somerset has handled enquiries from more than 70 productions, from major feature films to small photoshoots, of which around 20 have resulted in filming or photography taking place. Screen Somerset will also work with Visit Somerset to make it easier for production to find film-friendly accommodation and catering providers, and to capitalise on screen tourism opportunities.
- **Green business support** - Launched in October 2023, the 'Go Green Scheme' and the 'Somerset Green Business Grant Scheme' offer local businesses practical help and financial support to reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions. The Go Green Scheme, delivered by Balanced Energy, has now supported around 50 businesses to understand their energy consumption and how it can be reduced, identifying overall potential energy and carbon savings of 35%. The Green Business Grant scheme has awarded grants totalling around £180,000 to 10 local businesses to take forward a wide range of energy efficiency and renewable energy measures – from e-forklifts to smart controls.

4.42. Under REPF, 28 projects have been funded across business and community priorities for the Fund, fully allocating the Council' £856,686 available REPF funding for 23/24. Projects include:

- A bottling facility for cider production, enabling full on-site production and reducing carbon footprint. This will create new job and training opportunities
- Catering equipment for on-site catering and increasing capacity of a wedding venue.
- Provision of new washroom facilities at a charity rewilding site, enabling additional opportunities for volunteers and increasing number of visitors to the site.
- Provision of additional equipment for ice-cream production, which will increase output, enable new lines/expansion and create a new job opportunity.
- Skateboard park and additional recreation facilities in village in south Somerset.

4.43. **The iAero Centre and innovation Centre network.** The iAero Centre is a purpose-built innovation facility in Yeovil offering high-quality office, light industrial and collaboration space as well as wrap-around innovation support services. Occupancy of the centre has increased significantly in the past year and almost all space is now taken. In addition to our anchor tenant, Leonardo UK, Honeywell, Morson Projects, Yeovil College and Mark 3D all now have a presence in the Centre.



In 2023 the Council secured £0.26 million of Local Growth Funding (from the HotSW Local Enterprise Partnership) to equip iAero with specialist technology including a digital test bench, VR headsets and the installation of a Factory+ Wall display to introduce digital transformation technologies to SMEs in the high value manufacturing and

aerospace sectors.

4.44. An industry expert is currently seconded into iAero from Leonardo UK to lead operations at the Centre. This has been vital to the success of the Centre, and Leonardo UK have recently agreed to extend the arrangement to May 2025.

Staffing capacity has been further enhanced by the secondment to the Council of a Centre Business Manager from Leonardo. The Centre is now very well placed to accelerate delivery of its economic development objectives and embed a financially sustainable delivery model.

4.45. The iAero Centre forms part of a network of centres managed by Somerset Council. Alongside the Yeovil Innovation Centre, the Somerset Energy Innovation Centre in Bridgwater, and (from May 2024) the Firepool Centre for Digital Innovation, iAero is managed jointly by the Economic Development and Strategic Asset Management team. Business development, event management and client liaison activities are led by the Economy team, with staff from Strategic Asset Management supporting leases and tenancy management, property maintenance, compliance and facilities management.

4.46. **Enterprise Centres Network.** The Council manages a network of Enterprise Centres across Somerset providing flexible modern workspace on easy in - easy out terms to help small businesses to grow. The network currently has over 130 workspaces and occupancy levels are at 92% at the time of publication. In December 2024, following a 10-year collaboration, management of the Enterprise Centre Network transferred from an outsourced management via Torbay Development Agency to an in-house operation, with support services provided by the council's Facilities Management, Estates, ICT and Legal Services functions. The successful transition of the network was a major achievement for the Economic Development and Strategic Asset Management teams, alongside the construction and opening of the new centre at Chard covered in paragraph 4.16 above.

4.47. **Business Support.** The Council undertakes a number of activities to support small businesses which are at the heart of Somerset's economy. Building on best practice from our predecessor Councils this work includes:

- *Somerset Business Hub* – With learning from the Mendip's Business Hub, this service is a central point of contact for small businesses wanting to access advice and support from Somerset regulatory services. Services include online training with access to a library of online resources and training modules, guides and packs from business start-up to food safety management. The hub has provided networking opportunities through themed events which have helped attendees build valuable connections. This year the hub has dealt with 185 enquiries, sold 53 online training packs and held 9 events/courses.
- *Business Newsletter* – with a circulation of over 12,000 business contacts across Somerset. this new electronic newsletter provides businesses with

relevant and current business support information. This includes both Somerset Council support and wider partner activity including upcoming business events and networking.

- *Somerset Mentoring programme* – this new programme (financed by UKSPF and Somerset Council) in its first year has trained 50 locally based senior business people (including from Singer Instruments, Barclays, Leonardo and PwC) to be business mentors. 63 people have been supported through a mentor, providing guidance at critical stages for their business. A further 15 mentees are currently being recruited.
- *Doing business with Somerset Council* - a joint event with The Federation of Small Business and Somerset Chamber in autumn 2023 was attended by 40 Somerset businesses and inform businesses how the Council's procurement processes work.



4.48. **Business resilience/managing sudden impacts on local business communities.**

The team has been involved extensively in providing support to business communities affected by sudden impacts.

- *Watchet B3191 closure* – in summer 2023 the Council provided £30,000 to enable a local response to the business impacts of the indefinite closure of the B3191 due to safety concerns following cliff erosion. The Council has been working with the local Task Force to support businesses and help boost visitor numbers.
- *Flood affected businesses in A303 corridor (Yeovilton– Lattiford)* - This involved direct engagement with 70 businesses to understand flood impacts. Eight community/business flood drop-ins were attended. with business guidance and sign-posting provided.
- *Storm Henk* – When the Government Flood Recovery Framework threshold was triggered Council officers worked with affected businesses to access

the Department of Business and Trade's Business Recovery Grant and signpost to other Storm Henk support from DEFRA for land-based businesses. It is expected that 10 businesses will qualify for the Recovery Grant totalling c. £20k.

- *Brean* - local businesses have been supported through the change from a largely visiting leisure-based demographic to one which is accommodating the HPC workforce. EDF S106 funds have been deployed marketing initiatives (a local, national and a business led campaign) and to provide business grants. The business grant fund is £75k and provides grants for business improvements, adaption and marketing. Launched in summer 2023, to-date 12 awards totalling c£45k have been made.

4.49. Employment and Skills. The Council commissions a range of programmes to support the employability of local residents and to develop the skills needed in the workforce of Somerset. We are adept at securing funding from Government and other sources to resource this activity. Aligned with the development of our future economic strategy a priority in 2024/25 is to develop a strategic plan for this critical area of work. Examples of programmes progressed in the last twelve months include:

- *Redundancy response* - In response to a number of redundancies in Somerset (including Wilko stores and Pittards Leather), the Economic Development service stood up the Response to Redundancy (R2R) Task Force. The group, involving a range of partners (including the Job Centres), provides a strategic and co-ordinated package of support, with a single point of contact, to affected businesses and their employees. Employees will be offered employment and skills support with the aim of supporting individuals into new roles. The offer of this group is now being considered by Internal Teams and a co-ordinated support response scheduled to support affected staff.
- *Skills Bootcamps* - the bootcamps programme offers flexible training in skills in demand by employers to individuals who are 19+. Somerset Council, working with Dorset LEP, has been awarded £3 million through wave 5 of the bootcamps funding by the Department for Employment to roll out a training programme in 2024/25. This will engage 660+ learners across Somerset and Dorset in construction, engineering, early years, retail, hospitality, health & social care, leadership & management, teaching assistants and HGV. In addition the Council is managing a Wave 4 bootcamps programme Here 52% of individuals who have completed training have secured employment. There are currently 111 learners still on programme of which 49 are employed by local employers such as Hewins

Oak, Leonardo, Beagle Aircraft, Branstons Ltd, Yeovilton Airbase, FGP and Merck.

- *Adult and Community Learning (ACL)* - ACL develops the skills, confidence, motivation and resilience of adults of different ages and backgrounds in order to progress towards formal learning or employment; improve their health and well-being (including mental health) and to develop stronger communities. The Department for Education has previously directly contracted delivery of ACL in Somerset but transferred the responsibility to the Council in July 2023. In the 2023/24 academic year the Council grant funded Somerset Skills & Learning to continue to deliver the programme. In the 2024/25 academic year the Council will be granted £2.524m for ACL. We will be running a procurement to secure a strategic delivery partner for the core service and will award smaller contracts to community-based organisation to deliver in our harder-to-reach areas. We are currently finalising the service specifications and aim to launch these in the first quarter of 2024/25. In 2023/24 SS&L had processed 2,226 enrolments of which 1,045 are unique learners as at February 2024 and a target to engage with a total of 6,167 by end of July.

F - Building Control

4.49.1. **Progress and achievements.** Building Control operates in an open commercial market, so it has been vital maintained its performance and external reputation during the transition to an integrated Somerset wide service. Building Control has achieved its financial targets in 2024/25 and secured an overall market share of 68% of building control activity in Somerset, meaning that the Council is providing Somerset with a competent regulatory Building Control service. Practical examples of work undertaken by the Building Control service in the past year include:

- *Fee earning activity* - this includes all new Building Control applications, spanning everything from a replacement window to a major housing or non-residential development. Examples of projects that Building Control has covered over the last year would include on-going major development of Jurston Farm in Wellington, the completion of the new Bridgwater Cinema development, and various industrial developments such as Street Retail Park and Commerce Park in Frome.
- *Non-fee-earning activity* - this element of the service is equally important, involving Building Control being available to assess dangerous structures both inside and outside of the working day.

- *Dangerous structures* – this activity often involves high pressure situations, where the trained professionals have to make critical decisions on these structures, to ensure safety for the people of Somerset.
- *Celebrating building excellence* - including recognising local contractors and architects carrying out the highest quality projects. As part of this, Somerset Council works alongside LABC (the national body of Local Authority Building Control) to organise a celebratory event to recognise these professionals. Somerset Council Building Control was proud to have four national finalists in the most recent awards in January this year, celebrating building excellence in Somerset.

4.50. Progress preparing for the new regulatory framework. Building Control is currently going through the most significant changes in the history of the profession. This is due to the tragedy of Grenfell Tower, and the system review that followed. There is now a much greater emphasis on competence, accountability and effective enforcement of the regulatory requirements. Due to this, Building Control will now be a registered profession, where all individuals will have to pass rigorous competency assessments to demonstrate that they are competent to carry out the role. In response the Building Control service has invested resources into current staff to support them in this process. This means that staff will continue to be able to fulfil the service's statutory duties post the new regulatory framework. Approximately 30% of the overall national profession are leaving the industry, demonstrating the challenges the industry has faced. However, the team at Somerset Council has worked incredibly hard to ensure they are ready for the challenges ahead.

G – Trading Standards

4.51. The Council's trading standards functions are delivered through a joint service spanning Somerset, Devon, Plymouth and Torbay. Devon County Council acts as the lead authority and employer for the partnership. The remit of trading standards is to protect consumers, support business communities and contribute to economic growth and resilience. The partnership is governed by a Joint Service Review Panel which oversees performance and sets priorities for the service. Priority areas for the service in 2023/24 have included: scams, doorstep crime and rogue trading, animal health and welfare (including disease control), illicit tobacco and vapes, and food allergens and standards. The service has successfully worked with the Avon and Somerset constabulary to seize illicit tobacco and vapes at various retail outlets in Somerset. Trading Standards has also worked with various agencies including Citizens Advice Bureaux to combat

scams and doorstep crime (which are often targeted at the most vulnerable members of our communities) in the past year.

H – Commercial Investments

4.52. Management of Commercial Investment Property. It has been a busy first year for the newly amalgamated investment portfolio, with a small interim commercial property team coming together on vesting day to replace a mixture of in-house and external consultant expertise utilised by the predecessor councils. Specialist estates surveyors from this newly formed team inspected and valued all 49 properties (spread from Glasgow to Redruth to Welwyn Garden City) during the spring and summer of 2023, developing relationships with tenants and a consolidated, consistent analysis of the assets inherited by Somerset Council. Whilst the implementation of the council's new finance system has presented significant challenges for the team, rent collection and the financial management of the significant (c. £18m) annual income stream has improved through the year and we now have robust income collection and financial management in place. Asset management by the team, including rent reviews, lease renewals and new lettings has generated £17m in additional aggregate contracted income over the term of each lease. Notable successes include re-gearing Marks & Spencer's Yeovil lease to keep them in the town until at least 2032; letting 54 Willis Way, Poole for a fifteen-year term; letting Imperial House, Newport for a ten-year term and increasing the rent at Reevesland Industrial Estate. The coming months will see new lettings at Commerce Park, Frome and Alchemy, Welwyn Garden City at rents in excess of previous tenancies. All of this work adds value to the portfolio, although the downturn experienced by the national commercial investment property market has offset asset management gains with a net reduction in overall capital value.

4.53. Disposal of the portfolio. Following the analysis of the portfolio by the Strategic Asset Management team, and discussions with DLUHC on the potential requirement for a capitalisation directive to support the 2024/25 budget and prevent a S114 notice, the Executive resolved at its meeting on 8th November 2023 to dispose of the Commercial Investment Property portfolio. Jones Lang LaSalle were subsequently appointed to work up an orderly disposal strategy for the assets over the coming years, ensuring that the council receives best consideration for the sale of these assets. Legal specialists have also been appointed and the marketing of assets has commenced. This work is being overseen by the Property and Investment Executive Sub-Committee, which has met regularly since December 2023 to oversee the performance of commercial investments and progress with the disposal programme.

4.54. **Battery Energy Storage Scheme (BESS) Joint Venture.** The Strategic Asset Management department also oversees the council's inherited commercial investment in the SSDC Opium Power Limited joint venture company. The council is a shareholder in this company (rather than the owner of the BESS assets) and its interests are represented by two appointed company directors in accordance with a shareholder agreement governing the distribution of income and governance of the company. Again, the over the first year of Somerset Council's ownership of this commercial investment work has focussed on establishing robust controls and an understanding of the performance of the company. As with the Commercial Property portfolio, the work of officers in this area is overseen by the Property and Investment Executive Sub-Committee.

I – Asset Management, Estates & Asset Valuation

4.55. **Asset Disposals.** Alongside the disposal programme for the Commercial Property portfolio, the Strategic Asset Management team has also re-focussed efforts on a broader programme of asset disposals to support the financing of the Capitalisation Directive to balance the revenue budget position in 2024/25 and 2025/26. Again, disposal strategies are being developed to ensure that the council receives best consideration in asset sales, which for the Council's non-operational portfolio often involves securing planning consents prior to disposal. This takes time, particularly given the need to secure phosphate mitigation solutions as part of planning approvals. Nonetheless, asset sales totalling £7.3m were achieved during the 2023/24 financial year; work to develop the pipeline of disposals for 2024/25 and beyond has been accelerated, with assets with a potential disposal value of up to £28.3m in 2024/25 having been identified and declared surplus. Some of these sales and pipeline opportunities stem from decisions taken by legacy councils (in some cases, options agreements or sales subject to planning were signed a number of years ago). Following the development and adoption of a new [Policy for the Disposal of Assets](#) in November 2023, all decisions to declare assets surplus are taken by the council's Asset Management Group, who oversee the disposal programme.

4.56. In addition to providing capital receipts to support the council's financial position, asset disposals often also support Council priorities by releasing land to support housing development (including the development of affordable and social housing, or specialist care accommodation), and support the long-term financial sustainability of the property estate by removing the council from maintenance liabilities and other site holding costs. Notable examples in 2023/24 include the development or sale of sites in Somerton, Frome and Yeovil for affordable housing

and care accommodation. The Strategic Asset Management team works with a range of other departments to ensure that opportunities to utilise surplus land to support wider council priorities are explored prior to marketing sites for disposal.

4.57. Asset Devolution. A commitment to exploring the devolution of assets to City, Town and Parish Councils was established through the Local Government Reorganisation programme, and prior to vesting day decisions were made to devolve a number of assets to the new Taunton Town Council and (through a pilot project) to Bridgwater Town Council. In addition to the implementation of these decisions, the financial emergency has brought a new focus to asset devolution work, as a means of safeguarding valued discretionary services and facilities that might otherwise be closed, due the council being increasingly forced to divert funding to support demand-led statutory services. As with all property transfers, asset devolution is time-consuming and often complex, and the department has been working across a very broad front with limited resources (additional funding provided through the 2024/25 budget setting process will be utilised to try to recruit additional resources to speed up progress). Nonetheless, during the 2023/24 financial year, progress has been made on a broad range of asset devolution initiatives:

- A number of open spaces and public toilets are being transferred to Taunton Town Council, with initial discussions held on the potential for a further wave of asset devolution.
- Six parks / open space assets and a former youth centre are in the process of being transferred to Bridgwater Town Council – transfers are targeted to conclude soon.
- The Asset Management Group has authorised officers to transfer the Key Centre family hub site, and a number of open space sites, to Frome Town Council. Detailed discussions to progress these transfers are underway, alongside discussions on the potential to share use of the Somerset Council owned library and depot sites in Frome to support Town Council objectives and operations, as well as a wide-ranging review of further opportunities.
- The basis of a significant asset and service devolution agreement has been agreed with Yeovil Town Council, and work is underway to progress the necessary transactions and lease agreements, targeting completion by August 2024.
- A wide range of further discussions are underway with other local councils – in particular, Wellington Town Council, Minehead Town Council and Glastonbury Town Council have worked with officers from the estates function to agree a number of potential opportunities.

4.58. Asset Management Plan & implementation of the Corporate Landlord model. The Somerset [Property Asset Management Strategy and Plan](#) was approved by this Council in February 2023. This document guides the work of the Strategic Asset Management team, by setting six strategic objectives for property and asset management:

- The Council's estate is financially sustainable, efficient, and effective.
- Assets are fit for purpose, safe and compliant.
- Assets address the Climate Emergency.
- The Council's estate is used to meet housing and care needs, with an emphasis on social housing.
- The Council's estate supports prosperity and economic growth.
- Address the growing challenges in the council's school buildings estate.

4.59. Notwithstanding an increasing focus on the disposal and rationalisation of assets to support the financial emergency, progress has been made against all of these strategic objectives (as evidenced elsewhere in this report). As well as setting strategic objectives, the document also established an Asset Management Plan, prescribing the approach Somerset Council should take in managing its property assets. Again, progress has been made against this plan:

- A Corporate Landlord approach has been established, with the centralised Strategic Asset Management department taking a lead role in all aspects of asset management, with an organisation-wide overview of usage, compliance and property running costs.
- A strong grasp of asset management data and property records is being established, with good progress being made during 2023/24 (as set out in paragraph 4.62 below), albeit with further work to do in 2024/25 and beyond.
- Good progress has been made in establishing the prescribed approach to governance & decision-making, with the establishment of the Asset Management Group, and agreement of the Policy for the Disposal of Assets.

4.60. Property Rationalisation and One Public Estate programmes. Building on initial analysis and planning under the Local Government Reorganisation programme prior to vesting day, progress has been made with the rationalisation of the council's operational property during 2023/24. This is a complex and wide-ranging programme being delivered in conjunction with local public partners (in particular, local NHS bodies) to maximise the opportunities for co-location of public estate. The biggest opportunity is in the rationalisation of the council's office estate, which is significantly under-utilised; there are also opportunities to

co-locate and rationalise council customer service points and depots. Activity during 2023/24 in this area is summarised below:

- The relocation of the Somerset Centre for Integrated Learning (SCIL) to new facilities at Broughton House in Taunton has enabled Somerset Council to exit its lease of Dillington House in November 2023, ending the council's exposure to operating losses and other risks and liabilities at this site.
- At its recent April meeting, the Executive agreed to consolidate customer facing services in Yeovil town centre into a single site at Yeovil Library, and also to consolidate back office, library, customer service, children's centre and enterprise centre activity in Williton onto a single site at West Somerset House. This decision followed detailed feasibility & design work, and extensive discussion with service managers, staff, community representatives and local members during 2023/24. This decision will be implemented during 2024/25.
- We have agreed a number of lease and licence arrangements to make better use of surplus space in Bridgwater House – in particular, NHS teams moved into the first floor of the building in March 2024, generating income for Somerset Council and enabling the NHS to terminate a lease with a private landlord. The NHS deal builds on work with the Council's One Public Estate partners to analyse post-COVID office use across the NHS, Council and Police estate in Somerset, and identify opportunities to work together to reduce costs. Reviews of opportunities to share space in Yeovil, Shepton Mallet, Taunton and Chard are ongoing.
- A business case for changes to office accommodation in Taunton has been developed, and we are currently consulting Trade Union representatives on proposals to consolidate back-office workspace in Taunton to the B Block building so that surplus space at Deane House can be leased to public partners, generating income for Somerset Council. Separately, work to separate and clear C-Block on the County Hall campus completed in early 2024 and this site will be marketed for disposal during the current year; following the temporary winter closure of A-Block to reduce heating costs we will also be reviewing the long term need for this building.
- Finally, a review of all Council depot sites (used by Highways, Fleet, Grounds Maintenance, Transport and other service functions) commenced in 2023/24, with scoping and analysis work underway. Optimising our depot estate will depend on business needs following the wider transformation of the council; the impacts of decisions to cease, in-source or devolve services will be analysed as this work progresses.

Taken together, if all of the above initiatives are fully implemented, total annual net revenue savings in property costs are anticipated to exceed £1m –

additionally, the council will significantly reduce the long-term costs of holding and maintaining property and generate capital receipts. Going forward, our property rationalisation programme will accelerate as the future size, shape and accommodation needs of the Council become clearer through ongoing corporate transformation work.

4.61. Landlord / tenancy management and the council's leased estate. Estates teams have continued to manage a wide range of leased and multi-tenanted property sitting outside the commercial investment portfolio. This important work goes on behind the scenes across hundreds of leased properties – all of which require active management to ensure rental income is optimised, liabilities and risks are managed, and the estate supports the Council's strategic objectives. Achievements in this area during 2023/24 include:

- Marketing and leasing units at the Northgate Yard development in Bridgwater – during 2023/24 leases have been agreed for all but one unit at this new site.
- Working with the Quantock Hills National Landscape service to develop New Stowey Farm as an exemplar for regenerative agriculture. New Stowey Farm is an agricultural holding owned by Somerset Council which was previously tenanted, most recently for grazing, with the tenant leaving in 2023. The farm will continue to operate as a working farm, employing regenerative agriculture techniques with the aim of creating nature-rich farmland through habitat creation and restoration, delivering carbon sequestration and climate change mitigation as well as engaging communities to increase understanding of regenerative agriculture and provide opportunities for learning, training and volunteering.
- Progressing and completing nine Academy leases, transferring school sites to Academy trusts. The agreement of a lease for Monkton Wood Academy secondary school in Taunton was a notable achievement – a complex project which transferred a large secondary school campus to the Cabot Learning Federation Multi-Academy Trust, preserving the joint use of the Tacchi-Morris arts centre on the campus for the school and the community.
- Working with the Adult Social Care commissioning function to agree, renew or change leases and tenancies for a wide range of care accommodation in the council's estate, which plays an important role in supporting vulnerable adults.
- Leasing space at the Lace Mill office site in Chard to Wabtec (formerly Brecknell Willis), increasing the usage of this historic site and providing accommodation to retain employment in the town centre, following the closure of manufacturing operations.

4.62. Valuations for Statutory Accounts. Another area of achievement which is very much behind the scenes is the annual valuation of property used in the production of our statement of accounts, which has received increasing scrutiny by external auditors in recent years. During 2023/24 officers in our estates teams faced the significant challenge of producing closing valuations for the five legacy council balance sheets and responding to audit queries so that the 2022/23 accounts can be signed off. This difficult work is now complete, with very positive feedback from external auditors and the council's Audit Committee, who have noted improvements from previous years. At the time of writing the team are working through the new challenge of valuing Somerset Council's real estate assets.

4.63. Asset Management System and Property Records. The development and roll-out of a new, comprehensive asset management system (Civica Property) across a newly formed asset management department has been a significant achievement during 2023/24, touching almost every part of the operation of the Strategic Asset Management team and providing a robust foundation for Somerset Council's asset management records and internal control systems as we bring together five diverse portfolios. This work is the continuation of a project which started in late 2021, and has been progressed throughout the year across the department by a small project team working with hundreds of staff and stakeholders:

- In April 2023 LA maintained schools began reporting property related faults directly into the system. This has resulted in a more streamlined process for schools and the removal of double handling of data by the Education Property team.
- In May 2023 Facilities Management teams started carrying out their regular health and safety checks of properties through the system for the former County and South Somerset District sites, with the remaining legacy District teams going live towards the end of the year. Benefits included an increase visibility of findings through the checks and a more efficient process in reporting subsequent repair calls. Also in May the corporate Health & Safety team began carrying out fire risk assessments directly in the system. As a result, the Council were able to reduce the number of systems they used in monitoring compliance and follow a more efficient process in managing remedial actions associated with the assessments.
- In June 2023 Schools and Strategic Asset Management teams started completing Health & Safety annual returns, fire drill inspections and other soft FM related inspections in the system. Again, this has reduced the number of systems used to monitor compliance.

- In August 2023 the Education Property team went live with the Inspections module, managing their planned preventative maintenance for schools through the system. More robust, efficient processes were put in place and the new process saw a reduction in double handling of data for the schools. Another benefit included increased visibility of compliance across the school's estate.
- In November 2023 compliance dashboards were developed, using Power BI technology, providing high level compliance reports and figures shared with stakeholders.
- In December 2023 the Property Maintenance Group went live with the plant module, enabling the in-house maintenance team to capture condition data for mechanical and electrical assets through barcoding technology. This will significantly improve our understanding of the life-expectation and condition of boilers and other plant, supporting decisions on maintenance investment to prevent the failure of critical systems.
- Teams continued to make significant progress throughout the year uploading legacy council property and estates records. This work will continue through 2024 and beyond – the centralisation and validation of GIS and deed records across the Unitary council is a huge task.

J – Building Maintenance, Compliance, Energy and Facilities Management

4.64. RAAC and life-expired buildings. The risks posed by a range of life-expired concrete components in public buildings have been understood for a number of years within the building surveying profession, but the issue gained national prominence in 2023 with the RAAC crisis. RAAC (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete) was widely used between 1940 and 1990 and many public buildings have floors, walls and ceiling slabs made of RAAC because it was lightweight compared to other forms of concrete. The former County Council carried out a desk-top review of school building records in 2019 under and concluded that there was a low risk of RAAC in Somerset. A further, more detailed review commenced early in 2023 following updates to national guidance, and a sudden change in the risk assessment for schools announced in August 2023 meant that the small building surveying team within Strategic Asset Management had to accelerate this work to provide assurance to school communities. 108 Local Authority maintained schools were assessed with detailed surveys undertaken at 90 of these sites to confirm that no RAAC was present. Across our non-schools estate, 443 sites were assessed, with detailed surveys undertaken at 75 of these sites. No RAAC was found to be present in Somerset Council buildings through this work, which completed in November 2023.

4.65. RAAC is now a well-known issue nationally, but there are many other historic building materials used in our older buildings that are reaching the end of their viable life-span. In particular, our specialist Building Surveying staff are carefully monitoring Orlit concrete types present in two of our LA maintained school buildings, as well as other (non-RAAC) concrete structures in accordance with assessed risks. Remedial and survey work has been undertaken in 2023/24 to establish that there are no imminent risks, but going forward we will be looking to develop plans to replace a number of buildings where structural components are nearing the end of expected lifespans, should funding become available.

4.66. **Condition programmes.** The council's financial situation means that investment in repairs and maintenance is currently restricted to high priority areas where there is a risk to health and safety, or a critical risk of building failure. The tables below set out the activity undertaken under our schools and corporate condition programmes during the year:

Project Name	Project Value	Action in Year 23/24
School Condition Projects over £100k		
Wadham School Window Replacement	£0.95m	Stage 6 Practical completion/Handover
Wadham School Heating Replacement	£1.00m	Stage 6 Practical completion/Handover
Wadham School Building Works	£1.80m	Stage 6 Practical completion/Handover
Herne View Primary School Condition Works	£0.60m	Stage 6 Practical completion/Handover
Stawley Primary School - Replace Modular Building with New-Build	£0.90m	Full feasibility study completed. Stage 3/4 Design work now progressing
Albert Street PRU - Replace Modular Building	£0.30m	Full feasibility study completed. Stage 3.4 Design work now progressing
Ashlands Primary School - Underpinning of Victorian wall	£0.10m	Site investigations and monitoring undertaken.
Priddy Primary School - Surface and drainage	£0.14m	Contractor appointed.
Heathfield Community School - Flat roof	£0.19m	Stage 3 design
High Ham Primary - Floor, wall , windows, sanitary	£0.10m	Stage 3 design
Eastover Primary - Doors, windows	£0.16m	Completed
Eastover Primary - Doors, windows, roof	£0.12m	Completed

Project Name	Project Value	Action in Year 23/24
Taunton Holway Park Primary - Roof works	£0.25m	Completed
Oaklands Primary School - PHASE 2 - render walls & window cills	£0.13m	Stage 3 design
Bishops Hull Primary - Roof works, doors	£0.32m	Stage 3 design
Somerset Bridge - Lighting	£0.11m	Out to Tender
Burnham-on-Sea Infants School - Roof	£0.11m	Out to Tender
Hindhayes Infants School - Skylights	£0.10m	Work Allocated
Frome College - Roof, Boiler, windows, flooring	£0.53m	Completed
Stoberry Park School - Replacement building	£0.24m	Completed
Fairmead School - Roof	£0.12m	Out to tender
School Condition Projects under £100k (collectively)		
18 projects	£0.28m	Out to Tender
128 projects	£3.30m	Allocated / Ordered
99 projects	£3.20m	Completed

Project Name	Project Value	Action in Year 23/24
Corporate capital maintenance schemes active in 23/24 (over £100k)		
Kilve Court Condition essential maintenance	£2.00m	Full feasibility study completed. Stage 3/4 Design work now progressing
Heritage Asset Condition Programme	£0.40m	Feasibility study undertaken. Stage 3 now progressing.
Bridgwater Library Roof Replacement	£0.40m	Stage 4 complete. Out to tender.
Taunton Library - Boiler	£0.21m	Out to tender
County Hall - health and safety external works	£0.16m	Works on site, nearing completion
Burtens Orchard - Roof, chimneys	£0.12m	Completed
Orchard multi-storey car park -	£0.30m	Out to tender

Project Name	Project Value	Action in Year 23/24
Concrete repairs		
Shape Mendip - Roof, drains	£0.10m	Stage 4 design
Corporate Condition Projects under £100k (collectively)		
3 projects	£0.13m	Out to Tender
11 projects	£0.41m	Allocated / Ordered
5 projects	£0.23m	Completed
Minor compliance works	£0.14m	Various works committed/completed.

4.67. Condition programmes are reassessed regularly to ensure that scarce funding is targeted to the buildings where need is most critical, with a regular review of building condition undertaken through cyclical condition surveys. Bringing together condition information from across the five legacy portfolios and entering this data into the new Civica Property Asset Management System has been a significant challenge during 2023/24; we have some gaps in data which we will continue to work to address during the year ahead. The development and launch of a new 'Core Offer' condition survey service to schools, with 100% take up across the LA maintained school estate, has significantly improved our data on the condition of LA maintained school buildings.

4.68. **Compliance and planned preventative maintenance.** Again, during the first year of operating across a much larger estate, consolidating and bringing together a wide range of Hard FM operations has been a significant achievement. Following the in-sourcing of facilities management and compliance services from the former Mendip District Council idVerde outsourcing service, three of the five legacy council estates are now operating from a single shared service team using the Civica Property platform; work to align the other two former district council functions is well underway. In addition to the alignment of the legacy council estates, our maintenance and compliance teams have also taken on new assets in the newly in-sourced enterprise centre network, new Children's Homes and two new innovation centres. A consistent approach to monitoring compliance and maintenance activity across the different portfolios remains work in progress whilst alignment continues, but the following activity and performance measures give an indication of the scale of this activity during the year:

- Average for building compliance - across Somerset Council - 91% (performance at quarter 3 - all non-school operational sites).
- Number of reactive helpdesk calls actioned in year - 3015 (former county, east and south sites only).

- Planned maintenance activities completed in year – 3283; 93% completed on schedule (former county, east and south sites only).
- Annual Asbestos UKAS accreditation – zero adverse findings in 2023/24.

4.69. Energy Management and Energy Purchasing. Work to consolidate energy contracts, billing systems and smart metering across our operational estate remains underway, but significant progress has been made during 2023/24 and we have a robust consolidated forecasting process to keep on top of energy costs (an area of significant financial risk for the department).

- We continue to work closely with Crown Commercial Services to take advantage of the best value opportunities for energy and fuels that can be achieved. Related services such as smart metering and data for our gas and electric have recently been re-contracted to give us better access and insights into our consumption and to consolidate these services under single providers.
- As important as the procurement of cost-effective utilities and the optimisation of decarbonised energy technology is managing how and where that energy is used; the energy team have worked closely with the property rationalisation group to inform where best savings might be possible from partial building closures and with the Facilities and Property Management Groups to utilise our Building Management Systems effectively.
- Work is continuing to add remaining former district council sites to the consolidated billing system. Invoice validation and processing via the energy management software will reduce administration time and late payment charges can be avoided, as well as identifying potential cost recoveries. Cost and consumption data is also captured, enabling reports for budgeting and energy management purposes to be produced and cross referenced with the new data and insights from smart metering.

4.70. Facilities Management and Digital Mail. Further consolidation and alignment activity has been progressed in our facilities management services and associated service and utility contracts, with over 150 operational sites now being managed through an aligned function using the Civica Property platform. Other achievements in this area during the year include:-

- Supporting our property rationalisation programme through office moves, clearance, closure and handover of sites – in particular, Dillington House, C Block, the Seahorse Centre, Rollercoaster building and temporary winter closures of A Block and part of the Shape Mendip campus.
- Implementation of amendments to the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 legislation, which came into force from 1st October. This was a significant change for our operational and tenanted estate, strengthening

the requirements for responsible persons and the co-ordination of fire risk management across landlord and tenants in multi-tenant buildings.

- Working with the civil contingencies function to develop and implement plans, policies and procedures to respond to an increasing range of potential security threats. Our facilities teams are gearing up to respond to the implementation of Martyn's Law, a new duty expected to come into force in 2024, which will require Somerset Council and other public bodies to increase preparedness for, and protection from, a potential terrorist attack.
- Mobilising a project to align and consolidate print, post and digital mail services. These critical support services play a key role in income collection and a range of statutory services; work to align services will continue through into 2024/25 and is dependent on wider change in client departments.
- A wide range of contract alignment and re-tendering work to drive efficiencies in premises contracts – new council-wide contracts for waste disposal and a range of other services have been let, and a procurement / alignment strategy has been developed and agreed with procurement colleagues.