

Area North committee – 23 November 2011

## 10. Area North Local Priorities 2011-12

*Strategic Director* Rina Singh, Place and Performance  
*Assistant Director* Kim Close/Helen Rutter, Communities  
*Service Manager:* Charlotte Jones, Area Development Manager (North)  
*Lead Officer:* As above  
*Contact Details:* charlotte.jones@southsomerset.gov.uk or (01935) 462251  
 areanorth@southsomerset.gov.uk (01935) 462252

### Purpose of the Report

This report is to provide an opportunity for discussion and endorsement of key priorities for Area North by Councillors at the start of the new quadrennial (2011-15).

The report also includes a summary of the current work programme and use of resources by the Area Development North service.

*[Please note:*

- *This report should be read in conjunction with the report from Financial Services in this agenda on the use of budgets under the control of the Area Committee.*
- *Councillors are asked to contact the Area Development Manager or other named contacts in advance of the meeting with requests for further information]*

### Public Interest

The SSDC Area Development Service supports four Area Committees and 60 ward members to identify and address local social, economic and environmental priorities for Yeovil, the market towns and rural areas of South Somerset, in Areas West, North, South and East.

During the year each Area Committee makes financial and other decisions to support changes led by the local community, as well as making its own investments, which together provide long-term benefits to the area.

This report proposes a set of working priorities, to use through the next 12-15 months.

### Recommendations

Members are recommended to

- 1) Endorse the three top priorities for Area North over the coming year, as set out on page 67.
- 2) Note the progress of projects and programmes as set out in this report and Appendix A.

## Background

In a rural area such as Area North in South Somerset, economies of scale can be harder to achieve for public services and private sector. Building on existing partnerships, or promoting voluntary action can assist to provide greater equity of service for local people. Lack of access may bring pressure to re-design service provision.

South Somerset District Council aims to address this challenge by promoting the local economy, by service innovation, and by building upon the local skills and knowledge found in local communities. The council's Area Working system; *'enable-partner-deliver'* ethos and its mission to be *'an organisation consistently improving local quality of life for all'* underpin this work.

## Introduction

A report to the Area North Committee in August proposed three key priorities for the coming year as a starting point for the new term, following council elections in May 2011.

Agreement on local priorities helps direct the allocation of time and of funds held within the Area Portfolio, and act as a basis for work with SSDC services, other public agencies and communities.

The draft priorities were discussed at the August meeting and further considered at a councillors workshop and tour in September together with a short questionnaire. Current evidence held by the Area Development service from local communities, town and parish councils, business groups and partners has been reviewed, together with consideration of the current economic and public sector environment.

Discussions and ideas put forward at the August committee meeting, tour, workshop and questionnaire, and meetings with ward members included the following points:

- In the future, due to funding restraints, affordable housing would be increasingly difficult to deliver – new models need testing and supporting.
- A focus on employment and supporting small-medium businesses to establish and grow is paramount due to the relationship between jobs and household income. Area North could be more self-contained. Small creative businesses offer potential for Area North. There should also be opportunities for apprenticeships and training.
- Faster Broadband is a key to further economic development and to retain competitiveness.
- Tourism should be supported as it brings huge benefits to the area. This requires proactive marketing including signage for businesses within towns and in the surrounding countryside.
- While the role played by agriculture has changed over the years, food and farming remains an important feature of Area North, and is an asset for the future.
- Most residents place a high priority on living in safe communities. There are changes to the additional resources available to support 'community safety', and a new approach needed between partners / agencies and community organisations.

- Supporting voluntary groups can help to achieve many aspirations of local communities, and the community development approach adopted by SSDC is often critical to success. Small grants can help move things forward very effectively.
- Investment into local amenities and facilities – rights of way, sports facilities and local activities are all important to residents. New development needs to take account of that and contribute. New ideas for example community land trusts, car clubs or community composting may contribute to sustainability.
- Ongoing community involvement in local leadership makes a difference to quality of life. Councillors – including town and parish councils – should help involve newer and younger people to play these important roles. Helping promote good practice in local governance is important. Devolution to Parish Councils can be a more efficient use of resources.
- Area North has a distinctive environment, including its historic buildings and environment. The National Trust properties, the extent of public rights of way and other areas like Ham Hill and the River Parrett are notable assets within the district. The Somerset Levels and Moors is a low wetland of international significance for bio-diversity, and its low levels means that a number of communities are especially vulnerable to flooding.

### **Current evidence of priority from parishes and communities**

There are numerous local projects and initiatives underway in Area North, showing continued high levels of interest in communities taking steps to help themselves. Community representatives or other partners such as the police, housing associations, and Somerset County Council can contact SSDC in a number of ways to seek help and support to address local issues, or make the most of opportunities, and there are numerous examples of current investment into social, economic and environmental services across Area North.

### **Issues / requests for help and support include:**

- Finding solutions to anti-social behaviour and crime, improving and protecting the local environment, both natural and built, and promoting safe neighbourhoods.
- Help to refurbish / improve facilities for community use to meet higher standards for access, energy efficiency, or due to increased population / demand for services.
- Requests for help to understand the processes and rules governing social enterprises and the means to establish, run and maintain facilities such as shops and pubs or other forms of business (including affordable housing). This is noted at a national level especially in rural areas, and a variety of different sources of support is now available.
- Interest in a community led approach to planning for housing, employment and facilities - particularly in the light of the Localism Bill and concern for the future of local jobs, affordability of housing and infrastructure.

- Making responses to the reductions in budgets and changes to public services. Recent months have included the closure of SSDC toilets in Stoke sub Hamdon and South Petherton, and reduced hours of the community office service in Somerton and Langport. SCC youth centre based evening sessions in Area North have ended, and there are plans to reduce hours in SCC libraries in Martock, Somerton and Langport, and to close the library in South Petherton. SCC support to voluntary groups for community transport and those supporting vulnerable adults is changing. Community volunteers and local councillors are working together to find different ways to continue to meet local needs.
- Parish Councils have raised the following issues at the recent Annual Meeting with town and parish councils, through their regular enquiries and through a questionnaire:
  - The need for broadband,
  - Affordable housing,
  - The need to protect employment and services from residential development;
  - Speeding through village centres;
  - The importance of local facilities including rights of way.

### **Conclusion – revised top priorities for Area North**

On the basis of the above evidence three top priorities for the Area North Committee (and Area Development Service) for at least the next year are proposed as:

- 1) **JOBS** – we will aim to add value to the economy in Area North, through promoting sustainable economic growth, assisting with the delivery of the Somerset Rural Broadband programme and enhancing the offer to visitors.
- 2) **AFFORDABLE HOUSING** – we will assist with the delivery of affordable homes in Area North, including support to test and develop new models.
- 3) **SELF-HELP** – we will promote greater levels of self-help to promote the sustainability of local services and facilities for all ages.

### **Resources to support the delivery of priorities**

The Area Committee's priorities are supported through the work of the Area Development team, together with an annual grants budget, and a dedicated allocation of the council's capital programme.

A summary of the previous five years capital investment for 2010-11 is included for information in Appendix B.

The Finance report, which is the next item on the Agenda proposes a number of small revisions to the current capital programme to better reflect current circumstances.

The following paragraphs highlight the current programme of work and investment supported by the Area Development service together with a few additional items of information, relevant to Area North. Further details of the current programme of support to community-led or community based projects is attached in Appendix A.

## **Supporting the provision of services and activities for the community**

Area Development North offers an enquiries service to help anyone within the area seeking guidance on ways to start up or develop a local service or amenity, or seeking help to address or resolve an issue within the community. People using this service include local town and parish councillors, volunteers, as well as individuals and businesses. Ward members will also request help or information from time to time to assist with their local leadership role.

Main requests are for guidance on project planning, sources of help and funding, SSDC community grants, equipment loan and printing for community projects. Issues / local concerns may also be raised and help given, or contacts given for other agencies / services. Answering enquiries can involve some additional research, but is often done using local and professional knowledge. Another benefit of this service is to build relationships with local community organisations.

A number of last year's enquiries have developed to the point where, with ward member support, they can now be seen in the main Area North work programme (see Appendix A), these projects are receiving help through officer time, and in some cases financial assistance. Current enquiries on a ward basis can be provided on request.

## **Community Offices and outreach work to promote and access to housing and welfare services**

Area North Development manages two SSDC community office services in Somerton (three days, 9 hours) and Langport (four days, 22 hours). There is also a weekly surgery based in Martock (3 hours) as part of our support to the local volunteers working from the parish community office.

In general demand for community office services continues to reduce due to the changing ways in which people access and use services. Access to housing and welfare services continues to be the most valued face-to-face service by more vulnerable customers.

To promote services provided by SSDC through wider community engagement our Area Support Assistants can make one-off visits to local community groups and activities. A short programme of three trial visits to Shepton Beauchamp, Ilton and Seavington took place in September / October, which proved successful and further sessions are planned.

The Housing and Welfare service have identified greater levels of demand for the welfare benefit take-up service in Area North and will provide additional hours using the service enhancement allocation carried forward from 2010-11.

*For further information on the above please contact either Teresa Oulds or Madelaine King-Oakley.*

## **Local Information Centres**

SSDC supports four Local Information Centres (LICs) in Area North in Langport, Somerton, Martock and South Petherton. The LICs are staffed by volunteers, and each parish has a local co-ordinator. Volunteers are provided with training in customer service and supporting visitor enquiries by the SSDC Tourism service. The Area North Development service monitors and supports an annual Service Level Agreement. Each LIC receives between £500 and £750 per year from the Area North community grants

budget to support the financial costs of premises and materials. Other costs are met by local fundraising and parish precepts.

Despite an increase in the use of the Internet for visitor information, the provision of a face to face service in the main centres continues to be valued by residents and visitors. The LICs also provide opportunities for a great deal of very local information and knowledge to be found and shared!

We are encouraging the different LIC groups to work together, to learn more about different aspects of Area North and to identify common opportunities to encourage more tourism to the area. This work links into the wider programme of the Market Towns Investment Group and Somerset Market Towns Forum.

*For further information on the above please contact either Teresa Oulds or Pauline Burr.*

### **Affordable Housing Programme**

The current programme includes work in ten parishes, mainly based on the 'rural exception scheme' model, but with alternatives being actively considered in the light of changes to funding schemes and the availability of land. There are two schemes in villages with planning consent, yet to be constructed. Small-scale schemes are likely to be between 2 and 10 units. The draft Core Strategy policy SS2 – development in rural settlements has caused positive discussions within a number of rural communities.

In the larger settlements around 99 affordable homes have been completed in the last 2-3 years in Area North, there are a further 56 with planning consent and a current application if approved includes 18 affordable homes. The draft Core Strategy indicates further growth to take place in Area North over the next few years and there will be a policy to secure a proportion of new dwellings as affordable homes.

A series of presentations to explain the current economic and spatial planning considerations for affordable housing was given at the Annual Meeting with Town and Parish Councils.

*For further information on the Area North Affordable Housing Programme please contact Jo Calvert [jo.calvert@southsomerset.co.uk](mailto:jo.calvert@southsomerset.co.uk) (Housing Development Officer) or Charlotte Jones.*

### **Neighbourhood management and community safety**

Area Development acts for SSSC at a local level to contribute to community safety through the work of Local Action Groups. The SSSC Community Safety Officer and Community Development Officer attend local meetings, to act as a contact point for SSSC and can advise on ways to resolve or address local issues. There are various schemes and initiatives to help promote community safety – many supported by the Avon & Somerset Police – for example Neighbourhood Watch, Community Speedwatch, and Farm Watch programmes.

There has been a considerable reduction in direct budgets to support community safety, and formal partnership arrangements are under review. A further update report will be made once new arrangements are proposed. The scope of community safety work for SSSC is also part of the current review of Area Working.



The September agenda included a report from the Neighbourhood Policing Sergeant, which can be read on this link:

[http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/media/354758/items\\_for\\_info\\_sept.pdf](http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/media/354758/items_for_info_sept.pdf)

There is also a great deal of information on current levels of crime and anti-social behaviour published on-line. The Neighbourhood Policing page which includes ward (beat) level information is:

<http://www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/LocalPages/SectorDetails.aspx?SectorID=20>

*For more information on ways to address community safety, or to find out more about current community safety issues in your ward, please contact Les Collett or Steve Brewer or the Area North Neighbourhood Policing team - to report a non urgent crime, discuss your policing priorities or receive crime prevention advice call 0845 456 7000 email [SSNSouthSomersetNorth@avonandsomerset.police.uk](mailto:SSNSouthSomersetNorth@avonandsomerset.police.uk)*

### **Community Planning – Parish & Town Plans, Neighbourhood Plans**

The Area Development service can advise parish or town councils thinking of producing a parish or town plan through comprehensive community involvement. There is no one way to this and there is no fixed template for town or parish plan either! Community involvement is based on the idea that many voices taking part in decision making is better than just one, and also that local discussion and experience promotes innovation. Drawing these voices and innovations together into a coherent framework requires leadership and governance. This is the aim of a parish or town plan – sometimes also known as a community-led plan or CLP.

For land use and spatial planning issues (with more specific advice coming from Development Management / Spatial Policy services) the new Localism Act has introduced the concept of 'Neighbourhood Plans'. The parish of Queen Camel has been selected to be part of national pilot programme. SSDC will encourage town or parish councils to wait for the detailed legislation to appear before starting down this route. Smaller parishes without an indicated level of growth under the draft Core Strategy may find that use of a sustainability appraisal supported by high-quality community participation, will act in a similar fashion to the ideas behind the Neighbourhood Plan, with ideas developed under the draft SS2 policy

A total of 16 parishes (out of 32) in Area North have a published town or parish plan – although 13 were published five or more years ago. Three parishes (Norton-sub-Hamdon, Long Load, Pitney and Tintinhull) have adopted Village Design Statements.

Somerton and Martock are soon to publish their refreshed town / community plans, and Stoke sub Hamdon, who will refresh their parish plan in the coming months. Shepton Beauchamp, Compton Dundon and High Ham are considering how to plan modest development through a sustainability appraisal and housing needs survey for the village to promote more sustainable places to live and work.

*For further information please contact Les Collett.*

### **Market Towns Investment Programme**

Langport & Huish Episcopi, Somerton, Martock and South Petherton are all members of the South Somerset Market Towns Investment Group (MTIG). Two representatives from each place join with representatives from Area West and East towns meeting around twice a year. SSDC has a dedicated capital programme to address priorities arising from

local community plans and support the local representatives to deliver their projects through a collaborative approach.

Previous work under MTIG has included reviewing protocols for CCTV and the purchase of additional cameras, and a series of environmental schemes to enhance gateways and town / village centres. In 2010-11 the district wide group worked to invest £167,000 into a programme designed to develop and sustain the value of tourism visits to the ten market towns – including £90,000 from SSDC. A further programme of capital investment is currently under development within MTIG.

*For further information please contact Teresa Oulds or Pauline Burr.*

### **Annual Meeting with Town and Parish Councils and engagement with local councils.**

Town and Parish Council liaison is part of the Area Portfolio for SSDC. This includes the arrangement of an annual meeting. This year's meeting for Area North was in October, attended by over 30 local councillors. Service representatives included the Somerset Waste Partnership, SSDC Streetscene, Development Management, Spatial Policy and Area Development. There were presentations from the Somerset Broadband programme and an Affordable Housing roadshow – a series of presentations from planning and housing services, and two housing associations.

Feedback from the event was positive, as is usually the case. Parish councillors particular value the networking session and the topics were of great relevance.

SSDC places a high value on strong links with parish councils. The time invested by ward members to attend regular meetings and act as a channel for communication is not to be underestimated. The enquiries which stem from this contact helps SSDC address local needs and to better understand the distinctive characteristics of each community it serves. In addition the district council provides a variety of advice and support to clerks and town / parish councillors from a number of service teams.

*For further details please contact Charlotte Jones.*

### **Other areas of community based work supported by SSDC / Area North Development**

- **Community facilities and activities development** – advice and support in collaboration with the Community Health and Lifestyles team. Current work includes support to complete funding for new MUGAs in Langport / Huish and South Petherton, together with the implementation of the secured / planned investments from s106 contributions.
- **Protecting Post Offices and other key village services** – this may include assisting a local community relocate a Post Office service, or providing support to consider local management of pubs or shops.
- **Economic development including tourism**, – this includes involvement with planning applications with an economic impact; developing links with the National Trust – a major source of visits to Area North, and collaborating with Somerset County Council to implement the Somerset Rural Broadband Programme. Area



North Development also supports the work of Local Information Centres and the Market Towns Investment Group – referred to earlier in the report.

- **Redundant land and buildings, conservation and environmental protection** – Area Development works closely with service teams including Development Management, Conservation and Environmental Protection to monitor land and buildings which are either underused for potential work space or housing and / or at significant risk of deterioration.
- **Somerset Levels and Moors** – SSDC maintains numerous links with other councils and agencies to promote sustainable management and development within the Somerset Levels and Moors. This includes the Somerset Water Management Partnership, and the Somerset Levels and Moors Programme – a grant funding scheme for small businesses and community organisations. Through the work of the Somerset Biodiversity Partnership, there is a current programme running to support the conservation of traditional orchards.

*For further details on any of the above points please contact the Area North Development team – [areanorth@southsomerset.gov.uk](mailto:areanorth@southsomerset.gov.uk) or 01935 462252.*

### **Financial implications**

None from this report. The current financial position of the Area North budget is included in the next report.

### **Corporate Priority Implications**

The allocation of resources by the Area Committee, including the Area Development Service work programme, has been fully informed by the SSDC Corporate Plan (2009-12), including priority outcomes and key targets.

### **Carbon Emissions and Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)**

None directly from this report. There are a number of local initiatives designed to promote carbon reduction and 'Transition' within the Area North programme.

### **Equality and Diversity Implications**

None directly from this report. The Area Development Plan includes a number of projects and initiatives, which actively promote equalities and aim to remove barriers to discrimination. The Area Development Equalities Impact Assessment and Action Plan is published on-line:

<http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/communities/equality-and-diversity/equality-analysis/>

**Background Papers:** *Local Priorities – ANC August 2011*

---