

10. Langport Town Centre and Riverside – Regeneration Programme (Executive Decision)

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Purpose of the Report

To provide an overview and update report on a range of projects and programmes, which aim to contribute to long term social, economic and environmental well-being for the Langport area and to seek members' endorsement for continued partnership working from SSDC.

To seek approval for a financial allocation to improve the SSDC Langport and River Parrett Visitor Centre and car parking area at Westover.

Public Interest

This report gives an update on the current programme for partnership work involving SSDC and aims to identify those areas of work still identified as potential weaknesses to the overall well being of the area.

Recommendations

- (1) Note the report and highlight any queries or issues for further consideration.
- (2) Endorse continued partnership from SSDC, working to promote and improve a range of town centre and riverside community services and facilities, and addressing the next steps outlined in the series of tables 1 – 7 included in this report.
- (3) Allocate £10,000, delegated to the SSDC Countryside Sites Manager, towards improvements at the Langport Visitor Centre and Westover car park from the Area North Capital programme – Langport Vision allocation.

Background

The long-term vision shared by South Somerset District Council and a range of partners including the local town and parish councils, and Somerset County Council, supported by regular community consultation and feedback is that Langport should remain and develop as a thriving and vital market town, providing cultural, educational and economic opportunities for those who live and work in the town and for visitors.

A brief (recent) history of investment and change into Langport town centre and riverside.

Over the last 15 years or so a series of projects and developments have been designed by a range of public and community led organisations to contribute to the continued vitality of Langport working within the particularly sensitive environment of the Somerset Levels and Moors.

From the mid-1990s onwards South Somerset District Council has been a significant partner in the development of a substantial programme of investment into the economic heart of Langport.

This began with the construction of the Langport and River Parrett Visitor Centre, and creation of a cycleway link to Muchelney, as part of the council's commitment to widening public access to the countryside for education and enjoyment.

Later, attention turned towards the apparent decline of the central shopping area, with multiple vacant premises and poor visual appearance.

From the late 1990's onwards SSSDC supported the development of a number of physical improvements to the town centre and related areas, in partnership with the town, parish and county councils, SWRDA and other agencies. It is estimated that funding from English Heritage, the local authorities, the Regional Development Agency, other grant giving bodies and local private investment will have totalled £2.5m to date.

A substantial portion of this investment took place between 2001-2003 through the Langport Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (HERS), the Langport Town Centre Scheme and more recently with the restoration and conversion of the former warehouse at Great Bow Wharf (2004-07).

Throughout this period, the importance of the surrounding wetland and river Parrett that flows through Langport has been endorsed by regular community consultation. This includes the recognition of its importance for increasing the value of tourism to the local area, and the opportunity to promote local activity and recreation for all ages.

In 2006 a residents and traders survey agreed that the visual appearance of the town had improved*, but also highlighted a number of further improvements that would make a significant difference to the community, businesses and visitors to Langport. Some of these have now been achieved and some remain. (*63% of 168 responses)

Further local consultation by the town & parish council in 2007, and by partners to the 'Waterlinks' programme (2006-07), provided further evidence of support for continued partnership work to take opportunities offered by Langport's location.

The Langport and River Parrett Visitor Centre – request for capital investment

Langport and River Parrett Visitor Centre sits on the edge of Langport town in the parishes of Huish Episcopi and Curry Rivel. The centre was built 12 years ago and at that time experienced high footfall, operating effectively as a visitor destination and local cycle business.

Over the years both the contents of the centre (interpretation and displays) and the building itself have become tired. Changes to the local infrastructure have altered the way people approach the building and at this time a significant body of work could be

undertaken to improve the building, the visitor experience it offers and also its level of usefulness to the local community.

In the 12 years since the visitor centre was built, there has been little done by way of updating and refurbishment. The installation of the new Cocklemoor Bridge has had a positive effect on the pedestrian traffic to and past the visitor centre and appears to have encouraged young families to use the route as part of a circular walk.

The Westover overflow parking area has suffered through a lack of maintenance and has become overgrown and uninviting; despite having a larger footprint the overall capacity for the space is limited to about 5 cars.

Appendix A includes an SSDC capital appraisal to allocate up to £10,000 towards a small programme of work to upgrade and improve the visual appearance and visitor experience of the Visitor Centre, emphasising the centre's key location at a main gateway to the town.

The objectives of this investment are to achieve:

- Improvements to the visual appearance and visitor experience of the Visitor Centre, internally and as a gateway to the town.
- Improvements to the parking area, on Westover, supporting both visitors to the Visitor centre and Great Bow Yard, and users of the cycleway, maintained by SSDC.

Overview of Langport town centre and riverside developments – and next steps.

The tables 1 - 7 below set out on the following pages include information on the background, change and current investment plans for a number of places within Langport Town Centre and the area closest to the river.

1. Langport Town Hall (Owner: Langport Town Trust)	
Position c.2000	The impressive Grade 2 listed building was identified as in need of investment, improved management and being in a poor state of repair and internal decoration, with limited accessibility for disabled people. This problem was in part caused by its under occupation, limiting its income. There was also no useful access to the rear of the building which overlooks the Common Moor.
Change	<p>Under the direction of the Langport Town Trust, the town hall has undergone significant refurbishment, and access created for disabled people. This has made the Town Hall more attractive to tenants. In turn this has provided a greater level of operating income. For a few years the main ground floor room was used as a computer learning centre by Yeovil College, and is now a meeting and training room. Current tenants include the voluntary sector support agency, VISTA and the arts organisation, Somerset Art Works. Both are countywide hubs for their respective sectors and attracting a wide range of visitors to Langport. The town council maintains an office for the clerk with public access.</p> <p>As part of the developer contribution from Tesco's move to Langport, the space behind the Town Hall was landscaped to provide a public garden (known as the town garden) with a connecting pathway to Tesco. Community events have included markets and open-air performances, including the launch of Somerset Art Weeks 2009. The 'market under the clock' continues to operate, with new security gates installed to create a public way through to the town garden when the market is closed.</p>
Next Steps:	<p>LTC are planning the installation of the 'Langport pump' as a heritage project – in collaboration with local schools, in the town garden.</p> <p>Somerset Art Works are developing an inter-generational arts project in partnership with SCC.</p> <p>Continued use of the town garden for community events.</p>

2. The Langport Information Centre (Leaseholder: Langport Town Trust)	
Position c. 2000:	In 2000 the provision of visitor information in Langport was through a part-time desk hosted in the Langport library. Broader information on public services was through the SSDC Area Office at Kelways (as now).
Change	The Langport Information Centre (LIC) opened in 2002, fully funded by grants achieved by the Langport Area Development Trust, and has continued to provide through a group of dedicated volunteers. The expected income streams to support the centre independently of grants did not materialize, and in 2008 SSDC and the local town & parish council acted to prevent its inevitable closure. Care of the LIC has now been transferred to the Town Trust, with additional financial support from Huish Episcopi Parish Council. To reduce costs, the centre has re-located to smaller premises. Increased support from SSDC and Langport Town Council has refreshed the operation of the LIC, including increased volunteer numbers and new promotional leaflet. Good working relations exist with the LINKS community transport service, which shares the same office.
Next Steps:	Further development of the LIC to ensure to ensure ongoing financial stability and growth, including training needs for volunteers, income streams and a service level agreement with SSDC.

3. The Town Square, Toilets and central car parks (Ownership / lease – shared between SSDC , Langport Town Trust and Council)	
Position c2000:	The Whatley car park area and former toilets formed a major part of the Langport town centre regeneration scheme, together with traffic calming measures on Bow Street / North Street the scheme was developed during 2000-01, with work commencing in February 2002. SSDC led the contract, with considerable external funding from SCC, Wyvern Waste, English Heritage and SWDRA.
Change	<p><u>The 'Island'</u> The forming of a central island, and associated public space for markets and community events, was a cornerstone of the overall town centre regeneration scheme, with a significant re-modelling of Whatley car park. A late re-design, at the insistence of SWDRA caused considerable controversy at the time, and the 2006 community survey indicated mixed opinions regarding the success of the development. The "Island" as it is known, has not seen the levels of activity anticipated; there is a perception that the space is not well designed for market stalls, events and general pedestrian movement. With the support of SSDC, Langport Town Council installed an electricity supply along the length of the island in 2009, which has increased the flexibility of the space. There was much praise for the Christmas tree lighting presented by Langport Town Council.</p> <p><u>Public toilets</u> New public toilets were constructed by SSDC as part of the town centre scheme, which suffered from early complaints linked to ventilation and cleaning standards. These have been largely addressed, and by agreement the management of the toilets have been transferred to Langport Town Council. A further extension has been considered, and SSDC provided a capital sum to support this, as part of the transfer of lease.</p> <p><u>Car parking</u> The town centre scheme involved some change to the make up of parking, including the provision of short and long stay parking, backed up by enforcement of parking Orders. Parking remains free from charges in Langport, in line with the SSDC Car Parking strategy. There is currently some local concern expressed for the capacity of car parking, linked to the increased use of buildings such as the town hall and Great Bow Wharf for employees and conference delegates. Being equidistant from Taunton, Bridgwater and Yeovil, Langport is an ideal stopping off point for people in the rural hinterland to access public transport. It is also possible that this will have increased with those taking advantage of free bus passes for people over 60.</p>
Next Steps:	Complete the business case for modifications to the 'island' to further promote use for markets and community events. Review car parking capacity through a local survey.

4. Cocklemoor (Owner: The Environment Agency)	
Position c2000	Cocklemoor is a large open space, which separates the town centre from the River Parrett and includes the main flood bank, which protects the town. Cocklemoor plays host to a variety of community uses, including visits from a travelling fair. The area is popular with fishermen, and the Scout Association runs a canoe club. A public right of way follows the edge of the river, promoted as part of the River Parrett Trail. In 2000 there was one piece of surfaced path – between Stacey’s Court and Cocklemoor car parks, maintained by SSDC.
Change	Cocklemoor continues to be a popular venue for community events, including two River Festivals, and regular car boot sales organized by the Langport Events Group. In 2007 a contemporary designed pedestrian bridge was installed by Somerset Council Council, linking Cocklemoor to the Langport Visitor Centre. An adjoining surfaced pathway was constructed by SSDC as a link between the new bridge, along the length of the flood bank, and the town centre. The footbridge to Staceys Court was enhanced as part of a poetry project for adults with learning difficulties. SSDC and Langport Town Council have supported the purchase and installation of new benches and pedestrian signage through the town centre and along Cocklemoor (all maintained by Langport Town Council). The town council is currently investigating the possibility of an asset transfer of Cocklemoor and will consider taking responsibility for pathways. The pathway along the flood bank runs parallel to the path from Whatley car park to Staceys Court Bridge beside the Back River, currently they do not link up, which restricts use for disabled people. The path along the Back River is a poorer grade finish than the new path and would benefit from resurfacing.
Next Steps:	Complete negotiations between LTC, EA and SSDC for long-term management of Cocklemoor, seeking reduced revenue implications for SSDC. Secure improved access for all abilities from town centre car parks through to the Visitor Centre, including links with Stacey’s Court.

5. Great Bow Wharf (Owner: The Warehouse Trust) and Great Bow Yard (Owner: private)	
Position c.2000	The warehouse at the Great Bow Wharf is a Grade 2 listed building at the western end of Bow Street. In 2000 the site was largely derelict, and building had fallen into a state of disrepair. It was acquired by the Somerset Trust for Sustainable Development (STSD), as part of a wider regeneration project for the whole site.
Change	The warehouse building has been re-developed into small business units, a café and a number of meeting rooms, let for commercial and community use, and was officially opened in November 2007. The adjoining “Eco-Homes” have received a number of national awards as an exemplar for sustainable development. The Warehouse and a small amount of public open space, including a portion of the riverbank, has transferred to the ownership of the Warehouse Trust, a newly formed company limited by guarantee, and registered charity. There are two members: Ecos Trust (formerly STSD) and the Langport Area Development Trust. SSDC contributed around £250,000 to the Warehouse project, and SWRDA around £350,000.

	<p>A new business however well planned often experiences problems in its early days, and the Warehouse Trust continues to be no exception. SSDC has maintained close involvement, as part of its funding agreement, and acts on behalf of SWRDA to monitor the overall progress of the business plan.</p> <p>Over the last 18 months, through the efforts of the company directors and dedicated centre manager, the Warehouse Trust has maintained 90% tenancy of its office space and has both a developing and returning client base of users for its meeting rooms. Community use has started to increase with the recently formed cinema club. This saw a “full house” at its inaugural screening in February and offers matinee performances to older people and a children’s film club. While the day-to-day operations are now being well maintained, options for the structure of the company and composition of the board are under review; with the aim of ensuring there is long-term sustainability of the business and increased community involvement.</p>
Next Steps:	<p>NB: A more comprehensive report will follow at a later date.</p> <p>Review and revision to current governance arrangements for the board, promoting wider community involvement Increasing community use of the building and its services, and ensure financial stability of the whole enterprise</p>

6. Access to and use of the River Parrett (see also separate report in this agenda)	
Position 2000	<p>In terms of the river in 2000, it was much as the river is now for public access. The river Parrett flows through Langport and is understood to be a public waterway. However there is very limited if any public rights of access to move from the river bank onto the river – due to the nature of riparian (river bank) ownership. A number of residents use the river with personal craft, and there is a long time Scout Canoe Club based in the town.</p>
Change	<p>The Langport Vision and Action Plan (2002), and subsequent local consultation identified improving access to and usage of the River Parrett in the Langport area, as a high priority for long-term investment. Strong links are made between local economic and environment benefits, together with the opportunities for activity and participation on and near to the river network. Whilst various studies have been completed, and much analysis of the issues has taken place, the progress of recent years has not kept pace with local expectations.</p> <p>Langport River Group was formed in 2002 and includes a range of local organisations and representatives with an interest in the river and its benefits. In 2004 the River Group commissioned the Langport River Corridor Study, which established a clear framework of opportunities and constraints upon developing the use of the river.</p>

	<p>Langport has played host to two successful River Festivals. The Environment Agency constructed a slipway near Black Bridge, and have from time to time provided permissive access for boat trials and of course the River Festivals. Boat trials have always been successful events, and draw much local interest. In 2008 the Somerset Waterways Development Trust secured £50,000 from the Big Lottery - Peoples Millions – and have commissioned a purpose built community boat.</p> <p>During 2006 a partnership was formed which created the “Waterlinks” programme – a potential £50 million award from the Big Lottery for a series of linked projects stretching across the Levels and Moors– all under the theme of ‘making more of water’. During this time using feasibility funding from the Big Lottery, several pieces of technical assessment, local consultations and design work around the river area in Langport were completed. Studies included a canoe study of the Parrett and tributaries starting from Langport, consultation with a range of residents and community groups including riparian landowners from Langport to Thorney, and a technical assessment of various locations to aid use of the river for boating and canoeing.</p> <p>In 2008 the South West branch of the Environment Agency published their strategy – ‘Enjoying Water’ which promotes the EA role to facilitate greater public use of the waterways (however without a statutory role to require this).</p> <p>In 2009, SSDC and the Somerset Waterways Development Trust prepared a report, which researched the position on public navigation rights, considered potential models to establish and manage access onto the water, and conducted stakeholder consultation.</p> <p>There is currently a Government consultation to seek views on policy relating to the promoting and facilitating use of waterways.</p>
Next Steps:	<p>Support the Langport River Group to achieve a short-term action plan to increase opportunities for the use of the river, and develop a fuller Waterway Plan, with support from the Environment Agency for the Upper Parrett.</p> <p>Installation of new canoe steps to be set into the bank (near the Cockle Moor footbridge) (Scout Association)</p> <p>Trial visits to Langport from the new trip boat owned by the Somerset Waterways Development Trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See associated report in this agenda and request for further financial support for feasibility work.

7. The Visitor Centre, the Centre's overflow car park at Westover and the Cycleway	
Position c2000.	<p>Visitor Centre - The centre opened in June 1998 to offer visitors, schools and local people the chance to find out about the River Parrett Trail, the local landscape, wildlife and points of interest, before exploring them for real. The Langport Visitor Centre is located next to the River Parrett at the western end of Bow Street. It is owned by SSDC with day-to-day management provided by a business tenant - Bow Bridge Cycles.</p> <p>Westover car park - The centre has a small car park on site but cyclists and walkers have the option of using the small overflow car park further into the Westover Industrial estate.</p> <p>Cycleway - SSDC leased two stretches of land from approximately 1998 on the former railway line, to create a cycle / walker link to Muchelney.</p>
Change:	<p>In the 12 years since the visitor centre was built, there has been little done by way of updating and refurbishment. The installation of the new Cocklemoor Bridge has had a positive effect on the pedestrian traffic to and past the visitor centre and appears to have encouraged young families to use the route as part of a circular walk.</p> <p>The Westover overflow parking area has suffered through a lack of maintenance and has become overgrown and uninviting; despite having a larger footprint the overall capacity for the space is limited to about 5 cars.</p> <p>The cycleway leases have continued since their inception, although one lease requires renewal and the second expires at the end of 2011.</p>
Next Steps:	<p><u>The Langport Visitors Centre</u> Improve the signage and external appearance of the centre to enhance its significance and encourage use. Adjustments to improve the experience for schools, the local community and visitors Improved outdoor facilities for visitors.</p> <p><u>The overflow car park at Westover</u> Improve visual appearance, safety and use, through clearance of overgrowth, and increased area for parking. (An assessment of the car park by SSDC Streetscene service has indicated that some basic maintenance would increase the parking capacity of the site by at least four additional spaces and make it more attractive for car owners to use.)</p> <p><u>Cycleway</u> - See update report – Item for Information February 2010.</p>

Summary and Conclusions

- 1) A wide range of investment into SSDC and locally owned assets across the centre of Langport, and out towards the river has in combination created a number of good conditions to secure the long-term well-being of the area. These include the existing and additional indoor and public open spaces for visitors, residents and businesses, and improvements to the visual appearance and physical access in and around the town centre.
- 2) Langport's position at the 'heart of the levels' and its unique relationship with the River Parrett, promotes a range of cultural opportunities, notably for the arts and recreation, attractive to residents and visitors alike. The numbers of meeting rooms and cafes has increased, creating a range of places for visitors, trainees and delegates to meet, with resulting marketing opportunities for the town.
- 3) There remain a number of smaller interventions (shown within the 'next steps' sections). Based on research and past experience, there is good evidence to support additional investment by the public sector, or through the facilitation of public and private partnerships. There is good evidence of support from the local community to these potential improvements. Their completion, will add significant value to the work already achieved.
 - A request for a contribution from the Area North capital programme (Langport Vision allocation) towards the costs of improved parking at Westover, and improvements to the Langport and River Parrett Visitor Centre is attached at Appendix A.
- 4) Continuing to support local aspirations for greater public access to the river and widening opportunities to take part in boating and canoeing, including the introduction of a community trip boat, appears to require a firmer and more organised push from the community, but perhaps surprisingly not a unachievable amount of investment.
- 5) The research and consultation around navigation on the River Parrett completed towards the end of 2009, established a good foundation for a limited amount of further evidence gathering and project planning. This can be done alongside making small steps forward to the overall goal.
 - A separate report seeking further financial support and commitment from the Area North capital programme (Langport Vision allocation) is included in this agenda.

Financial Implications

The current Area North Capital Programme includes in the future spend for Reserve Schemes approved in principle but awaiting allocation a sum of £35,000 for Langport Vision. Allocating up to £10,000 from the Area North Capital Programme towards improvements to the Langport Visitors Centre and Westover car parking – from the Langport Vision allocation of £35,000 will leave £25,000 for future spend.

Corporate Priority Implications

1.14 Support South Somerset Together to develop and support distinctive, balanced, local economies in South Somerset through a range of measures...

2.9 Increase resident satisfaction on country parks, open spaces, street cleaning, car parks and public toilets.

3.20 Increase children and young people's satisfaction with parks and play areas and adult participation in sport and active recreation.

3.29 Increase access to services and facilities by public transport, walking and cycling.

4.26 Develop two services through, or in partnership with, the voluntary and community sector by 2010.

5.1 Enable the continued development of multi-service hubs ("one stop shops") across South Somerset.

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

Equality and Diversity Implications

Plans to enhance and promote Langport as a thriving market town, takes into account local accessibility and actively promotes partnership working between a range of user groups and service providers.

Background Papers: *Area North Committee August 2006 - Agenda Item 9 Update report on Langport Regeneration Programme*

Items for Information - Langport Cycleway - February 2010 Waterlinks Programme bid documentation

Langport Area River Corridor Study and River Group minutes and agendas

Environment Agency – Enjoying Water.

Langport & Huish Episcopi – draft community plan and Langport Area Tourism Strategy.