

ILMINSTER DIVISION COUNTY/DISTRICT REPORT JUNE 2020

SCC Financial outcome for 2019/20: Positive financial results and a major boost to reserves have put SCC in a strong position. In the last financial year, SCC increased its reserves to £76.2m across the board and delivered efficiencies that enabled a £6.4m underspend on the total budget. SCC Covid19 Finances: SCC estimates additional costs of around £47m to help communities deal with coronavirus. To date the NHS Clinical Commissioning Group have reimbursed approx. £6m. and the Government have allocated an additional £26m. to Somerset. It is expected that a further Government award to help close the small shortfall will be made soon. Major expenditure has included: Paying a 10% increase to all care home providers to help them stay financially viable through the crisis – £3.1m; Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) – Central government provides just 22% of the PPE required by schools, nurseries and key workers in Somerset. SCC is funding the remaining 78% – predicted cost £6m; Setting up and running two new care homes (one in Yeovil) – £1m each; Supporting nurseries and childcare settings to enable them to financially survive – £2.1m; Running social care services seven days a week – £1m; Supporting District Councils with additional homelessness costs – £800k.; Supporting our supply chain on major building projects – £2.3m., plus a range of other costs.

FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

For clarity, as several people have made enquiries, and as consultancy for the preferred option for Somerset is underway: A Unitary Council is a type of local authority that has a single tier which is responsible for all local government functions within its area. This enables functions, which otherwise sit in two-tier County and District authorities, to be brought together. These could include Housing and Social Care, Environmental Health and Trading Standards, Leisure Services and Public Health, On-Street and Off-Street Parking, Waste Collection and Waste Disposal, School and Road Planning with Residential Planning.

There is one access number for services, one website and an integrated customer contact centre to deal with the full range of residents' enquiries.

I understand that both SCC and SSDC are progressing with their preferred options and I am awaiting information in relation to the business case costs from both SCC and SSDC.

A number of briefings are being held this coming month, and it is expected that SCC full council decision will be made on 27th July. The business case for SSDC is in process.

UNITARY SURVEY

SCC have commissioned a survey from Cognisant to support the public engagement work for the One Somerset proposal. As part of this work they are contacting all Town and Parish Councils to obtain some initial feedback from them on the proposal to develop a one Council model for Somerset, where currently services are being delivered by four Districts and SCC. There will be further opportunities for local councils to provide a more detailed response to the proposal, as the debate progresses.

Cognisant is an independent market research company and will be collating feedback received for inclusion in the One Somerset Business Case. The form can be accessed by clicking on the following link: **The deadline for feedback is 5pm on Friday 3rd July 2020.**

<https://cognisant.researchfeedback.net/s.asp?k=159126110667>

More information can also be found at the One Somerset website www.onesomerset.org.uk

SOUTH WEST JOINT COMMITTEE

At this month's AGM, the Chair, David Fothergill, withdrew his nomination to continue in the role and Cllr. Val Keitch has replaced him as Chair of the Heart of the SW Joint Committee.

COVID-19 BRIEFINGS

Recipients of my monthly reports have also been receiving regular weekly updates in relation to SCC and other Covid-19 activity, which I do not propose to repeat here.

RELAXATION OF LOCKDOWN

During the last few weeks, and in the weeks ahead, we will see the re-opening of many businesses, largely managed by a co-ordinated effort between SCC and districts. Plans for social distancing in towns has not been without its challenges. Locally, focus has been on high streets and increasing Licensing resources to handle new legislation and fast track applications permitting licensed premises to have seating outside; the max. fee for applications has been set at £100.

PUBLIC TOILETS

There have been a number of complaints in relation to the presence of human faeces in public spaces, largely as a result of the closure of many public toilets. SSDC have confirmed that any facilities under their management have remained open throughout.

CLIMATE CHANGE

SCC have become founding Members of a new network of 21 councils, established by UK100 to campaign on climate change. Those involved in the Network represent a quarter of the population (25%) and two fifths (41%) of England by area. The aim is to focus on rural communities who face unfair barriers in trying to decarbonise, finding it difficult to attract funding for projects which don't fit traditional cost benefit analyses, and which often favour urban concentrations with less overall carbon reduction impact.

Commonplace: A new interactive online mapping tool to enable members of the community to flag up specific areas of concern where changes to walking, cycling and travel could make a positive difference; aimed at building on temporary measures, including pedestrianised high streets, that were introduced to encourage social distancing and the safe movement of pedestrians and cyclists. A figure of £482k for Somerset has been indicated from the second tranche of funding for new schemes. The map can be accessed via this link:

<https://somersestcovidactivetravel.commonplace.is/>.

Discussion at SSDC is ongoing in relation to the challenges posed by the re-charging of hybrid vehicles, where vehicles are being left by owners beyond the necessary charging time.

SSDC DIGITAL STRATEGY

It is agreed that there needs to be a more pro-active approach, with scope for improved working with partners. Cyber Security and governance also need to be considered. At present IT purchases are not organised centrally and there are concerns about moving onto iCloud for data storage; some feel that information storage needs to be retained in the control of a UK based company; there are concerns over risks associated with using a single supplier, and physical site access. Consideration is also being given to styles of working, moving away from current reliance on an A4 format when screens are generally used in landscape mode.

LIBRARIES

SCC is planning the phased re-opening of library buildings, due to start in July.

Social distancing measures will be in place and a 'personal shopper' service will be available as customers will not initially be able to browse. Staff will be available to select items for customers based on popular titles, specific interests and favourite authors.

Full details of which libraries will be available can be found at www.somersetlibraries.co.uk

Importantly, there will be no overdue charges for items borrowed before closure due to COVID-19.

SSDC PLANNING

As part of the overhaul of SSDC's planning process, the planning validation and enforcement report has been approved to go live on July 1st. Regular working group meetings, of which I am a member, continue. SSDC have updated their webpage with additional information.

<https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/services/planning/apply-for-planning-permission/>
https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/media/3400/ssdc_validation_checklist_master.pdf

<https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/services/planning/planning-faqs/>

Local residents have raised concerns over several errors on some applications, which officers have been informed of. The Carnival Park application has caused considerable local discussion.

INDEPENDENT POLICE ADVISORY GROUP

Raves/illegal music events – these have been increasing in prevalence across the country and early intervention is key to either prevent them or mitigate the impact.

Protests – as lockdown eases there has been a resurgence of protest activity e.g. Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion and others. The police have a duty to ensure that they are lawful and peaceful and engaging the community in handling such events is vital.

Pubs Reopening – SSDC Licensing are leading this activity. Businesses are having to adjust and temporary legislation gives all premises permission to have 'off sales' and to apply to site tables and chairs outside. Enforcement focus will be on irresponsible premises and those causing ASB and crime. It is anticipated that this weekend will be busy, requiring additional policing activity.

In a joint investigation with Lincolnshire Police, three men have been charged in connection with a series of lead thefts from churches across Somerset, including several in this area.

The thefts connected with this charge in our area are:

- St Mary's Church, Barrington, Ilminster, between 18-19 February 2020
- St Peter's Church, Ilton, Ilminster, between 20-21 February 2020
- St Peter and St Paul's Church, South Petherton, between 4-5 March 2020

Overall, levels of crime remain stable and are at around 20% lower than expected seasonal levels, although there is expected to be an increase as lockdown rules are relaxed.

Investigative support has been put in place in time for the return of schools and officers have been working closely with local authority and health stakeholders, who have received additional training to ensure that there is a collective upscaled response to child protection in relation to schools. It is anticipated that there may be a rise in referrals as children return to school. This approach will be monitored and developed ready for September.

Extra funding has been announced for domestic abuse and sexual violence charities and Avon and Somerset are bidding for £580k. Local charities have also been encouraged to apply.

MENTAL HEALTH TRANSFORMATION

It is recognised that there has been a gap in the early implementation of secondary mental health services. Somerset had submitted a bid to provide this service, which was successful in Oct. 2019, one of 12 sites across the country. Part of the new model has been to increase access to a range of primary mental health support in service users' own community locations. The intention is to remove 'gatekeepers' that have been preventing easy access to services, and to break down barriers between primary and secondary care. In a survey carried out, service users were emphatic that they did NOT want a signposting service. Locality teams have been set up to provide an integrated approach between health and social care. MINDLINE helpline is now operating 24/7, along with other remote access support, including community rooms.

SSDC COVID-19 IMPACT – PROTECTING CORE SERVICES

Potential loss of income does pose a risk. Revenue from parking, theatres and other district council-maintained facilities, which provide funds for other services, has shown a significant decrease as a result of the Coronavirus; up to £10m. this year. There is particular concern over the future of leisure facilities.

Contrary to previous reports, it is now anticipated that there will be further government funding to support local authority owned commercial initiatives, including retail and industrial investments and it is unclear how much may or may not be made available. Initially, central government had indicated that all Coronavirus related costs would be reimbursed.

It is difficult to forecast in the current environment, but at the time of writing SSDC rental receipts were slowing down, with 90% of quarter rents received, and 64% of tenants indicating that they are confident in being able to meet their financial obligations at the end of this month; some concessions have been accommodated.

It is intended that SSDC's commercial strategy will continue, albeit with consideration of the types of business acquired.

Consideration is being given as to how to better support businesses and services post Covid-19. It is accepted that it may be necessary to scale back or stop some services, and that budgets and the medium-term financial strategy will need to be reviewed.

It is intended that emergency reserves will cover any shortfall.

Officers are actively working on a draft recovery plan, including working with the Heart of the SW on economic recovery, with a Recovery Advisory Group having been set up.

SSDC feel that they have been prudent in their commercial strategy and have risk reserves in this area, although insufficient to fill the gap. If central government seeks to require local authorities to use their reserves, this will impact on planned regeneration plans. Chard Regeneration is continuing, albeit at 90% capacity, and it is expected that the opening will be delayed until 2021.

Non-domestic rate retention has been deferred for at least one year, along with the fairer funding review, with an impact of around £2m. There is a legal obligation to meet precept payments but no indication as to when within the financial year these must be paid.

There seems to have been some confusion over the receipt of monies from SCC to support the cost of assisting the homeless. SSDC officers were unaware that the agreed sum of £150k had been paid by SCC

SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS OFSTED REPORT – MAY 2020

A more consistent and coordinated approach is required to ensure the best outcomes for children with SEND. Education Health Care Plans remain a key issue, in addition to the high number of school exclusions of those children with SEND. One of the reasons for this is seen to be connected to the high increase in the number of children requiring Education, Health and Care Plans in Somerset, above the national average, and that current levels of funding are insufficient. Educational outcomes for these pupils is below the national average and there is concern that a high proportion of those schools seen to be failing in this area are Academies, over which the local authority has no control.

The identification and impact on health needs of Children Looked After has improved.

Special schools have received very positive reports; the main area of concern is how children with SEND are supported in a mainstream setting.

It is accepted that the right services, whether related to education or healthcare, have until now not been available in the right place at the right time.

ADULT SOCIAL SERVICES

Adult social care continues to operate 24/7, with some relaxation for certain teams in order to ensure that if there is to be a further Covid-19 spike that everyone is on alert for immediate action. Discharge arrangements – changes that have been brought about as a result of the pandemic are likely to continue for the foreseeable future, where new ways of working have been shown to be more effective. Discharge funding is at present being provided by the NHS (£4.3m.)

Many areas where there remain challenges are outside the control of SCC e.g. Track and Tracing. The care and health letter in support of care providers during Covid-19 has been published, and SCC has received national praise for their approach.

There has been significant collaboration with acute trusts in relation to staffing, with an acknowledgement that if someone in a care home setting is shown to be positive this will involve all those in that setting having to self-isolate for 14 days.

There have been a number of temporary and interim care placements put in place, with cost implications that have been understood to be necessary.

Quality Assurance review activity is continuing, largely carried out by phone at present, which has shown to be effective in clearing a previous backlog.

A central government Infection Control Grant of £8.3m has been received – 75% of this is ring-fenced, with strict criteria, and is expected to go directly to the 240 care homes in the county, and based on numbers of beds, as soon as it is received. In order to access this money, care homes need to have signed up to the Care Home Tracker, which over 90% have done so far. Some care homes may not choose to accept the money offered due to the conditions and reporting procedures required, but this is being challenged. The funds are mainly being used on PPE provision. At present SCC is still providing PPE without charge to care homes, because it is more cost effective to purchase in bulk, although this situation may change in future. Assurance has been received that a clear focus has been put on the quality of PPE provided.

A survey has been completed to begin to look at options post-Covid-19.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

During the last 2-3 months one of the key challenges has been the discharge from acute hospitals of patients with complex needs, and such conditions as dementia, either with or without Covid-19. It was felt that initially the right support was not available, resulting in some delays due to capacity issues. A new model, working together with other agencies, has been introduced to enable some patients to be segregated where necessary. This trial, using multi-disciplinary working, appears to be have successful, but now needs to be assessed to shape future ways of working.

Effort has been made to ensure that only those testing negative for Covid-19 are placed in settings where others may be at risk. With this in mind, Hendford is been used primarily to allow those testing positive with Covid-19 to be placed there.

For those on mental health wards the aim has been to have them spend as little time as possible in hospital settings. Two properties, used as 'step-down' houses, have been made available for initial discharge, one in Wells, another in Yeovil, for patients who no longer need to receive medical treatment but who still require support and a more home-like environment in which to recover from their mental health crisis. The average stay is 2-6 weeks, until they feel ready to move on; under the Care Act no charge is made for this intermediate care.

STEP-UP HOUSES – One is now open in Yeovil, set up to support those in the community undergoing a mental health crisis, but who may not need medical intervention; those who would benefit from secure short-term crisis support, with time spent away from their home. This is a joint pilot venture with ENABLE to allow professional teams across the service to engage with people to access the help they need. The intention going forward is to reduce mental health re-admission rates, with fast-track assessments being carried out. Total costs per year for this service are in the region of £400k. Results have been very positive so far, and it is intended that this will eventually become a district-wide model.

SCC CHILDREN & FAMILIES SCRUTINY

Safequarding – activity on identifying vulnerable children, and in working with agencies for CAMHS and mental health support is being treated as a priority.

Schools have been very pro-active in supporting children's services and the police.

There has been some increase in domestic abuse issues.

No additional money has been provided for schools to control resources in terms of how they manage the physical aspects of their sites, and staffing; the majority of staff are aged over 50. To help to manage the situation schools have been sharing resources.

The challenge will be in the next phase in terms of ensuring that all primary children will be able to access education before the end of the summer term. This is unlikely to be achieved due to the logistics of some schools. At present around 50% of those able to return to school have done so, amongst the highest nationally.

Currently, whether or not children return to school is down to parental choice; it has been challenging to engage with secondary school children to ensure their return. There is also concern that teenagers are often unwilling to continue to observe social distancing.

Children's care placements, especially teenagers, remains a problem, reflected nationally.

The PPE supply chain remains a challenge for some, as businesses and services re-open.

Funding support has been provided for the Early Years sector.

National emergency planning meetings are being held daily with central government.

There is as yet no timescale for school life to return to normal and no guidance on whether schools will be asked to return early after the summer break; this is unlikely, as many schools have been open throughout and it is felt that staff will need the break.

There is particular concern over children deemed to be vulnerable, and those who may have suffered anxiety or trauma during Covid-19, resulting in an increase in possible behavioural challenges. It is acknowledged that remote support is not suitable for all.

Primary Head Teachers are meeting regularly, and so far feel that SCC support has been positive in terms of the challenges posed by re-opening.

School transport – there is a lack of clarity of how to manage this in terms of social distancing, particularly once secondary school children return to school, which is seen as a major challenge.

Supporting Children & Families – SSDC is currently working with 75 families, and plan to increase this to 200 over the next three years.

Key impacts and concerns as a result of Covid-19

- Increase in demand for services as we come out of Lockdown
- Concern over Young Carers
- How the education system will cope, especially smaller rural schools
- Availability of monetary and staffing resources
- As a result of the Coronavirus it is increasingly likely that a child will be living in poverty in Somerset, where there are also very low levels of social mobility.
- Need to address underlying issues.
- Impact of Covid-19 – increase in benefit and council tax claims.
- A multi-agency partnership approach is needed, between schools, primary care, police etc.

WADHAM/SWANMEAD SCHOOL

SCC has won the judicial review in relation to the decision of the Regional Schools Commissioner to allow Swanmead to become an academy. The academy order has now been quashed and I understand that the decision is not going to be appealed.

RE-CYCLING

All "business as usual" materials are now being accepted at all 16 recycling sites in Somerset.

The full list of materials taken at Somerset recycling sites is:

- Rubbish – material you would usually put in your black rubbish bin, excess black bags not taken by kerbside collections
- Bulky items, such as furniture and mattresses
- Garden waste
- Large household electrical items – white goods, TVs etc.
- Small household electrical items – irons, toaster etc.
- Hazardous household chemicals e.g. solvents, garden chemicals, paint thinners, antifreeze.
- Cooking oil and engine oil, in disposable containers of up to five litres
- Scrap metal
- Plastic pots, tubs and trays
- Paint
- Man-made wood - chipboard, MDF, etc
- Natural wood - untreated timber, tree trunks, etc.

This also includes cardboard as well as commercial waste and other waste you pay to dispose of – including tyres, gas bottles, soil and hardcore, vehicle parts, plasterboard and asbestos (card payment only).

Trailers and vans can access the sites at any time, with the appropriate permit.

Although sites have been busy, the recently introduced "shop-style" social distancing arrangements – floor markings and signs – have worked well.

Please note that staff are unable to offer assistance with unloading or handling waste items.

No items brought to sites can be put forward for re-use at the moment; anyone planning to bring items fit for re-use is asked to retain them for the time being.

The number of unloading bays has been reduced to allow social distancing.

On site safety restrictions remain in place, including:

- Gloves to be worn when outside the vehicle
- Maximum of two people per household
- Strict social distancing
- On busier sites traffic may still be directed by staff

All sites are open for their usual summer hours. There have been long queues at peak times (early morning) and people are encouraged to visit sites only if necessary.

Chard now has a queue cam installed, which can be checked prior to attending a site.

www.somersetwaste.gov.uk/recycling-centre-queue-cams

Quieter times tend to be 4pm-6pm on weekdays.

ACTIVITIES/MEETINGS

1/6	Donyatt PC
2/6	SSDC Scrutiny
2/6	Iminster Literary Festival committee
2/6	SSDC Regulation
3/6	SCC Adults' Scrutiny workshop
3/6	SCC Children's Scrutiny
3/6	SSDC Area South
3/6	Horton quiz
3/6	Winsham PC
4/6	SSDC District Exec.
5/6	DSFRA meeting
5/6	SCC Pensions Committee
5/6	SCC Coronavirus briefing
7/6	Horton service
8/6	Morning prayers
10/6	SSDC Area East
10/6	Independent Advisory Group
10/6	SCC Policy Scrutiny
10/6	Horton quiz
11/6	SCC Regulation
11/6	SSDC planning group workshop
11/6	SSDC Audit
12/6	SCC Coronavirus briefing
14/6	Horton service
15/6	Morning prayers
17/6	SGS Governor training – Risk Assessments and H&S training
17/6	SSDC Area West
17/6	Horton quiz
18/6	SCC Audit
18/6	SSDC Planning Group workshop
19/6	MP briefing
19/6	SCC Coronavirus briefing
21/6	Horton service
22/6	Morning prayers
23/6	SSDC Planning working group
23/6	Iminster TC
24/6	LIFEbeat training – Rebuilding and Connecting Schools post Covid-19
24/6	Horton quiz
25/6	SSDC Audit
25/6	SSDC Licensing sub Committee
25/6	MP briefing
26/6	SCC Coronavirus briefing
28/6	Horton service
29/6	LIFEbeat training - School Health
29/6	SGS Head Teacher Performance training
30/6	SSDC Scrutiny
30/6	Alex Parmley SSDC CEO
30/6	SCC One Somerset workshop
30/6	Ashill planning