

South Somerset District Council

Organisational Assessment

Pre-publication version dated 03 December 2009

Provided under embargo



oneplace

for an independent overview
of local public services

South Somerset District Council

Overall, South Somerset District Council performs well

Managing performance	3 out of 4
Use of resources	3 out of 4
Managing finances	3 out of 4
Governing the business	3 out of 4
Managing resources	3 out of 4

Description of scores:

1. An organisation that does not meet minimum requirements, Performs Poorly
2. An organisation that meets only minimum requirements, Performs Adequately
3. An organisation that exceeds minimum requirements, Performs Well
4. An organisation that significantly exceeds minimum requirements, Performs Excellently

Summary

Overall, South Somerset District Council performs well. It scores 3 out of 4 for Managing Performance. It is good at getting local people involved and they rate its services highly. The Council is doing well against its targets and corporate aims. It is on course to deliver what it set out to do. Last year, it was one of the best councils in the country for improving its services. Some areas, such as recycling which were very good are even better this year. South Somerset now has one of the highest recycling rates in the country. There are fewer homeless people in South Somerset this year. The recession is making it harder for the Council to persuade house builders to build affordable homes. But it has been more successful at this than any other council in the South-West.

The Council has excellent relationships with other public and voluntary organisations. This helps deliver efficient services to residents. For example, local people are offered many activities to help them to be healthy and active. The Council gives extra help to people who are less well-off.

The Council is doing the right things to help the district be economically secure. Early in 2009 it produced a Recession Strategy to identify how it could help local people and businesses that may be affected by the recession.

The district is safe and clean and residents value this. Crime levels are low. More people in South Somerset than average are satisfied with the way the Council runs things and with the quality of the environment.

The Council scored 3 out of 4 for Use of Resources. It knows how and where it spends its money and compares its costs with those of other councils. It

looks for savings through better ways of doing things. It saved £300,000 in one service alone during last year. The Council also checks regularly whether it should keep or sell its assets. The Council has a good track record of making planned savings and it is working hard to make the £1.1m savings it needs this year.

Councillors and senior managers at South Somerset are good leaders. They know a lot about their communities and work well with each other. Scrutiny councillors could be better at following up whether their checks on performance are making a difference.

About South Somerset District Council

South Somerset is the biggest district in Somerset. It is a rural area with ten market towns. A third of its residents live in Yeovil but almost half of the population live in very small settlements.

The number of older people is high compared to the working population. The population is mainly white, with only small numbers from other ethnic groups. There is not much poverty in the area. Unemployment is low, but so are wages. Many people work in either the service industry or manufacturing. People are generally healthy, but people in the most deprived areas can expect to live 8 years less than those in the least.

The Council has a Liberal Democrat majority. The Council's vision is 'an organisation consistently delivering an improving quality of life for all'. Its five aims are:

Increase economic vitality and prosperity

Enhance the environment, address and adapt to climate change

Improve the housing, health and well being of citizens

Ensure safe, sustainable and cohesive communities

Deliver well managed, cost effective service valued by customers

Organisational assessment

Increase economic vitality and prosperity

The Council has a good understanding of the economic issues in the district and has done a lot to tackle these. It made good plans to help local businesses at risk from the recession. These plans include forecasts of the likely numbers of people who might lose their homes or need to claim benefits. Advice leaflets were given out telling people how it could help them. The Council now tries to pay all invoices within ten working days so that it can help the cash flow of smaller businesses. The Yeovil Innovation Centre provides an excellent and easy way for small businesses to start up or expand. There are already six businesses in place at the Centre. It is on target for 12 by next

April. A business ambassador service helps new businesses get the right advice and support from the Council.

The Council is leading regeneration in Chard - one of the more run-down areas in South Somerset. It is using Government funds to help bring stability and income into the town.

Enhance the environment, address and adapt to climate change

The Council keeps the area clean, tidy and looking good. Over 90 per cent of local people report that they are satisfied with the environment. It has Green Flag awards for three of its parks and Yeovil won a Gold award for Britain in Bloom. The Council helps South Somerset people recycle more than half of their waste, making it one of the top areas in the country. Its 'scrapstore' helped divert over 33 tonnes of waste from landfill sites. It has improved the cleanliness of streets and public areas. Nearly 69 per cent of local people feel the Council makes the district cleaner and greener.

The Council is using less energy and bringing down its CO2 emissions, but, like other councils, it has more to do on this. It has set itself demanding targets in its Carbon Reduction and Climate Change plan, including a hydropower project. All the Council's service plans now contain clear climate change objectives.

Improve the housing, health and well being of citizens

The Council has done well in helping local people to live in homes they can afford. It provided more affordable homes than any other district council in the South-West. With other Somerset councils, it set up the countywide Choice-Based Letting service. This gives people a bigger choice of homes to rent in a wider area than before. The numbers of homeless people in the district reduced from 135 last year, to 31.

The Council works well with other organisations and the public to improve the health and well-being of local people. The Street Initiative gives sports and urban dance experiences to many young people living in more run down areas. 60 new sports and exercise classes were set up in rural areas. 'Community health walk leaders' have led health walks for nearly 1000 people. Area Development Teams hosted several events last year to tell older people about the help they could get from public bodies. As a result, over 300 homes in deprived areas received free home insulation to help residents stay warm.

Ensure safe, sustainable and cohesive communities

South Somerset has relatively low crime levels. Over 92 per cent of residents say they feel safe in the area. The Council and Police work well together to deal with anti-social behaviour and crime. They bought new digital video

cameras small enough to fit on an officer's head ('head cams'). These have proved useful especially for cases of domestic violence, where they provide an important way of recording evidence and help to cut down violence. The Council uses these for environmental crimes such as fly-tipping, as a way of capturing evidence with less paperwork.

The district has many Polish and Portuguese migrant workers and the Council does a lot to help these newer communities feel part of the district. More than three-quarters of people living in the area feel that people from different backgrounds get on well together. By adding new translated pages to its website and hosting cultural events, the Council is helping people overcome language barriers and understand different cultures. The Council is also doing good work to help travellers and gypsy families. It won over £2.2m to provide new facilities in the district, including a site for travellers who want to manage their own location. A Council liaison worker specialises in keeping in contact with the travelling community.

The Council has made some progress in making its services fair and easy for everyone to use. Improvements include better translation of council information for people who don't speak English. Changes to the website were made for people with sight difficulties and extra equipment provided for people with hearing difficulties. The Council has more work to do in this area but is well on course to make improvements.

Deliver well managed, cost-effective services valued by customers

The Council provides good quality services that have continued to improve this year. During 2008/09 it ranked second in the country for improving its performance. Assessments and audits also showed that services were improving. The Council improved its planning service and the Government stopped carrying out extra checks on it.

The Council manages its services efficiently. It understands costs and performance. It also keeps a check on whether it's delivering its plans properly. The Council uses an improvement approach called 'lean thinking' to look for better ways of running services at lower cost. It saved £300,000 by doing this in its revenues and benefits service. The way it reports its finances is excellent. As a result, it achieved all of its aims last year and 96% of its aims are on target this year.

Customer satisfaction with the Council's services is generally good. Last year's Place Survey showed that almost 45 per cent of people felt satisfied with the way the Council runs things. This is slightly higher than the average for other councils in the South-West.

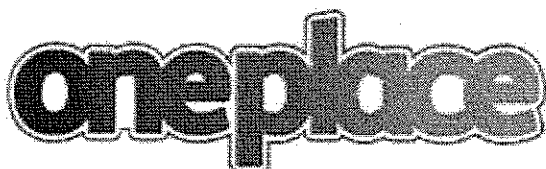
Leadership of the Council is good. The Council has very strong arrangements for talking with local people about things that concern them. Four Area Committees provide residents with an opportunity to decide how some of the Council's budget is spent. The Council also has good information on population trends and economic activity in the area. It uses this in planning its services with local people. The Council does well to get public and voluntary organisations together. This helps them make more of their money, skills and

ideas.

The Council moves with the times and is keen to improve how it works. It is helping senior managers to be more efficient by changing the way they are organised. It is moving from four Directors to two, with six Assistant Directors supporting them. This will help the Council deliver its plans and it will also save money. But the Council still has financial pressures this year and is working to save £1.1m.

Councillors are closely involved in making plans and in checking performance. Training for councillors is good and several have gained a BTEC qualification in community leadership. The Council has won Beacon Council awards for good work with local people. Scrutiny councillors have improved the way they check performance but don't always follow up on whether this is making a difference.

CAA looks at how well local public services, working together, are meeting the needs of the people they serve. It's a joint assessment made by a group of independent watchdogs about the performance of local public services, and how likely they are to meet local priorities. From 9 December you will find the results of Comprehensive Area Assessment on the Oneplace website - <http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk/>



for an independent overview
of local public services

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Telephone: 0844 798 1212

Fax: 0844 798 2945

Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

www.audit-commission.gov.uk