



SALC

SOMERSET ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS LTD

SOMERSET ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS LTD

ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022



Chairman's introduction

The last annual report that I introduced was in the midst of a Global Pandemic and in general covered events before that time. We had experienced major upheaval in the country. My comments here cover the main activities of the association up to 31 March 2022.

While still dealing with majority of enquiries through emails, the approach of delivering a service to our membership has changed significantly with both our Chief Executive Officer, Justin, and his assistant, Simon, in the main working from home and most meetings and training courses being delivered online.

The association moved from an unincorporated association to a company limited by guarantee from July 2021. This has not been without difficulty with a need to develop a business plan, establish new accountancy procedures and bank accounts.

At the same time the existing structures of local government in Somerset were under review. SALC was involved in hosting Q and A sessions on both bids for a new unitary authority. As a result of steering clear of being involved in the relative merits of two proposals to establish unitary local government in Somerset we have been able to continue delivering a service to our members and maintain relations with the existing authorities. The result was a Structural Change Order issued by the government in early 2022 leading to elections being brought forward in our sector to May 2022, and the replacement of the four districts and county council with a new unitary authority with effect from 1 April 2023. Our staff were involved in a lot of extra work prior to these elections.

Both unitary bids included the establishment of a system for local communities to work together to promote local priorities to the unitary council. The resulting local community networks will have a profound effect on the way that many of our members interact with their neighbours, statutory bodies, local organisations, and charities. Work commenced on the creation of a new parish charter and the establishment of a new Taunton Town Council, elections for which would take place in May 2023. This would result in all of Somerset being "parished".

During the period 2020/1 we were involved with Somerset County Council on an "Opening up safely" grant programme. This led to discussions with the county council to undertake a health and wellbeing project, an idea which, on a modest scale we had already been considering.

The year 2020/21 was the last complete year that the association was an unincorporated body, but because of the pandemic we were working in very different ways to our previous experience. The burden placed on the organisation planning for the re-organisation of local government and the expansion of training services stretched all of us and especially the staff. We concentrated on continuing to deliver a service and taking on new challenges rather than holding general meetings.

I would like to thank the county committee and subsequent board of directors for the efforts that they put in during the year on behalf of you, SALC's members.

I would also like to place on record my thanks for the work undertaken by Justin and Simon during a time of transition for the association.

Dave Mitton

Chairman of the Board of Directors

Somerset Association of Local Councils Ltd

Registered Office: Edgar Hall, Somerton Business Park, Somerton, Somerset, TA11 6SB

Officers and Board Members

The Board Members and Officers are those in office as of 30th April 2022.

Chairman

D Mitton

Chief Executive Officer

J Robinson

Assistant County Executive Officer

S Pritchard

Board Members

Mrs J Allgrove

Mrs J Lawrence

D Aldridge

E Jones

D Mitton

Mrs L Whetlor

P Seib

The Core Activities of The Association

To say that much has changed over the last two years at the association genuinely feels like an understatement. Our last AGM was held at the end of 2020 and in July 2021 we took the leap in moving over to a new legal entity as a limited company. Looking back over this period from 2023, SALC feels like a very different organisation. We now have four staff members, rather than two; we have navigated our way through Covid, and played our part in helping communities emerge from the pandemic by offering three rounds of recovery grants; we have played an active role in helping to shape local government reorganisation in Somerset, alongside securing £1 million of grant funding from Somerset County Council for a pioneering health and wellbeing programme.

Although this report technically covers the first year of the new company, from 1st July 2021 through to the 30th of April 2022, I would like to take the opportunity to introduce our two new staff members who have both hit the ground running since joining us in July 2022 and have already brought fresh ideas and ways of working to the association. We are most grateful to Somerset County Council for the financial support that has enabled us to expand our team during this key period of change within local government.

Sam Winter, our new Council and Business Support Officer, needs no introduction to long serving clerks and councillors, as her impressive local government CV already includes a period working at the association. Sam's legal, human resources, and workplace mediation qualifications and experience as a former town clerk has already boosted our advisory team capacity and broadened our knowledge base. Sam will additionally have a key role to play in supporting our health and wellbeing programme as it evolves.

We are also delighted to welcome Ann Diment to our team as our new Health and Wellbeing Officer. Ann has worked with a broad range of health and VCSE sector organisations and has brought a wealth of experience and contacts to the role. Ann is keen to engage directly with local councils to help find local, community-based solutions to tackle health inequalities in Somerset.

I would also like to thank Simon Pritchard for his hard work during this exceptionally busy period, and I thank our board of directors for their support and encouragement. I would especially like to pay tribute to Dave Mitton and Jean Allgrove who, after two decades of dedicated service to the association, will be standing down from the board at our AGM; we will all miss your wisdom, humility, and kindness.

Support Services

At the end of the last annual report, staff were working from home thanks to Covid lockdowns and the ever-shifting government guidance. Learning to work online and meet on Zoom has undoubtedly made the association more productive and able to engage in a broader range of conferences and events. Meetings that would previously needed to have been scheduled over several days could all be attended on the same day with no time lost to travel and expenses kept to a minimum.

As in previous years, most queries and requests for support and guidance were received by email, although the phones were certainly ringing when lockdowns occurred throughout 2021 and the opportunity to chat to clerks and councillors was very welcome at times.

When making an enquiry to SALC, it is helpful if the office can clearly identify the sender or caller by both name and member council, together with a contact number if you need us to call you back. It is important to remember that our advice is for the council as a corporate body and should be made available to all members. Having something in writing will help facilitate this, hence our preference for enquiries to be made by email when practical.

Our website also allows members to access useful information without contacting the office. Members are reminded, however, that the website can only provide for general advice and there are still many enquiries that will be best discussed with a SALC officer. I would like to thank Sam Winter for all the hard work and creative effort she has put into this vital resource for our members.

The office now receives around 2500 enquiries a year from members and partner organisations, excluding training and event enquiries. Whilst we have the expertise to handle the vast majority in-house, members also have access (through SALC) to specialist legal and financial advice provided by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). The NALC service has no additional fee as it is part of your membership and is a vital safety net, especially for very small councils who would struggle to afford the fees for a private legal opinion.

In addition, we have continued our association with the Parkinson Partnership to ensure that councils have access to professional financial advice as and when they need it. Steve Parkinson is one of the country's leading experts on local council finance and his knowledge of VAT legislation is second to none. If any member council needs help with VAT or any other financial matters, do get in touch and we will be able to provide you with a free and thorough professional opinion from an accountant, often in just a few days.

We have continued to focus on the outreach work we can offer to members and can arrange to meet with member councils online, often with very little notice, or face to face if required. We can offer support and advice on a very wide range of issues from basic procedural advice, through to handling complaints, conflict management, employment issues, salary benchmarking, finance/audit, business planning, community engagement, health and wellbeing, and charitable trusts.

With advance notice, we can also offer support at council meetings if requested by a member council. Occasionally we are asked to observe meetings and then produce a report for the council highlighting any issues or areas for improvement. Several members have also requested us to review projects undertaken by the council and to act as a "critical friend" when things have not quite gone to plan. In short, if a council is not happy with its governance arrangements, meetings, or individual projects/services, we can usually find a way to assist.

As always, we are open to ideas and suggestions from our members for both events and new services.

New Services and Projects

In addition to the traditional services offered by the association, there were three significant new opportunities to provide additional assistance to our members during 2021 and 2022.

As we began to emerge from Covid in 2021, we were approached by Somerset County Council and asked if we could come up with some ideas as to how some of the Covid recovery funding made available by the government could be passed down to town and parish councils. Although SALC had never run a grant programme before, the opportunity to ensure that local councils could benefit from £500k of funding was too good to miss and The Opening Up Safely and Reconnecting Communities Fund was swiftly born.

The grant programme had two main purposes: funding to help with the costs of safely reopening facilities or keeping them open (together with helping to cover some of the costs already incurred), and funding for projects and events designed to bring people together again, in a safe environment. I think we were successful in keeping the process as simple and light-touch as possible and over 100 councils benefitted from funding for a diverse range of projects: from the purchase of cleaning products and hand sanitiser, through to community get togethers, the creation of outdoor meeting spaces, and village hall refurbishments.

After what had been a very difficult 18 months, the grants programme clearly demonstrated that many parishes were keen to engage with projects to improve the wellbeing of their communities. It seemed that the next logical step would be to build on this work by running a wider health and wellbeing project if our funding partner (Somerset County Council) was willing to provide financial support for perhaps a one-year trial. Our discussions with the county council far exceeded these expectations and by March 2022, there was a firm offer of £1M of funding for a three-year period to provide the staff needed to manage a new health and wellbeing programme and provide a comprehensive new grants programme for the local council sector.

I would like to put on record our thanks to Jeff Brown, Service Manager for Stronger Communities at Somerset County Council, who has been instrumental in both new ventures; Jeff has been a pleasure to work with over the past two years. I would also like to thank the former leader of the council, Cllr David Fothergill, for his support. There will be much to report on about how the project has developed in the next annual report.

The final new project saw SALC partner with the Community Council for Somerset (CCS) in April 2022 to develop a new support programme for councils looking to start or review a community plan. Again, we are grateful to Somerset County Council for allowing us to use some of the unspent Opening Up Safely and Reconnecting Communities funding to support this project. The CCS Community Review scheme is now ongoing and has engaged with 25 town and parish councils who are either working on or preparing to start on a community plan. The scheme has provided training, resources, and one-to-one support to these councils, with the first new plans being produced as I write this report. The project will also leave a legacy of an online toolkit of resources for other councils who wish to undertake a community plan in the future. I am grateful to the CCS for all their hard work on this project and for making our idea a reality.

Training

A comprehensive training offer is a key service offered by most county associations and SALC is proud to be able to offer a broad range of in-house courses, together with access to specialist training provided by some of our partners.

All training for the 2021/22 period was offered online and more people attended sessions than would normally be expected outside of election years. Online training has enabled us to provide more sessions and not be too concerned about small numbers of attendees at sessions. Participants seem to have enjoyed not having to travel and being able to access training from the comfort of their own homes, but this can be disrupted by occasional technical glitches and poor broadband connectivity in some areas; a power-cut made one of my own sessions especially difficult. I would like to thank Simon for assisting with training delivery and developing new courses over the past 18 months.

2021 saw us continue to offer new training opportunities by partnering with outside agencies, thus allowing members to benefit from the knowledge of nationally recognised experts. In addition to continuing to promote the specialist finance training offered by Steve Parkinson, we also partnered with Breakthrough Communications to offer access to their comprehensive range of specialist IT and media related courses.

The association also continued to provide in-house CiLCA training for clerks. We are grateful to our CiLCA Trainer, David Mears, for all his hard work in making this course such a success. These courses were also made available to the Dorset Association of Town and Parish Councils throughout 2021 until they had developed their own training programme.

In addition to our standard courses, the association continues to offer bespoke training to individual councils, at very reasonable rates. Please contact a team member for further details.

Policy Issues

There has still been only limited interest in the Local Councils Award Scheme, which replaced the former Quality Councils scheme in 2016. There are currently three tiers of accreditation, allowing most councils to at least achieve the entry level. Submissions are now judged by NALC through a national panel of councillors and clerks. As of today, only two councils are currently accredited – congratulations to Frome Town Council and Milborne Port Parish Council

More of our clerks were also successful in completing the Certificate in Local Council Administration this year. It is now estimated that over a third of councils nationally either have a CiLCA qualified clerk or one studying towards the award. One major benefit is that having a qualified clerk remains one of the key criteria should a council wish to adopt the General Power of Competence. It is fair to say that staff recruitment and retention has been a significant national problem over the past two years, but it is good to see more councils referencing CiLCA in their job advertisements and providing the encouragement and resources to help their staff achieve this useful qualification.

Another way that councils can help with staff retention is to demonstrate high ethical standards and sign up to The Civility and Respect Pledge, developed by NALC, SLCC, and other partners. To quote the NALC website (where further details can be found):

“The Civility and Respect Pledge is being introduced because there is no place for bullying, harassment, and intimidation within our sector. The pledge is easy for councils to sign up for and it will enable councils to demonstrate that they are committed to standing up to poor behaviour across our sector and to driving through positive changes which support civil and respectful conduct.

We invite all councils to take the Civility and Respect Pledge.”

At a more local level, local government reorganisation (LGR) was firmly on our agenda throughout 2021 and 2022.

In 2020, our then County Committee had swiftly approved a proposal from Frome Town Council to jointly commission a report on the opportunities LGR might present for our sector and we were subsequently joined in this venture by Glastonbury Town Council and the Somerset Branch of the SLCC. An event for larger councils was held in Frome just before the first Covid lockdown was announced but the events planned for our other members had to be curtailed.

We remain grateful to Mel Usher for his work on the subsequent report and a great deal of useful feedback was received from over 70 other member councils before it was finalised. Ultimately, the recommendations from the Usher report found their way in to both the county and district unitary authority bids – something of a first for areas in the process of LGR where the views of our sector have often been ignored.

By 2021, both unitary bids were competing for government approval and the association was pleased to host several online Q&A sessions with both the district and county teams, culminating in a debate between both groups, with both sides passionately making the case for their respective bid. The association’s board choose to remain neutral as the views of our members were somewhat diverse on this complex topic. Eventually, however, the county council’s bid prevailed and attention then moved to beginning work on some of the recommendations in the Usher report.

Throughout 2021/2022, the association has worked with the unitary implementation team on developing proposals for Local Community Networks. SALC helped shape the content of the three parish conferences held to date, we worked with SLCC to develop a new parish charter for Somerset and participated in the new council’s implementation advisory board. Two of our board members, Dave Mitton, and Lorreta Whetlor, also tried to engage with Somerset West and Taunton Council as they began the process of creating a new parish council for Taunton.

Of course, this is just the start. We are yet to agree a final version of the charter and it will be fascinating to see the new LCNs in action as they evolve over the coming years. The process of change has been challenging for our principal councils and has left many in our sector wondering how the relationship between the tiers will change. Experience from other areas that have already moved to a unitary authority suggests that

very little changes, initially at least. For some larger councils, we will probably see more opportunities around asset and service devolution in the medium-term but for most of you, it should be business as usual. What I think has changed is the nature of the relationship between SALC and what will very soon become the new Somerset Council – we undoubtedly have a stronger voice now as an organisation and by continuing to work together with our members, we should be well positioned to make the most of what the new authority has to offer.

Justin Robinson, CEO

Chairman's supplementary comments on the work of the association up to October 2023

As it has not been possible to hold a quorate annual meeting since the change in status of the association, I thought it appropriate to comment on the work of the association since 31 March 2022.

If we thought that things might be settling down for us following the pandemic 2022 proved us wrong. Nationally we had three prime ministers and several changes in the secretaries of state with responsibility for our sector. Locally our familiar structure for local government was being wound up to be replaced in 2023 by a new unitary authority. The association undertook a major programme of training, this time online, for new councillors and chairmen. The association had been working with the Somerset County Council administration on our relationship as a sector with the new authority. A completely new administration took control of the new shadow unitary authority but thankfully, after a period of reflection, the general approach to our sector was continued in the same vein. With the Community Council for Somerset, we were involved in a community planning project.

A major new aspect of our work is that we embarked on an entirely new three-year project up to the end of July 2025 for expanding the role of our sector in Somerset in promoting health and wellbeing. This includes running a grant programme with the, then, county council promoting health and wellbeing. This has resulted in us employing two new members of staff for the period. Ann our Health and Wellbeing Officer and Sam our Council and Business Support Officer.

In establishing ourselves as a company we have had some major problems arising from the need to set up new, and close old, bank accounts.

In the build up to the establishment of the new unitary council and the elections brought forward in our sector in May 2022 the officers were involved in a lot of extra work and that has continued unabated with the elections and consequent training of new local councillors a year earlier than originally planned.

While still dealing with majority of enquiries through emails, delivering a service to our membership has continued with all staff, in the main, working from home and most meetings and training courses being delivered online.

The association was represented at a number of conferences run by the new team of the Shadow Somerset Council to establish local community networks and three pilot schemes were established to test out ways in which LCNs might operate. Work is continuing on the creation of a new Parish Charter. The association also met officers of Somerset West and Taunton leading up to the establishment of Taunton Town Council. We expressed our opposition to including surrounding parishes within the plan. With effect from 1 April 2023 and confirmed in elections in May 2023 all of Somerset is now “parished”.

The burden placed on the organisation, as a result of re-organisation of local government, the provision of new services (including a new website and policies) and the expansion of training services has stretched all of us and especially the staff. We have continued to concentrate on delivering a service and taking on new challenges rather than holding general meetings. Putting to one side the fact that we are now a company limited by guarantee as the report points out SALC today is very different from the organisation which existed in 2020. We have even had a change in the location of our office at Edgar Hall in Somerton.

The association faces further challenges in the next year. The chief executive has decided to move on from the association. Both Jean Allgrove and I are retiring as members of the board of directors. I thank all the directors for the efforts they have made on your behalf to date and especially Jean Allgrove who was a member of the county committee when I joined over 14 years ago. We are seeking the appointment of new directors to fill existing vacancies and to replace Jean Allgrove and myself. Thanks also to Jenny Lawrence, our representative to the National Assembly, and Loretta Whetlor (her deputy). Jenny has also ably represented us at meetings of the Somerset Playing Fields Association.

I would also like to place on record my thanks for the unstinting efforts by the Justin, Simon, Sam, and Ann during an unprecedented and challenging time. Without the support of all these enthusiastic and supportive members of staff the association would not be able to function. In particular, I would like to thank Justin for the work that he has undertaken for over ten years and to wish him well for the future.

Dave Mitton

Chairman of the Board of Directors

SALC Membership 2021/2022

Total Number of Parish Councils in Membership 257

Total Number of Parish Meetings in Membership 3

<i>Mendip</i>	<i>Sedgemoor</i>	<i>Taunton Deane</i>	<i>West Somerset</i>	<i>South Somerset</i>
Parish	Parish	Parish	Parish	Parish
Ashwick PC	Ashcott PC	Bishops Lydeard PC	Bicknoller PC	Abbas & Templecombe PC
Baltonborough PC	Axbridge TC	Bradford on Tone PC	Brompton Ralph PC	Aller PC
Batcombe PC	Badgworth PC	Burrowbridge PC	Brompton Regis PC	Ansford PC
Beckington PC	Bawdrip PC	Cheddon Fitzpaine PC	Brushford PC	Ash PC
Berkley PC	Berrow PC	Chipstable PC	Carhampton PC	Ashill PC
Binegar PC	Brean PC	Churchstanton PC	Clatworthy PC	Babcary PC
Buckland Dinham PC	Brent Knoll PC	Combe Florey PC	Crowcombe PC	Barrington PC
Butleigh PC	Bridgwater TC	Comeytrove PC	Cutcombe PC	Barton St David PC
Chilcompton PC	Broomfield PC	Corfe PC	Dulverton PC	Barwick PC
Coleford PC	Burnham on Sea &	Cotford St. Luke PC	Dunster PC	Beercrocombe PC
Cranmore PC	Highbridge TC	Creech St Michael PC	Exford PC	Brewham PC
Croscombe PC	Burnham Without PC	Fitzhead PC	Exmoor PC	Broadway PC
Ditcheat PC	Burtle PC	Halse PC	Exton PC	Bruton TC
Doultong PC	Cannington PC	Hatch Beauchamp PC	Holford PC	Brympton PC
East Pennard PC	Catcott PC	Kingston St Mary PC	Huish Champflower PC	Buckland St Mary PC
Evercreech PC	Chapel Allerton PC	Langford Budville PC	Kilve PC	Cary Moor (Grouped) PC
Frome TC	Cheddar PC	Lydeard St Lawrence & Tolland	Luccombe PC	Castle Cary TC
Glastonbury TC	Chedzoy PC	PC	Luxborough PC	Chaffcombe PC
Godney PC	Chilton Polden PC	Milverton PC	Minehead TC	Chard TC
Hemington PC	Chilton Trinity PC	Neroche PC	Monksilver PC	Charlton Horethorne PC
Holcombe PC	Compton Bishop PC	North Curry PC	Nettlecombe PC	Charlton Mackrell PC
Kilmersdon PC	Cossington PC	Norton Fitzwarren PC	Old Cleeve PC	Charlton Musgrove PC
Leigh on Mendip PC	Durleigh PC	Nynehead PC	Porlock PC	Chilthorne Domer PC
Litton PC	East Brent PC	Oake PC	Sampford Brett PC	Chiselborough PC
Lullington PM	East Huntspill PC	Otterford PC	Selworthy & Minehead	Combe St. Nicholas PC
Lydford PC	Edington PC	Pitminster PC	Without PC	Compton Dundon PC
Meare PC	Enmore PC	Ruishton & Thornfalcon PC	Stogumber PC	Corton Denham PC
Mells PC	Fiddington PC	Sampford Arundel PC	Stogursey PC	Crewkerne TC
North Wootton PC	Goathurst PC	Stawley PC	Timberscombe PC	Curry Mallet PC
Norton St Philip PC	Lymsham PC	Stoke St Gregory PC	Upton PC	Curry Rivel PC
Nunney PC	Lyng PC	Trull PC	Watchet TC	Donyatt PC
Pilton PC	Mark PC	Wellington TC	West Quantoxhead PC	Dowlish Wake PC

Priddy PC Rode PC Rodney Stoke PC Selwood PC Shepton Mallet TC St. Cuthbert Without PC Stoke St. Michael PC Stratton on the Fosse PC Street PC Trudoxhill PC Walton PC Wanstrow PC Wells CC West Pennard PC Westbury sub Mendip PC Whatley PC Witham Friary PC Wookey PC	Middlezoy PC Nether Stowey PC North Petherton TC Otterhampton PC Over Stowey PC Pawlett PC Puriton PC Shapwick PC Shipham PC Spaxton PC Stawell PC Thurloxtan PC Wedmore PC Wembdon PC West Huntspill PC Westonzoyland PC Woolavington PC	Wellington Without PC West Bagborough PC West Buckland PC West Hatch PC West Monkton PC	Williton PC Winsford PC Withycombe PC Withypool & Hawkridge PC Wootton Courtenay PC	Drayton PC East Chinnock PC East Coker PC Fivehead PC Hambridge & Westport PC Hardington Mandeville PC Haselbury Plucknett PC Henstridge PC High Ham PC Hinton St. George PC Horsington PC Horton PC Huish Episcopi PC Ilminster TC Ilton PC Keinton Mandeville PC Kingsbury Episcopi PC Kingsdon PC Knowle St Giles PM Langport TC Long Load PC Long Sutton PC Lopen PC Marston Magna PC Martock PC Merriott PC Milborne Port PC Misterton PC Montacute PC Mudford PC North Cadbury (Grouped) PC North Vale (Grouped) PC Norton sub Hamdon PC Odcombe PC Pen Selwood PC Pitcombe PC Pitney PC Queen Camel PC Rimpton PC Seavingtons (Grouped) PC Shepton Montague PC
---	---	---	---	---

				Somerton TC South Petherton PC Sparkford PC Stocklinch PC Stoke sub Hamdon PC Stoke Trister PC Tatworth & Forton PC Tintinhull PC Wayford PC West & Middle Chinnock PC West Camel PC West Coker PC West Crewkerne PC Wincanton TC Winsham PC Yeovil TC
--	--	--	--	---