

Annual Report 2020/21

Leaders View

The past twelve months has been dominated by Covid and Local Government Reform. A year ago we went into lock down, the councils were asked to invoke their emergency procedures to plan to help the vulnerable.

The Local Resilience Forum led the response at a county level. SNC were part of that command structure and lent staff as the various cells got up to speed. We worked to ensure that food parcels were distributed, homeless people were taken off the streets and our staff could operate from home. Our staff were heavily involved with the distribution of emergency grants that the government made available.

As we began to have the limited unlock in the summer SNC staff were involved with the return to business. Environmental Health staff inspected premises and gave advice on a safe reopening and Economic Development staff worked to ensure shops had signage and advice on how to socially distance and trade safely.

The routine continued through the second and third lock downs. Throughout members had regular briefings as to the strain on the local hospitals, bed occupancy rates, infection rates and sadly the death rates in the district and county.

Since the beginning of 2021 we have had the vaccination rates which has seen Northants make great progress in vaccinating all of our most vulnerable cohorts and we are now moving to second injection for the older population while moving down the age groups.

Throughout this the process of Local Government Reform has been ongoing. In April 2020 the government issued a revised Structural Changes Order to cancel the elections for May and create a Shadow Council made up of all the existing Councillors. Ian McCord, the Leader of SNC was appointed as the Leader of the Shadow Council and Jonathan Nunn, the leader of Northampton Borough was appointed Deputy Leader.

The programme for creating the new council was revised to scale back the ambition and get to a 'safe and legal' position on day one, Vesting Day, 1 April 21. The revised program has delayed some of the planned savings and integration by approximately one year.

The Shadow Authority met in June for the first time and three subsequent times, although the fourth meeting in February did require a second night to complete the business. The Shadow Authority has in place a budget, constitution, scheme of members allowances, and other policies and procedures that are needed to establish the new council.

Alongside the full Shadow Authority there has been a shadow executive that has the leader and one other member for each of the four councils. This Executive has met monthly and approved many of the plans to get the new council underway.

From 1 April to 10th May this is called the Interim Period when the old councils are abolished but the new councillors to be elected on May 6th have not taken over. During this period all the existing councillors will continue and the Executive will meet. If there is a need for a planning committee it will be the SNC, DDC, NBC existing committees that will meet to decide.

Looking forward, once the election is out of the way a new set of 93 councillors will set the policies and direction of West Northamptonshire Council. There are many decisions to be taken, for example office accommodation and where the council will have its headquarters. These have been quite deliberately left for the incoming new members and not the outgoing ones.

No matter what your view is on how we got to where we are, we now must leave the past behind and look forward. There are opportunities that the new council will create that we must seize. If we can get planning and highways to work more closely together, have housing and adult social care aligned and environmental health and trading standards all operating as one team our residents will be better served by better quality decision making. That is the new goal. A fresh start and bright future for all.

Planning

Local Plan Pt 2

This plan has been many years in compiling and sets out the future of our district for the next 5 years. It was consulted on many times by our parishioners both locally with exhibitions, on the internet and in our own publication SNC Review. It was adopted at full Council in July 2020 and form the backbone of current and future planning applications in our district. It has been used on many occasions since adoption to prevent speculative developers trying to build in the open countryside outside village boundaries. It also importantly identified areas within the district suitable for industrial development and it is encouraging that applications have already come forward for two of these sites which vindicates our choices.

Land Supply and appeals

Having a land supply of greater than 5 years is key to resisting developments in the Countryside and the fact we have one of at worst 5.18 has meant we have refused applications. We won a significant victory at appeal over a site of 300 houses in the open Countryside near Grange Park, following another successful rejection for a site of 50 houses at Rothersthorpe. We currently have about 6 appeals being considered by the planning inspectorate.

Virtual Working

Due to Covid the planning department have spent the last year working from home and planning Committee meetings have been held via Zoom each month. This has proved to be a total success and the department have dealt with more applications in the last year than before which is good as the number of applications being very high due to people at home deciding to alter their houses. The monthly meetings have operated well and have had some lengthy debates which have not been stifled by being held virtually.

Major Developments

Towcester South extension continues at pace and there are more than 500 properties now occupied on the site which has triggered first S106 payment to Sponne School plus the construction of a new primary school due to open September this year. Current development at Radstone in Brackley is drawing to a close in the current phase with in excess of 1500 properties being built. The new medical centre and Sainsbury's supermarket were completed and are in operation in the town as well.

Towcester Relief Road

This long-awaited road commenced construction in December 2020 and looks likely to be completed by 2023 well ahead of schedule mainly due to advance funding from the Government. There has been a lot of local discussion about the road and its future effectiveness in diverting traffic from Towcester Town Centre. However it will link the A5 from near the current Whittlebury turn across to the A43 south of current Abthorpe roundabout thus giving traffic the chance to circumnavigate the town and this will be encouraged by local road signage.

SNC Financial Highlights

2020/21 has not been a normal year! What should have been a "calm sea and a prosperous voyage" turned into the perfect storm. What should have been a year where we prepared for a smooth handover to the West Northamptonshire Unitary Council has been impacted by the covid pandemic which has generated a significant additional amount of work for many of our departments, not least in finance.

On top of the expected work of preparing the budget for the new authority, the billing of Council Tax and business rates across West Northamptonshire and arranging the transfer of assets, they have had to cope with a significant increase in the number of benefit claimants, last minute changes to business rates and enabling the payment of millions of pounds in grants supporting jobs and businesses across the District.

Council Tax

With the creation of the unitary authority the structure of the bills will change and the District and County amounts will be combined. Comparing the WNC bill with the previous County/District and Adult social care elements the bill rises by

5% for a Band D property. The Fire Service bill rises by 2% and the PCC element tops the list with a 5.1% rise. Overall, the tax increase is 4.9%.

As we need to harmonise Council Tax across the West over the next 3 years the rises in South Northants will be slightly larger. Rises in Daventry District will be higher still and slightly smaller in Northampton Borough.

Council Tax bill for 2021/22 for a Band D Property

Body	2020/21	2021/22	Change
NCC	£1,170.98	£1,396.61	
SNC	£196.33		
NCC Adult Soc. Care	£114.44	£158.89	
Total WNC	£1,481.75	£1,555.50	5.0%
PCC	£255.04	£268.04	5.1%
Fire Service	£61.97	£63.20	2.0%

Total	£1,798.76	£1,886.74	4.9%
--------------	------------------	------------------	-------------

Cost Increase from previous year	£65.53	£87.98
---	---------------	---------------

On top of this residents will be paying the Parish Council precept and if you want to know what a particular parish will be paying the full list is available on the Shadow Council web site as part of the [paperwork](#) for their budget meeting.

To help offset the increase for those most financially vulnerable the Council Tax Reduction Scheme has been set at 20%, a decrease from the 26.5% originally consulted on. A hardship fund will also be established to help those who face the largest increases and additionally additional support is being provided for those leaving care.

Council Tax Collection

South Northamptonshire always had an enviable reputation for the collection of Council Tax and we continued that in 2019/20 collecting 98.64%, the highest collection rate in all of Northamptonshire. We were the 27th best Authority in England, rising from 56th the previous year.

	Council Tax			NNDR		
	Rank 2018/19	Rank 2019/20	Change	Rank 2018/19	Rank 2019/20	Change
Ranking - England						
Corby	198	202	-4	181	202	-21
Daventry	134	122	12	118	72	46
East Northamptonshire	156	153	3	50	91	-41
Kettering	142	141	1	34	31	3
Northampton	254	243	11	210	189	21
South Northamptonshire	56	29	27	68	112	-44
Wellingborough	94	81	13	8	8	0
	% 2018/19	% 2019/20	Change	% 2018/19	% 2019/20	Change
Daventry	98.0%	97.8%	-0.1%	98.7%	98.9%	0.2%
Northampton	96.3%	96.0%	-0.3%	98.2%	97.9%	-0.2%
South Northamptonshire	98.5%	98.64%	0.1%	99.1%	98.5%	-0.6%
Average West	97.3%	97.1%	-0.2%	98.4%	98.3%	-0.2%

Government Grants

As a result of the pandemic business have been hit hard and the Council has fully played its part in providing financial support over the periods when businesses have been forced to close or had their trade significantly reduced during periods of restriction. This has required a significant amount of work as the Council need to balance the need to pass on

the funds as soon as possible but also ensure that claims are valid. We have worked hard to establish procedures that include the appropriate checks but also make it simple for businesses to apply for them. Because there have been many different types of grants, with different criteria, that are applicable for different time scales (for national restrictions, tier restrictions etc.) we have worked to streamline the process so that multiple grants can be applied for at once.

Government support for businesses affected by the pandemic has involved for certain support, Local Authorities distributing grant funding for businesses in their area. South Northamptonshire has seemed this year to have been a branch of the Brand Rishi Bank. This has also included individual funding for those having to self-isolate and not being able to earn. This will continue into the next year but will be administered by West Northamptonshire Council.



Grant funds are in addition to business rate support for business. Retail, hospitality and leisure businesses have benefit from not only zero business rates for 202/21 but lump sum grants of up to £25k. There are business rate reductions and further grant funding available for 2021/22.

To date some £4m has already been distributed to businesses in the area and this continues to grow week on week.

SNC Grants

SNC, for many years, has been able to use 50% of its new homes bonus to support local organisation across the District. In 2020/21 we have distributed nearly £700k to a variety of communities. In total, over the course of the New Homes Bonus scheme SNC has been able to provide well over £5m in funding through our grants scheme.

New Homes Bonus

Going forward into the Unitary, it is not proved financially viable to allow for this money to be donated to good causes and has had to be incorporated into the new Council's base budget. Next year will be the last year in which the scheme operates and during the course of the year the government will be consulting with Councils as to an alternative scheme.

Investment and Assets

During the course of the year the Council has continued to invest in the District in a wide variety of ways. We have been able to fund the acquisition of the Co-op car park, refurbish the toilets and continue work on the Watermeadows in Towcester. We have also ensured that the toilet block in the centre of Brackley continues to be open, arranging the license from the County for continued use and ensuring that funding has been made available to complete a refurbishment of the facility.

In addition, we have been able to sell the Town Hall to Towcester Town Council to ensure it's continued use at the Centre of the Town.

Financial Position

Although we will not have any final accounts for South Northamptonshire until well after the elections the Council remains in good financial state, as it has been for many years. The last figures that are published will be the monitoring report for January 2021. This indicates that the forecast out-turn will be an underspend of £290k. This is very creditable given the additional costs that the Council has incurred over the year as a result of the pandemic.

Wellbeing & Housing

Wellbeing

Community Resilience Hub

Since the end of March 2020 the Healthy Communities Team has led South Northants District's Community Resilience Hub. The Hub responds to referrals passed through by the county Covid support hotline. So far 287 individuals have been referred to SNC's Community Resilience Hub to arrange appropriate help and ongoing support. Some individuals had multiple requests, generating 329 requests for help in total. The requests for help have included 162 food deliveries, 114 prescription collections, 25 supports with loneliness, 3 items of mail posted, 7 supports with computer problems and 18 other acts of support including transport to medical appointments. There are currently 300 registered volunteers. The Community Resilience Hub works in partnership with local organisations from the community and voluntary sector and couldn't have delivered this response without their valued support. Organisations currently supporting the Hub and actioning referrals are Daventry Volunteers, BRC, Ability Transport, NERC (referred by central cell), SNC Customer Services Team, Tessa Matthews - Social Prescribing Link Worker, Good Sam App, SNVB and Cherwell District Council. SNC's Community Resilience Hub is currently providing on-going support to 100 individuals.

Ability Transport stepped in to help with collection and delivery of vital food parcels. At the height of the Covid 19 pandemic lockdown our Healthy Communities Team were working flat out to support our most vulnerable and isolated residents through our Community Hub. The team were ensuring that support was given to every resident in need. Every day vital food parcels were coming in to the District and being delivered out to our residents, which was incredibly challenging. Brackley and Middleton Cheyney were struggling to get their food parcels delivered into the District from Milton Keynes. Nigel Hinch of Ability Community Transport, which is part funded by SNC, stepped in to support us.

Towcester Centre for Leisure Refurbishment

Despite the leisure centre having to close due to Covid-19 restrictions the planning and preparation work for the refurbishment continued. South Northants Council funded the £1m refurbishment project which started in September 2020 and completed on schedule in February 2021. The refurbishment works include:

- refurbishment and refit of the wet changing rooms
- new and enlarged fully accessible changing room with hoist
- extension to the fitness suite, increasing square footage by 20%
- construction of the multipurpose studio, designed for yoga, pilates, meditation etc
- extension to the spinning room
- new reception area decoration and reception counter
- new flooring throughout the main areas of the centre
- high / low level painting and maintenance of the pool flume structure
- painting of poolside handrails and pool hall wall
- updating of dryside disabled toilet
- poolside hoist on site
- addressing all dilapidation work, the air handling units and the building management system

The leisure centre is now planning to re-open to members on the 12th April following Government guidance as part of a phased return to leisure and physical activity. Returning (and new) members will benefit from the high quality improvements delivered through the refurbishment programme.

Community Funding Grants

South Northants Council has been supporting community projects and voluntary groups across the district for the past 6 years with financial funding. During this time £5,692,410 worth of grants have been awarded to over 270 projects. The grant awards have supported both small community projects and big scale projects such as new facilities.

Financial Year 2020-21

In total for the financial year 2020-21 we have awarded a total of £654,882.70 to 29 applicants. The breakdown of the awards can be seen below;

Applicant	Project Outline
Adstone Old School Village Hall	Energy reduction project
Deanshanger Parish Council	Community volunteers / Good neighbours

Eydon Community Sports Field	Lawn mower
Road Village Hall & Playing Field Charity	Buggy access to playground
Towcester Area Door to Door	Community transport
Towcester Evening WI	Planting bluebells
Towcester Football Club	Junior Football Tournament 2021
Wappenham Parish Council	Millennium oak tree protection
Brackley Brownies	5th Brackley Brownies continuation of services
Stoke Bruerne Canal Partnership	Waymarking project
Boddington Good Neighbours	Good neighbours' setup
Yardley Youth Football Club	Youth football U9 & U11 winter training
Nether Heyford Playing Fields Association	Portable floodlights for Heyford Playing Fields
Greatworth Community Transport Association	Community minibus service
Ability CIC	Community transport
Boddington Parish Council	Recreational cycling in Boddington
Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)	South Northamptonshire Advice Service
Daventry Contact	Provision to SNC
Maidford Parish Council	Renovation and repairs of Maidford Village Hall
Renew 169 Wellbeing Café	Mental health project (2 years)
South Northamptonshire Volunteer Bureau (SNVB)	Brackley area volunteer car service (BAVCS)
South Northamptonshire Youth Engagement (SNYE)	Youth provision and support (2 years)
Towcester Studio Band	Development plan 20/21
Harpole Youth Club	Toilet refurbishment
Cogenhoe & Whiston Parish Council	Village hopper community bus service
Northampton Mens Own Rugby Football Club	Dressing room refurbishment
Racing Minds CIC	Men's mental health support group
Re-Solv	Boosting wellbeing and community resilience – today and tomorrow
Wootton Grange Bowls Club	New equipment
South Northamptonshire Volunteer Bureau (SNVB)	Minibus
South Northamptonshire Volunteer Bureau (SNVB)	Rural Information Centre
Daventry Volunteer Centre	Happy at Home Project

Leisure and communities Section 106 developer contributions

Work has progressed to support our local sports clubs and Town and Parish Councils to access SNCs allocation of S106 funding for leisure and communities. The following projects have had funds agreed and our Leisure Facilities and Contracts Officer continues to build a future pipeline of projects. Roade Football Club - £6,000, Middleton Cheney Academy, £11,000, Brackley Cricket Club - £67,000, Brackley Bowls Club £36,000, Mens Own Rugby Club - £19,000, Brackley Squash Club - £17,000 and Roade Library - £89,758.

Building Stronger Communities Strategy

This Strategy was adopted by the Council in December 2020. The Strategy was co-produced and led by the Healthy Communities Team with input across SNC and from key partners including community and voluntary groups, Public Health, Northampton Borough Council and Daventry District Council. Supporting documents include seven Factsheets providing a detailed evidence base of data for South Northants. This includes a factsheet dedicated to the impact of Covid-19 and how the strategy aims to address this. The Strategy has four themes to deliver improved services to South Northants residents:

- People: Enable residents to live safe and healthy lives
- Engagement: Enable more residents to participate in building stronger communities
- Resilience: Build the capacity to deliver meaningful interventions for local communities
- Place: Create identity, culture and connection to the district

Key early pieces of work will look to build upon the support networks and address issues highlighted by the pandemic. There will also be an eye on the opportunities to upscale project delivery across the new West Northants Authority. The work focus will include:

- Reduce isolation and loneliness within our communities
- Expand involvement in volunteering and mentoring
- Address inequality in access to food and other essential resources
- Create better connected communities through improved community transport links.

The Healthy Communities Team and supporting Officers worked incredibly hard to develop this strategy to drive community development across our District. With our move into West Northants Council a communities strategy takes on an even more important role. This strategy will reflect the local needs of our residents and deliver local outcomes ensuring the needs of our residents are met and not lost during the transformation. The design of the strategy took a co-production approach, which has been important for the success of the strategy as we cannot deliver all the priorities alone. This has been delivered through three phases. Phase 1, during January and February this year stakeholder workshops, 1-1 conversations and small group conversations took place with our community and voluntary organisations and Parish & Town Councils. Phase 2 saw the theme focussed workshops with relevant community voluntary organisations. Due to the pandemic, Phase 3 was put on hold until July when a survey was launched, further 1-1 conversations were held and a Members workshop, this enabled stakeholders to tell us how they can contribute towards the objectives and give us their ideas for how we can deliver these. Officers consulted with Daventry District Council & Northampton Borough Council colleagues. They then consulted with our residents across our district and finalise the strategy.

Towcester Watermeadows Project

The project work at Towcester Watermeadows has been broken down into 3 phases.

Phase 1 has been funded by a grant from the RDPE (Rural Development Programme for England). This part of the project takes place inside the entrance to the Watermeadows on Northampton Road. Red Kite Network are an independent practice providing specialist landscape, ecology, green space and environment consultancy. This phase sees the creation of a gateway and welcome area with signage and historic information into the Watermeadows from Northampton Road. Here will be a children's play area and a picnic area. There will be new pathways to enable easy walking with pushchairs, wheelchairs and mobility scooters, and a decking area at the Bury Mound entrance. This work is scheduled to start in the next few weeks but is subject to the current covid lockdown, contractors ability to work and the supply of materials.

Phase 2 puts in a network of 2m wide bound Breedon gravel pathways and seating around the northern field for informal recreation, again giving a clear access for waking, pushchairs, wheelchairs and mobility scooters.

Phase 3, the southern field, is funded by a Water Environment Grant to support river habitat and flood alleviation improvements. The works have been informed by a feasibility study undertaken by Five Rivers Environmental Contracting. Five Rivers are specialist environmental contractors who deliver ecological mitigation works, habitat creation and mitigation, and habitat management services. This work will see the removal of the dilapidated weir in the River Tove and associated mitigation to the upstream river and work to create a small meander to the river in the southern field and some lowering of the river embankments. Focus is to preserve the natural habitats, management of the meadow and grassland, biodiversity and birdlife. This phase of river works are more complicated and require further consultation, we hope that work will start in the Autumn.

Our Healthy Communities Team are working in partnership with key stakeholders to deliver as much of our proposed Action Plan, which sits within our Sports & Leisure Strategy and our Stronger Communities Strategy, as possible. Currently activity delivery is very much dependent on Covid restrictions. The Team have written an Activity Action Plan to compliment the Watermeadows project. This plan draws together a co-ordinated delivery of activity across a wide range of interests to maximise the overall of the Watermeadows. Activity includes physical activity sessions including the popular Park Run, community events, arts projects, historical and biological information sessions. Delivery of the Activity Plan, which will be led by the Healthy Communities Team is on hold until Covid restrictions allow activity to progress. The team continues to keep communicating with key partner organisations who will support the delivery and will input into the communications plan to ensure effective promotion of activity.

The Watermeadows remain open to the public during the current Covid lockdown for people to exercise in, walk their dogs and enjoy while observing social distancing.

Delivering 'Active Lifestyles' through the pandemic

Keeping our Walking Football programmes going. Sessions in Towcester and Blisworth have continued through a mix of face to face delivery and online activity. In total 74 walking football sessions have been delivered since April 2020. 52 older people have registered for the Walking football programme with a total participation of 1097 across both

locations. During the periods of lockdown where face to face delivery has been prohibited Kieren, SNCs Youth Activator has organised a popular weekly Quiz and Catch up for participants. Both Sessions are set to return at the end of March 2021.

Wildcats football coaching programme for girls. Since April 2020, 19 sessions have been delivered in Towcester. Wildcats has 32 girls registered and the total participation across the 19 sessions has reached 324. Due to Covid-19 16 sessions have been delivered online through video calls and online training videos. Face to face delivery is set to return on 31/03/2021.

Supporting children not in mainstream education through home education programme. Since April 2020, 17 sessions have been delivered to a total of 31 children. The sessions have averaged 13 children, with overall participation totalling 224 attendances. Due to Covid-19 online content has also been delivered and weekly sessions have continued through Zoom. Sessions are set to return to face to face delivery from 31 March 2021.

Online activities. As well as sessions being delivered in a virtual way to regular participants of the Youth Activator Sessions, Kieren produced a total of thirty daily challenges for the community to take part in during Lockdown 1. He has also used the Playwaze app and encouraged families to download and join in challenges set during February 21 half term. We had a total of 26 members register.

School holiday activity programmes. The Covid 19 restrictions and government guidance have meant we are unable to provide our activity programme through the school holidays for children and teenagers. The Healthy Communities team working on a range of virtual activities and sports to keep children and teenagers active and engaged during the holidays.

There are lots of ideas and information on our website to help children and adults keep active at home.

Arts Development

Because of restrictions on physical activities, which stopped all cinema, live performances and Taking pART workshops, 'development' has been more about finding alternative ways for arts groups to keep going, so work has mainly been keeping the networks active, learning new ways of communicating and planning for the future in a very flexible way. The key achievements through the past 12 months include the adaptation of the monthly Arts Events Calendar to provide frequent Arts News updates on resources and useful information for the voluntary and professional arts sector (email and web pages plus social media), facilitation of creativity packs distribution to needy families with young children during the first lockdown.

Sue Carverhill, SNCs Arts Development Officer did a fantastic job putting together The Big Green Draw to get our district drawing and she has been extra busy this week being interviewed by BBC Radio Northampton and the Brackley Community Radio to spread the word. The Big Green Draw Festival is a worldwide celebration of drawing, that takes place each year to promote the universal language of drawing. The theme of this year's festival was 'A Climate of Change'. Sue gave our residents the opportunity to take part by creating a **'Postcard for the Future'**. Residents were invited to create and contribute pictures with a few words to express their vision for the future, either locally or globally. The pandemic has impacted people in many negative ways, but the reflective and expressive act of observing and drawing or painting is very beneficial for children and adults, especially when combined with time spent in natural environments. The contributions were collected and shared and displayed in the front windows of The Forum and also online.

[Northants Cultural Education Partnership](#) in collaboration with SNC and Northamptonshire Music and Performing Arts Trust hosted a 'free' songwriting and wellbeing course for 7 -12 year olds with additional learning needs, in February. The sessions will take place on Zoom with singer, songwriter and vocal coach Sophie Garner. Participants received a copy of [Sophie's Creative Songwriting Journal](#) ahead of the online sessions. Over the five days everyone created their own original song and learnt about how singing can help our mental and physical health.

South Northants Art Trail in October saw all 37 venues taking part. The event was well adapted with social distancing and the opportunity to book specific time slots to see the artists and their work. This insured the control of numbers of people at the private studios.

Computer support for school children. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the divide that exists between those young people who have their own computer and those who do not have access to one at home. Our IT team have risen to the challenge of covid and already offered up 20 redundant laptops for use by local families in desperate need of IT equipment while they home schooled their children during lockdown. Normally laptops would be taken by an IT company and reconditioned for onward sale. Our two IT Service Desk staff have reformatted the laptops and reinstalled Windows 10 so that they are ready for use. SNC identified an urgent need for 200 computers where children are not

able to participate fully in lessons due to not having appropriate equipment at home. It is great news that SNC has been able to play a small but important part in this project. So far, the first ex-SNC laptops have been delivered to Blakesley School and Kislingbury School. These computers will definitely help make home learning a little bit easier for those families that need it. This work is ongoing.

Towcester Food bank

Through the pandemic the Healthy Communities Team have worked closely with the Foodbank in Towcester and other local food organisations like the Community Larder, who have risen to the challenges of Covid. SNC supported the food bank to find a temporary secure location big enough to handle the larger food stores required and to allow volunteers to work at a safe distance from each other. We are very grateful to the volunteers for their work and our local supermarkets for providing food and financial donations to the Foodbank. We have some wonderful local Royal Mail workers collecting food as they drop off the post. Addressing the inequality of access to food for some of our most vulnerable residents is a key priority of our Building Stronger Communities Strategy. This work will continue as a priority for the new West Northants Council.

SNVB

The SNVB (South Northants Volunteer Bureau) have had to adapt their service offer since March 2020 as many of their regular programmes have been restricted by Covid-19. The volunteer bureau has supported a new influx of volunteers who have offered their time during the pandemic. The mini bus service is one example of how SNVB has adapted, using their mini bus to provide a vital service in collecting and distributing food parcels to vulnerable residents in our district. South Northants Council has committed to continue financial support to SNVB for the first 12 months of the new West Northants Authority.

Parish and Town Council Clerks/Chairmen's Forum

The Healthy Communities Team have continued to communicate with Parish and Town Councils throughout the pandemic. Three virtual forums have been delivered as a way of keeping Clerks and Chairmen updated. Local Government Reform has been a constant agenda item. Other updates have included The Building Stronger Communities Strategy, Planning, 2021 Census, Housing Services, SNC Community Resilience Hub and emergency Covid support to residents. The Healthy Communities Team will continue to organise the virtual forum until face to face meetings are allowed.

Parish newsletter

Since going into National Lockdown mid-March 2020 the Healthy Communities Team has continued to keep in touch with Town and Parish Councils through a regular newsletter. Fortnightly newsletters from April 2020 moved to monthly from September and include important updates including the Community Resilience Hub and SNC's emergency response to Covid-19, local and national funding opportunities, housing support services, economic support for local businesses, opportunities to take part in physical and wellbeing activity, planning updates and climate change news. In total 12 newsletters have been sent out to Town and Parish Councils through the year.

The 2021 Census

Town and Parish Councils have been informed about the 2021 Census through presentations at two virtual Parish Forums. Information has also been included within the Town & Parish Newsletters.

Saturday 27 June was Armed Forces day and a chance to show our support for the men and women who make up the Armed Forces community, from currently serving troops to Service families, veterans and cadets. Reserves Day provides an opportunity for the country to recognise our Reserve Forces. Showing support for the Armed Forces provides a much valued morale boost for the troops and their families. Seven years ago all the local authorities in Northamptonshire signed the Armed Forces Community Covenant. This covenant is a voluntary statement of mutual support between the civilian community and its local Armed Forces Community. Its purpose is to encourage support for the Armed Forces Community working and residing in South Northants and to recognise and remember the sacrifices they made. For ourselves and partner organisations, the Covenant presents an opportunity to bring our knowledge, experience and expertise to bear on the provision of help and advice. The covenant encourages the integration of service life into civilian life and encourages members of the Armed Forces to help their local community. Celebrating Armed Forces Week is part of our commitment to those who have served and those who do serve, to ensure we give them the gratitude, compassion and practical help they deserve. And just because we live in a relatively peaceful time, that does not mean they are any less important.

The 2020 British Legion Poppy Appeal.

We were able to once again support the British Legion Poppy Appeal with thanks to Waitrose in Towcester who gave the British Legion permission to set up a socially distanced stall in the empty trolley bay at the front of the store. Volunteers were situated outside but under cover. PPE masks, gloves and hand sanitiser were provided and a card reader for contactless payments.

Towcester Youth Coffee House (TYCH)

TYCH launched two new schemes to support our young people in Towcester and the right across the district during the Covid 19 pandemic. TYCH were unable to open their building to young people during lockdown and therefore thought about what they could be doing to support our young people. They provided Loggers@ which an on-line forum for 11-14 year olds. The hour long virtual youth club has been held on Thursday evenings. The sessions are fun filled with activities including quizzes, treasure hunts and escape rooms. Hosted by two volunteers and each session being recorded will ensure that the young people and volunteers are acting in a safe and secure environment. The good news is that, if this venture proves a success within our more isolated and rural communities, TYCH will continue to run the group even after the pandemic comes to an end. They also offer 123BPM, an outdoor, Covid secure physical fitness session. Cleverly thought out, the title of the club represents the optimum heartbeats per minute for an average 15 year-old in order for the exercise to be beneficial to their health and wellbeing. 123BPM sessions are run twice a week enabling a session for 7-9 years and one for 10-13 years.

The Renew169 Wellbeing Cafe in Towcester is supporting its visitors during the lockdown 'virtually'. The café has been able to continue to operate virtually for their visitors and has several new people joining the group. They are holding virtual coffee afternoons which gives people the chance to connect, chat and take part in an activity. Specific events and activities provided include quizzes, language lessons, reading, writing and singing for wellbeing, a photography group and a book club. The café continues to work in partnership and share information with other organisations including MIND and IAPT through their Facebook page.

Housing

Rough sleepers

At the beginning of the Covid pandemic the Housing Teams reacted immediately to support the rough sleepers in our district. Officers worked with County colleagues supporting the county response to rough sleepers to ensure everyone was given temporary accommodation. Work is now taking place to outline what the future offer will be for rough sleepers. The Housing Team have compiled a report regarding SNCs temporary accommodation options, which details the current position. The ultimate aim will be to support those who have been sleeping rough to access longer term housing solutions in order to resolve their homelessness. This approach will differ depending on the specific needs and requirements of the individuals and conversations are currently taking place as to possible housing solutions.

Free school meals. Our Housing Options & Strategy Team are working with partners in the West Northants locality to support the roll out of Free school meal vouchers for eligible pupils across Northamptonshire through the school holidays. Assistance has been provided in the form of supermarket vouchers distributed by schools.

Housing Full Internal Audit. Our Private Sector Housing Team received flying colours in their full internal audit. The service were awarded overall 'significant assurance' and highlighted that the Council has sound procedures in place for administering 'Disabled Facilities Grants'. Four out of the five areas tested were given full assurance with the fifth 'significant assurance'. This fifth area was in recognition of the difficulties in progressing grants during Covid-19 and were deemed to be largely outside of the team's control. This recognises all the hard work put in by the team to make sure we provide a great service to our residents of South Northants, and we intend to continue to build on this success. I am so proud of our team, this proves the enthusiasm and dedication this team has to providing residents with much needed adaptations in their homes, which has included discretionary grants to help people in difficult situations that might not have otherwise got help. Their commitment continues through the challenges Covid brings.

We extended our revision to the Discretionary Disabled Facilities Grant (DDFG) criteria to continue though the pandemic to provide swift assistance to help disabled residents when the usual route of a mandatory disabled facilities grant would present delays owing to social distancing rules and practices implemented by The Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020. Our Discretionary Housing Grants Policy 2018 introduced the opportunity to take advantage of the grant flexibility provided by the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002 and led to the implementation of two discretionary adaptations grants. The DDFG contributes to achievement of the corporate priorities in the Corporate

Plan 2020 to 'Support our residents to live independent and settled lives'. It is a discretionary grant of up to £10k to help qualifying residents were the mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) process would result in an inappropriate delay in the delivery of the required adaptations.

Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) provision and its provision as we go into West Northants.

The grant funding SNC receives for DFG's is ringfenced, therefore it cannot be spent on anything else. This will continue when SNC transfer to West Northants Council. Any remaining DFG monies at the end of this financial year will be transferred to WNC and be ringfenced for DFGs within the current SNC district. The DFG grant available for this financial year was £699,781. This included a carry forward from the previous financial year. The anticipated spend as of December 2020 was £648,000, however it is likely that the level of expenditure may reduce, any unspent monies will be transferred to a South Northants locality DFG pot within WNC.

Customer Services & IT

A year ago I wrote that in April we would split our customer services teams from Cherwell. In fact we were in an early trial of running this service in March 2020 when Covid – 19 ground everything to a halt.

We could not have foreseen we would go into the Covid-19 Lockdown just as Council Tax bills were going out to our residents and business and the Election for the new Shadow West Northants Council due in May 2020 would be postponed until 6th May this year.

The Forum was closed but our staff were incredible and laptops were provided and we were able to set up the telephone service through laptops and customer services were fully operational in our staff's own homes which was an amazing achievement.

With our communities unable to work normally access to information was essential and our website came into its own and whether you called emailed or went on line you were able to get the information and services you needed.

Our Customers services team have been exceptional with a consistence answering of over 94% of all telephone calls received in less than 30 seconds,

I am delighted this team will be with us in the new West Northants Council which starts on the 1st April, it has been a roller coaster journey this last year.

We were able to maintain and deliver to our residents our quarterly SNC review which was so important in keeping you informed of what SNC was doing in the district.

I am proud of the legacy we are leaving for our South Northamptonshire residents as we form the new West Northants Council it is good to know we will be able to deliver even better services to you all as we will now have all functions of responsibility which in future means only one point of contact for anything you need to do rather than before when having to contact either the District Council or the County Council.

For the Council continuing to operate we have all adapted well to online meetings and I am delighted with the way Members and Officers have ensured the legal functions of the Council have been delivered, Zoom has been very useful but as we all know a meeting in person is what we will all look forward to which we hope will be able to do in a few months' time.

Waste and recycling

We are very proud that we were able to continue a full waste and recycling service throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Thanks must go to all our staff, in particular the crews, who worked on despite the difficult situation. During that period there were unusual fluctuations in the amount of waste and recycling collected. This has been put down to so many staying at home, where more food was consumed than usual and a greater use of takeaway meals and home deliveries. There were also many households which, at the start of the lockdown, took the opportunity to have clear outs, as well as a large amount of DIY work carried out resulting in extra tonnage. Probably and mainly for the same reason, fly

tipping increased. Waste and recycling tonnages increased in all areas - garden, blue bin recycling, black bin rubbish and food.

Some of the vehicles have been replaced with new ones and the collection vehicles with pods will be phased out by the end of the year. Instead, the new vehicles have more capacity with dedicated vehicles being used instead for food collections. This reduces costs and is more efficient.

One of the first council staff Lateral Flow Testing stations in the county has been set up at the depot. This offers rapid Covid tests to all SNC staff that cannot do their jobs entirely through home-working and aims to identify any staff who are asymptomatic.

Going forward, the Tove Depot operation in Towcester is ready to become part of the new West Northamptonshire Council from 1st April and residents will still receive the same service and options as before.

Environmental Health

The last year has been very tough for everyone working in all areas of Environmental Health. The opening and closing of public facing services such as retail, pubs and restaurants in a Covid secure manner is one side of the work that has had its own difficulties, including monitoring the lawful operation of premises during regulated periods. The takeaway sector has been particularly busy with the added situation of new businesses starting up to serve this enlarged market. With restrictions on visits, assessing and monitoring these businesses has been especially hard. The team has also been involved to a greater extent in the Covid work providing the infection prevention and control response to outbreaks in care homes, schools and workplaces. The team has assisted, the county with Track and Trace, where South Northants residents have been difficult to contact. They have worked with the police on joint compliance issues and also provided mutual aid support to other parts of the county, where Covid cases were at a more severe level.

Licensing

Like the Environmental Health team, their licensing counterparts have been working with Covid in addition to their usual work. They are working side by side with their Environmental Health colleagues, monitoring the situation to ensure the rules are not being breached. If that was not enough, they are further working with their colleagues in Daventry and Northampton, with the goal of harmonising licensing policies for the new unitary. The most difficult area being taxi licensing.

Moat Lane

The Towcester Moat Lane Regeneration Scheme has almost reached completion and is arguably SNC's greatest legacy. The result is the transformation of an unsightly part mainly wasteland adjacent to the town centre into desirable housing, an historic site, new shops, and the acquisition of the Watermeadows as high quality public open space. On top of this is the building of the Forum civic building and acquisition of no less than four car parks, three of which are free. This is something very few local councils could have even dreamt of. It should be remembered that when Conservative-run SNC put the proposal to do this to council as far back as 2007, the political opposition claimed it would be a disaster and could not work. They have been proved very wrong. All that is now left is to finish the building work on the corner of Watling Street and Northampton Road, where flats and shops will complete the building part of the project and significant improvements to access and wildlife habitat will further enhance the Watermeadows very soon.

The Economy 2020 – 2021

Due to the economic competitiveness of South Northamptonshire, this area has been able to tackle the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and still embrace opportunities for growth.

Despite the number of residents that have been made redundant, unemployment levels remain far below the national average and have consistently been the lowest in the County throughout the year. New businesses continue to start-up and investment in the District remains healthy.

South Northamptonshire has the highest percentage of residents skilled to NVQ Level 4+ within the County, far exceeding the national average. Broadband coverage has exceeded 97%, despite delays presented due to the

pandemic. Superfast Northamptonshire has ambitious plans to increase coverage across the County to deliver the original target of 99% coverage by March 2021 as soon as possible.

Local Successes

There have been many successes in supporting and recovering the local economy:

- From the first day of lockdown last March, the SNC Job Club evolved into a virtual service that was available to all residents online. As shown in the attached Employment Support infographic document, there has been an extensive range of new and innovative functions to support residents into employment or start their own business.
- Support was provided to the SNC Revenues and Benefits Team to disseminate COVID-19 grants, as well as offer guidance and advice. A new section of the website was developed, providing accessible and clear information regarding Government support and guidance to allow employers to understand and access what they needed as soon as possible.
- In November, SNC sourced a COVID-19 Impact Assessment to identify the effects of the pandemic on the local economy and consider interventions to restore the local economy. This document is available through the SNC Economic Growth Team. The report did identify at the time of publication that only 5 local employers had faced insolvency, while nationally there was an average of 18 insolvencies per local authority across the same period.
- A new resource, the SNC Business Toolbox, was developed to help unemployed residents start their own business and existing employers to plan for their future growth, source funding and evaluate risks and opportunities. The Toolbox is vital for local employers to assess their business health and has been designed to provide a shortcut to economic recovery and creating additional new employment opportunities.
- On Friday 20 November, the Economic Growth Team secured a visit of the exclusive Small Business Saturday virtual roadshow to showcase the District and the employers to a national audience. Many local businesses were interviewed, raising awareness of the quality small businesses in this area. Small Business Saturday also provided extensive business support through webinars and advice, which was promoted by the Economic Growth Team for the benefit of local employers.
- The SNC Economic Growth Team set up a *Think Local & Support Small Businesses* campaign to serve a range of purposes: providing local solutions for residents to buy essentials, promoting small businesses across the County (and beyond) and to foster an ethos of keeping everything local. Aligning with the messages of Small Business Saturday, this campaign championed a community spirit between small businesses and consumers, recognising that as a District, everyone succeeds through the growth of the local economy.
- The long-awaited arrival of Sainsbury's opening in Brackley took place on 25 November, which included robust plans for community engagement and supporting the local workforce. The SNC Job Club was a delivery partner and ensured over 90% of the new employment opportunities were taken up locally.
- Through a partnership with the Motorsport Industry Association (MIA), throughout the year, South Northamptonshire has been promoted as the ideal place for businesses and employment within the motorsport and automotive industries.
- The SNC Economic Growth Team has been innovative in its approach to supporting the local economy, including a robust place-marketing strategy to enhance the reputation of this District to a local, national and global level. The Team has used social media and online platforms to promote positive news and support to the masses. Throughout this year, total views of their content have been an incredible 640,000. This is an average of over 50,000 views of the Team's publicity per month.

Next Year and Beyond

Although things are yet to be decided for West Northamptonshire Council, the vision has already been made that West Northamptonshire is great place to live, work, visit and thrive. Recent correspondence states:

"We have ambitious plans for West Northamptonshire to make this area a great place in which to live and work and where businesses can prosper...We aim to recover and grow the economy, playing a full role as one of the largest

authorities within the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, while establishing strong and safe communities with good housing. We want residents to have the best prospects and the skills to succeed, and for children to have the best start in life.”

The SNC Economic Growth Team, once they have transferred into the new authority, will continue to champion businesses and economic growth. South Northamptonshire will continue to grow its economy:

- Panattoni Park in South Northamptonshire, home to three buildings let to Eddie Stobart who has already moved in, will see further units delivered at 250,000 sq ft, 380,000 sq ft and 430,000 sq ft, totalling over another 1 million sq ft at the park. Work has already begun on the first two of these units and the final will begin towards the end of 2021.
- The development of High Speed 2 going through South Northamptonshire will create a wide array of employment and upskilling opportunities for the District. Support staff working in planning, design, finance and administration will use the HS2 office in Brackley. The new Brackley operation will also have an induction centre for workers joining the wider HS2 programme. In total, over 120 new posts are being created and are set to support the area’s economic recovery in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.
- SEGRO Logistics Park Northampton Gateway (SLPNG), approved by Central Government, is a large-scale Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI) of up to 5,000,000 square foot located adjacent to J15 of the M1. Construction of this major development has already begun which will attract quality employers into the District and create up to 7,500 jobs. The SNC Economic Growth Team is Chairing an Employment and Skills Group for this site to ensure this development has the greatest impact for the local area and local people.
- Government has announced a new Spatial Framework for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, which will have the status of national planning and transport policy, providing a strategic framework for local planning. South Northamptonshire is at the heart of the OxCam Arc, an area that provides over 2 million jobs and is home to over 3.7 million people. The Arc currently generates over £110 billion to the UK economy every year and the plan is to almost double this to £200 billion by 2050.