



## **27<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

Good evening, Mayor and Councillors.

Since our last report at our July meeting, the death of Queen Elizabeth II notwithstanding, it was a relatively busy period for the council. However, the Queen's passing only served to concertina the business of the council in September, therefore a heavy programme bookended the traditional August holidays. As a result, we apologise that this report is rather long and comprehensive, but even holidays don't interrupt the workload of local government. They only serve to slow it down for a time.

As previously reported, the juggernaut of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) continues to hurtle towards us, with the consequent disruption at all levels of the organisation. But it is worth pointing out, that within a few days of this meeting, it will be less than six months before the demise of South Somerset, Mendip, Sedgemoor, SWaT District and County Councils and the new Somerset Council will begin to emerge from the crucible.

In the meantime, we can report the following SSSC highlights:

### **➤ Licensing**

- At our meeting on the 21<sup>st</sup> July, Full Council discussed and approved the Statement of Licensing Policy. This is a five-yearly requirement under the Licensing Act 2003.
- The updated statement included additional requirements of event holders to produce Event Management Plans ('large-scale events'), as well as encouraging event organisers, in light of the Climate and Ecological Emergency, 'to consider taking steps during the planning of the event to reduce the burden on the environment without compromising event safety'.

### **➤ Energy Rebate Discretionary Scheme Policy**

- Again, at our July meeting, Full Council agreed to an additional discretionary energy rebate policy, that will help support those suffering financial hardship as a result of the rising cost of living. The extra funds of just over £298k have been provided by Central Government to local authorities around the country.
- The policy has been coordinated in conjunction with the other Somerset District Councils, 'with the aim of having a Somerset-wide scheme'.
- The payments will be administered by SSSC and in some cases, in partnership with South Somerset Citizen's Advice. They will take the form of one of payments for those households who are eligible.



- 234 households received £150, 9,357 received a 'top-up' to existing payments of £27.00, which leaves a ringfenced amount for those households and individuals who fall between the cracks.

### ➤ **LGR Section 24 Agreement**

- As part of the statutory change procedure when councils are undertaking major reorganisations, such as that which we are undergoing now, constituent councils are required to abide by certain financial constraints, so as not to jeopardise the financial security of the new authority.
- To that end, SSDC had previously agreed to a voluntary code, with the other four councils, which pre-empted the Section 24 that is now in place. This report, presented to us at our July meeting, was by way of an explanation as to the impact this had on the councils.
- The S.24, which came into force in June, basically restricts all councils on how they spend their monies and dispose of their assets. This seeks to prevent a 'fire sale' prior to any merger. In this instance any land in excess of £100k, Capital contracts exceeding £1m or non-capital contracts exceeding £100k, must first have approval. These are cumulative financial limits and are backdated to the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2007.

### ➤ **Auditor's Annual Report for the financial year 2020/21**

- At last Thursday's Full Council meeting we were presented with our Auditor's Annual Report. You may have read in the press or heard from other sources that SSDC has had some issues with its Annual Audit Report for FY 20/21.
- Unfortunately, the issues arose from a cumulative impact of changes in legislation, experienced personnel turnover and LGR, which combined to create a perfect storm which delayed the Auditors in their work.
- This resulted in SSDC being issued with a warning of significant weakness being identified in the council's capacity to produce financial statements on time. Although the council did not miss any of its statutory deadlines for reporting, it has meant a delay in the final audit being signed off.
- However, as a result of an investigation by the auditors, a concern was raised about the governance arrangements in respect to a settlement agreement made with a former senior employee. The outcome of this has meant a 'Statutory Recommendation' was issued by the auditors under Section 24 (Schedule 7) of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. This is the second highest warning an auditor can give to an organisation, which required the Council to discuss and respond publicly to the report. This the council did at its meeting on Thursday last.
- Notwithstanding the above, the auditors surmised that they were satisfied that SSDC had appropriate arrangements for managing financial resilience risks; had not identified any significant weaknesses in arrangements in improving economy,



efficiency and effectiveness, and that they anticipate giving an 'unqualified opinion' on SSDC's financial statement for FY 20/21.

- On a truly positive note, we received a report to our Audit Committee last week with regards to one of our commercial investments, our joint business venture SSDC Opium Power Ltd. As a company this operation was set up to provide two outcomes. The first was to generate (no pun intended) an income stream that the council would be able to use in support of services to the people of South Somerset. This was in response to a funding gap identified due to anticipated lower grant funding from Central Government. The second outcome was to help in the reduction of carbon emissions and move to net-zero as a country. This would be achieved by building a Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), capable of storing energy supplied from renewable sources for later use in balancing the national grid at short notice. Basically, this means storing energy for when the sun doesn't shine or the wind doesn't blow.
- As the report highlighted, this has proved a very successful undertaking on the part of SSDC. The scheme was expanded last year from the first initial site near Taunton (which was then itself expanded), to two additional sites near Fareham in Hampshire.
- The Taunton site has now been operational for over a year and the two Fareham sites have only recently come online. However, initial results have been very positive and exceeded income expectations quite considerably. Although the actual figures remain confidential at this time, 'the Council expects to receive significant dividend income from this financial year onwards.' As this embryonic market matures, so this investment will mature and become a very valuable asset for the remainder of SSDC's life and on into the new Somerset Council.

### ➤ **Buildings at Risk**

- At last Thursday's meeting we were presented with a report on SSDC's approach to dealing with Buildings at Risk and the associated register (BaRR)
- As a district, South Somerset has some of the highest concentration of Conservation Areas and Listed Buildings in Somerset (80 and 4,600 respectively, compared to 162 and 10,700 across the county as a whole).
- Sadly, due to the pressures outlined below (see Planning), our development management team have had to focus on our statutory planning duties and the BaRR updates have been pushed down the priority ladder.
- However, in response, SSDC have approved a one-off budget to provide funding for a 'targeted review' and updating of the BaRR. The council has also engaged a 'Heritage Consultant' to advise on appropriate courses of action and liaise with owners of Buildings at Risk.
- In the meantime, key Buildings at Risk have been identified where there is a risk to public safety, and the planning team are working with Building Control to look at approaches to deal with those sites.



- Enforcement have also been identifying buildings and created a priority list where unauthorised work is being carried out on listed buildings.

## ➤ Planning

- One of the biggest issues SSDC faces in its final few months is the continuing challenges facing our planning system. With many complications adding to the mix, with the recruitment and retention of personnel being only one strand. In August members received an update on the latest position of our planning department.
- As with many councils across the country, planning remains a major challenge, both in manpower provision and time consumption. Recruitment of permanent Planners nationally 'remains challenging' which results in SSDC having to draw on agency supplied planners. This situation is not ideal and obviously has cost implications for SSDC in the service delivery, as well as continuity and cohesiveness issues that accompanies a team in flux.
- However, despite the challenges, the planning department are managing to overcome obstacles such as the introduction of new software, which helps with information flow and resource deployment. For example, this has seen validation times improve over the first quarter of the year from 13 days to five.
- Enforcement, always a controversial area, although continuing to make progress, is still heavily loaded, with cases arising as fast as cases are being drawn to a conclusion. This is an area of planning that does draw on a lot of time, money and resources, which involves complicated casework across several agencies inside and outside of the council. The latest figures to August 2022 give you an idea of the scale of the task, complexity, costs and time consumption, not just with our planning staff, but with other agencies, including Natural England, the police and a legal system, which is also under strain:
  - 346 live enforcement cases
  - 134 cases closed so far this year
  - 24 Enforcement notices served up to the end of July 2022 with a further 8 with legal awaiting to be served
  - 13 cases are being prepared to send to legal by end of August
  - 2 appeals in against enforcement notices with one going to a public hearing
  - 6 current ongoing prosecutions which are awaiting court dates
  - 10 prosecution cases are being formalised for prosecution
  - Where alleged offenders continue to deny us access to sites, we are now starting to apply through the courts for warrants of entry to those premises. We will also now prosecute anyone who refuses entry with obstruction.
  - The team are working in partnership with Natural England Enforcement Team on a large case which has a multi-agency approach. We are awaiting court dates on this matter with the aim of bringing an end to



the unauthorised use and development on this site which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

- There is a further large-scale case with a multi-agency approach involving not just council departments but also central government departments.
- The Phosphates issue is still presenting a major hurdle in our planning process and continues to be an additional burden on our team. Our hopes rely on the 'En Trade credit model' being approved, so that developers can begin to mitigate their developments. However, this was reliant on Natural England approving the scheme.
- Unfortunately, staffing shortages being experienced at Somerset County Council Ecology Service has created a knock-on effect of 'lengthening delays' in being able to progress phosphate impacted applications. Again, this is resulting in SSDC employing external consultancies to try and mitigate the impact, with its subsequent additional costs.

### ➤ **Parks and Recreation**

- Over the last few weeks SSDC's parks teams have once again achieved the 'Green Flag' status for their work. This recognises them as 'some of the best parks in the country' and is an international recognition of the high standard which meets 'the needs of the community' and helps promote good practice and recognises the hard work of our staff and volunteers.
- As the last couple of years have amply demonstrated, the need for green space in which to relax, unwind and enjoy, has never been greater. We are fortunate that some of our larger towns have not only maintained such spaces, but that they have achieved such recognition is testament to the hard work and dedication of those who look after them.

### ➤ **Electric Vehicle (EV) Charging points**

- Across the district, the continued roll-out of EV goes on, in partnership with other councils across the Southwest together with Scottish Power. 22 sites and 27 units were identified, of which the Marketfield Car Park in Chard was the latest one to become operational.
- Unfortunately, a delay of up to four months had occurred due to issues connecting to the local electricity grid. But the District Network Operator (DNO) should be resolving this soon.
- As you will have seen, work has already started on the Ilminster site in the Wharf Lane/Orchard Vale Car Park to install 2 units. Work will hopefully be concluded soon, and an announcement will be made when they become operational.
- Their location in this car park, close to the town centre and our recreation ground, will hopefully serve to bring visitors into the town off the A356 and A303, who are traveling onward to holiday elsewhere.





## ➤ Area West Committee

- Area West Committee last met on the 20<sup>th</sup> July 2022. This was our last 'informal' meeting held on-line. All future meetings will be held in person at Chard Guildhall in accordance with the decision made by SSSDC to resume all face-to-face meetings.
- The Committee discussed two applications for grants which were approved for recommendation to the Chief Executive. The first was to Chard Town Council for the sum of £5000 towards their air-conditioning project for the Guildhall. The second was to recommend a grant of £4252 to Broadway Playing Field Redevelopment. Each represented a 19.69% and 7.42% respectively, contribution to the overall cost of their projects and taken from the Area West Capital programme. After these decisions, just under £23k remained in the programme.

## ➤ LGR and 'Local Community Networks (LCN)' Consultation

- As members will probably know from April next year, it is envisaged that a series of LCNs will be established across the county which will also act as committees within the new Somerset Council.
- A consultation over the future shape and definition of the LCNs is underway and invites feedback from across the county. The consultation will close on the 17<sup>th</sup> October 2022. This consultation will not only look at the function and form of the LCN, but also a name that will better describe their role within the council. Public engagements are taking place across the county and details can be found by following the link: <https://newsomersetcouncil.org.uk/local-community-networks-consultation/>
- Although, here in South Somerset we have been used to, for some time, our 'Area Committees' which have acted as local conduits for some of the functions of SSSDC; across the rest of the county, this will be a new concept. Whether the new LCNs will emerge as a similar model to what we have here in South Somerset, will depend on the outcome of the consultation.

## ➤ Things to look out for:

- On the 6<sup>th</sup> October 2022, SSSDC will begin the first phase of transferring to the 'single digital platform' for the new council. SSSDC will be the first of the councils to do this, so it will be a rather steep learning curve. This will involve migrating all our current digital service provision on to the new system which will mean that during that period, SSSDC digital services will not be available for our residents. Enhanced support is being put in place to enable the council to continue serving the public during this transition phase, and it is hoped that minimum disruption will occur as it is taking place over a weekend, which is traditionally quieter.



Hopefully, everything will go smoothly, and normal service will resume on the 10<sup>th</sup> October. But please be aware, experience has taught that even the best laid plans rarely withstand first contact with the enemy. In this case, the enemy is software programming!

Cllr Val Keitch

Cllr Brian Hamilton



## INFORMATION REFERENCES:

Links to South Somerset District Council's agendas, minutes and other useful information can be found at the following links:



YouTube recordings of SSDC meetings:

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSDst3IHGj9WoGnwJGF\\_soA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSDst3IHGj9WoGnwJGF_soA)



SSDC agendas, minutes and decisions can all be found either through the 'Modern.Gov' application or by following the link:

<https://modgov.southsomerset.gov.uk/uuCoverPage.aspx?bcr=1>



For a guide to vaccinations in Somerset, visit:

<https://www.somersetccg.nhs.uk/health/local-services/health-services-during-coronavirus/covid-19-vaccinations-in-somerset/>



Coronavirus. For information on a range of different support that is available visit: [www.southsomerset.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/coronavirus)



Somerset Waste Partnership: <https://www.somersetwaste.gov.uk/>

Recycle More: <https://www.somersetwaste.gov.uk/recycle-more/>

## SSDC NEWS:



Links to South Somerset District Council's latest news stories can be found at the following link: <https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/news/>