



15th September 2020

Good Evening Mayor and Councillors,

As we put together this report for you we remain in the difficult times which have seen unique challenges thrust on the Staff and Councillors of South Somerset District Council (SSDC), as well as the Towns and Parishes we serve. At this moment, but by the time you receive this report, new restrictions which are being muted by the Government for social gatherings will probably be enacted, which in turn will impact on our District's nascent recovery from this pandemic.

However, at the time of writing, SSDC is still responding well to the Crisis. While the majority of our staff continues to work from home, we are looking to allow the gradual return of some to our offices. But this will be as the situation dictates and not forced or rushed into. Our primary concern is and will remain the safety, health and wellbeing of our staff during this crisis.

As most of you will be aware, the council's formal meetings are all still being held virtually, in accordance with the latest Government guidance and can be viewed by the public live streamed on YouTube. The public also have the ability to attend and ask questions of the council on a pre-arranged basis by contacting our democratic services team. This was exemplified recently by a question being asked by a member of the Extinction Rebellion pressure group at our last full council meeting. Meetings can be viewed by following this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/southsomersetdc>

As you may expect and as we have reported previously, SSDC's finances have taken a hit. However, we hope that some of the grant money will come back from central Government, but at this moment it is unclear how much or in what form that will take. Clearly the loss of income from Westland's and The Octagon has made a dent in SSDC's finances, but our reserves and our good financial management over several years is standing us in good stead to weather the storm. We may be battered and bruised by this, but we are definitely not on the floor. For this position credit must go to our Commercial team for their continued hard work.

Although the Westlands leisure centre has reopened in a limited capacity, with various screenings being shown, these remain subject to the latest government guidance and the situation may have changed by the time this report is presented to council.

While on the subject of leisure facilities in the district, you will be aware and indeed have discussed an application for grant funding by the Ilminster Tennis and Bowling Club. This proposal will be discussed at the forthcoming Area West Committee (16th September 2020). It has been recommended to the Committee for approval that the



award of £12,500, 'be allocated from the Area West capital programme and subject to SSDC standard conditions for community grants'. A link to the agenda and accompanying report can be found here:

<http://modgov.southsomerset.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=131&MId=2775&Ve r=4>

With regards to our Commercial investments, our Scrutiny and District Executive Committees received our '*Investment Assets Quarterly Update Report*' that showed our investments were holding up well through the current situation. With no pun intended, our Battery storage site near Taunton is now operational and it is intended to increase its capacity from 25 Megawatts to 30 Megawatts as soon as practicable, in order to increase our revenue stream. Additionally, as you may have seen announced recently, SSDC has now acquired an additional site near Fareham in Hampshire for a new battery storage facility that we hope will be up and running by 2022. This will provide another revenue stream for the council, as well as increasing our commitment to supporting renewable energy and a greener economy going forward. The full report can be viewed by following this link:

<http://modgov.southsomerset.gov.uk/documents/s31950/Investment%20Assets%20Report.pdf>

As we begin to look forward beyond the current health crisis, we have a small team looking at our recovery strategy and what needs to be done. Local businesses are being approached for their views and the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) is looking at a recovery plan for the Area as well. That work is progressing well and representations have been made to Government for more funding.

Work continues at pace on our three regeneration projects in Wincanton, Yeovil and Chard as we continue our commitment to invest in the future of our area.

We have passed a motion to set up a programme for Accelerating Housing delivery and will shortly be appointing a manager to take that project forward.

As with all housing and development, challenges continue through the planning process, not just here at SSDC but throughout the country. This has been brought to the fore and highlighted recently by the Government's response to housing pressures. On the 6th August 2020, the government published a consultation document '*Changes to the Current Planning System*' and a planning white paper '*Planning for the Future*'. Both consultations propose radical changes to the planning system, in the short and longer term. This can be found by following the link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future>

As part of SSDC's response a briefing paper has been issued and distributed to Town and Parish councils in our district for consideration. In the meantime, workshops have also been held and are ongoing to look at SSDC's Planning service



in particular and an interim Lead specialist has been appointed who is a very experienced Planner.

Recently Cllr Keitch was elected Chair of the Heart of the Southwest Joint Committee of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), which will give us a bigger voice with her role as a Director of the LEP. Details can be found by following the link: <https://heartofswlep.co.uk/>

While the health situation remains as it is, there will be no changes to SSDC councillor roles at this stage as the Annual General Meeting of the Council has had to be postponed until next year. However, as we look to the long-term, amongst others, Cllr Brian Hamilton is currently programmed to attend the Local Government Association (LGA) Leadership Academy beginning in October. This has been slightly delayed because of the pandemic.

This brings us to the subject that is likely to dominate discussion in Town and Parish Halls throughout the District for the next few months. For the past couple of months most of Cllr Keitch's time has been spent working on the Future of Local Government in Somerset (FOLGIS). We note that this subject is an item on the agenda later and therefore will give more information about it if asked. Meanwhile, the four District leaders and CEO's have met with Simon Clarke, who was until recently the Minister at MHCLG that we were dealing with in respect to unitary proposals for Somerset. How this change of personnel will impact on Somerset we are yet to find out at this time of writing. However, our constructive meetings informed our work and as you will have seen, helped us shape our thinking and has now been released as the "*Stronger Somerset*" business case. This can be found by following the link: <https://www.strongersomerset.co.uk/>

Again, at the time of writing, this has been passed by a special SSDC's Scrutiny Committee meeting held on the 8th September and is about to be presented to a special SSDC District Executive Committee meeting on the 10th September in preparation to be put before SSDC's Full Council on the same evening. Again, you will be able to watch these meetings via the YouTube link above.

Val Keitch

Brian Hamilton