

9. **SSDC Economic Development Service**

<i>Portfolio Holder</i>	<i>Jo Roundell Green</i>
<i>Strategic Director:</i>	<i>Rina Singh, Strategic Director</i>
<i>Assistant Director:</i>	<i>Simon Gale, Assistant Director, Economy</i>
<i>Service Manager:</i>	<i>David Julian, Economic Development Manager</i>
<i>Lead Officer:</i>	<i>David Julian, Economic Development Manager</i>
<i>Contact Details:</i>	<i>david.julian@southsomerset.gov.uk or 01935 462279</i>

Purpose of the Report

To update Area North Members on the past year's work of the Economic Development Service (ED), noting that since the management re-organisation of September 2009 the Service is now responsible for Economic Development, Tourism and Heritage across the District.

Public Interest

The report provides an update on the work undertaken by the SSDC Economic Development, Heritage and Tourism Service in 2009-10.

Recommendation

Members are invited to note and comment on the report

Background

As part of the Place and Performance Directorate, the service includes Economic Development, Heritage and Tourism. The service has 22 members of staff and is responsible for the day-to-day running of facilities at:

- The Yeovil Innovation Centre;
- Visitor Information Centre, Yeovil;
- Museum of South Somerset, Yeovil;
- Community Heritage Access Centre at Lufton
- Cartgate Tourist Information Centre.

Economic Development

The Innovation Centre

Following the unexpected withdrawal of the appointed operator for the Innovation Centre in December 2008, SSDC took over its direct management, relocating the Economic Development team from Brympton Way. Whilst this has to some degree limited the amount of resource available to the wider economic functions of the team, the team have still been able to provide support to a wide range of projects and economic interventions in the last twelve months.

By early 2010 The Innovation Centre had let 13 of its 36 units tenants which represents a 36% occupancy rate. This exceeded the forecast of the 2007 business plan that suggested 30% occupancy by the end of year 1. The Innovation Centre also hopes to let one of its larger 'anchor tenancy' spaces in 2010 which will give considerable financial stability to the overall project. The Centre has also created a substantial income stream through the letting of meeting rooms.

The managing partnership of the Innovation Centre (SSDC, Somerset County Council and the South West Regional Development Agency) have bid for funding from the European Regional Development Funding to help pay for operating costs across the next three years. If this bid is successful, it will provide a number of options for the future management of the centre.

Rural Business Support

The principal role of the Agricultural Development Officer continues to be the provision of economic development advice to rural businesses throughout the District. This remit was expanded in 2008/09 to provide support to the wider rural economy, including post offices, shops and garages.

Advice offered ranges from analysis of business plans, help with grant applications, providing a link to internal SSDC departments and signposting towards external agencies such as Business Link. The Agricultural Development Officer has made 42 farm visits in the last year with approximately a third of these visits made in Area North. These visits offered specialist agricultural business advice including views on planning applications.

In total, advice was provided to 91 planning applications in 2009/10 with 40 of these applications coming from Area North.

The Recession Strategy

The latest Job Seeker Allowance (JSA) statistics for South Somerset (April 2010) show that there are 1883 claimants in the South Somerset Area. This figure is considerably higher than the pre-recession figure of April 2008 (783 claimants) but lower than the April 2009 figure (2014 claimants). The latest figures suggest that the recessionary peak number of claimants may have passed. April statistics also show that there are currently over 400 jobs available in the South Somerset area and this suggests that there is potential for considerable reduction in the JSA figures as 2010 progresses.

The current JSA figures indicate a headline rate of 2.1% unemployment in South Somerset. Whilst this compares favourably to 2.9% in the South West 2.9% and 4.1% in Great Britain, there is clear evidence that the recession has made a significant impact in South Somerset.

SSDC's Recession Strategy was adopted in May 2009. The strategy included a twelve point Action Plan aimed at helping reduce the impact of economic recession locally. One project was to use part of the Local Authority Business Growth Incentives (LABGI) funding to promote Business Rate Relief. District Executive allocated £112,000 in June 2009, to this project; a final report is due shortly, followed by a review of the Rate Relief policy using the experience gained.

The project group has also conducted a review of the take up of mandatory rural rate relief checking post offices, shops, pubs and garages. The vast majority of those eligible are claiming, but two premises were identified and have been encouraged to apply. An on-line application service was made available on SSDC website with around 80% of the applications made on-line.

The Hardship campaign included a direct mail-out to small businesses in South Somerset in January 2010. There were 90 initial enquiries with 52 businesses then choosing to work with the ED team to assess the qualifying criteria for this form of rates relief (criteria being; proof of hardship, proof of the community benefit of the business, and proving that rates relief will actually make a difference to their businesses)

The assessment process has proved quite lengthy, in order to ensure decisions are robust and defensible. We are now in the final stages of allocating rates relief to the majority of the applicants. 11 applications for hardship relief came from businesses in Area North.

The Implementation of Development Management Principles

All the component teams of the Economy Group are now committed to the Development Management concept. Advice is offered, where relevant to a planning applicant at any stage of the Planning Application Process, including comprehensive advice offered at pre-application stage.

Where more formal input is required a monthly pre-app surgery is arranged where applicants, particularly those submitting major applications can meet and discuss their application with a variety of officers ranging from Development Control to Environmental Health and Community Regeneration Officers. Applicants are assured access to a broad spectrum of advice from across the District Council.

Contacting major employers across the district

With the aim of highlighting the amount of support available to businesses companies of all sizes from a variety of agencies, the Economic Development Team Leader made initial contact with all bar 4 of the major employers in South Somerset. This was followed up by visits to 47% of those companies. Not all companies wished to see an SSDC officer, but all were made aware of the business support that SSDC and its business support partners can provide.

Communicating and sign-posting the Recession Strategy

As part of the cross-department approach to delivering the Recession Strategy, colleagues from the Revenues and Benefits team were proactive with their assistance to local people affected by the economic downturn. A number of 'redundancy meetings' were undertaken across the district to provide advice and support to several hundred people facing redundancy. The team received good or excellent feedback from the work places they visited. The Revenues and benefits team are continuing with this support in 2010-11. There was also a benefit take up campaign for pensioner households that yielded a net increase of 174 households receiving council tax benefit resulting in additional awards of approximately £1/4 million this year.

The Revenues and Benefits team also reorganised and improved the provision of business rates relief's advice on the website to sign-post all businesses to the range of help that is available. So far in 2010 we have received 304 applications for small business, charity, rural and hardship relief applications. This is in addition to the 52 hardship applications mentioned above.

Inward Investment

South Somerset District Council remains committed to the principle of creating Inward Investment through the 'Into Somerset' partnership. South Somerset District Council is a founding member of the project and has committed funds from the Local Authority Business until 2011. The scheme is hosted by the Somerset Chamber of Trade in Taunton and promotes Somerset as an excellent county in which to locate, grow and

develop businesses. The primary aim of the scheme is to raise awareness of Somerset to regional, national and international audiences, whilst recognising that differing parts of the County have different specialist economic sectors and offer different skills sets.

Gerard Tucker is currently seconded three days per week from the Economic Development Team to the position of Inward Investment Manager for the Into Somerset programme.

Producing the new Economic Development Strategy

In 2010 consultants Ecosgen are undertaking two economic appraisals that will inform future economic strategy for South Somerset District Council.

They are currently completing an Economic Appraisal for Somerset (this is now a statutory duty for the County Council). This appraisal will result in an economic robust analysis for all the districts of Somerset and will provide guidelines and recommendations for the development of local economic strategy. The county-wide appraisal aims to investigate the uniqueness of local economies within the County and to apply 'economic geography' to the appraisal to help reflect local distinctiveness.

Ecosgen are also undertaking an economic appraisal for Yeovil. This is funded by SWERDA and is primarily intended to provide a refresh of the Yeovil Vision. The study cannot appraise Yeovil in isolation of the surrounding Market Towns and thus further detailed information on the nature of the South Somerset economy is being accrued.

These studies will result in the production of two strategic documents:

- The refresh of the Yeovil Vision
- A new Economic Development Strategy for South Somerset

Tourism

The tourism sector accounts around 6% of the value of the South Somerset economy. It is not one of the major economic sectors of the District but nevertheless generates large amounts of local spend with strong multiplier effects on the local economy. Most tourism businesses are of high value to local and rural economies. They tend to employ local people and they are strong supporters of local business and local supply chains.

The bi-annual Value of Tourism report from South West Tourism calculates that tourism in South Somerset generates around £160 million of economic activity annually from tourists and day visitors. The figures are calculated using the nationally recognised Cambridge Model for economic appraisals.

Most of this valuable economic sector is in the hands of small businesses, and many of them enjoy and rely on high standard of business support from our Tourism Officers

Tourism Business Support

2009 was a particularly successful year for support to small businesses in the tourism sector. Close links had been established with the Tourism Skills Network based with the Somerset Tourism Partnership at Moorlynch. Many training courses were run during the year ranging from customer care to advisory courses on new government regulations. Over 150 South Somerset tourism businesses attended these courses

A new Leaflet Exchange event was organised in 2009. This event was held at the Fleet Air Arm Museum and brought together approximately 50 tourist attractions and 140

accommodation providers. It provided a single venue for exchanging tourism leaflets and proved extremely popular and very useful to the trade. (The 2010 event has just been held at Haynes Motor Museum and has proved equally successful)

The Tourism team maintains regular contact with the trade through a bi-monthly newsletter. This has a circulation of approximately 500 businesses. This is circulated by email (or by post for those who request it). It provides up-to-date information on tourism trends, tourism news items from the regions, details of changes in legislation, and news of the training courses that are available.

The Somerset Tourism Partnership

The partnership entered its fourth full year of operation and successfully produced and distributed the third edition of the Visit Somerset brochure. This amounted to a total distribution of 250,000 copies. The conversion analysis undertaken by an independent research company (South West Research) shows that for every £1 that is spent on the production and distribution of the brochure, £38 is spent directly on the tourism economy of Somerset. The conversion rate for this brochure is therefore calculated at 38:1 and this we are advised is an excellent rate of return for a brochure of this type.

It is also the third year of operation of the Visit Somerset website. This is the County-wide tourism website that is generating around 2500 'hits' per day. It is a substantial website that includes on-line booking facilities. Indications are that the tourism industry is becoming increasingly reliant on the internet as the main means of promoting an area and individual businesses. It is believed that around 70% of all tourism trade is now influenced and conducted via the internet.

The partnership has a Sustainability sub-group that has produced car-free travel itineraries that proved very popular with tourists and were also picked up readily by the national media. National media coverage was also secured for a number of Area North businesses through selective and thematic press – releasing. Cider Country, Ham Hill and 'escaping the A303' all produced national press coverage for local businesses.

It should be noted that the budgets of the Somerset Tourism Partnership are directly affected by reductions in Local Authority contributions. The partnership is currently working with a private sector group (comprised of Somerset-based tourism businesses) who are willing to take on some of the marketing functions of the partnership. Closer partnership links with the private sector are likely to provide the best options for a sustainable route forward.

Tourism Publications

The tourism team produce a number of publications for the tourism trade and visitors to South Somerset.

Discover South Somerset is our headline publication. This is primarily a 'what's on' in South Somerset guide and consistently proves to be the most popular and best used of the publications. It is used by tourists and the trade to keep up to date with events and activities across the District .

Other publications updated for 2010 include; Market Towns, Classic Gardens, the 80 mile cycle ride and car-free holiday routes.

Tourist Information Centres (TICs) and Local Information Centres (LICs)

The Tourism Teams run two major TICs in South Somerset at Hendford in Yeovil and at the Cartgate Picnic Area. Both receive around 30,000 visitors a year and provide information and a range of services to tourists to the area (and beyond). Both TICs have

won Silver Awards for Excellence in Tourism in recent years and both continually record high scores (amongst the highest scores in the country) for their 'mystery visitor' accreditations.

The tourism service has always operated a small grants system for the network of LICs that operate in our Market Towns. From 2010 these grants were made available through the Area Grants process. The team still provides a full-range of back-up advice and support for the tourism aspects of LICs.

Heritage

The Heritage Team is based at the Community Heritage Access Centre (CHAC) at the Lufton Depot. They run two major facilities; one is the Museum Of South Somerset in Hendford Yeovil, the other is CHAC itself.

The Museum of South Somerset houses a range of exhibitions, displays and artefacts depicting the life and heritage of South Somerset. Exhibitions staged in the last two years include 'Hard Work', Innovation In South Somerset, Wings over Everest, Are you all right for Saturday? (an exhibition of local football history), the Hunter Collage (from Montacute House), Skillet and Cookery Utensil Exhibition and various photographic exhibitions. The current exhibition is entitled Museum Miscellany, it was assembled by our volunteers and takes a look at some of the more unusual and quirky items from the South Somerset Collection.

CHAC is a major depository for items currently not on display in either the Museum of South Somerset or in the Community Museums run by voluntary groups in many of our market towns. CHAC stores these exhibits under environmentally controlled conditions. The facility is open to group visits by arrangement and has received almost 3000 visitors in the last 12 months.

The Heritage Team also organise and support a wide range of outreach events. Our educational/ outreach officer makes approx 50 school visits per year that account for over 1500 service users annually. Major events such as the Country Fayres are well supported and this year the 'give one hour project' attracted tremendous interest when staged in Yeovil Town Centre. The service has over 30 volunteers who collectively contribute around 300 days of voluntary time. The volunteers are particularly invaluable in helping record and maintain the Heritage Collection.

Through a project partnership with Somerset County Council, we have secured the services of a Community Museums Officer one day per week. This officer works closely with Community Museums across the District offering advice on collections management, displays, visitor management and business planning. This programme will continue until at least 2011.

Our Community Museums Officer can be contacted on 01935 462829 (best day for contact is a Friday)

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications as a direct result of this report.

Corporate Priority Implications

The work of the Economic Development, heritage and Tourism Service supports the Districts Council's corporate priorities:

- Increasing economic vitality and prosperity
- Enhancing the environment
- Improving the health and well being of our citizens
- Providing cost effective and well managed services

Carbon Emissions and Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

None from this report

Equality and Diversity Implications

None from this report

Background Papers: *SSDC Recession Strategy 2009/10*
Value of Tourism Report 2008 (South West Tourism)
