

**COMMUNITY WORKING REVIEW**

# **Findings of Research into Somerset Council's Work with Communities**

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(Research Findings. 15/01/2026)



**CITIZEN  
NETWORK**

FOR A WORLD WHERE  
EVERYONE MATTERS

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Outline of the review

The inclusion and democracy organisation [Citizen Network](#) has been commissioned to review how **Somerset Council**<sup>1</sup> can support and engage communities. The review is designed to reflect on the aspirations set at the time the Council became a unitary authority and the experience since. The review will **recommend a framework for Somerset Council that will support a programme of community development and engagement**<sup>2</sup>. This will increase opportunities for communities to:

- Be listened to;
- Have the power to influence decisions; and,
- Build on their own strengths.

The review will explore how the Council can **work with communities**, building on what is working well now. This document contains the findings of the research from the first phase of the review. These research findings evidence the key design challenges for instituting best practice in community development and engagement, informing stakeholders on potential solutions in the design phase (see Section 2 for more on our approach).

The review has been motivated by three key considerations:

1. The move to a unitary authority **envisioned a future in which communities would have a greater involvement in decisions that affect them and greater control over local assets and services**.
2. **Community development and engagement can help communities develop the skills and resources** to meet their own needs and help services better meet the needs of communities.
3. It is likely that the **Government will soon oblige every council to engage with communities specifying some form of neighbourhood committee** – therefore the role and future of Local Community Networks (LCNs) are within the scope of this work.

The review is being carried out alongside other reviews happening now, both within the Council and in partner organisations, driven by changes in national policy. The review timeline has been set to fit with the annual review cycle for LCNs and to be relatively swift to enable cross-communication with other review and transformation processes.

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<sup>1</sup> Where 'the Council', 'Council member', 'Council service' and similar is used in this report, this is shorthand for Somerset Council. City, parish and town councils are specified as such or referred to with the shorthand 'parish councils' or 'parishes'.

<sup>2</sup> The full brief is presented in Appendix v.

## 1.2 Background and context

Somerset Council was created as a unitary authority in 2023 from five councils: Somerset County Council and the district councils of Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton, and South Somerset. The unitary authority was positioned as an opportunity to create a "[single clear voice for Somerset](#)" and simplify public access to services. The move to a unitary authority also envisioned a future in which communities would have greater involvement in decisions that affect them and greater control over local assets and services. This aspiration, to enable community-led initiatives, co-production with communities and responsive engagement has faced multiple challenges.

Local government in England has experienced falling budgets, with severe financial pressures for the Council leading to workforce instability and a high turnover of staff. Increasing demand for services has met with increasing costs for delivery. Partners organisations are facing similar challenges. Like other local authorities, the Council operates with partners who work to different geographies and administrative boundaries. Although there are some shared boundaries in common, few are standardised, and they are subject to regular change and review. The current amalgamation and shift from Primary Care Networks to NHS Neighbourhoods, alongside a boundary review of the Council's electoral divisions, are two such shifts.

In this context, the Council is conducting research to improve community engagement and neighbourhood governance. The research aims to understand how the Council works with communities. This includes a review of: community engagement and neighbourhood governance; how Council members are supported in their role; how Somerset Council supports communities, including city, parish and town councils (parishes) and Voluntary, Community Faith and Social Enterprise organisations (VCFSEs); how Somerset citizens can take part in shaping what the Council does; and, how the Council works with partner organisations.

A major component of Somerset Council's approach community engagement and development was the Local Community Network (LCN), intended as a means of supporting place-based connections between the Council, communities and partners within unitary governance. This vision included responsive engagement of communities in Council decisions and the enabling of community-led actions, where residents would take the initiative to meet their own needs. LCNs are therefore part of this review.

18 LCNs are supported by 9 Link Officers. Whilst LCNs would not function without the administration and relationship building of Link Officers, the Link Officer role is not confined to LCNs, Link Officers also aim to provide support and act as a link point for parishes, link Council departments into communities, and form connections to support public health in the widest sense. Link Officers are also a point of contact between the Council and communities in LCN administrative areas. Given their importance in the operation of LCNs, the review considers the role of Link Officers and their role in working with communities.

This future of LCNs is particularly relevant in the national context of mandated neighbourhood governance mechanisms proposed under the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (currently [the Bill](#) is in the Committee stage in the House of Lords). This creates both opportunity and pressure to establish effective approaches to neighbourhood governance. There is therefore a need to understand where, when, and for

whom LCNs work, as well as whether LCNs should continue in their current form or changed, and the tensions that define what options are open.

The review brief extended beyond evaluation of LCNs to examine wider local governance, community development, and participatory practices. Taking such a broad view is important for two key reasons: first, any change to LCNs will affect the wider network of community activity; and secondly, a successful structure of neighbourhood governance relies upon a healthy wider ecology of community development and engagement. The challenge for the Council is contributing to the topsoil of this ecology, enabling connection and collaboration rather than duplication or discord.

Part of the Link Officer role is contributing to health outcomes, which is understood through the lens of the wider determinants of health and the Building Blocks of Health model (see Figure 1.2). This emphasises how the health of a person is dependent on many aspects of life, from education and skills to the availability of transport. In facilitating neighbourhood governance the Link Officer role needs to connect with multiple points in a community. This work, linking the community to the Council and supporting connections across community, supports broader health outcomes alongside those of stakeholder networking and citizen participation.

In the same way, this review needs to consider far broader work with communities than just the LCNs because they do not flourish or fail independently of what is around them.

**Figure 1.2 The Building Blocks of Health**



## Objectives and aims of the review

This review will ‘co-produce a framework for the Council which identifies opportunities to build, evaluate and continuously improve, an effective programme of community development and engagement’ (see the Review Brief in Appendix vii). The review will examine national and Somerset policy context and best practice. It is engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including: Council members and officers; VCFSEs; colleagues in health and police services; and, councillors and clerks in parishes. In scope for the review are changes in how the Council works with communities at:

1. **Community level:** Supporting relationships of care and resilience to meet needs.
2. **Organisational level:** Enabling services to work collaboratively with communities.
3. **Systems level:** Creating policy and structural conditions that enable community empowerment.

The questions it will consider are:

- How to best engage communities, whether communities of interest or geography.
- How to support elected members in their role, and more widely support working with community representatives.
- How to define where the work of LCNs and Link Officers sits in relation to that of partners, in particular [Connect Somerset](#).
- How to support communities to become more self-reliant and embed [the Building Blocks of Health](#) into working with communities.
- Where it is appropriate to increase community participation to shape how the Council delivers services
- How to include people who do not usually engage with the Council.
- How to define and talk about the work of community development and engagement, participation and co-design, in ways that achieve clarity and consistency.

Whilst LCNs form a kernel at the heart of this review, it is wider in scope to enable a more holistic consideration of where LCNs sit within the work of the Council with communities.

The review is informed by Design Thinking (see Section 2) and the search for co-developed ideas and solutions. In doing this it seeks to understand what helps and hinders the work of the Council with communities, what the tensions are preventing ideal solutions, and how to develop solutions that navigate these. The Council has considerable good practice in community engagement and development that offers a locally relevant basis for solutions and can also inform learning in the wider national devolution debate.

## 2. Our Approach - Designing for Real Systems

The review follows a [double-diamond design approach allied with systems thinking](#). This means seeking to understand and reconcile competing stakeholder needs and in creating solutions, being aware of how constraints, legislative, financial or technical might prevent them from working. It also uses [Appreciative Inquiry](#), focusing on what is working and being creative about overcoming challenges. The double-diamond model comprises four phases:

1. Discover (engaging in research and evidence gathering);
2. Define (analysis and problem framing);
3. Develop (co-design and option exploration); and,
4. Deliver (recommendations and implementation planning).

The review has been divided into two phases:

### **Phase 1: Research Phase – Discover and Define (September-December 2025)**

During the discovery phase, the research team gathered evidence on priorities, working methods, and capacities through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The research was designed to identify where issues prevent good engagement with communities, areas of alignment within and between the Council and partners, and where differences exist and how this connects to current engagement functions.

In the subsequent defining phase, analysis has been used to distinguish between structural tensions (inherent to the systemic context) and perception tensions (where different groups see the same issue differently). This approach has created a structured evidence base that will feed into Phase 2 workshops - moving from the Discover and Define phases towards Developing and Delivering.

### **Phase 2: Identifying and Developing Design Solutions (January-March 2026)**

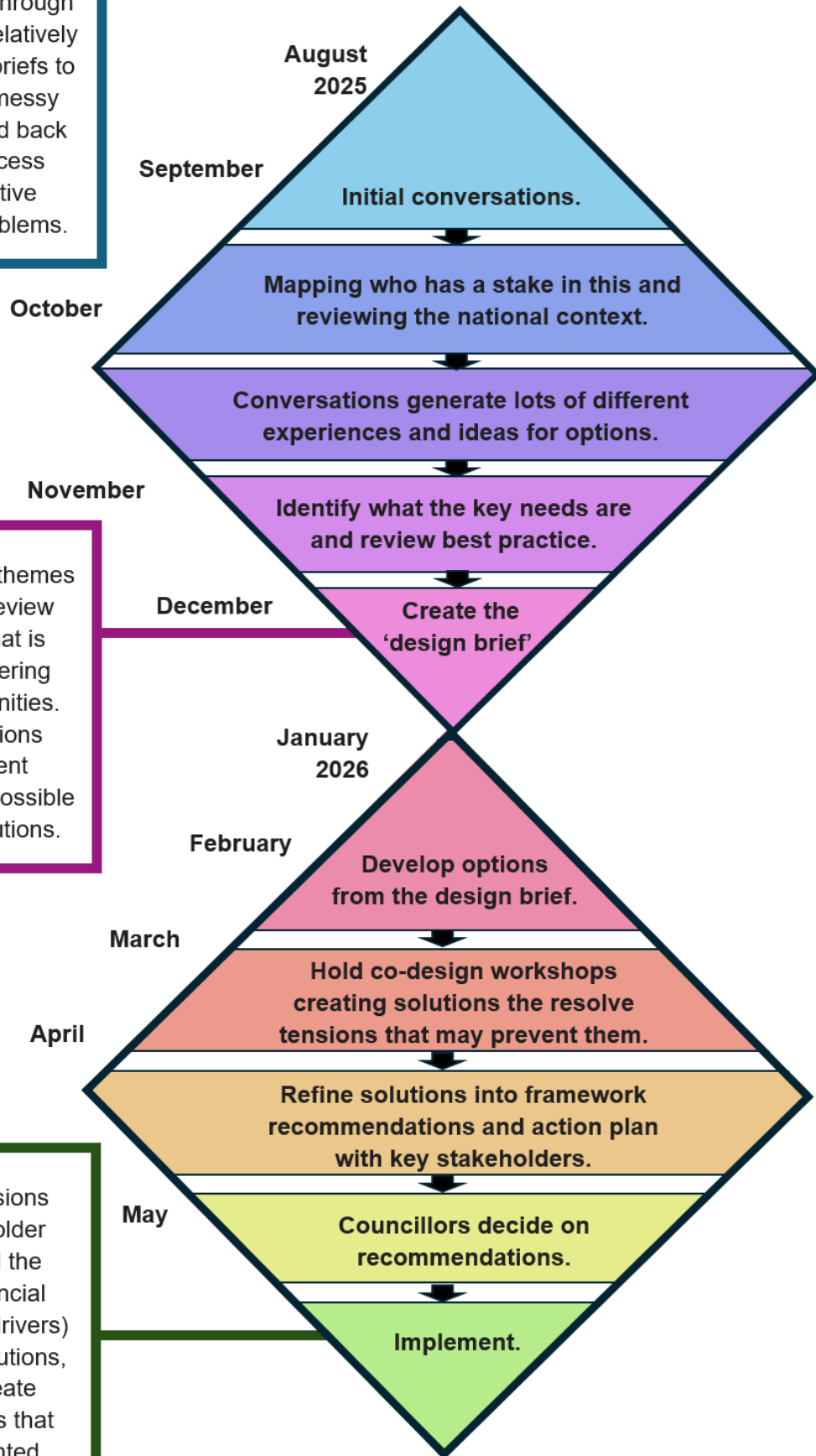
In this follow-on Developing phase (early 2026), underlying issues will be explored to find ways of resolving them, through co-design workshops with stakeholders. The workshops will explore design tensions, identify areas of alignment, examine what stakeholders can influence through power analysis, and draw on existing good practice.

The workshops will position stakeholders as problem-solvers in the conversation rather than passive consultees, using the research as an evidence base. This approach:

- Enables stakeholders to understand different perspectives and needs
- Aims for collaborative ownership in the generation of solutions
- Uses structured facilitation techniques to move from unresolved conflict towards resolution

This methodology recognises that sustainable solutions emerge when the people involved move from defending positions to exploring needs and creating responses together that acknowledge the tensions present. Options will be costed, community governance spaces and roles reviewed, and design challenges will be framed with appropriate detail to enable informed decision-making. If approved, this work will then enter the delivery phase.

The Double Diamond approach moves through stages including relatively narrowly defined briefs to very broad and messy conversations and back again. This process allows for creative resolutions to problems.



Analyse emerging themes and map to the review brief. Identify what is helping and hindering work with communities. Identify the tensions between different stakeholders and possible constraints to solutions.

By exploring tensions between stakeholder preferences and the boundaries (financial pressures, policy drivers) that might limit solutions, the aim is to create recommendations that can be implemented.

DISCOVER → DEFINE → DEVELOP → DELIVER

## 3. National Context and Best Practice

### 3.1 Engaging with & working with communities

As a first step, it is important to define what is meant by ‘engaging with’ and ‘working with’ communities in this report.

- **The practice of engaging with communities (community involvement) is to ensure that what the council does meets community needs.**
- **The practice of working with communities (community development) is to support communities to meet their own needs.**

There are a range of approaches through which local authorities can engage with and work with communities. What the precise practices and mechanisms are doesn’t matter so much as the broad aims. Research shows that having a wide range of different practices is best because that supports different preferences and needs (Leman, 2023).

#### 3.1.1 What difference does engaging with and working with citizens make?

Engaging with and involving citizens has positive impacts when there is a commitment in the institution to the process alongside a willingness to adapt and develop over time (Mansuri and Rao, 2013; Baiocchi and Ganuza 2016). Ideally, this commitment creates a virtuous cycle of trust and joint problem-solving between citizens and local government, reducing conflict and increasing support for policy decisions (Bussu et al, 2022). However, it is when citizen involvement develops into deep conversations, involving citizens actively in shaping services from the start, that benefits are greatest:

A coproduction approach that facilitates closer collaboration between government and civil society actors might help create more inclusive and embedded spaces that bridge the gap between institutions and grassroots (Bussu et al, 2022, p.14).

There are evident connections here with the HDRC Somerset approach (see Appendix ii) and the proposed development of the Link Officer role (see Appendix v).

There is growing empirical evidence that preventative, relationship-based community development (including social prescribing, social capital building and anti-isolation work) produces measurable social and, in many cases, financial value for local authorities (Hoddinott et al, 2024). This is through reduced demand on health and social care and improved wellbeing and employment outcomes, giving a typical return on investment of [£3 for every £1 invested](#) in both social and economic value (see also Polley et al, 2023). Critical to good outcomes are:

- People with the necessary skills, including staff and volunteers.
- Effective engagement with the local community.
- Partnerships in place and the co-production of projects.
- Community infrastructure that supports social interactions.

Social connectedness is widely regarded as the single most important characteristic of resilient communities. Strong interpersonal relationships, trust between neighbours, and a sense of belonging create robust social networks. These networks, alongside trust in local organisations, can be mobilised to provide mutual help and support in times of need. Community development is not an activity that should sit in isolation but should be a fundamental infrastructure for community wellbeing and resilience.

Findings from a number of studies find social capital – relationships of care in place - acts as ‘a protective shield for children, families and communities under stress’ (Coutts and Velásquez, 2025). Another area of importance is reducing social isolation, with the formation of contacts [reducing the burden on health and social care services](#). The broad social prescribing infrastructure of Somerset, from health connectors to peer-support groups, along with initiatives such as Connect Somerset will have positive impacts around these areas.

This context makes effective community engagement more essential. Community-led work and co-production can reduce direct spending whilst supporting prevention. Responsive engagement increases the impact of limited local authority resources. Where local government acts as a collaborative partner with other public services and communities, outcomes are demonstrably better even when working with constrained resources. A compelling example of this is given in Appendix iv.

There are many examples of good practice. However, a model that works in one place at one time with one set of people may well not work in another. It is therefore important to attend to the principles of good practice and seek to apply them in place.

### **3.1.2 What does citizen participation and community development mean in practice?**

If we asked ordinary people how the Council should work with communities, people would have very different views. People are different in whether, how, and what they want to be involved in. They have different values and this is reflected in the different ways the work of the Council with communities could be evaluated. A set of key values, based on many studies of good practice, are set out in Table 3.2.1 below. Whilst these forms of value are in some ways distinct, there are some key factors.

Several kinds of value depend on developing trusted relationships: between people in the Council and people in the community, between people in the community, between people who work with communities and those in communities. However, not everyone can or wants to actively contribute to community activities, to be part of these relationships. People may not recognise themselves as part of a ‘community’ at all. Who is involved depends on personality, education, opportunity, confidence, resources and wider support infrastructure and whether local issues resonate enough to stimulate action by individuals. This can cause imbalances of power and entrenched poverty of opportunity (Mansuri and Rao, 2013). It cannot be assumed that community activity is always an inherently positive phenomena, and by its nature, sometimes there are tensions and differences that need to be mediated and inclusive solutions sought (see also [this review by Collaborate CIC](#)). Most importantly, because they are based on relationships communities are *complex* – being complicated, changing, interacting, and unique. This implies a different approach than to systems that are simple, or just complicated (see SC 2025, pp14-15).

In assessments of value, the most common form of value is short-term financial value, which is simple to understand and immediately impactful. However, this neglects broader kinds of financial value, never mind more complex forms of value. An appreciation is needed for different kinds of value, where impact may be long-term, for partner organisations or individual citizens, or be difficult to assess.

**Table 3.1.2 A multi-dimensional value typology (adapted from Burnett, 2025 and Leman, 2023)**

Valuation type	Summary	Measures of success from this value lens
Monetary and cost-benefit analysis	Often used as the default measure of success and efficiency but typically viewed through a short-term siloed lens rather than a cross-organisation long-term assessment of cost-benefit.	Money saved and efficiencies: Does the work with communities save money or lead to evidenced efficiencies (including long-term benefits and for partner organisations)?
Recognition, reputation and appreciative value	The organisations and people involved in supporting social goods are recognised and appreciated. For example, through formal accreditation as well as informal valuing.	Improved reputation: Does the work with communities improve the recognition and reputation of those involved, including the recognition and appreciation of meeting personal goals?
From a capitals perspective	Measuring outcomes in terms of how they support different capitals (social, <a href="#">relational</a> , built, infrastructure, natural) and inclusive social value	Diverse outcomes: Does the work with communities lead to a range of positive outcomes across the community and is this valued?
Community assets and ownership	Understanding <a href="#">what assets a community already has</a> (for example, people and skills) and the potential for more delivery and ownership of services and assets by the community	Community ownership: Does the work with communities recognise what the community already has and does it further shift delivery or ownership to the community where appropriate and wanted?
Inclusive democratic culture	Policy and service shaping includes points of openness and transparency to the community, and points of outreach to people not usually included.	More democratic processes: Is the work with communities open, transparent, and inclusive, including in the shaping of policy and services?
Policy influence and outcome	Activities enable communities <a href="#">to be involved</a> in policy design at every stage, from policy prioritisation, through decision-making, to implementation.	Policy and service shaping: Is the community involved in co-defining, designing, and production of policy and the services that come from it?
Regenerative value and the value chain	Activities that encourage positively reinforcing outcomes, through a carefully considered systems approach, from adapting to local context through to increasing social value in the supply chain	Amplifying value: Is the work with communities designed so that it fits local context and the wider system of positive levers and incentives, and encourages other cascading benefits in a holistic way?

## 3.2 The national context

Local communities across the UK face a multiple and interlocking 'crises', affecting them to varying degrees: post-pandemic fallout and recovery, cost-of-living pressures, the climate crisis, fractured social cohesion and rising political tensions. This context creates both urgency and constraint for citizen participation and community development work.

The analysis for this review begins by establishing the national policy landscape to better understand the broader context of neighbourhood governance challenges and opportunities in Somerset. This section examines the evolving devolution framework, including the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill and its implications for the relationship between strategic authorities and 'hyperlocal' governance structures. Doing so establishes the parameters within which neighbourhood governance must operate and highlights the broader pressures and opportunities facing local authorities across England.

### 3.2.1 The Legislative Framework: Devolution as a Two-way Street

The current government's direction, whilst not yet fully settled, is focused on setting up an architecture within and through which neighbourhood governance will function. Key policy directions include a focus on strategic mayoral authorities and the acceleration of unitary authority formation; emphasis on Test and Learn approaches that value local experimentation driving innovation; investment in neighbourhoods, though with limited guidance on spending priorities; central control over planning policy, effectively diminishing neighbourhood planning powers; and renewed emphasis on neighbourhood consultation and governance. This creates a complex environment where multiple initiatives seek to organise within and across public services at relatively small scales with the belief this will better reflect needs, more effectively deliver services, and engage communities.

#### *Community Rights and Powers*

The Localism Act 2011 was framed as a fundamental transfer of power from central government to local government, communities, and individuals. The Act introduced a suite of "Community Rights" designed to give local groups tangible tools to influence their environment:

**Community Right to Bid** allows community groups and parish councils to nominate local buildings or land as Assets of Community Value. If such an asset is put up for sale, eligible groups can trigger a moratorium period, originally six months, giving them time to raise funds and prepare a bid to purchase it. The proposed English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill strengthens this right by creating a Community Right to Buy, giving community groups first opportunity to purchase and extending the moratorium to twelve months.

**Community Right to Challenge** enables voluntary or community bodies, parish councils, or groups of local authority employees to submit expressions of interest to take over local services they believe they can run more effectively or innovatively. If the authority accepts the expression of interest, it must run a procurement exercise for that service, assessing whether this would promote or improve social, economic, or environmental wellbeing.

**General Power of Competence** gives councils the legal capacity to do anything an individual can do, provided it is not specifically prohibited by other laws. This was intended to give councils greater confidence to be creative and innovative, for example by entering new types of partnerships. This power extends to parishes that meet specific criteria around training and open electoral competition.

These rights support the value of community ownership discussed above. However, the practical impact of these rights has been limited. The Right to Bid has enabled some successful community asset acquisitions but remains dependent on communities' ability to raise substantial capital. The [Mayday Saxonvale](#) scheme in Frome illustrates both the potential of community-led development and the practical contingencies—key personnel, civic infrastructure, popular and political support—that make such schemes difficult to replicate. Even in this case, the decision was contentious and its success uncertain. Smaller-scale development through community right to buy is likely to remain a niche part of future provision. The Right to Challenge has been rarely used, partly because the procurement requirement creates barriers and partly because communities often lack the capacity to take on service delivery.

### 3.2.2 The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill

The [English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill](#) signals the most significant structural reform to local governance in England for decades. The Bill's centrepiece is creation of Strategic Authorities, a new tier designed to establish a clear framework of decentralisation from Government. Strategic Authorities will gain devolved powers across transport and local infrastructure, skills and employment support, housing and strategic planning, economic development and regeneration, environment and net zero, health and wellbeing, public service reform, and public safety. Mayoral Strategic Authorities will gain particularly significant planning powers.

In the context of community engagement, the Bill includes two key provisions:

First, it strengthens the Community Right to Buy as described above. This provision represents continuity with existing localism principles.

Second, Clause 58 of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill places a duty on local authorities to make appropriate arrangements for effective neighbourhood governance, whilst providing the Secretary of State with power to define neighbourhood areas and specify parameters for what arrangements will be appropriate. This is arguably the most direct intervention by national government on neighbourhood governance in decades. However, the Bill itself does not specify the form of neighbourhood governance preferred; this will be defined by the minister once it becomes an Act of Parliament. The government's [Pride in Place](#) strategy summarises the approach:

We will require all local authorities in England to establish effective neighbourhood governance. This will ensure that neighbourhood working is hardwired into how government works, and that local councillors are empowered to act on the issues that matter to people where they live.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government undertook extensive consultation with local authorities, parishes, academics, and other organisations on best practice and barriers to neighbourhood governance. Submissions to the Commons

committee considering the Bill's second reading ranged from arguments for close prescription of format (from the National Association of Local Councils) to very flexible outcomes-based approaches (from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny).

The current ministerial preference is thought to be for giving delegated authority to councillors, who would be influenced by community discussions within a flexible governance framework, but would retain authority over devolved decisions. There would not be a prescribed structure, nor would formal powers be expected to be devolved to a local committee. The role of parishes is protected but not given prominence in the current proposals. The Bill itself is currently being considered in the House of Lords ahead of the third and final reading. Given the size and complexity of the Bill, not to mention the febrile political context, there is uncertainty over whether it will be passed in this parliament.

### 3.2.3 Changing approaches to neighbourhood:

Whilst the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill addresses local government structures, parallel reforms across health, policing, children's services, and other public services are simultaneously redefining how "neighbourhood" is understood and operationalised (see also Section 7.8). This creates a complex landscape where different services have different "place-based" or "neighbourhood-focused" services.

**Health:** The NHS transition to [integrated care systems](#) represents a significant shift in how health services are planned and delivered. The Somerset Integrated Care Board (ICB) is establishing neighbourhood-level structures operating at the scale of 30,000-50,000 people. This "neighbourhood" scale reflects effective cross-team working requirements rather than community identity or local government boundaries.

**Policing:** Following a [Government policy focus](#) and [evidence informed guidance](#) on neighbourhood policing, when implemented to a high standard, there is a move towards integrated neighbourhood policing. In Somerset this neighbourhood working will be coordinated through two integrated policing districts (East Somerset and West Somerset).

**Early Years:** Cross-partner working, already a duty on local authorities for the safeguarding of children, is significantly advanced around Early Years through Connect Somerset. The Government's [new Family Hubs programme](#) will bring in further resources to consolidate cross-partner delivery of services in place. This initiative may result in another kind of geography, as it typically builds around existing provision rather than creating new centres.

**Education:** Somerset has six education areas whilst schools, particularly at Primary level, form a natural focus for communities, often with catchment areas that don't align with other administrative boundaries. Academy trusts add further complexity, as schools within trusts may have governance and planning relationships that cross local authority boundaries.

**Environment:** Somerset's four river catchments create natural units for flood risk management, biodiversity planning, and environmental resilience that have prominence in national resilience policy and particular relevance for Somerset. These catchments bear no relation to other administrative boundaries, yet they represent the functional geography for addressing challenges faced by local communities.

## 4. Somerset Context and Best Practice

### 4.1 History and the present day

#### 4.2.1 A brief history of Local Community Networks

Local Community Networks (LCNs) were part of the original One Somerset Business Case for shifting towards a single unitary authority for Somerset. They have faced variable engagement on a strategic and everyday basis. Their position as a neighbourhood governance structure at a point when this may become mandatory offers an opportunity for positive change and building on experience.

#### LCN History and Purpose

Local Community Networks are described by the Council as the ‘voice of communities’, focused on establishing strong connections between the Council, communities, and partner organisations. Eighteen LCNs operate across the county, each comprising groups of parishes with boundaries designed to reflect community boundaries alongside administrative boundaries. The intention was to work across these boundaries with an ethos of "lines not walls".

The LCNs were established as part of Somerset's local government reorganisation in 2023, replacing the previous district council structures for engagement and creating new mechanisms for community engagement with the unitary authority. Learning from three pilot areas was combined with reviews of locality working in other unitary councils. There were suggestions that LCNs could play a place-shaping role around planning or an integrative role for public services (Stafford and Skirton, 2022). Their primary function has been bringing together the Council, parish & town councils, VCFSEs, public sector partners alongside initiating thematic working groups.

The LCNs were introduced into a situation where place-based governance had several different roles. This included: Area Committees that considered planning applications and made small grants to VCFSEs; parish clusters and joint working with national parks; locality teams and officers who provided local knowledge and contact points for councillors. These different structures meant differing experiences and expectations from stakeholders around LCNs.

The financial crisis facing the newly vested unitary did not allow for the more ambitious models of LCNs to be instituted. Instead, the LCNs faced funding and staffing instability. This led to ‘inconsistency in resourcing and corporate “buy in”, significant staff turnover and a focus on servicing formal meetings at the expense of the informal engagement and local partnership working’ (see Appendix v). The Council committed to evaluating LCNs at the two-year point following their establishment. This commitment was made recognising that any new structure would need time to bed in before meaningful assessment. This document is part of that review process. After a peer review in 2024, there were recommendations that effective LCNs would need a clear definition of their role and authority, dedicated resources beyond officer time, and flexibility to adapt to different local contexts and cross-boundary issues.

Although the Council recognised from the outset that LCNs represented only one part of a wider ecosystem of community engagement mechanisms the relationship between LCNs and these other mechanisms was not clearly defined. This has led to questions about whether LCNs were intended to coordinate this ecosystem, operate as one element within it, or eventually supersede some of the existing structures.

#### 4.2.2 The Broader Ecosystem of Community in Somerset

LCNs work within a broader ecosystem of organisations, broadly categorised here but each containing great variation in interests, size, capacity and activity:

**Parish, town and city councils:** Somerset has 327 parishes, ranging from small rural communities with populations under 100 to substantial towns with populations over 60,000. These councils are independent local authorities with their own precepts, democratic mandates, and statutory powers. Some have significant staff teams and service delivery capacity; others rely entirely on volunteer clerks and have minimal budgets.

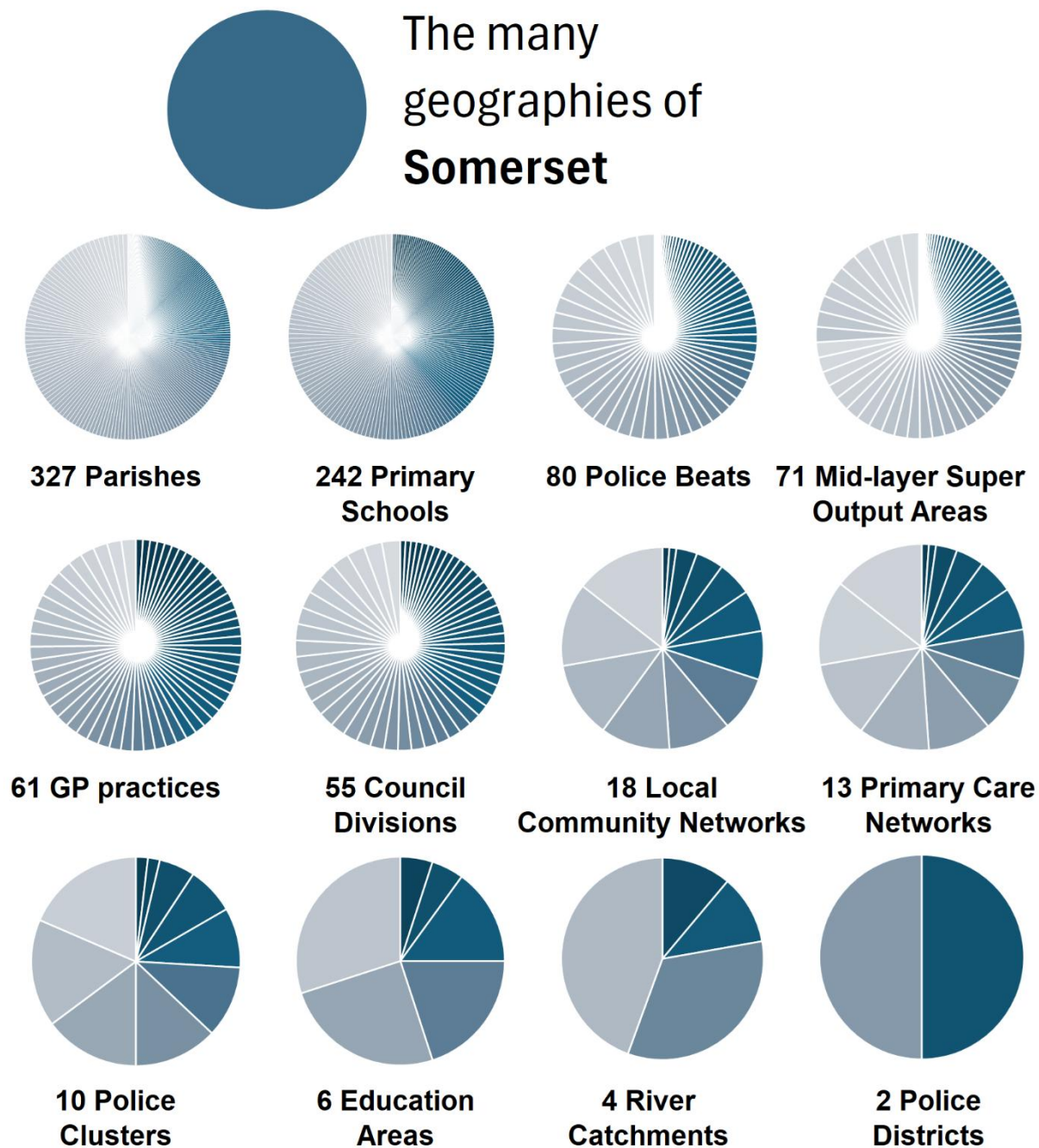
**Voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector:** Somerset has a diverse landscape of well over 2000 organisations providing services, coordinating volunteers, and advocating for communities. Infrastructure organisations like Spark Somerset provide support to this sector, which includes everything from anchor organisations to small informal networks. The Strategic Partnerships team maintains a Memorandum of Understanding between the VCFSE sector, the Council, and the Integrated Care Board (ICB).

**Public sector engagement:** The ICB, Primary Care Networks (13 PCNs across Somerset) and GP practices (61 across Somerset) create multiple channels for health-related community engagement. The emerging NHS neighbourhood board structures seek to create more cross-team working with the broad aim of increasing health, including early preventative work. This is similar to the existing Connect Somerset collaboration across multiple agencies around 'cradle to career' provision, aiming to create efficient and more effective working around families, early years and young people. The Council funded Connect Somerset Champions performing a stakeholder linkage role in this area. The police service (2 districts in Somerset) are transforming to a more integrated model, seeking to perform a similar role around maintaining law and order.

**Social prescribing services:** Multiple agencies provide social prescribing services across Somerset, including Village Agents, Health Connectors, Social Prescribing Link Workers, Health Coaches and others. These social prescribers listen to people and then refer them to a range of sources of support. Their role varies depending on the organisations they are funded by and embedded in. They aim to act as trusted contacts who understand how to link people to activities that will help them.

**Everyday makers and doers:** Every community has people who contribute through relationships of care, helping family or friends, alongside local business owners and workers. From this group may come campaigners, VCFSE members, and representatives. Equally, they may continue simply playing an active role in the community.

Figure 4.2.2 The many geographies of Somerset

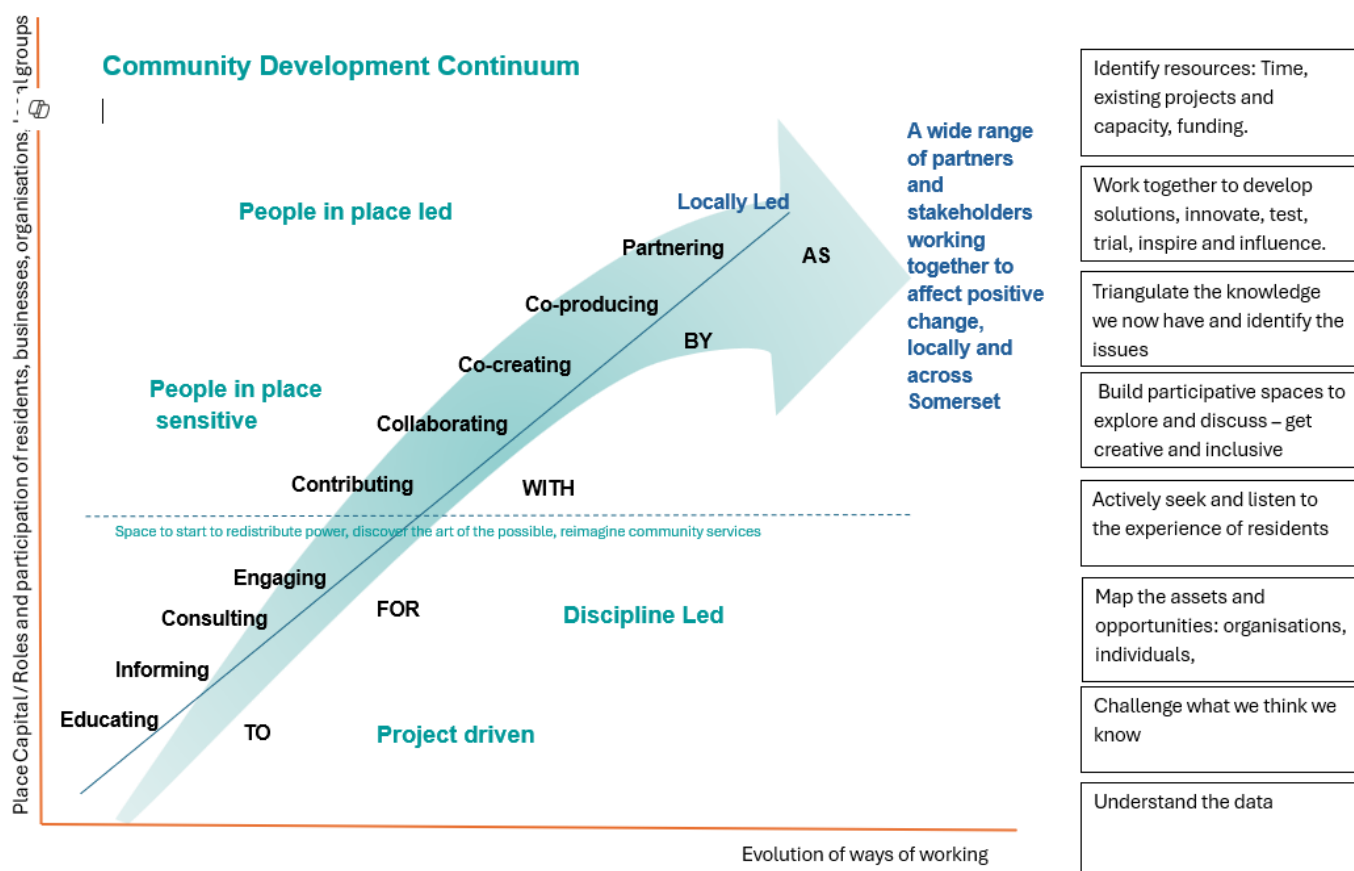


## 4.2 Aspirations for the future

### 4.2.1 Building community development and citizen participation

The aspiration for LCNs was for them to play a fundamental role in giving ‘local residents a voice and more influence over decisions that impact them and their communities’ (SC, 2023, p.21). This is envisaged as a continuum that would lead to locally-led change, see Figure 4.2.1 below. More broadly, the Council is looking towards increasing: partnership working, community development, social prescribing, and involving citizens in participatory co-design. These are all being explored as enablers of change in how the Council works with communities to support citizens (SC, 2025).

**Figure 4.2.1 The continuum of Community Development in Somerset**



The work around community development and engagement closely connects with the corporate aspirations for Somerset to be a greener, more sustainable, healthy, caring, fairer, ambitious, flourishing and resilient place. As noted in the introduction, the Building Blocks of Health is one framing supporting this work, emphasising how actions across a range of factors can help improve life outcomes. There are several frameworks and principles that speak to different aspects of what the Council does with communities, offering a route to coherence in working with communities, both within the Council and across partner organisations.

## 4.2.2 Spreading best practice: What's Good in Somerset

Organisations in Somerset have developed considerable good practice in community development and engagement that deserves recognition and enhancement. These include the Health Determinants Research Collaboration Somerset (see Appendix ii), Connect Somerset, the Village Agents social prescribing model, cross-LCN working groups (see Appendix iii), and Spark Somerset's data dashboard. The question is not whether the Council should abandon current structures but how existing approaches and partnerships can be adapted, resourced appropriately, and integrated effectively to strengthen the broader ecosystem of work done alongside communities.

Four illustrative examples of nationally recognised innovative practice are detailed below to illustrate the diversity of what is being done in Somerset. In all these cases, it is the people involved who have innovated and driven change, supported by wider networks open to new ways of doing. These connect with three challenges that are evidenced in this review: collaboration on data sharing; implementing preventative work; and revitalising local governance.

### Transform Family View

Somerset Council's 'Transform Family View' is a pioneering "single digital view" system designed to unify fragmented data across public and voluntary sectors. The initiative emerged from a decade-long journey within the Council. There was a recognition that different agencies (Police, NHS, Schools, DWP, and VCFSE) were viewing the same child through different lenses. The purpose was to create a "single version of the truth" that identifies risks, vulnerabilities, and the protective network around a child.

The technical architecture is built on a "Data Lake" approach using modern cloud infrastructure with a "big bucket" where approximately 1,000 data points from various case management systems are ingested. This includes internal council data and external partnership data (Police, Education, Housing). Records from multiple sources are merged into one single, accurate record for a child.

The data is presented via a Power BI dashboard. It is role-based, meaning a school teacher, social worker, or police officer sees different levels of information appropriate to their professional requirements and legal basis. The system incorporates algorithms to identify high-risk individuals, such as those at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).

Over 1,300 professionals (including staff from 92% of Somerset schools) now access the portal, allowing for immediate identification of other practitioners involved with a family. This has transformed weeks-long processes arranging support conversations into a 24-hour turnaround with transparency over which professionals are involved. Somerset's model is currently being used by the Department for Education (DfE) as a national blueprint.

### Health Connections Mendip

Health Connections Mendip is an example of social prescribing and community-driven healthcare. It has a "Compassionate Communities" approach, focusing on social connectivity as a primary driver of clinical health.

The service was launched in 2013 at the Frome Medical Practice. The project was born from the realisation that medical interventions alone could not address health issues rooted in social isolation, poverty, and lack of community support. It was inspired by the "Peckham Experiment", which provided holistic care for families rather than individuals and focused on the broad building blocks of human well-being rather than just the direct causes and symptoms of disease.

The model operates through a layered system of support:

**Health Connectors:** Professionally trained staff (a hybrid of Social Prescribing Link Workers and Health Coaches) who work 1-to-1 with patients. They listen to the patient's story, help set personal goals, and navigate them toward community resources.

**Community Connectors:** A network of trained volunteers (over 2,000+ local residents) who signpost friends, family, and neighbours to support services. They act as the "eyes and ears" of the community.

**The Directory:** A live digital database of over 400 local groups, services, and activities (from exercise classes to bereavement support).

**Community Development:** When a gap in support is identified the team helps community members set up and sustain new groups.

The Mendip model is one of the few social prescribing initiatives with peer-reviewed data showing a direct impact on emergency healthcare utilisation.

<i>Metric</i>	<i>Measured Impact</i>
<b>Unplanned Admissions</b>	<b>14% decrease</b> in Frome (2013–2017) while the rest of Somerset saw a <b>28.5% increase</b> .
<b>Healthcare Costs</b>	Total costs fell by <b>21%</b> in Frome, compared to a <b>21% increase</b> across the county.
<b>Patient Agency</b>	<b>89%</b> of patients felt more able to manage their own health and wellbeing after intervention.
<b>GP Workload</b>	<b>77%</b> of patients reported contacting their GP less often.
<b>Access to Support</b>	<b>88%</b> felt more able to access support within their community.

The success of Health Connections Mendip made arguments easier for preventative models, such as Connect Somerset and Village Agents social prescribing model.

### **Minehead People and Place partnership**

The Minehead People and Place Partnership meets regularly to share updates, improve communication for the organisations working in Minehead and ensure best outcomes are achieved for the community of Minehead. This forum has improved communication between the Council and the VCFSE sector and has resulted in positive outcomes for Minehead across various projects and sectors.

The partnership is attended by two Council members. The partnership demonstrates how bringing together diverse stakeholders around a shared place-based agenda and common aims can generate meaningful community action. Recently there has been some difficulty in accessing and sharing information with the Council due to limited capacity to support the partnership. This has highlighted how the success of such initiatives is dependent on the ability of partners to invest time and resources into making them work.

### **The Balsam Centre**

One example of many forms of community activity across Somerset, the Balsam Centre is a community hub in Wincanton. The centre works with other VCFSEs, contracting mental health for NHS and delivering mental health services in family safeguarding (those at risk of being taken into care). This enables coordination in a multi-agency care landscape and service provision support to families. Users attend the centre and its horticultural and therapeutic services.

The Balsam Centre was set up by a person with lived experience of mental health issues and has now been in operation for 25 years. Its creation was facilitated through a partnership with the District Council, health services, local philanthropists, and the community. The centre's success is attributed to its long-term commitment, dedicated staff, and a central location with gardens.

The centre takes an approach of listening to people who come through the door, with strong and deep connections across the community. The centre sees its services as interconnected, joining up the dots between partners and identifying where there are gaps in services. At the heart of the centre is a team of dedicated people who are located in the community, rooted in local connections. This supports a common culture, knowledge, and approach to solving problems.

As noted above, these are just four examples of good practice and there are many more. In exploring the work of the Council with communities in Somerset, an important part of our approach is to evidence the tensions that prevent more of this work being done, even when it is widely recognised as positive.

## 5. Research methodology

### 5.1 Our approach to the research

The research approach used for the review aimed to involve broad participation and explore the topic from multiple angles. This was an ambitious undertaking in the time available. Discussions with the Council partnerships team established an initial framing and approach to stakeholder sampling.

**Table 5.1 Overview of research methods and practices used in the research phase**

<b>Research method</b>	<b>Research practice</b>
Stakeholder interviews and focus groups	Semi-structured interviews with Council officers and members, LCN Link Officers, parish & town councillor and clerks, and police, health and VCFSE representatives.
Stakeholder survey	An open comment survey that invited participants to reflect on what had worked, or not, around the Council's engagement with communities - before moving onto an appreciative imagining of the future.
Place-based focus groups	Facilitated discussion and detailed exploration of four LCN areas with different characteristics (rural, urban, mixed) and with varying levels of functionality.
Literature review	Exploration of relevant literature including relevant best practice, policy context and drivers, including case studies, academic literature, and policy frameworks.
Quantitative data analysis	Analysis of the change in precept for Somerset parishes relative to other authorities in a similar situation and the national average.
Thematic coding	A combination of guided and emergent coding across five broad research questions and multiple sub-themes.

## 5.2 Who We Engaged and Why

The research engaged stakeholders representing different roles and perspectives within Somerset's community ecosystem:

**Somerset Council Officers (12 interviews, 11 survey responses, 5 focus group participants)** – these officers execute the operational work of the council across different services. Their perspectives illuminate how community engagement functions in practice, what barriers exist within organisational structures, and how different services approach working with communities.

**Somerset Council Elected Members (9 interviews, 9 survey responses)** - councillors provide the representative link between communities and the council. Many also serve as town or parish councillors (5 of those interviewed held dual roles), giving them insight into how different governance tiers interact. Their perspectives reveal the practical challenges of navigating between community leadership and strategic council decision-making.

**LCN Link Officers (9 focus group participants)** – these officers bridge the gap between the Council and communities, supporting the eighteen LCNs. Their experience of community engagement, relationship-building with diverse stakeholders, and facilitation of the LCN structures provides insight into what works, what doesn't, and why.

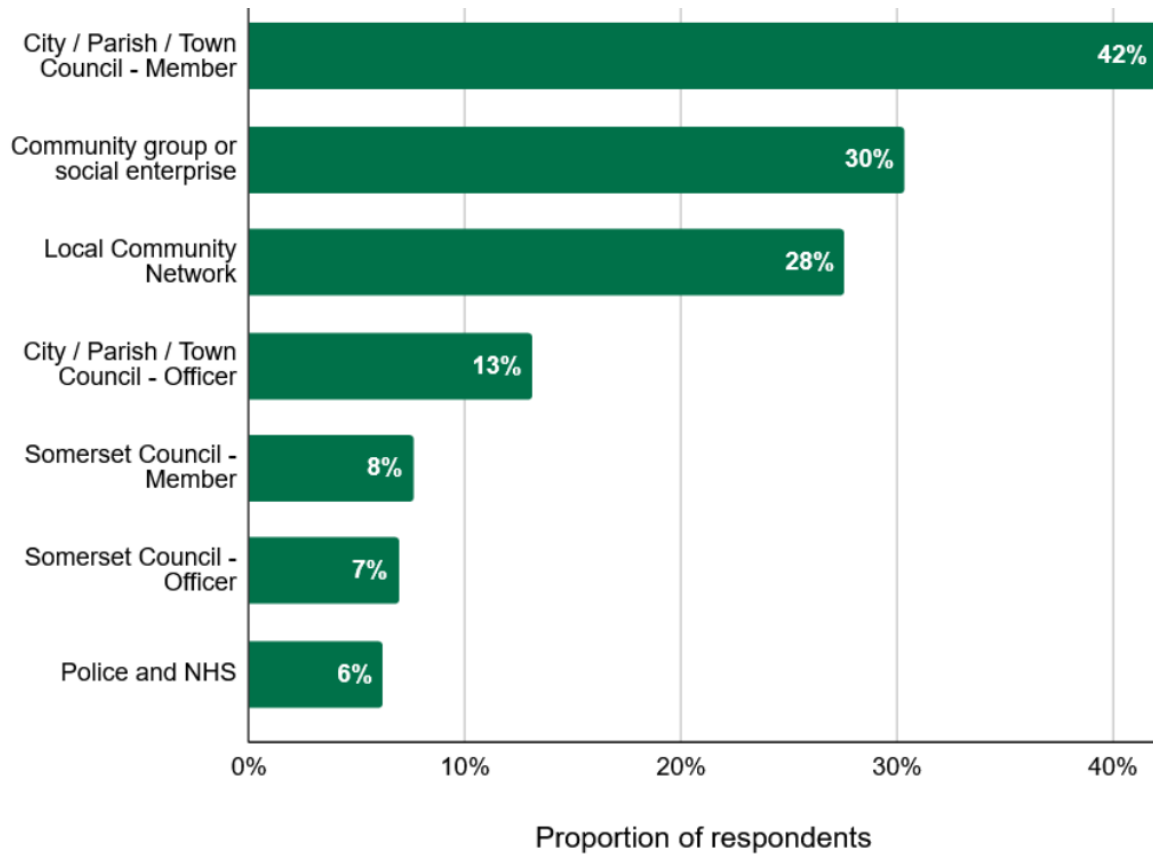
**Parishes (2 councillor interviews, 55 councillor survey responses, 2 officer interviews, 18 officer survey responses, substantial focus group participation)** – these councillors and officers represent the smallest-scale of local government. Many now face increasing expectations to deliver more services amid the devolution of assets. Their perspectives illuminate growing ambitions alongside capacity challenges, and the relationship dynamics with the unitary authority.

**VCFSE Organisations (8 employee interviews, 43 survey responses, 13 strategic focus group participants)** - encompassing voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise groups that support community-led and non-profit action for public, social and environmental good. Their perspectives are rooted in their work with communities and meeting everyday needs, though strategic VCFSEs have a broader view of what helps make the sector flourish and the role of the Council in helping or hindering that work.

**Public Service Partners (7 employee interviews, 8 survey responses)** - representatives from health (NHS), policing, and other statutory services illuminate how different public services approach place-based working and how Somerset's neighbourhood structures relate to their own community working.

This comprehensive stakeholder coverage ensured the research undertaken captures perspectives from across Somerset's community engagement landscape. Interviewees were selected through recommendations from the Council review team, purposive selections made by the research team after desk research, and snowball selections following survey responses. Place-based focus-group and participants and survey respondents were self-selected. Figure 5.2.1 shows the profile of survey respondents by stakeholder group.

**Figure 5.2.1 Responses to the survey by stakeholder group (n=145, note that one respondent can hold multiple roles)**



## 5.3 Place-based focus groups

The place-based approach recognised that community engagement functions differently in different places based on local history, geography, demography, existing relationships, and community capacity. Each focus group brought together town and parish councillors and officers alongside VCFSE group representatives that operated in those areas.

The place-based focus groups sought to understand how the Council's transition to unitary authority and the introduction of Local Community Networks had affected community engagement in practice, and how greater devolution might create new opportunities whilst addressing current challenges.

Sessions were structured to allow thorough exploration of themes over approximately ninety minutes, examining:

- Existing community engagement practices and relationships.
- Successful elements worth building upon.
- Areas requiring improvement.
- Immediate actions that could make a difference.
- Longer-term strategic priorities.
- How to ensure comprehensive stakeholder inclusion in ongoing discussions.

Four place-based focus groups examined community engagement within the context of the following specific LCN administrative areas: Taunton, Minehead and Watchet, Levels and Moors, and Crewkerne and Ilminster. These locations were selected to represent Somerset's geographic and demographic diversity:

**Urban/market town contexts:** Taunton represents Somerset's largest town with substantial population, multiple parishes, and complex governance relationships.

**Coastal communities:** Minehead and Watchet as coastal towns face specific challenges around seasonality, tourism economy, and geographic peripherality.

**Rural contexts:** Levels and Moors and Crewkerne and Ilminster represent predominantly rural areas with dispersed populations, small parishes, and distinct community identities.

## 5.4 Thematic coding

**Thematic coding** was used to organise responses across five research themes defined by the brief and emerging from the research (see Table 5.4 below). This coding enabled systematic analysis of:

- Where issues helped or hindered good practice in community development or citizen participation.
- Areas of alignment within and between the Council and partners.
- Where differences exist and how this connects to issues with how engagement currently functions.
- Design tensions requiring resolution through the Phase 2 workshops.

Analysis employed systematic qualitative coding to organise the substantial volume of data generated through interviews, surveys, and focus groups. The coding framework was developed iteratively, beginning with an emergent analysis that then mapped across to the five main objectives set in the research brief (see Appendix vii) and expanding to capture themes emerging from participant responses.

**Table 5.4 Main research themes and sub-themes**

<b>Research theme</b>	<b>Research sub-themes</b>
Engaging with communities	LCNs and formal governance structures; informal networks and working groups; engagement and participation methods
Supporting Council roles in places	Supporting councillors in their roles; cross-organisation and partner working; the Link Officer role
Supporting self-reliant communities	Devolution, funding and autonomy for parish councils; supporting the capacity and activity of VCFSEs; working directly with communities.
Community participation in delivery	Linking communities into council decision-making; clear, honest and transparent communication
Strategic change and partnerships	Learning and valuing what works for the long-term; collaborative working with partners

## 5.5 Methodological Considerations and Limitations

Several methodological considerations need to be understood when interpreting the findings of the research phase:

**Self-selection bias:** Survey and focus group participation was voluntary, meaning those who chose to engage may have stronger views (positive or negative) than those who did not participate. The research team sought to mitigate this through purposive sampling of interviews to ensure diverse perspectives were reflected.

**Role complexity:** Many participants held multiple roles, and their responses may have reflected particular role identities rather than comprehensive viewpoints.

**Geographic coverage:** Whilst place-based focus groups covered diverse Somerset contexts, not all eighteen LCN areas were examined. The four selected areas provide illustrative insight rather than comprehensive coverage of local variations. Responses through survey and interviews tended to highlight LCNs that were working very well or working badly.

**Timing:** Research occurred around two years after LCN establishment, meaning participants were reflecting on relatively new structures still evolving. Some challenges identified may reflect teething problems rather than fundamental issues; conversely, some longer-term impacts may not yet be visible.

**Stakeholder balance:** The research achieved good coverage across stakeholder groups, though the voice of City, Town and Parish Councils are particularly prominent in survey responses (55 councillors, 18 officers). This reflects strong engagement from this stakeholder group.

These limitations do not invalidate findings but contextualise them. The research provides robust evidence of stakeholder perspectives, experiences, and priorities whilst acknowledging it captures a moment in time within an evolving system.

As this report will note, there are many different definitions and ways of interpreting concepts such as 'engagement' and 'neighbourhood'. Terminology changes and can be subjective and are sometimes politicised. Notwithstanding these inherent tensions, some working definitions were established as a reference point in this research. Doing so allows a consistent framework to be used, to both understand what is being referred to, and also to invite wider debate on the usefulness and appropriateness of these terms. Some terms that are used consistently throughout this report are, therefore, set out in Appendix vi; the role of language is further explored in Section 7.8.

## 6. Thematic Analysis

We made it very clear to [participants]. We don't necessarily have the answers. We're a collective, a partnership. So, if we fail, we all fail. No one is to blame. It's just "let's find solutions together". (SCO10)

The thematic analysis presented here draws on the research done, including interviews, focus groups, a survey and public documents alongside information supplied to us by Council officers. The themes discussed are broadly based on the research brief provided but are necessarily adapted to reflect major themes arising from the research itself. This chapter includes numerous quotes from participants. This has been done because it was felt important to include the voice of those who have taken part in the research.

It should be noted that as this research aimed to be an inclusive exploration of how the Council works with communities, there are a wide range of topics covered. **Only a few topics were referred to by the majority of stakeholders within any one group** and, aside from some broad reflections, no topic was referred to by the majority of all stakeholders. As noted above, the history of governance in places shapes expectations for what people expect from the Council. There are, therefore, differences in expectations across places. Where relevant, these are drawn out in the text. However, the authors would ask readers to place more emphasis on the usefulness of different experiences and ideas for where the Council and partners might practically develop its work with communities.

Each quote used, or statement of a viewpoint without a quote, has a code attached to signify which stakeholder made the statement. Where a statement was reflected in the statements of others, multiple codes are given, though this should not be taken as necessarily comprehensive given the amount of information gathered. **Respondent codes** identify the source of quotes and points whilst maintaining confidentiality:

- SCM: Somerset Council Member (councillor)
- SCO: Somerset Council Officer
- LLO: Local Community Network Link Officer
- CTP: City, Town or Parish councillor or clerk
- PBS: member of public services (NHS, Police)
- VCF: member of a voluntary, community, faith organisation or social enterprise

Identifiers with numbers refer to interview and specific focus group participants, survey participants are identified as 'Survey'. Identifiers beginning FG refer to focus group participants not individually identified in the recording. Many participants held multiple roles — for example, serving as both unitary and parish councillors, or being employed by the Council whilst also being involved in VCFSE organisations. The codes used were selected to reflect the primary role of the interviewee.

Whilst efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of case studies and best practice examples, there are likely to be errors in interpretation and inevitably some nuance missing from what are always complex situation-dependent ways of working. This research mainly aims to raise questions and awareness of potential routes to improvement, providing a platform for further discussions around how the Council and communities work together.

## 6.1 - Engagement with communities

How the Council can best engage with our communities, be it through communities of interest/experience or geography. This section will consider the model of LCNs before moving to thematic networks and how Somerset Council build relationships with communities.

### 6.1.1 - Local Community Networks and communities of geography

The research evidenced a number of factors that help and hindered Local Community Networks (LCNs) and a set of tensions around priorities or boundaries to what could be done.

**Table 6.1.1 What helps and hinders LCNs, and the tensions faced**

What helps	What hinders	Tension
Clarity over role alongside a fit to local needs and context.	No clear fit with existing needs or context, no clarity over role.	Implementation of a clear model vs. reflection of local needs and ownership.
Perceptions of impactful activity and positive engagement and a feeling of ownership.	Perceptions of lack of impact and a spiral of disengagement and a feeling of imposition.	Implementation of a clear model vs. reflection of local needs and ownership.
Making the activities and meetings relevant to a stakeholder group.	A stakeholder group finding activities and meetings are not relevant to them.	Integrating diverse interests vs. speaking to particular interests.
Being an effective way to reach a stakeholder group and the community.	Lack of engagement by stakeholders and the community.	The need to reflect on impact and development vs. limited time and capacity.

Discussions around LCNs formed a significant part of interviews and survey responses, with responses often referring to them unprompted. This section summarises experiences and viewpoints emerging from the research about LCNs and the tensions between these different experiences and preferences.

#### *What makes LCNs successful (or not)*

LCNs were perceived to work well where there was alignment between local needs and the structure of the LCN introduced. This said, it has taken time for them to become embedded even areas where they have been viewed as working well (VCF2; SCO9; CTP, Survey). Exmoor LCN was repeatedly highlighted as a positive example in the survey, building on the foundation of the long-standing Exmoor Area Panel. It is cited for its Highways subgroup, support for the Moorland Food Bank, and well attended public meetings (SCM1; SCO8/9; CTP, Survey). However, Exmoor is also an outlier, being the smallest LCN by population, having the fifth largest number of parishes, and being a cohesive and active rural community (see Appendix i). There was no simple pattern of success or failure across LCNs but there were evident reasons why some had flourished and others struggled.

Where LCNs have not been perceived as successful, there were responses of falling attendance where ‘people have got to that point where they’re going, “this isn’t achieving anything”. And that’s when you get disengagement, isn’t it?’ (PBS6, also SCM5). One Link Officer commented that it would be better to pause and quickly review an LCN that was evidently failing rather than continuing with the same model despite it not meeting expectations ‘because then it becomes actually quite damaging and a big issue’ (LLO9).

Several participants said that LCNs were perceived as a top-down construction that partners were ‘mandated to deliver’ rather than a form that fits the shape and needs of communities (CTP, Survey; SCM1; SCO4; VCF3). As one Council officer said, the perception from some is of ‘engaging with the community, but not necessarily on the community’s own terms’ (SC08). This perception itself risked creating barriers to engagement that then undermined the potential of the LCNs to succeed (SCO9).

It has been recognised by the LCN team that there is a need to better communicate the role of LCNs and their successes, to both inform and encourage participation (FG LLO; also, VCF1/5; CTP, Survey). This was emphasised in the SWAP audit report<sup>3</sup> on LCNs and has been partly resolved. There remain issues around how the papers and minutes for LCN meetings are hosted, and therefore their transparency to scrutiny.

#### *The ask and the offer*

The top 5 priorities for LCNs identified in the 2022 consultation, prior to their founding were:

1. Acting as committees of the Council with formal influence over services to reflect what’s most important to their local area.
  2. Identifying local issues and priorities using data and evidence.
  3. Bringing together public service providers with VCSFE and local businesses to work together to deliver shared goals.
  4. Being a forum for ‘community voice’, where participants discuss and promote shared ambitions for their local area.
  5. Supporting parishes to work together, including across LCN boundaries.
- (Stafford and Skirton, 2022)

Consultation responses also expressed a clear preference for the aim to: “Ensure [The Council] remains responsive to local needs”, with improved outcomes for residents and supporting active community decision-making slightly lower priorities. The LCNs were therefore to be a link into the Council, but potentially also be actors, convenors and network builders in the local governance ecology.

The powers and resources given to LCNs on their formation was different from what had been originally planned. This had an inevitable impact upon their capacity to fulfil a key ask from participants: that they had formal influence over services. This gap was reflected in comments from many stakeholders, though evidently not speaking about all LCNs, that they

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<sup>3</sup> SWAP Internal Audit Services (October 2025) Final Audit Report – Local Community Networks. “The review identified significant gaps, weaknesses, or instances of non-compliance. The system of governance, risk management, and control requires improvement to effectively manage risks to the achievement of objectives in the area audited.”

were a 'talking shop'. Even where LCNs were found to be useful as a place for discussions and making connections, the lack of perceived impact for some stakeholders was a source of frustration:

We're just getting the usual kind of blocking response and there's no acknowledgement that this is more important for the community because we've gone through this process of the LCN so fundamentally there's a problem where officers ... have their strategies that they are working together with colleagues as a team, but local priorities that are coming up through the LCN are not being taken seriously. (VCF1, also VCF2/3/5/6)

Some of the feedback I got... was from [a VCFSE CEO], was that there's just no teeth in that, you can all talk about stuff, but if you're not actually going to try and get something done, she was saying, "What's the point of me coming to these meetings as, as CEO?" I don't think we do provide value. (SCM4; also, SCM3/5)

I think [what is needed is] a real clarity of purpose of what the LCN is there to achieve ... to carve out two hours from my personal life is really quite tricky and I'm not in the minority. So, it's got to really serve a proper purpose ... to get the investment to make them a real meaningful meeting (PBS6; also, SCM8; SCO11)

Participants highlighted ways in which LCNs could change or resourcing could be reallocated. The discussions illustrate the diversity of views around this topic. First is a view that they could be a route into decision-making through the attending unitary councillors:

[The LCN] should be like a kind of Uber surgery, if you like, for local Members. In other words ... you say, if you've got an issue with something going on locally, come on in. Tell us, tell us about the issues, and we'll take that forward to council for you ... Have a cup of tea, talk to somebody who will start joining dots and get something happening within your community (SCM1).

it's a really positive democratic step forwards to create a forum where people and organisations can bring issues to the local members (VCF1).

Second, is a view that suggests planning scrutiny could be devolved to LCNs, alongside the ability to give small grants, in a model that echoes that of the former South Somerset Area Committees:

They did the local scrutiny, making sure that policies were appropriate for the place; they did a bit of executive function, that was one meeting, and then the planning was considered as effectively a second meeting (SCM7; also SCM4/5/9; VCF1).

When someone wants to decorate the village hall and that is £300, £400... is very well acceptable, but there isn't any network for that at all now. As far as I know, there is no small grants [scheme] and they certainly could be done via the LCNs (SCM5; also LLO9; CTP1/5; SCM7/9).

VCFSE participants in particular contrasted previous funding arrangements through this process, where local decisions 'funded lots through grants' (VCF9; also VCF10) and organisations could 'get a small grant sorted in weeks ... now everything goes through central processes that take months' (VCF15), though from another viewpoint the process worked in a fairer way than one decided by Council members (SCO5).

Third, is a view that the resources directed towards LCNs should be transferred to bodies that had a better level of resources, such as parishes:

One of the problems that became clear quite early on is that the LCNs don't have any teeth ... The Town Council already did what the LCN was planning to do, and had a bit of meat to it as well (SCM2; also CTP, Survey)

There is a perfectly well tried and tested system of dealing with things like highways planning as well, via the parish councils and the parish council clerks (SCM5; also CTP, Survey).

In questioning the impact of LCNs, participants were typically wanting clarity about what they were founded for, as these interviewees stated:

The mantra that comes back all the time from the voluntary sector is to be clear on the ask and be clear on the offer and actually we've not managed to articulate that in LCNs (SCO5)

I was always told to never give somebody a job or ask somebody to do a job unless they 1) were given a clear understanding of the authority and role they had, and 2) they had resources to do it. And the LCNs have neither of those. (SCM7)

These views echo those articulate a balance noted at the founding of LCNs, between having a broad scope of roles and responsibilities but this meaning they were not closely defined.

Some LCNs were seen positively as local forums stimulating activity and providing a networking space, which speaks to a viewpoint that the focus of those within the room is critical to the success, or otherwise, of LCNs as convening and governance spaces:

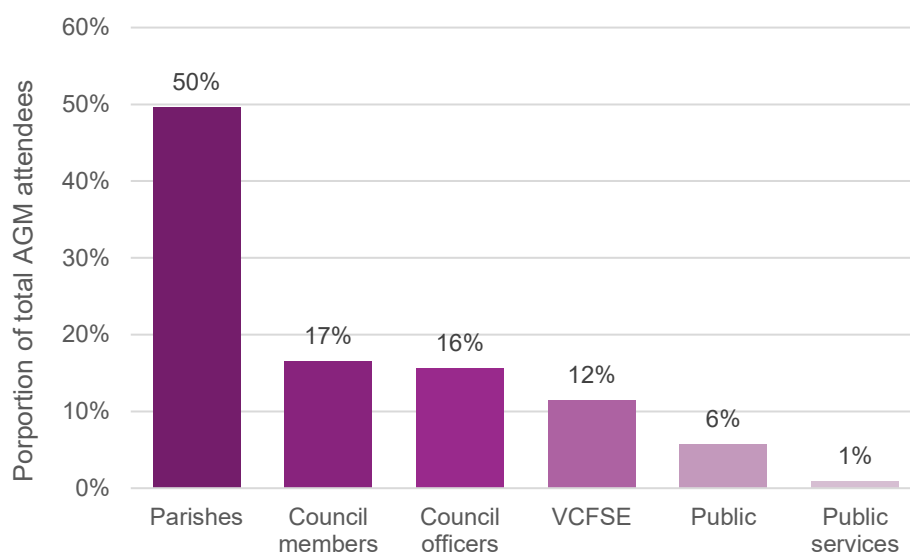
The quality of the conversations and the willingness of the people in the room to take a punt and have a go is what's demonstrated the value of LCNs, in the same way that demonstrates the value of all community activity and community development activity. Unless you've got people in the room that are willing to have a shot, you aren't going to get anywhere. (SCO5)

#### *Who is at the LCN meetings*

The activity and priorities of LCNs is shaped by who attends them. This section considers the involvement of: parishes, ordinary members of the community, public services and Council officers and members. In the setting up of LCNs the parishes were key stakeholders. As Figure 6.1.1 below illustrates, parishes constituted half of all AGM attendees and were the largest stakeholder group present in all but 2 LCNs (Brigwater and Taunton), where VCFSEs were the largest stakeholder group (see Appendix i). The participation of VCFSEs was variable. There was little attendance from members of the public, though this was

understood to vary depending on the issues being discussed. Public services, typically the police, only attended specific meetings.

**Figure 6.1.1 Attendance at LCN AGMs by stakeholder group (n=416)**



The reflections from several Council members, who were also parish councillors, was that the interests of larger parishes were very different to those of smaller councils, which impacted on how the LCNs could accommodate both.

In our LCN we have two large towns ... and they have large budget town councils and what they can focus on is completely different than what a parish council that may have a clerk that is paid four hours a week ... the small parishes gave up and walked away ... it's simply budgets, I have one parish council has a budget of £4,000 a year ... whereas [the town] has a nearly £700,000 budget, what [the parish] considers something that [it] can deliver is, it doesn't align with [the town] at all. (SCM6, also SCM1; SCM3; SCM9)

The dominance of larger parishes was not the case across all LCNs:

There was a selection of town councillors, just a couple, I have to say they all seem to have dropped out and it was very - it's been very much dominated by parishes (SCM8)

Participants reflected on the relevance for attendees being a key factor, as one parish councillor stated 'we are all very busy and are unpaid' (CTP, Survey; also LLO4) with some smaller parishes simply seeing no relevance to their work (SCM3; SCO1; VCF1) and others preferring to engage with the themed working groups rather than the general meetings. The timing of meetings was also an issue for some parish councillors, if they were working in the daytime at the same point as an LCN meeting was being held (SCM6).

For Council members, one was frustrated by perceived obstacles to progressing topics within the LCN and questioned whether involvement was 'worth my while', reflecting the balance between time and perceived value (SCM8). However, where Council members and officers did not engage then this removed the incentive for others to engage also, as the

connection with decision-makers in the Council was one reason given for attending (VCF1; also LLO6/7/9; SCM8).

There were differences of opinion about the position of Council members in LCNs. Some argued for councillor leadership of these forums, while others suggested Council members should not necessarily have a leadership role (SCO5; SCO, Survey), or 'shouldn't have Somerset councillor involvement' at all, with councillors engaging when needed (SCM4). For councillors covering multiple LCN areas, the expectation that 'one of these chairs or vice chair has to be a unitary councillor' becomes unmanageable when they're 'already a chair or vice chair elsewhere' (LLO2). One Link Officer noted this created 'a real struggle for them as well as for us' recognising that councillors needed to choose 'which meetings they need to go to and feedback on' rather than attempting comprehensive coverage (LLO2)

For Council officers, their concerns around attending were oriented around impact upon their service. There was regular attendance from some Council departments and was valued by both Council officers and other stakeholders. Contact over time built understanding and supported a reciprocal exchange of information on Council work in places, such that with the LCNs 'everything seems to be running a lot smoother' (SCO9). However, it could also be felt as an additional demand on services:

We've got busy teams doing lots of busy things that they've got set agendas ... So engaging with things like how LCNs work and what they're going to do in the next year and a lot of that comes from the LCNs themselves. It doesn't come from us but then we're there having to answer the questions and go to the meetings and understand what is needed beyond the core LCN team. We were never given any capacity to do that. So we're having to find that capacity out of thin air. (SCO2)

Whilst some services did make a commitment to find capacity, others did not. Several Link Officers spoke of their frustration in motivating Council officers to attend, exemplified by this comment:

We're relying on the relationship we have with those officers. We spend a lot of time trying to build relationships with officers both successfully and unsuccessfully ... we're relying on our friendships that we have in the council, with so and so's third cousin that we can pull into a topic that we know they'll be interested in, rather than [the] organisation saying [to officers] you do have to engage and you have to engage on this topic. (LLO7)

For public servants, and particularly the police, LCNs formed a potentially useful means of communicating with Council members and officers, parishes and community, and gaining information. This would allow a route of communication that had been lost with diminishing capacity to contact parish councils individually. For them the usefulness of LCNs was limited where this attendance from parishes, councillors, and other stakeholders was limited:

We haven't got enough parish councils at those LCNs ... the hope was, is, when LCNs came in, they would supersede the need to go to parish council because they would feed up through the LCN ... that's not what I've seen so far, I feel like that's how it was pitched at inception. (PBS6; also PBS5)

One of the frustrations was that as a key stakeholder, these services were not consulted on meeting timings before they were sent out:

With the LCNs we had a load of dates that were issued to us and said these are the dates but there's no one working within that area on that particular date, so we can't send anybody because there's just no one there (PBS4; also PBS6)

For participants, one of the key missing group of stakeholders in LCN meetings was ordinary members of the community (VCF7, SCO2, CTP3). The current [Terms of Reference for LCNs](#) make it clear that they are for recognised stakeholders rather than members of the public but there were concerns that this led to a lack of diversity in viewpoints and that there was no forum for connecting with the public (SCM1; also SCO4). A Council member articulated an example where they felt it worked well:

A well chaired public meeting to air and answer community concerns has shown how much better that is at engagement with a community than drop in sessions where individuals are talked to separately, nobody learns the whole, and the public feels that people have been picked off individually. (SCM, Survey)

A police officer stated this was a key need not generally served by the LCNs, leaving them without a channel to resolve community concerns (PBS4). Some Council members also thought LCNs were not providing a forum connecting to ordinary residents:

I had understood the LCNs to be a way of helping us unitary councillors to engage with our local communities, but I don't really think that's what's happening. (SCM8)

There is more around the engagement and involvement of the wider community in LCNs in section 6.1.3.

One of the key routes in for more active citizens is the involvement of smaller local VCFSE groups. There was a concern that even larger VCSFEs struggled to engage with LCNs given their limited resources (VCF6). However, it was the relevance and draw of the LCNs that was more widely perceived to reduce the engagement of VCFSEs (SCO5/9).

For LCN Link Officers, a key question was the definition and flexibility in core membership of the LCNs. This raises the question of who has a vote at LCNs and whether organisations that do not attend should retain voting rights when regular attendees, who contribute, do not (LLO2/4). This issue can be seen at the Bridgwater LCN, where a regular attending member of the community volunteered for an interim vice-chair position but was not eligible to stand, as her organisation (a local business) was not in the core membership (Bridgwater LCN [meeting notes](#) Monday 2nd December 2024).

## Agenda setting and themes

Exploring the annual reviews available for LCNs gives a good illustration of their focus and breadth of interest<sup>4</sup>:

- Highways and Traffic (11 LCNs)
- Transport and Active Travel (6 LCNs)
- Flooding and Emergency Planning (6 LCNs)
- Housing and Development (4 LCNs)
- Young People (4 LCNs)
- Health and Wellbeing (3 LCNs)

Other topics mentioned were: business development, climate and environment, road safety, devolution to parishes, LCN boundaries, economic regeneration, and Anti-Social Behaviour.

The focus of LCNs in some places did not engage some stakeholders, who were, for example, interested in health and well-being rather than roads (SCO11; VCF7). Whilst LCNs were constructed as a forum for any topic [across Economic, Social and Environmental issues](#), their focus was inevitably shaped by the meeting chairs and the stakeholders present (SCO5), such that they could be perceived as acting in the interests of whoever had the resources to be present or the Council itself (CTP, Survey).

In setting priorities, such as working groups, some annual reports cited the use of data to inform discussions that then generated prioritised themes for the year. For others, priority areas were selected from more general discussion. There is a risk that without standardised transparent mechanisms for shaping the agenda, the process could become exclusive:

The chair and the officers control the agenda ... it's supposed to be a two-way relationship. ... I didn't ask directly, I asked through the vice chair ... "can you put this on the agenda because I can't get it on" (SCM8).

A suggestion was made that LCN Link Officers could curate a more inclusive process towards agenda setting. This would aim to bring a wider range of stakeholders in from the community and build a sense of shared purpose, structuring debate. However, this would rely on resources and engagement to support the process (SCM8; SCO5).

Conversely, another view was that the chairs, typically Council members, should be in more control of the agenda than is currently perceived to be the case. Here, the main issue was argued to be their selection, which:

Shouldn't be party based. There's some very effective people who are in opposition and should be recognised for that - for how good they are as communicating and listeners, and these people tend to be sidelined. (SCM6).

There was a common theme of comments for the agendas of LCNs to be shaped in the interests of a broad range of stakeholders, acting on behalf of the wider community. From

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<sup>4</sup> Number of LCNs given below are where these topics were mentioned in the most recent annual report available.

responses, there is no standard way in which to set agendas or priorities across LCNs, leading to a range of practice, as outlined above. The LCN Link Officers did speak of an evolving process towards thematic working:

Say we have our AGM once a year. That's where we discuss our priorities. That's where we discuss our themes and they should inform the next, let's say three LCN - full LCN meetings. (LLO3)

They're becoming more themed meetings ... as time has gone on, and decided at the AGM, they have been more focused. That's probably the way that most of us, if not all of us, are going anyway. (LLO4)

It's all about knowing what it is you're, in effect, selling to your community... If they know what's going to be talked about and they know that you're going to have professionals there that can give a good presentation and can move things forward for them, then I think you've got more chance of actually getting people there. (LLO6)

Defining meetings around priorities and need was a preference for some interviewees: 'I would rather be attending several LCNs because each had a particular purpose than a geographic pen' (SCM7, also SCO5).

Several participants spoke about the potential for LCNs to be forums for training and development, sharing expertise and best practice:

Saw a really great example of that in Dowsborough LCN with the Spaxton Community Land Trust who are doing amazing work. ... We have some really great things happening across the county but the 'stuff' that is coming to meetings is not reflecting that. (SCO, Survey)

[LCNs are] very helpful because it enables you to get to a group of parish and parish and/or town councils at once and in fact we've got a number of workshops that we run ... that works well to get people together and they so they can share experiences. (SCO12)

Yesterday we were talking about statistics and data and I thought not many people would maybe want to be interested or engage and actually we had really good engagement, really good conversations. (LLO2)

There was a cautionary note over the demands that such training could put on Council officers, where they were delivering:

We started to do some little short talks about how we work and what it is we do ... the number crunching and all of that. We ran into a situation a few weeks ago where we were short on capacity ... we couldn't, therefore, attend a couple of [LCN] meetings but it was seen that we weren't allowed to not attend ... I get that, but I don't want staff feeling the stress of having to deal with going to those meetings and realising that while they're out at those meetings ... maybe half a day, the work is piling up. (SCO2)

As forums for thematic discussions and skills development, LCNs are having some success. However, the idea of thematic discussions opens a further question about how LCNs are

convened and connected to networks oriented around interest. This is discussed below, alongside a consideration of networks that are flexible in terms of their geography.

### *Geography and boundaries*

An extensive consultation prior to the setting up of the LCNs evidenced that support was at best mixed for the proposed LCN boundaries (Stafford and Skirton, 2022). Issues that had been raised through this process, such as the integration of rural and urban areas within the same governance structure, were again reflected in this review. There has been thought given to making the LCN boundaries fit communities rather than administrative boundaries:

LCN boundaries and geographies are complicated and clunky because they're about real people in real places ... If there was one set of boundaries that would make it easier. But I don't think it would fix it because we've still got those various separations (SCO5).

However, it was evident from responses that the geography of the LCNs affected their activity. Some participants viewed the LCNs as failing to reflect long standing local governance arrangements (SCM5); others thought that they included too diverse a geography (SCM9; CTP, Survey); whilst for others they did not cover an area sufficiently distinct from existing governance arrangements (SCM2; LLO9). Even if the ambition had been that they would reflect communities, there was a perception for some that they reflected the priorities of the Council (VCF9; also SCO4).

There was a desire amongst participants, including parish councillors, LCN Link Officers, public service workers and Council officers for the boundaries to:

- Align with how parishes wished to group and work together.
- Create a consistent geography for working across the Council.
- Align, where possible, with geographies of partner bodies.  
(CTP1; LLO2/4/5/6/9; PBS4/6; SCO6).

Several Link Officers thought factors such as the number of parishes and VCFSEs were more important than population in the design of LCN geography, though they had varying views on the impact boundary changes would have on existing LCNs (LLO2/4/5/6). The compromises and judgements that shaped the existing LCN boundaries would be present in any future boundary drawing. At least one LCN was reported as already reviewing whether to include another parish within the boundary, to reflect overlapping interests (see [Bridgwater LCN minutes](#)).

Similar conversations around geographies are being had in the police and health service and, again, participants expressed how alignment was ideal but there were multiple tensions in drawing boundaries (PBS1/4). Regardless of what the boundaries are, cross-boundary working would remain important given any geography will fail to reflect some issue, for example around transport routes or flooding (SCM9; SCO12).

One key critique of current LCN boundaries was their amalgamation of urban and rural areas (LLO9; SCM1/3/9). In contrast, LCNs were viewed as potentially having a mediating role between towns and surrounding small parishes:

There's no point in the town council saying we want to set up a food belt and having a great vision unless they actually engage with the parishes and everybody around them. [Similarly] ... looking at flooding issues at one end of the LCN and how we manage might well affect how it how it manifests itself at the other end of the LCN. So there are quite a few issues that we can and should be dealing with on a more sort of regional basis. (SCM8; also SCO5/9)

This mediating role was also felt to be important between parishes, as they increasingly provided services and assets that were previously provided at a District level but now the responsibility of parishes that are thinking of excluding people not from their area or demanding funding from neighbouring parishes (SCM9).

Work around emergency planning is increasingly using more flexible networks rather than the LCNs, given discussion around flooding may involve a relatively small group of parishes, or extend across LCN boundaries (SCO12). This speaks to the role of thematic networks, the subject of Section 6.1.2, below.

#### *Flexibility in implementing communities of geography*

In considering how structured networks are implemented, several interviewees raised the issue of consistency. The value of consistency was something illustrated most clearly in this comment from a police officer, reflecting on the greater geographic integration of both Council and police services:

If we go back to when we had a two-tier authority system of the county and the local authorities, that was a real struggle for us. We had four different flavours of licensing, for example. We had four different flavours of antisocial behaviour ... [Similarly] we weren't interested in what they were doing over in Bridgwater. We're going to do it our way. And that would have been really frustrating for any stakeholder who was cross-border because they would have these different flavours to deal with. (PBS4)

The counterpoint to this is the variation across areas, which will be further highlighted in Section 6.1.3 below. Reflections from council officers and VCFSE member in their work with communities illustrate an experience of adapting to working in different ways in different areas:

The villages ... can be quite resilient and well organised. You need a different model in the towns or in parts of the towns. That's something we're looking at with some of the town councils. (SCO12)

We've now mapped out our governance and it looks different in each of the 12 different areas depending on the maturity of that neighbourhood and the partners involved in that neighbourhood as well ... what is delivered locally at a place is very much dependent on the strength of that community, the partners involved and the need of that community as well. (SCO4)

I'll get hold of a [parish] chair and I'll say - look we want to put something in your area. Is it helpful if we go anywhere near the market and they say "well, no you don't [want to be] doing that" ... it's almost tar and feathers territory.

However, there's a back room at the pub after the market ... and you may find that people wander down and just have a quiet chat with you there. (VCF2)

A community that has a high proportion of commuters to Bath or Bristol will have different skills, culture, and attachment to place than a community that is mainly based around agricultural and local industry. An area that has other strong local governance structures, such as well-resourced Town Council, local partnership or park authority, will have different needs from an LCN to those without these structures. The impact of these differences should be understood to impact people's preferences and expectations for how to work together in a community group and their perception of structures and need for support from organisations such as the Council (SCO5/8; SCO, CPT, Survey).

The evidence from both this review and the previous consultation is that there are multiple factors that pull on the definition of LCN areas. Somerset has numerous geographies. What must define the geography of LCNs, and indeed whether they have a fixed geography at all, is their role within the wider governance structures and ecosystem of Somerset.

## 6.1.2 - Thematic networks and working groups

The research highlighted the role of networks oriented around interests rather than geography, and the important role of thematic networks within and outside of LCNs.

**Table 6.1.2 What helps and hinders thematic networks and working groups, and the tensions faced**

What helps	What hinders	Tension
Connecting to a direct and concrete need, such as flood prevention	Failing to engage stakeholders if they view a topic as not relevant to them	Broadening a thematic topic to encourage long-term actions vs. keeping a topic narrow and directly relevant
Being able to impact directly on the area through facilitation, funding and relevant networks	Not convening all relevant stakeholders or not having the resources to impact on the issue	LCNs creating thematic working groups around any area of interest vs. limiting to issues where the Council has direct control
Having Link Officers and officers based in services supporting working groups	Where working groups duplicate or overlap with existing forums	Enabling an LCN to create a thematic working group vs. supporting existing thematic networks and bodies
Clusters of parish councils working together on issues of common interest	Parishes not working with each other	LCNs being viewed as the primary forum for parishes vs. supporting organic parish clusters forming

Aside from LCNs, various different networks oriented around thematic areas of interest were described and discussed in the research. From the results of this review, an important practice of the LCNs can be seen to be setting up of thematic working groups to reflect priorities and to progress particular strands of activity. This raised questions around how duplication of already existing networks could be avoided and the connections with relevant stakeholders improved.

### *Networks oriented around an area of interest*

A thematic area of wide interest in Somerset was around flooding and emergency response. Some discussions and work have been delivered through LCNs though it has increasingly involved networks of parishes independent of the LCNs. This has ranged from small networks working together to address flooding challenges, such as the Three Villages Flood Group ([www.3vfg.org.uk](http://www.3vfg.org.uk)), to wider clusters arranged around the same catchment or parish clusters (SCO12). The activities described included the Council facilitating community meetings, or delivering workshops at convened meetings:

The engagement officers would arrange for a variety of agencies to come along and set up stalls so that members of the public, parish councils, can come in and get the information they need. (SCO12)

They appointed a couple of councillors from the parish and then the council came up they had a ... general meeting for the public in the town hall which was very good. The water board were there ... highways were there. Everybody was there. So, “anyone, any questions” ... and that works well. (SCM5; also SCO12)

The activity described also included one-to-one outreach to communities affected by flooding and also work with schools. This is part of a wider strand of resilience work that has gained good engagement from a range of stakeholders, as this councillor relates about a Somerset Prepared event in Taunton:

So many parish council representatives there, LCN Link Officers there, council officers there, sharing information about being a more resilient community ... If we can put our efforts into what do people actually really want to know. (SCM4; also SCM3/6)

This speaks to a wider issue around boundaries that thematic networks may be effective at addressing:

We're trying to work within catchments more and more because there's a lot of synergy between communities within the same catchments. (SCO12)

Work around emergency responses involves interests that occur at a range of geographies, from immediate work around flood risk to broader cross-catchment working. There is also a broad interest from a range of stakeholders and joint working between the Council and partners. This delivers funding for activity alongside supporting the mutual connections and understanding between partners (LLO2).

Another example identified of cross-partnership working on a shared interest was on community safety. Here, the geographic split between East and West Somerset matches Police Districts:

We have a fortnightly meeting which ... top slices our demand over different issues whether it's hate crime and social behaviour, burglaries ... [and] comes up with a multi-agency plan to deal with that particular issue in any one area. So, for example, we might have [a] lot of disorder in [a place]. We would then probably own that as a lead agency and then we would call partners together and we would come up with an action plan, and we would track that through the priorities process to make sure that we're actually dealing with it. So, housing would rock up with that. (PBS4)

This engagement with multiple stakeholders by the police is clear in focus and resourcing resolutions. For less formalised networks, there were examples of the role of councillors in convening these (SCM1). However, the extent to which these networks flourished or did not depend upon the people and context:

You sow an awful lot of stuff, but very little of it comes to light because the reality is there are a lot of things that are beyond your control and beyond your gift. (SCM3)

Section 6.2, below, considers more around working in place and the support for elected representatives in their community leadership role, which includes this convening of networks of interest.

### *LCN Working groups*

LCNs themselves prompting thematic activity was an evident success. As noted in Section 6.1.1, Highways working groups were present in the majority of LCNs (and being explored in several more). Active-Travel working groups set up have developed into a cross-Somerset network that has prompted changes in how community groups and the department work together, including using different technology and easier processes (see Appendix ii).

It was evident from comments made that LCN working groups engage with relevant interests and support engagement from parishes and Council members:

The bit that's working well for that LCN are the working groups, which is Highways and the Active-Travel one. Those are the two that seem to be working and those are the two groups that came up from the people who were sitting around that table. (SCM3)

The Highways subgroup has made a concerted effort to understand the specific needs and priorities of local communities, which has led to more meaningful conversations and collaborative decision-making. (SCO9)

[Our LCN has] a highway subgroup, which covers potholes, the verges, gullies, things like that. That is well-attended. And because there's benefit there, we have clerks who will volunteer to go to that meeting to cover for other clerks who can't make it. And one of the clerks actually sends me a summary, which I then distribute out to the other clerks. (SCM6)

Prior to LCNs forming there had been activity around community engagement with Highways, but the scale of this work has evidently expanded with the LCNs (SCM9, SCO9). It is important to note that the success of the working groups was reported as dependent on:

- Having a theme that mobilised partners around a shared interest.
- A perceived responsiveness and impact enabled by the Council and partners, for example, Council officers and contractors being present and engaged.
- Key stakeholders being aware of the network and present, without significant duplication of other networks and processes.
- Groups being facilitated and engaged in a process of problem-solving. (SCO2/8/9; SCM3/4; PBS4; VCF1; CTP, SCM, Survey).

As with the LCNs themselves, there were expectations that their working groups would have a meaningful link through to the Council, unlike the expectations for less formal peer-support networks (VCF1). The support from Link Officers was also important for enabling the working groups:

Everybody knows that [the Link Officer] is now the ... point of contact. That's helped us when we've had turnover in our ... team to be able to move forwards in a really kind of consistent way. ... Having that single point of contact has been really good. (SCO2)

The Link Officers come in to provide that admin and support and tap into bits of the Council that you wouldn't necessarily be able to tap into. So, that has been really useful and helpful. (SCM3; also VCF1)

As with the core membership of LCNs, a question was raised about how membership and the remit of the working groups was defined. One participant stated of a working group:

The next time I tried to attend one, I was told, "No, you're not allowed to" ... I think it's probably just because it's me, but I don't know. (VCF5)

The reasons for who is included or not in working groups were not transparent in the Terms of Reference of the LCN and minutes indicated a formal process of approval.

Thematic working opens up the possibility of developing networks of interest that can then pull in a broader range of stakeholders (SCO5). What is evident is that whilst some thematic areas are within the scope of the Council and contractors to deliver, others - such as business, youth working, health and wellbeing, emergency planning - need a broader or different kind of collaboration to ensure ongoing impact (SCO4). There were examples given of where Link Officers and Council members connected LCNs with strategies that were initiated by larger parishes, using the LCN as a way of then "involving the wider the parishes outside" (LLO3; also SCM8).

One concern raised by participants and also at LCN meetings was the potential for working groups to duplicate other activity:

There was already a fair amount of duplication of networks and groups across the town that [the LCN] needed to work more closely with ... rather than setting up anything new. (Franklin, 2025; also PBS5; SCO2/4)

A related question is what work is most effectively done through LCNs, or through Council services already connected to these issues, and at what scale.

### *Organic Parish clusters*

One of the aims of LCNs upon founding was enabling and supporting cross-parish working. There was a tension evidenced between the role of the LCN in being a convenor of parishes and the councils themselves forming connections around common interests and geography. Parish clusters existed in different areas of Somerset prior to the founding of LCNs, being smaller alliances of parishes that retained a similar function - coordinating contact with public services, sharing best practice and resources:

They had a cluster, clusters of parish council meetings and that was really useful because what we agreed with that was that we would service those clusters and we were guaranteed to get a supervisor, so a sergeant or above, at those meetings... a gathering of five or six different sort of parish councils, which was more achievable. (PBS4)

If they want to do something with their next door neighbour parish they'll pick up the phone and speak to them rather than waste their time going to an LCN ... It's those parishes I know used to be the clusters ... people could just get the job [done] by picking up the phone, having a conversation. (SCM4)

It's allowing things to happen in local communities that are different priorities for different geographies and size, comes into that very much with parish councils. (SCO6)

Often communities won't listen to the council but they'll listen to other parishes. They're always very keen to know - has anyone else done this? Anybody working on this? Anybody crack this problem? And we try and put people in touch with each other. (SCO12)

As with thematic networks, there is a question as to how a structure such as an LCN convenes, interacts with, and supports networks of need and mutual interest amongst parish councils.

### 6.1.3 - Building relationships with communities

One of the important questions for the research was in considering the involvement of a diverse range of people apart from those who usually participate. The evidence gained oriented around the role of the LCN as a public platform, how the Council carries out consultations, and the potential for deeper participation to inform how the Council delivers services.

**Table 6.1.3 What helps and hinders building relationships with communities, and the tensions faced.**

What helps	What hinders	Tension
Community involvement supported by informality, involvement, impact.	Formal and bureaucratic language, focus on 'stakeholders'	LCNs as a forum for stakeholders vs. LCNs as a public space for community voice.
Link Officers forming inclusive relationships with the public through VCFSE networks.	Lack of capacity to connect and lack of impact when the public does attend.	Link Officers supporting inclusion of the public vs. supporting the networking of LCN stakeholders.
Involving a range of partners, particularly Council members and Link Officers, at an early stage.	Involvement at too late a stage in the process for the consultation to make a meaningful change.	Control over process vs. consultation 'in the wild'.
Training and sharing best practice.	Specialist language ('jargon'), overly complex and long consultations, inexperienced research practices.	Supporting professional development and good practice vs. Time and resource pressures on departments.

#### *Local Community Networks as enablers of community participation*

The LCN meeting was reported as an important mechanism of engagement in local places, though who this worked for and how varied considerably across the 18 LCNs. It was evident, as with who was involved in LCNs, that practically engaging a range of stakeholders was

challenging. What was evident from data and the participants was that LCNs are not a place where the broader community typically attend:

How do we really get the community voices feeding into the LCN? And it seems that doesn't always happen. It's more corporate, if you like, same organisations talking. (SCO11)

For Link Officers there was an evident view that informality would be preferable in terms of engaging members of the community:

The idea behind the LCN meetings is to take away some of that formality ... It's not a committee ... So, we don't need to be having votes on approving previous minutes and all that sort of thing. It should just be a way for people to come in and hear something positive and hear what's going on in their community and hear why it's going well. (LLO3; also SCO5)

They're far more formal than I really expected them to be. Very much more structured. And I don't think that really necessarily does us many favours. I think they could be far more flexible and informal and I think we could probably get more out of people if we approach them in that way. (LLO4)

Because we're working with community members, it can be off-putting because there's a particular language ... "addressing the Chair", for example. If you have never been to a council-based meeting, addressing a chair is quite an odd concept, and it does stop people from wanting to take part. (LLO6)

Whilst this is the case for those looking to involve the community, this is not the case when considering how partners such as parishes typically wish to engage, as this Link Officer states 'the LCN's that I work with ... they like that structure. They like that formality' (LLO8). Another Council officer notes the difference between spaces for informal building of networks and relationships, and the ones that have formal organisational representation and agendas:

The network event [helps] that relational soft networking convening space. But then there is a second meeting which [has] got more structure behind it. So, there'll be an agenda. It's more of a sit-down meeting. (SCO4)

This distinction between different kinds of spaces raises a question over whether LCNs also needed distinct kinds of meetings for different stakeholders.

In the 2022 consultation on LCNs, the largest perceived barrier to engagement with LCNs was time. This was particularly the case for volunteers who may have already done a working day, or public servants and council officers whose working day is already more than full. Responses to this review also related to the issue around the use of time and the possibility of reducing demands on time. This comment from a police officer summed up both aspects well, beginning with the experience of a structured meeting that allowed them to just participate for their section:

It's nice to be able to drop in and out quickly, for 45 minutes ... but actually I probably have a vested interest to stay for two hours because ... this is what the youth are telling me in Taunton. Right, now we're going to talk about how

we improve, how do we now improve services for the elderly. Okay, this is what I know that this is what people are struggling with right now. So, actually, we would stay for the whole two hours as a key vested member. (PBS6)

In other words, if the session was just about presenting information then there was little reason to stay, but if there were impactful discussions with other stakeholders, then it would be a good use of time.

There were differing viewpoints on the use of online meetings (SCM6; also FG CTP) with meeting records indicating the ability to attend online increased attendance by a relatively small amount.

Another aspect that made attending the meeting worthwhile, given the time taken, was a perception of commitment from the Council:

I can do the engagement side of it. I've gone to those mom and baby groups. I've gone and had those conversations. I've gone and pulled people in and got contact details and got [them] involved. It's just when they get in that setting, you think, well, what actually can we achieve ... there because half of the people in the authority won't turn up. (LLO7)

That the LCN Link Officers work to recruit people through building relationships is good practice but a slow process:

To get to know... individuals to keep track of, and that doesn't come quickly. It doesn't come overnight. You need to be quite embedded in the communities or be prepared to spend the time to get to know everybody and then identify the movers and shakers within each community. (SCO12)

A key tension in the work of building the relationships that encourage people to participate is that the greater the inclusion and deeper the involvement, the more resources it will typically take to initiate and sustain. As one VCFSE sector participant put it, 'we want bottom up but the bottom doesn't know how to express itself' (VCF7), or at least if in 'some communities, you absolutely can take a real bottom up approach to the whole thing ... other communities, I think, need some real help; (PBS2). For Link Officers, this role of community development was connected to their role in supporting the LCNs and linking into the Council.

An alternative to invited meetings was to 'just go to where they they are already ... where they feel safe and comfortable and just have a conversation' (SCO4). Taking advantage of community events was identified as one way of carrying out outreach, rather than engaging through events coordinated by the organisation, as this member of the public services said, 'It's a stronger model to do things together than it is just to do things in isolation' (PBS4). In this way, the time of both public and stakeholders was well spent.

#### *Citizen engagement with consultations*

Good consultations were felt to be those that had forward planning and outreach that involved stakeholders early. This allowed LCN Link Officers to embed consultations in LCN activities and promote them in local communities, which increased their reach and success (SCM8, SCO2). In-person drop-ins and the ability to complete responses in different formats were also valued (LLO6). Timing and inclusion were related, allowing parishes and LCNs

enough time to respond according to their meeting schedules (CTP, Survey; LLO9) and giving sufficient advance notice for communication and outreach to happen:

Whenever there's any kind of strategy review or policy review, they can go out to the LCN's ... There's one that closed a few weeks ago ... I don't know how that information got out to the public, but I don't think anybody knew about it. (SCM8)

You go to the people if there's a mums and tots group on or a reading group or a, you know, a dementia coffee morning - you go there and that's where you engage with people and that's where you ask them their opinions on ... consultations (LLO9).

There were indications that practice was changing, as this Council Officer working with communities states:

Normally they want things sent out yesterday or they want us to organize something yesterday but they are starting to come to us now to say, okay so how can we involve both at a community level but also at a parish level? So with community groups through LCNs but also wider community [and] parishes. (SCO6)

Part of good practice and making consultations accessible was said to be ensuring that questionnaires and supporting materials were well designed and accessible, which was not thought to be the case for several cited (CTP, SCO, Survey). One councillor called for officers to be given training, so that they 'provide enough time to engage well [and] understand what puts people off or excludes them', which could include piloting and initial conversations with local Council members and officers familiar with the locality (SCM7). A Council member gave an example of how their knowledge changed an approach:

We know that there is a big Malaysian and Indonesian population around the hospital that are mainly living in the East end of the town. They mainly worship up here [at the mosque]. Somebody who is on the ground knows that. ... They were busy planning on the basis that we were all white Christian (SCM7).

Another issue identified was the number of consultations coming into the community, as several participants, including a Council officer, raised:

The Council needs to talk internally especially around large community consultations. I have seen no evidence of a joined up approach, each directorate seems to be doing its own thing. (SCO, Survey; also CTP, Survey)

A wider issue identified was whether consultation responses had any impact. A concern was that they were being consulted when the result was already a 'fait accomplis' (SCM7), with perceptions that 'we're invited to meetings but the decisions are already made' (CTP3) and 'it will be happening regardless of how they consult', such that debate was considered meaningless (LLO1, LO8). As a chair of a parish council stated:

Any ask for consultation needs to result in improvements so that those involved can see something for their time and effort, as opposed to it being a tick box exercise. We asked, we listened, we did. (CTP, Survey)

One of the problems we tend to have is decide, announce, defend. You know, we make a plan, we announce the plan, we consult on the plan. (SCM7)

This speaks to a wider issue around the method of consultations. Consultations can gain a wide range of views on priorities but do not typically involve conversations that explore an issue in the depth needed to understand *why* something is an issue and the possible resolutions that might work for that person and those in their position. As this interviewee stated:

I would rather have a one-on-one conversation in a separate space where we could really talk through stuff. I just don't have the capacity to do that. ... We weren't doing it for, you know, the sake of doing consultation. We genuinely wanted to listen, but the mechanism that we put in place for doing that because of our capacity doesn't necessarily mean that we are able to hear what people are saying. (SCO2)

Such an in-depth conversation typically happens through deliberative workshops and forums, and processes of co-design.

#### *Methods of deeper engagement*

The Working Together Board in Adult Social Care was cited as one example of co-design, where a group of people with experience of adult care services acted as a critical friend to the delivery of those services (SCO, Survey). However, it was not evidenced to what extent this was more a consultative forum, similar to the Somerset Bus Partnership, which deepens conversations about the priorities for delivering services but where the design of services is not a shared project (SCO2). A Council member with experience of participatory planning notes how successful outcomes depend on communication throughout the project, such that 'you've got to always be humble enough to gather more and more information, even during a project to make sure that it's still on track' (SCM7). A clear example of co-design in Somerset is the Health Determinants Research Collaboration Somerset (HDRC) project, which has engaged in training staff and ordinary people in a community research model and co-design work, see Appendix ii. Whilst this is a time-limited (5 year) project, officers have an ambition to see this as a shift in practice between the Council and communities in how they work with each other:

We don't see it as a one-off, it is ... almost seed funding, to say here's to connect you and build a sustainable relationship going forward - that work can carry on. So that's quite an exciting sort of development. (SCO11)

Whilst this work will progress, one of the challenges faced is that the approach to engaging and involving communities is very different across different parts of the Council. Partners have found the approach to engagement inconsistent or not present, whilst council officers are orienting away from engagement for a range of reasons (LLO9; SCO2/5/11, VCF3). The breadth of this issue suggests a broader cultural change would be required to ensure engagement and involvement (also SCM9). Section 7.5 of the discussion chapter will take forward these themes and explore sector best practice.

## 6.2 - Supporting Roles in Place

How Somerset Council can support members and place-based officers in their community roles

### 6.2.1 - Supporting elected members

Councillors from unitary, city, town and parish councils fulfil a community leadership and champion role. Whilst they have different responsibilities, councillors at unitary and parish level face some similar challenges: information gaps; capacity constraints; and, structural barriers that undermine their effectiveness.

**Table 6.2.1 What helps and hinders supporting elected members, and the tensions faced**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Information shared proactively with councillors, enabling effective community leadership.	"Think local member" not implemented; Councillors finding it difficult to gain access to the right Council officer.	Investing time in engaging councillors vs demands on time from core service delivery.
Valuing the knowledge and experience of councillors as key partners for the Council.	Councillors, particularly at parish level, viewed as "amateurs" despite professional expertise.	Investing time in engaging councillors vs demands on time from core service delivery.
Councillors valuing cross-partner working in place.	Political demands to be seen as being responsible for any positive action; political factionalism.	Benefits of local partnerships and working as a team vs. political interests and alliances.

Section 6.2.2 below discusses how unitary and parish councillors may be considered as part of a wider team working in place with communities. The role of the councillor is also made much easier if they can resolve issues with council departments, covered in Section 6.4.1 below.

The shift to unitary has created a significant change in the experience of some councillors, with their previous district councils perceived as having more resources for building connections with community, and where councillors had more powers and resources in the locality (SCM3/4/5; LLO9; CTP5). There was a wish from some participants to revert back to more localised decision-making (SCM1/5) but beyond that, a wish for more ability to have practical impacts within places, which relates to the role of LCNs (see Section 6.1.1) and local funding and resourcing. The extent to which councillors have greater autonomy in place depends to some extent on the nature of LCNs, but also the efficacy of local team working and their capacity to draw on localism powers.

#### *Involving councillors in place*

Whilst working across roles in place has been illustrated as important, the flow of information from officers to members was highlighted. The Council's "think local member" policy, which should ensure proactive communication with unitary councillors, is perceived as being inconsistently implemented. Some Council members related their view of not being proactively involved:

It's a huge frustration when sometimes you're not told of something and you only find out after and then you're seen to be either a bad councillor because you've not told your resident something but you didn't know. And it just makes you also feel a bit useless when you don't know the information but it's been put somewhere and you find out late (SCM4; also SCM7)

We can work substantially better by working together because I could say, as I have done recently, I wouldn't actually go down that route because that's a bit of a bed of nettles at the moment, it'll be fine in the future but at the moment I would go this [alternative] route. (SCM7)

It should be noted that officers themselves had noted similar frustrations with not being aware of relevant work happening in a place, and therefore not being able to give information or giving incorrect information (SCO9/12; LLO). There was a flow of information from the Council to parishes through bulletins but no indication that parish councillors were involved in Council communications about their place. Parish and unitary councillors and Council officers who worked in place were potentially key partners for the work of Somerset Council but found themselves often overlooked.

### 6.2.2 - Cross-organisation / partner working in a place

Whilst the review brief spoke to supporting Council members in the role as community roles, it was evident that councillors were one part of a wider place-based ecology involving Council officers alongside VCFSEs, public services, business and local people. This section considers some of the factors that helped and hindered this ecology of place.

**Table 6.2.2 What helps and hinders cross-organisation / partner working in place, and the tensions faced**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Bringing together cross-sector partners around specific issues (homelessness, ASB, flooding).	Across non-aligned boundaries (4-6-12-18), making coordination difficult.	Flexibility to work across different boundaries vs. time and resources to engage with different structures.
Combining multiple specialisms and different connections in a place, enabling the sharing of knowledge and understanding.	Concerns over the motivations of stakeholders and imbalances in power.	The need to 'just get on and do it' vs. the need to take time building relationships and understanding.
Stakeholders who connect and work across organisational boundaries, being double-hatted or with broad areas of work.	Stakeholders siloed within organisations and teams, with no routine connection outside their area.	Double-hatted stakeholders / officers vs. Clarity and consistency in role. Building cross-partner and cross-team working vs. Time and resource.
Building trust through shared challenge (flooding, emergency response).	Preventing collaboration; resources protected rather than shared; communication breakdowns.	Managed control vs collaborative responsiveness: being open to uncertain challenges as partners.

Somerset Council, public services, and VCFSE sector networks all operate simultaneously, sometimes duplicating or working past each other. As noted above and in Section 6.5 below, the different geographies of stakeholders place barriers to working together. Depending upon the employing organisation, the focus of people in place-based roles can be very different. In a place, rich and powerful benefactors can 'impose their will on the parish... on their terms, on their purposes which are largely commercial' (CTP3). Conversely, those with money and resources can make a significant positive difference when they are 'engaged in the town and they want to see the town flourish' (VCF3). With any area, there will be personal and professional differences, hierarchies, and people excluded (see Mansbridge, 1983). Inevitably, where there is misalignment and discord then it harms working in place.

One dynamic particular to councillors was party politics, with political parties supporting councillors in their role, but with this affiliation also leading to partisanship. There was a perception from some that party politics interferes with problem-solving at local level, with calls for councillors to understand that 'politicking at that level is not really needed because we're there to try and get stuff done' (SCO6; also CTP4). The frustration was particularly if councillors saw their roles as being more about representing party than the area, with one participant reflecting on their local councillors being 'not the kind of people who would naturally be inclined to be active bringing together' (VCF3). It should be noted that this was a minority experience, with councillors usually appreciated as constructive advocates who link communities in places (SCO5; VCF2/5).

#### *Bringing partners together in place*

Alongside the challenges were opportunities. As noted above, thematic working convened a range of stakeholders in a place, which supported cross-sector working in place. Participants gave several examples around:

- Case-focussed working, such as a creative solutions process for homelessness brought together a range of stakeholders such as the Police and Housing services to resolve issues relating to individual cases. The value was in information sharing that meant a case could be progressed where it might otherwise be unresolved (PBS4; also 'One Teams', CTP3; coordinating ground works, SCO1).
- Broader thematic working on place-based issues, such as the Community Safety Partnership, which 'brought all the agencies together, Police, Housing, health visitors' (CTP3; see also Section 6.1.2).
- Thematic cross-sector and within-sector stakeholder networking events, such as the [Connect Somerset breakfasts](#), which seek to build relationships between partners and broadly consider issues around young people and families. As one attendee said, 'if you can combine eating your morning meal with talking to other people and networking, it's a good thing to do' (LLO6; also SCO4).
- Cross-team working day that helps build mutual understanding of roles and preferred working methods, with a commitment from managers to this kind of partnership working (LLO2; also SCO1).

It was evident from participants that these kinds of activities were valued as ways of addressing issues and improving working within places. As one VCFSE participant in a focus group stated, 'the best learning happens when we get together with people doing similar work, we solve each other's problems' (FG VCF). There were hopes that this practice would increase with an increased co-location of services within physical buildings (SCO4; PBS2).

Aside from one-off events, Council members and Link Officers acted in ‘boundary spanning’ roles, being people who, as part of their role, had working relationships with different kinds of stakeholders and could act as a line of communication between them:

Being that conduit in terms of communication, the person who builds the connections has connections with various stakeholders in your community - so you can connect people to support advice sharing information in that way, I think that's what I see my role in terms of communicating with residents (SCM4; also SCM1/3/6/7/8)

You've got that opportunity not just to share what the services in the council provide but also any anything that comes out of those conversations you can take back. ... we [are] not exactly an umbrella, but we are linking way more than each of the other services [given] their focus either statutory or by charity commission (LCN-02; also LLO6)

For some Council officers, their work naturally crossed over between different departments and stakeholders, particularly where they were jointly funded but also where their roles required working across sectors:

Part of our jobs ... is also to keep this approach and start to join the dots like we do with [our wider sector] to say actually you should really be needing to think about this and this and you're great if you could talk to so-and-so which is what we tend to do ... We're often the glue bringing things together (SCO11)

This boundary-spanning role was also fulfilled by members of VCFSEs. For example one VCFSE participant spoke of their cross-sector work in building a broad community organisation, doing ‘the necessary work to develop good relationships with individuals’ (VCF3; also VCF5). Another described wearing both Council and voluntary sector ‘hats’ as making work ‘twice as effective’ through the ability to navigate between neighbourhood and strategic levels (VCF13).

This spanning of different scales is also common to double-hatted councillors, sitting at both unitary and parish level. From survey responses, a fifth (20%) of parish councillors and clerks also had a formal role in a local VCFSE, a different form of being double-hatted and another way in which boundary-spanning naturally linked different stakeholders and interests.

Evidently, networks helped boundary-spanning work to happen, enabling stakeholders within roles to build connections, whilst place-based roles and cross-sector roles also supported this working. The benefits of good working in place were evident from the resolution of issues and the need for greater cohesion in how the Council worked in place.

### 6.2.3 – The role of the Link Officer

Several participants spoke of the need for a role that would act as the ‘eyes and ears’ of the council within the area, being a contact point for Council officers and supporting their links to the community whilst working alongside elected members (PBS3; SCM4/7). This section considers the role of the Link Officer in place and how this role might best support and be supported to enable work in place.

**Table 6.2.3 What helps and hinders Link Officers working, and the tensions faced**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Providing single contact points for the Council and supporting other place-based partners.	Under-resourced and not consistently supported by Council departments.	Responsive engagement with Link Officer vs Council officer workload and core delivery.
Engagement of stakeholders and a wish to make the LCN work.	Disengagement and the need to continue facilitating despite the LCN struggling.	Persisting with a model vs Withdrawing and changing tack.
Connecting with the community at multiple points, across different stakeholders and with ordinary members of the public.	Being too thinly spread to be effective.	Having a broad and deep engagement with community vs Risk that brief will not be fulfilled.

In considering the Link Officer role, it is worth reflecting on the review brief (see Appendix v), which notes that, in addition to supporting the main LCN meetings, the Link Officer team are developing:

- their role as the first point of contact for local VCFSE and parishes.
- wider parish liaison.
- their role in supporting emergency planning both in terms of pre-emptive support for communities to be prepared and in the event of an emergency (with an emerging role building on their local knowledge and relationships).
- and supporting services such as planning, transport and highways to engage with communities.
- Utilising local assets and mobilising resources.

In addition, the Link Officers are key partners in the Building Blocks for Health Partnership, supporting local communities to positively affect specific building blocks of health that matter to them. This includes building opportunities for participatory research and evaluation that will capture the experience and voice of residents, enabling community voice to inform service development and delivery.

This description of the Link Officer role is only partly reflected in discussions with Link Officers, where their focus and activity appear dependent on place and the officer themselves (FG LLO). Indeed, a Council officer reflected that the role continues to develop iteratively rather than following a single consistent approach, with effectiveness depending on individual officers’ skills, experience, capacity, and understanding of the role (SCO6; also SCO5). Whilst this flexibility may have enabled them to best meet the needs of their place, there was a consensus amongst Link Officers that to be sustainable the role needs to be

reduced geographically or the breadth of activity narrowed (FG LLO). There has also been a lack of support for tasks that would be better handled by officers in administrative support roles (SCO6).

The Link Officer has the potential to support community development, cross-organisational working in place, and provide 'locality based intelligence' for the Council and partners (SCM7; also SCM9). There is some potential overlap in this role with Connect Somerset champions, particularly where work touched on early years provision. This was noted, with one Link Officer having discussed their role with their counterpart:

We sat down and we literally said ... well, who does what, what do we do? And we identified what the Connect Champion is focusing on, what I'm focusing on, and we agreed that if somebody comes with this issue, we would support each other. ... We do a similar role because we engage but we've got a different role in that engagement (LLO2)

There is a role for us working closely with the Village Agents and with the Connect Champions and with the One Team so that we're not treading on each other's toes. We're complementing what each other's doing. I think that's important. (LLO6)

These viewpoints speak to the potential for team working in place across different place-based officer roles, VCFSE roles (particularly those funded by the Council), and learning from each other's good practice (LLO4/6).

With regard to what would support the role, there are similar themes to other Council officers and members around cross-partner working (see Section 6.2.2) and how those in place are linked into the council (see Section 6.4.1). One particular concern raised was around how resources could be better used across teams. Link Officers have found themselves not permitted to use council meeting rooms for public meetings 'even though there is no one using it and its free space [and] would be cost-effective and useful for everybody' (LLO1; also LLO7). Budgets available for activities was another area where Link Officers would appreciate more flexibility, so that money allocated for LCN room hire (for example) could be spent instead on funding an LCN working group project (LLO2).

## 6.3 - Supporting Communities

There are several ways in which the Council can and does support communities to become more self-reliant. This section will consider the working relationship with key partners in place: parishes and VCFSEs. Finally, this section will consider where the Council directly works in place to support communities.

### 6.3.1 Devolution and autonomy for parishes

The research evidenced how devolution has impacted on the role of city, town and parish councillors along with their relationship to community. The increasing size and responsibilities of these local councils raised expectations of a changing relationship with the Council, which had changed to reflect these expectations in some areas but not in others.

**Table 6.3.1 What helps and hinders devolution and funding working in place, and the tensions faced**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Devolution or partnership as a conversation about long-term value and what is sustainable within resources for both authorities.	Devolution undertaken as a cost-saving exercise for Somerset council.	Collaboration in an equitable conversation vs. Uncertainty and complexity in outcomes with a jointly negotiated process.
Flexible parish clusters for joined working and LCNs providing information, networking, and training.	Geographies or themes that are not relevant to the work of the parish, lack of buy-in from the Council into LCNs.	Flexibility in providing an 'offer' to parishes based on scale and need vs. Capacity to customise support.
Clear contact points for parish clerks and councillors to raise issues and gain a response.	Standard customer service mechanisms and a reliance on informal contacts.	Responsiveness to parishes vs. Managing demand so Council officers do not become overwhelmed.

#### *The risk of devolution without resources*

Participants questioned how the devolution of services and assets from the Council was being rolled out, as one officer said:

There are bits of our organisation that just want to [rid] ourselves of assets ... you either like it or you lump it, which is quite adversarial, which is really difficult for us where we are trying to build something that is not that type of relationship (SCO6; also CTP4; CTP and SCO, Survey)

This has placed significant burdens on some parishes to cover devolved services, where they do not have the advantage of Somerset-wide teams to cover absences and efficiencies of scale to reduce costs (SCO1/3/9). A Council member gave an example of a current devolution prospect:

The public open space will be up for adoption. It needs equipping. It needs a multi-use games area putting in, two playgrounds. Arrangements need to be made to mow it and trim the trees and so on. and the Council's already asking

the parish to take it on when hardly anything is known about the problem and the parish simply doesn't have the capacity. It's miles off having the capacity to do the conveyancing work and so on to adopt the land itself. (SCM7).

A Council officer wanted to see a shift in devolution to parishes that became more a conversation about capacity, outcomes and impact: 'let's talk about what might be the benefit of giving it to you and what do you intend to do with it and prioritising it around that way' (SCO3; also SCO8).

The expansion of services and assets being controlled by local councils has steadily increased pressures on parish councillors. Despite being unpaid volunteers, many of whom have full-time employment and caring duties, they are performing statutory functions that increasingly mirror those previously held by district councils (CTP3). Participants spoke of a skills gap for both parish councillors and clerks (FG CTP). The need for training and support is partly being met by the Somerset Association of Local Councils (SALC) alongside the Council (SCO3/6).

Where individual parishes did not have the capacity to take on devolved assets, this raised the question of whether 'we can enable, and it might be partly through the LCN's, conversation between parishes to join up and do it together' (SCO3). A Council officer noted one example of pooling, with the funding of a CCTV control room, which was going to be closed, 'we've now worked with our the all the city, town, and parishes that have the CCTV in their areas and they now fund that service' (SCO1). However, one participant spoke of a reluctance to be 'forced' to partner with neighbouring parishes for the funding of services or assets (FG CTP), indicating a wish that conversation should not be turned into obligation.

The expansion of the role of parishes into wider provision of assets and services has created increasing confusion on which council has responsibility for which service:

The town council and some of the bigger parishes are having to take up more roles. And what we've done, in effect, is created the old borough structure [taking] on some of the roles [of] the unitary Council ... Most of the community, most electors, most people who live in the town don't realise, have never realised, what Council does what, and the blurring of the lines is causing a problem. (SCM2)

This has resulted in frustration being misdirected, 'residents blame us for potholes but we have no authority over highways. We can report but not decide' (CTP1; also CTP4).

### *The growing parish council*

Parishes can raise funding through precepts, but this mechanism has significant limitations. One participant noted that precepts are 'politically sensitive', particularly during a cost-of-living crisis (CTP3). Small parish councils with limited tax bases cannot generate substantial income even with significant percentage increases. As one participant noted: 'a 5% precept increase in a small parish might be £2000. That doesn't go far when you're being asked to take on new services' (CTP5). An analysis of parish precept increases in Somerset suggest that they are approaching their ceiling, though with a trajectory that implies more rises to come (see Section 7.3.1).

The broadening responsibilities and demands on parish councillors raised frustration around continually being viewed as ‘amateurs’, ignoring the significant role of councils at this scale alongside councillors professional experience and local knowledge (CTP1; also CTP3). There was a suggestion that the Council should support the process of local governance and ‘help amplify the value of what [we are] doing’ (CTP4) alongside an argument that ‘devolution needs to mean something — actual power and actual money, not just more responsibility’ (CTP5; also CTP1).

Another impact of broadening responsibilities is parishes having a greater range of partners and relying on information around much broader areas of work, alongside needing new forms of specialist advice. Alongside SALC as a key partner, there was evidence of good practice around dissemination and coordinating advice (SCO3/6; CTP Survey), though there were also frustrations (CTP, Survey).

### 6.3.2 Supporting the capacity of the community sector

The Council directly funded VCFSEs alongside working in partnership with them, with the funding role being one that created most tensions with the VCFSE sector.

**Table 6.3.2 What helps and hinders the capacity of the VCFSE sector, and the tensions faced**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Infrastructure organisations providing scaffolding: governance support, funding advice, training, volunteer coordination.	Infrastructure organisations struggling with unreliable funding, insufficient valuing of what is already in place.	Large-scale short-term commissions vs Tiered funding models and stable funding streams.
Peer learning networks: enabling practitioners to share solutions; giving time to understand places and form relationships.	Failing to value long-term and complex impacts of community development by VCFSEs. Not supporting learning across the system.	Clear measurement of value vs. more complex forms of value. Asking VCFSEs to fit existing structures vs. Supporting more organic networks:
Strong connections between VCFSEs in place so people are referred to the right places; time to understand needs and form relationships.	‘Information overload’ in place; the instability of the VCFSE sector meaning ‘who does what’ changes too quickly; instability in Council staffing.	Enabling relationships and stability at arms length vs. Investing in directly commissioned delivery.
Shared understanding around the working relationship. Building up stable contacts with VCFSEs.	Trust / confidence deficit flowing both ways; not accommodating different scales and capacities of VCFSE.	Commissioner / provider relationship vs. Building collaborative relationships.

#### *The funding and commissioning of VCFSEs*

As noted in Section 6.1.1, there was a perception of loss of a simple small funding process from VCFSEs. There were several other concerns around funding. Participants raised the challenges they faced with the commissioning model for funding. VCFSEs found this process:

- Did not value community development and long-term outcomes (VCF15).

- Favoured large VCFSEs over smaller VCFSEs that ‘can’t afford to employ someone just to manage contracts’ (VCF20).
- Were not commissioned at a scale that smaller VCFSEs could match.
- Tended to favour the creation of new networks rather than ‘strengthen what exists’ (VCF15; also PBS3).

A Council officer agreed with some concerns around commissioning, stating ‘the whole point of going out to the sector is because we know that they could run it better than we could and it just feels like sometimes we’re making their job harder’ (SCO3).

One long-standing community organisation leader described their experience of losing a commission to an external body:

We’ve been doing this work for twenty years. Then a new project comes in to do the same thing. They don’t talk to us, they compete with us for funding, they confuse the community about who does what. After two years their funding ends and they disappear, leaving chaos behind (FG VCFSE).

The feedback from VCFSEs suggests a model of commissioning and funding that is not working for at least some organisations in the sector. Particularly important for the building of community capacity is the gradual development and strengthening of what is already in place. Several participants advocated for approaches that build on and strengthen existing community capacity rather than displacing it. One described a successful intervention:

We didn’t set up a new group. We found the existing group that was struggling, gave them some support and funding, connected them to others. They flourished because they had community trust and knowledge, they just needed help to grow (FG VCFSE).

Again, there was concern that the current model was one where; ‘funding always wants to know what problem you’re solving. If we say “we’re building on existing strengths”, that doesn’t fit the form’ (VCF12; also PBS2). This was within a view that relationships built with communities had a value and needed investment (VCF6) and where the groundwork needed to be done to create interventions that did not disrupt what was already there (VCF12; also FG VCFSE).

The stability and nature of funding for infrastructure organisations was also raised as an issue. VCFSE participants in this role stated a need for multi-year funding for core-costs:

If Somerset really wants community self-reliance, they need to properly fund the infrastructure that makes it possible. We’re the ones who support dozens of small groups, but we’re always on the edge ourselves (FG VCF).

We can get project money but we can’t cover our core costs. That means we’re constantly chasing funding instead of actually supporting groups (VCF15).

The need for stability was tied with a need for long-term working within places. One long-standing community worker explained: ‘You can’t parachute in and understand a place. You need to know the history, who trusts whom, what’s been tried before, where the energy is. That takes time’ (FG VCF). Similarly, a participant with a community stated that they had a

team who knew their community, were place-based and rooted in local connections, such that 'we don't need days and weeks of conversation' to solve problems (VCF7). Another community development worker reinforced the need for long-term commitment: 'trust isn't something you can create in a six-month project. It's built over years of showing up' (VCF13). Short-term funded initiatives struggle to build the relationships necessary for their own success.

### *Referring to the right people*

The fluidity of funding also meant that it was difficult to keep track of which activities were being undertaken by which VCFSEs:

It's sometimes a surprise when someone says 'oh you should have just bunged them across to us because we we've just started doing that'. ... It's just the speed at which third sector organisations can work. You know they may not update the website for another six weeks and that's you know that leads to problems. It means that we miss opportunities. (VCF2)

Whilst networking between VCFSEs could cover some of this fluidity, this convening requires resources that are limited in the VCFSE sector. One VCFSE focus group participant stated that, 'we tried to self-organise but without someone driving it, meetings fizzled out'.

Several participants noted that communities face 'information overload' rather than information scarcity. One participant described people feeling 'overwhelmed by all the different organisations, websites, phone numbers—they don't know where to start' (FG VCF; also LLO4).

The lack of joined-up information across services was raised as one part of this issue:

We've got the individual elements, but we're not communicating them well. And even if they're not provided by the same organisations, it doesn't matter. Let's communicate the function of those organisations ... the community doesn't care whether it's run by our service [or another] (PBS3)

This was an argument here for the principle of organisations sharing and showing relevant information for all partner services, so that a person would find the relevant service they needed in their area regardless of where they had gone for help.

However, there were also reflections that the complexity of what is provided was best navigated by direct support. One voluntary sector worker described their approach: 'I don't just tell people where to go. I find out what they actually need, work out what might help, and then I connect them personally—often I'll walk them to the first appointment' (VCF13). One GP practice representative noted the value of having 'someone in the practice who knows local resources and can make warm connections' rather than just handing out leaflets (FG PBS).

### *Building mutual trust and understanding*

There was a gap in trust on both sides. One voluntary sector leader suggested, 'start small, give us genuine autonomy over something modest and see how it goes, prove you trust us before asking us to take on bigger things' (VCF15). The converse was a lack of trust and wanting 'us to deliver but they want to control how we do it, that's not devolution, that's just

us implementing their decisions' (VCF12; also VCF15). Whilst there had been discussion within the Council around the devolution of assets and services to VCFSEs, there had not been sufficient capacity to progress this given the pace of devolution to parishes (SCO3).

Reflecting on the experience a different kind of partnership, a council officer thought a shift to a more cooperative way of working would be a change for both the Council and VCFSEs:

it's taken a little while to change that relationship to say [to the VCFSE] actually you are the experts in the sector, you're part of the collaboration for your expertise ... that is a shift in relationships between the council and the sector ... the council can have that very "we're the commissioner, you're the provider" ... but it doesn't always evoke the kind of relationship conversations that you might want to think about. (SCO11)

The implications of this will be discussed in Section 7.3.2.

### 6.3.3 The role of Somerset Council in working with communities

The evidence reveals a complex landscape of community development work in Somerset, characterised by strong grassroots activity alongside significant infrastructure fragmentation and resourcing challenges. One concern was that the invisible infrastructure of mutual aid represents significant community capacity that formal systems often overlook or inadvertently undermine. As this participant stated: 'People help each other all the time—checking on neighbours, sharing resources, organising things. It doesn't look like official community development but it's what sustains communities' (FG VCF). Whilst networks such as Somerset Connect and Village Agents are sector-leading impactful practice in supporting early help, a tension was evidenced between this form of provision and more community-originated activity (PBS3; SCO5).

The different kinds of roles the Council takes with the community was also a factor:

'if you're an enabler, you're trying to help the community identify and articulate those needs and aspirations and then navigate a route to achieve at least some of them. And if you're a critical friend, you might be adding a dose of realism and saying, well, you need to you need to manage your expectations or you need to prioritise ... but you might be a gatekeeper saying, "Well, you can't have that. We've only got we've only got 10 of those and nine of them are already spoken for". So in a way, different parts of the council are always going to be working against each other' (SCO8; also VCF2)

The kinds of spaces and processes, for example whether formal or informal, also shaped whether a Council officer was perceived more as an enabler or a gatekeeper (SCO4) alongside whether the officer was 'badged' as a Council officer (LLO).

The Council has been successful in mobilising volunteering work, drawing people from communities into working with Council services, though through emphasising the community benefit rather than the role of the Council. The work is done alongside Spark Somerset, as the key VCFSE partner in mobilising volunteering (SCO5). Through mobilising volunteers, the Council proactively involves citizens in delivery and enables local group activity. However, a cautious approach to risk was felt to be inhibiting some work with communities. An example of this was given in that many community clean-ups are no longer happening

alongside the Council due to a perception of liability around hazard from waste that is not shared by residents or the officers involved (SCO1).

Simple interventions can catalyse significant community activity. One gave an example: 'We introduced the food bank to the community garden. Now surplus produce goes to the food bank, and food bank clients volunteer at the garden. Everyone benefits and it cost nothing to make that connection' (VCF sector participant). One community development worker described their role as 'playing dot to dot around the system to make sure we are there at the right moment' (VCF sector participant), connecting people, groups and resources that would benefit from knowing each other. This connector role requires someone with overview of community assets and the relationships to broker connections, which is a potential role for Link Officers working in communities (SCO6). However, given the size of the unitary there was a question raised over whether such a role would be better located within the VCFSE sector, such as through contracted roles such as Village Agents or more flexibly through small VCFSEs located in places, rather than as a directly employed Council officer (SCO5).

**Table 6.3.3 What helps and hinders Somerset Council working with communities, and the tensions faced**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Asset-based approaches: starting from understanding community strengths and what is already in place before creating new roles.	Tendency to impose consistent structures and networks that can risk destabilising or duplicating what is already in place.	Consistency and confidence in provision vs. Supporting organic work within places.
Enabling volunteering through direct involvement alongside Council services and supporting community activity.	Lack of flexibility in processes to accommodate volunteering; overly demanding governance and compliance requirements.	Security in processes around HR, Finance, Health & Safety vs. Accommodating a level of risk to enable activity.
Connecting and linking roles within and across communities to support mutually beneficial collaboration.	Failing to contribute linkage roles at the right level or duplicating existing networks.	Prioritising linkages between the Council and communities vs. prioritising linkages within communities.

## 6.4 - Participation for delivery

### How and where it is appropriate to increase community participation to inform service strategy, development and delivery.

This section considers the dynamic between communities and the Council and the role of council officers and councillors in mediating between communities and council services, and how well concerns are transmitted and resolved.

#### 6.4.1 - Linking the community into the council

As Section 6.2 above outlined, council officers and councillors can work together effectively in place if they are enabled to do so. An important part of this enabling, which extends to partner organisations, is how they can connect to the structures, delivery and decisions in the Council.

**Table 6.4.1 What helps and hinders council officers link to the community, and the tensions faced**

What helps	What hinders	Tension
Officers within council services with community relationship building roles.	Lack of resources to fund roles; need to focus on specialists in core delivery; engagement not being a priority.	Recruiting those with skills for core delivery vs. Skills for engaging community.
Council members who engage with the community.	Lack of engagement with councillors by officers.	Investing time in engaging councillors vs. Demands on time from core service delivery.
Forming trusting working relationships.	Staff churn and changes reducing the ability to form relationships.	Stability and certainty vs. Change and precarity.

#### *The role of linking community into council*

The research undertaken evidenced that the role of linking communities to the Council was central to the roles of most officers and all the Council members who participated, though this was not perceived to be the case for all their colleagues. All of those active in places were potential sources of knowledge and insight for the Council, which was evidently utilised in some services but the extent to which this was the case across all services was questioned (SCO, Survey).

For LCN Link Officers, the 'link into the council makes the Link Officer distinctive' (LCN LO4), this being distinct from roles closely connected to the Council but located within VCFSEs (for example, Connect Somerset Champions; SCO4) and officers whose role was to undertake outreach for a particular service (for example, emergency planning). The role of Link Officers was complementary to that of Council members, connecting in place and being able to advocate directly for citizens on a range of issues.

For some Council departments, an officer in a community focussed engagement role has interacting with the community as part of their core delivery. Engagement officers acted as translators of complex services to citizens, gave advice, heard from a range of viewpoints, and took queries back to colleagues (SCO2/8/9). It was evident that this role required a distinct skillset from their colleagues, who had the specialist skills (such as highways, planning, transport) to deliver the service. These engagement officers also acted, to some extent, as a lightning rod for the complaints and frustrations of residents (SCO6). Each service had a distinct way of working with communities relating to: whether community engagement was a typical practice; the strength of connections to VCFSEs (such as through Village Agents); and, the extent to which the service was place-based (SCM9; SCO1/2/4). It was evident that across these roles there was innovative practice but little sharing of best practice between Council officers who engaged with communities, as this officer states 'there's lots of pieces of the jigsaw. And I'm not convinced that anyone's got the full picture' (SCO8).

The role of the LCNs came up as a way of enabling links between communities and the Council, particularly for Council officers, with one officer noting how it made connecting easier: 'this saves me 15 conversations or 15 emails because I've got all of you in the room' (SCO5). However, as much as this supported links into the council, it also needed resourcing that was not provided: 'we're having to find that capacity out of thin air' (SCO2). There was also a risk that LCN meetings became the only link into Council, with a response to one enquiry from a citizen being to 'raise it at their next LCN meeting', which was several months away (SCO3).

For Council members, their role in linking communities to the council was described variously as: '[the] conduit between the voters and the organisation' (SCM1), 'working with communities and trying to engage communities' (SCM8), '[to] be an upward voice' for stakeholders (SCM6), 'chasing up, trying to get responses' from the council (SCM3). For a community activist, knowing councillors was used as a shortcut through to the Council, saving 'a lot of hassle' (VCF5). For the Council member, not knowing who in a Council department was responsible for a piece of work in their area could frustrate their ability to be responsive to those community concerns (SCM7).

### *Building working relationships*

Several participants mentioned the importance of personal contacts in being able to connect with Council departments. Maintaining these relationships was made challenging by changes in staff or organisational structures (SCM5, SCM9), along with the size of the Council (CTP; SCM7), as illuminated by this frustrated clerk; 'Not knowing where to direct your query. Who deals with what. This seems to change all the time' (CTP, Survey). Council officers and members spoke about the impact of organisational instability upon their work:

We have lost an awful lot of organisational knowledge and a lot of personal contacts ... We're very conscious that a number of teams still haven't fully transformed or are short of staff or trying to recruit etc. So people try and make things work but some teams are just not in a good place to have those conversations. (SCO12; also SCM9; SCO9)

The building up of trusted personal relationships between officers with a community engagement role and others in the organisation was made more difficult by remote working:

I used to go and find out where they sat and then wander down, having a look at their calendar, and say, "Hi, I just wanted to introduce myself." ... It's really difficult for them to ignore you, isn't it? Whereas they can very easily ignore you via email. (SCO6, also PBS4)

Where officers were geographically based then that also was reported as helping in the building of relationships for place-based officers, such as in children's and adult's services (LLO7). A key enabler was a Council department having officers in formal engagement roles, whilst officers who were not public facing were less likely to respond (LLO4). The non-response to emails and other contacts was cited by all Link Officers in the focus groups as something that hindered connecting community concerns into the council. Several Council members indicated a need to repeatedly request a response or escalate to a more senior officer to gain a response, including to the CEO of the Council (SCM2/7/9).

#### *Resourcing relationship building in specialist services*

The clearest single ask from parish councillors was needing to have 'the details of the relevant person to speak with' (FG CTP). Several parish clerks requested 'directories' of staff or similar as they had experienced 'very long waits on [the] call centre and lack of return telephone calls' (CTP chair), and that 'it has become increasingly difficult to contact anyone in the council to discuss' issues (CTP clerk). However, this proposal raised a concern:

unless you've got an officer that is dedicated to engaging... they will have a full workload of things that they are supposed to do and engagement will be one very small part of that. And if you have an officer that is a single point of contact ... everybody emails Joe about Active-Travel then Joe is going to very easily become overwhelmed. (SCO2)

For more technical Council services, such as around planning and transport, officers with technical skills were typically distinct from those who had good experience in working with communities. Officers who had the right combination of understanding and community engagement therefore had to be specially hired to perform these roles (SCO2/8/9). This can lead to tension for these services in the balance between prioritising core delivery and prioritising building the relationships with communities that makes core delivery more effective and appropriate. The transition to an engagement model was felt by one Officer to be 'a really different way of thinking about how we deliver our services' (SCO2). It was evident that, for at least some services, this is a developing area.

One successful means of managing demand while enabling a link to council was the [website report function](#) for issues on the road network (VCF5; CTP clerk, Survey). This were felt to work well as a service, enabling partner organisations and people in the community to highlight issues straight to the Council. There were differences of opinion around whether these services should be further improved in-house or contracted externally (SCM7; SCO9).

## 6.4.2 - Clear, honest and transparent communication

Whilst communication was embedded across all that council officers and councillors did, there were a couple of themes that spoke to this area in particular.

**Table 6.4.2 What helps and hinders good communication, and the tensions faced**

What helps	What hinders	Tension
Coordination and cross-team working.	Siloed working and inward looking services.	Business As Usual vs. collaborative effort.
Information shared between partner organisations.	Siloed working and inward looking services.	Prioritising council communication vs. acting as a conduit for partners.
Clear and accessible information about standard processes.	Complex and jargon heavy processes; frequent change to processes.	Time spent producing communication materials vs. time spent delivering services.

As with other areas of engagement, communication from the Council had mixed perceptions from participants. The response to flooding was cited by some participants as an exemplar of how well the council could do. One participant, now a council officer, spoke about their perception from a position outside of the council:

The amount of input that we had from the council and from council officers was fantastic and it really helped when dealing with residents who had been flooded out or were being evacuated and everything like that. So that's something that sticks in my mind about when the council has really communicated effectively with people that needed it.

The response from the council over flooding was generally felt to be good in terms of clear communication and helpful responses (LLO3; FG SCO; SCO and CTP, Survey). It was the proactive communication and clarity that was appreciated, enabled by cross-team working and the mobilisation of resources from across departments (LLO9; SCO12).

The emergency response of the Council is an illustration of what can be achieved with sufficient directed resources and coordination in a collaborative effort. It illustrates that information about what the council and partners are doing in a place can be effectively communicated to councillors and officers in a place-based role, enabling proactive communication and the open flow of information (SCM9; VCF4). This connects with the Think Local Member policy and the expectation that council officers will keep councillors informed, copying in or otherwise sharing information, as appropriate. Using partner organisations and networks to disseminate information, and the effectiveness of this approach where it used parishes, was argued for (VCF2; SCO6; SCO9), reinforcing some of the experience evidenced in Section 6.3.3 on signposting.

An example was given on how transparency in Council processes can help:

We have built up some really good links with our city, town and parish councils that we might not have had before ... complaints may have been, "we don't know when you're turning up", "we don't know what you're doing in our

communities”, “we don't know why you're not doing this”. And now we share work schedules and plans with them so they can see where we're likely to be (SCO1).

Whilst parishes felt a lack of communication and engagement some areas of the Council's work (FG CTP; CTP, Survey), some good practice around communication was supporting collaboration and understanding about services.

Link officers noted how councillors who came and spoke plainly about a situation were valued:

[The councillors are] always very pleasant. They're always very open. They don't go and say things that are fundamentally incorrect. They report all the down and dirty stuff... they're not afraid to explain it. (VCF2)

Sometimes I have to give them not very good news or the news they wouldn't like to hear because the council can or can't do something ... otherwise I just try to be honest with people and let them know that as soon as possible. (SCM9)

They turn up and they're just honest. They're really blunt about the reality of the situation ... they have such a good reputation and people want to hear from them. (LLO7)

Broadly, a clear and open approach was valued by participants.

One council officer suggested that using AI might facilitate the process of communication more generally, ‘to summarise and channel documents / policies / information for dissemination, information to places’ (SCO6). What was perceived as valued by partners and the community generally was open and timely communication. A Link Officer gave the example of traffic regulation orders:

There's a very clear process of how you do that. There's a very clear process about how you obtain the funding, how you go about it and the consultation and a clear timeline. (LLO8)

A risk was identified that if information comes too late in a process then there was a "bait and switch" dynamic, where communities initially enthused about the prospect of change, for example in being able to introduce a 20mph zone, felt misled (LLO8; also LLO1). It was evident from conversations that some processes were complex and One suggested example given, used in another authority, was online [video guides](#) on aspects of planning to ease the process for both residents and council officers.

Such an approach included not over-promoting services or processes that might be limited in outcomes: ‘don't set up what you can't deliver’ (VCF14). Related to this was an expressed need to be clear about how terms were being used:

We talk about co-production but is it actually true co-production? I think we do market development, which is part of the commissioning cycle. But that to me is very very different to trying to get the community voice into everything that we do relating to our commissioning. (SCO11; also SCO8)

This issue of how terms such as consultation, participation, co-design and co-production are used and understood will affect communication between communities and the Council; they imply different ways in which people involved may understand the process of forming, deciding and implementing policies. There are also issues around the different uses of words like neighbourhood and community, with potential for confusion and contradiction (PBS2). There was an expressed need to have a shared understanding or definition around these words and the activities they referred to:

If we start to have an understanding as an organisation and also almost like a glossary, this is what we mean when we say X. So when we talk about community development, that is a 'how long is a bloody piece of string'. So we need to be really clear around what our boundaries are and what we are trying to do. (SCO6)

This issue is discussed further in Section 7.8.

## 6.5 - Strategic change and partnerships

This section explores how cross-Somerset partnerships and engagement can be sustained and embedded, particularly given the structural pressures faced by the Council and partners.

### 6.5.1 Learning and valuing what works for the long-term

The need to focus on gaining long-term outcomes is increasingly recognised by politicians and practitioners. It was evidenced in this review as a priority for many in the Council and partner organisations. However, with long-term outcomes being difficult to quantify, current financial pressures and national targets, there is a pressure to deliver immediately:

There's a financial imperative, particularly from the council perspective, but also from the NHS perspective [that doesn't] tie up nicely at all with doing 10 year community asset based community development work ... Understanding around asset based working with communities is still pretty naive across the system, and so that's a kind of culture and practice change. (PBS2)

Our energy as a police service has just focused on sort of dealing with the symptom rather than the underlying cause. And we're pretty good at dealing with the symptom because if someone goes shoplifting, we will go and nick [them] and we'll probably put them by the court and they'll probably be let out because actually it's just shoplifting... we're good at that bit. What we're trying to get better at is getting upstream and dealing with those underlying causes. (PBS4)

The role of evaluation was set out by a couple of Somerset council officers:

We need to be doing more to show what those prevention activities actually generate as the benefit on the other side. (SCO3)

We have to give them the evidence and some of that might be anecdotal but we then also have to invest in case studies, in good news stories, in actual hard facts as well... you know numbers, too. (SCO6; also SCO5)

There were several comments around how to value long-term outcomes: measuring social capital (VCF16); developing 'Somerset-specific success measures' based on key themes of work (VCF15); quantifying in terms of money saved (SCO3). The impact on particular services and individual lives was one way of demonstrating impact:

We can count actually... We got far less emails, we got far less phone calls because we're doing highways' working groups, for example. We can do that stuff. And we can also ask, do you think you're getting a better service? (SCO6)

I can tell you, for example, we've got less children in needs, not in educational training. We've got more people living in warm [dry] homes and less in cold damp homes. And it's almost a leap of faith that actually this is impacting on those because... We can't say it's causal ... This is that pragmatic approach to evaluation. (SCO10)

A shift in balancing immediate and long-term outcomes is something argued for in both the Council and partner organisations. However, it is also an area where there has been frustration over a lack of appreciation for the complexity of delivering long-term outcomes and the value of them (SCO3; VCF15).

A broader point around outcomes was made by several participants, who argued for the need to learn and build on what has worked well. This needed officers to reflect on examples of good practice along with management attending to and communications enabling the sharing of good practice (SCO5/7/12).

### **6.5.2: Collaborative working with partners**

We can either increase capacity or we can reduce demand. Those are pretty much the two levers that I've got in order to deliver in the community. Capacity growth ain't there is it? There's just no space. So we've got to increase the efficiency of dealing with that demand with the limited resources that we've got. And I guess that's our focus and that's our energy in trying to work effectively and collaborate together. (PBS4; also PBS1/2/3)

From a range of partners there was a stated ambition for greater cross-sector collaboration to address community needs. There was already progression reported in data-sharing and the development of cross-sector datasets (PBS1/4). The main challenges identified by public sector partners were: different boundaries, different organisational geographies, the need for trust and coordination.

#### *Misalignments in geography and direction*

As noted above, the difference in the geographic boundaries used by different services within the Council and by partner organisations can cause difficulties in working in place:

You have education locality areas, which I think there are six of across the county. You have four one team areas ... and then you've got Local Community Networks ... again some overlap some don't and then ... 12 Connect Somerset areas, as well. So you've got a four or six, a 12, and an [18]. There we go. Work that one out for me. (VCF4; also CTP3)

However, given the difficulty of aligning boundaries (PBS4), the solution was not necessarily in aligning boundaries but rather the direction of the different partner bodies. Legislation may be a positive driver here, as the Government is changing the funding and legislation around children's services, health, policing, and social care to emphasise prevention and place-based working. For a couple of interviewees, this indicated a need for pragmatism and working in place:

It's going to have to be much more around relationships, trust, good communication, understanding each other's perspective, and really keeping our eyes on the people that we're looking to serve... looking at what what's best for them. (PBS1; also SCO4)

There's a lot more collaboration out there than the system would recognize but that's because the system isn't geared up to make it work ... it just happens because people make it happen because they are the boots on the ground and they're the eyes of the communities. (SCO5)

The practice around cross-partner working in place is explored in section 6.1.2.

#### *Working with public services*

During the period of this review, the police and health services were both undergoing transformations towards more co-located neighbourhood working. Locally, the police were being organised into the two districts of East and West Somerset, to benefit both effectiveness and collaboration. In the health service, the transformation to neighbourhood boards was ongoing. One participant argued that a linking function from the Council to GPs, rather than the boards, would better ensure good collaboration across the county:

We're not a single NHS provider organisation like an acute trust is. We're probably more like the voluntary sector in some ways. But actually... if you don't engage with us in some of these conversations, actually we're going to end up going off in different directions. (PBS1)

These conversations illustrate the multiple different relationships that Somerset Council could be engaged in and the need to have relationships at different levels. However, reflecting on the number of professionals engaged in just one area of public services, a Council officer reflected the 'need to be pragmatic as to what's achievable and also recognizing there's lots of other spinning plates' (SCO4).

## 7. Discussion of objectives

This section discusses the Review Brief objectives in turn (see Appendix vii), exploring the tensions evidenced within them, the best practice related to them, and questions on possible solutions, to prompt reflection and discussion.

### 7.1 How Somerset Council can best engage with our communities, be it through communities of interest/experience or geography.

#### 7.1.1 Communities of Geography - the Local Community Network

As the Government looks to mandate some form of neighbourhood governance, the experience in Somerset of LCNs means that the Council is advanced compared to other local authorities. Indeed, some initial proposals from other unitaries are [very similar to LCNs](#).

LCNs have fulfilled their aims for some stakeholders and in some places very well but have connected less well for others. The initial conditions of their formation and issues with buy-in from Council members and officers has made it difficult for them to thrive.

In their current form, the aims of LCNs are not clear to many that are meant to engage with them. The ambition for LCNs to be *collaborative* networks that bring together different organisations is in tension with the ambition for them to be *participatory* networks that involve the whole community. A meeting that forms the function of convening parishes, a function that was evidently valued in several LCNs, would not necessarily have the same format as one designed to engage ordinary members of the public, or one that sought to convene VCFSEs and local businesses around a particular theme. For any group of stakeholders there would need to be clarity on what the 'ask' and 'offer' of attending the LCN was, which some participants felt was not obvious.

LCNs do not have formal powers and grant-making capabilities. A number of participants expressed a wish to see LCNs (or a similar structure) with the capacity to independently take forward ideas and decisions beyond connecting with wider networks and resources. This was partly connected with a wish to enable a funding route through the VCFSEs and would potentially support the involvement of stakeholders, including the Council members. There is no evidence that neighbourhood governance structures with grant-making powers, as currently instituted in other authorities, would greatly increase participation from citizens. The arguably transformative local government reorganisations in Islington in the 1980s devolved a tranche of council services (around 50 officers) to each of 24 local Neighbourhood Offices to work together alongside neighbourhood assemblies that advised on their operation (Burns et al, 1994). This was a model that was intensive in its demands on officers and resources, with the availability of council services leading to a significant increase in public engagement. Whilst it did result in a transformative relationship between council and communities, this kind of radical change would require a level of organisational and resource commitment beyond most, if not all, local authorities today.

An alternative approach would see the aims and purpose of LCNs emerging in place rather than being predetermined. This speaks to the principles of [Asset Based Community](#)

[Development](#) (ABCD), which would not prescribe a firm structure for a local network but allow the network to develop that meets the needs of the community. It connects with the brief aspiration for LCNs to perform ‘community engagement and development functions, building on and informing the development of these functions’. However, the current shape of Government policy suggests a structured process where councillors and officers will need to play an important role. The ABCD model rests on an assumption of local ownership and agency over the form of the network, something very different to the structured governance process of current LCNs but speaking to the preferences of several VCFSEs engaged in the research.

Therefore, options alongside or in place of the devolution of power and resources need to be considered to explore what might support different outcomes. Table 7.1.1. sets out three broad models. The current LCNs are Councillor-led but this need not necessarily be the case, even if councillors retained an important role within a particular kind of meeting or network.

**Table 7.1.1 Three models of local governance**

Model Option	Example	Features
Councillor-led	Barnsley Ward Alliance; South Somerset Ward Committees; Test Valley’s ‘Councillor Activists’	Elected members have a community leadership role. The model is usually ward-based and tied to grant-making and/or devolved decision-making capacity alongside local stakeholders.
Officer-led	Extended One Team; Together Team; Locality Team	Officers act as local teams coordinating activity. They support councillors and partner organisations in place. Multiple networks are enabled and connected through the officers.
Stakeholder-led	Neighbourhood boards; Neighbourhood forums; Business Improvement Districts	These bodies may have funding (for example, Pride in Place) or aim to obtain funding (for example, the Shepton Mallet Neighbourhood Board). Can be primarily business or VCFSE oriented.

Table 7.1.2 sets out the main tensions for LCNs, which are expanded below. It should be noted that where LCNs are referred to, this is shorthand for whatever neighbourhood governance arrangements are put in place, whether these have the same title or a different name.

**Table 7.1.2 What helps and hinders Local Community Networks, and the tensions faced**

What helps	What hinders	Tension
Clarity over role alongside a fit to local needs and context.	No clear fit with existing needs or context, no clarity over role.	Implementation of a clear model vs. reflection of local needs and ownership.
Perceptions of impactful activity and positive engagement and a feeling of ownership.	Perceptions of lack of impact and a spiral of disengagement and a feeling of imposition.	Implementation of a clear model vs. reflection of local needs and ownership.
Making the activities and meetings relevant to a stakeholder group.	A stakeholder group finding activities and meetings are not relevant to them.	Integrating diverse interests vs. speaking to particular interests.
Being an effective way to reach a stakeholder group and the community.	Lack of engagement by stakeholders and the community.	The need to reflect on impact and development vs. limited time and capacity.

There is a tension in that the ambition of the LCNs to be the primary convenor of local interests is in tension with others who believe they are also legitimate convenors, including parishes, other public services, and Council members. LCNs need to be relevant and distinct with respect to other local governance structures - parishes, advisory boards, BIDs, neighbourhood boards. They also need to be effective compared to informal community campaigns and activities, for example due their connection with the Council or attendance from stakeholders. Where this is not evident, then participation is likely to decline.

As Ansell and Gash (2008) evidence in their influential review of collaborative governance, it is the relationships that are built over time that are critical:

- Laying the foundation for quick wins.
- Supporting networks of trusted collaboration.
- Commitment to the process.
- Building a shared understanding through deep dialogue.

To build these relationships means having a good understanding of what relationships and activity the LCNs are aiming to facilitate and strengthen.

*Integrating diverse interests vs. speaking to particular interests*

- The need for stakeholders to have forums that speak to their priorities is in tension with the need for a forum that integrates a range of different viewpoints. Should LCN geographies be a forum for mediating rural and urban interests? Should LCNs aim to broadly include all stakeholders or focus on serving a particular stakeholder group?
- How should LCNs relate to parishes - as supportive partners, as an integral part of their operation, or operating independently alongside?

- How should LCNs relate to Council members – as platforms for community engagement, as forums for local-decision making, as stakeholder networking?
- Should LCN geography reflect Council divisions?
- Should there be an ongoing process for reviewing core membership of LCNs?

#### *Who are LCNs for?*

If LCNs are to shift towards more community inclusion, it may be that different kinds of events and meetings are held to include both ordinary members of the public and stakeholder organisations. Conversely, there are formal kinds of meeting that ordinary members of the public engage with, but with the public involved alongside stakeholders rather than as observers or casual attendees.

- There is a need for an inclusive public forum that is in tension with a need for a forum for stakeholders to meet. Are LCNs a ‘voice’ for communities (grassroots) or a ‘voice’ for stakeholders (grasstops)?
- How can community agendas and priorities be properly reflected in LCNs and this process be equitable and inclusive?
- Should agenda setting be standardised across LCNs or each LCN be given the freedom to select from appropriate best practice?
- What is the appropriate balance between the LCN considering Council priorities and consultations, and those driven by the LCN itself?
- What is the appropriate balance between the agenda and activity of LCNs being set well in advance and them flexibly involving and responding to who is in the room at a meeting?
- There is a need for training, upskilling and sharing best practice across stakeholders. This is particularly relevant for parishes but general skills development could have wider community benefits. Should this be a mandated role for LCNs?

The freeing up of capacity and making LCNs easier to attend and to take roles in was a theme of comments, raising several questions:

- Should LCNs focus more on remote and hybrid meetings, with voting rights?
- Should councillors who sit across multiple LCNs be able to nominate or negotiate with colleagues to sit on a single LCN?
- Should more prominence be given to non-councillors as chairs and vice-chairs?

More broadly there are questions over the powers of LCNs:

- There is a need for a simple small grant-funding mechanism for VCFSEs. Should this be delivered through LCNs, or would that detract from a role as a networking and convening spaces?
- What powers would be most appropriate to be delegated to LCNs?
- How can the interests of parishes and VCFSEs be effectively included if LCNs focused on ward councillor leadership?

#### *Best practice and evaluation*

The SWAP audit raised the question of how best-practice in LCN working is shared. The current connections between chairs appear limited and a facilitation of more connections

between chairs and vice-chairs appears important. For example, having bi-monthly online drop-in meetings to share experiences, or a well-performing LCN hosting a meeting to share best practice (see McCabe et al, 2007). The broader membership and role of the LCNs would affect what kind of peer-support would be successful.

The SWAP Audit also notes that the priorities were also not delivered against specific measurable objectives. There is a concern over the level of transparency and reflection in how agendas are set. Whilst a process of 'action trackers' are to be implemented for LCNs, there remains a need to reflect and assess progress. These could be modelled on the [Cornwall Community Area Partnership Action Plans](#). Here, an action plan is constructed by the LCN equivalent, with monitoring of responsibilities and activity over each quarter

Relatively light-touch measures for community organisations may be appropriate. For example, an adapted form of the [Confidence Framework](#) Rapid Review, or similar, could support the formalised sharing of best practice within and beyond LCNs alongside being an evaluation of where programmes were less successful. The key tension here would be in having a robust review process that is publicly available, as the current LCN annual reports show little sign of including what did not work alongside what worked. Transparency in assessment may have to navigate both geographic and political competition.

It also leaves open the question over whether LCNs, or a similar governance structure, have the same aims, functions and powers across Somerset, albeit in a form that allows sufficient flexibility across areas. Effective design of community governance must avoid close prescription—a rigid specification of neighbourhood governance risks undermining innovation and ambition.

#### *Community development and neighbourhood governance*

Neighbourhood governance as community development requires investment in community development capacity and officer time. Neighbourhood governance as empowered community voice requires a commitment to devolve powers and resources. Finally, structures would need to allow progressive engagement, providing multiple entry points for participation and pathways for deepening involvement over time. This raises more design questions:

- Could LCNs be a means of mobilising the resources and capacity of local communities alongside coordinating the existing resources and capacity of stakeholders?
- How can principles of co-design that support inclusive participation be woven into the more formal processes appreciated by many parishes?

Not everyone will engage through formal governance structures, and effective approaches recognise the value of both organised community groups and individual citizens. This requires an active inclusion, from being in public spaces to proactively forming connections with groups who would not normally engage. Link Officers could support such a process of connecting community development and neighbourhood governance but this implies a significant development from the current LCN model.

## 7.1.2 Communities of Interest

Whilst geographic communities are located in place, there will always be tensions over boundaries and ways in which the boundaries will not match need. The review explored perceptions of communities of interest, noting the LCN working groups that straddled the divide.

**Table 7.1.3 What helps and hinders informal networks and working groups, and the tensions faced**

What helps	What hinders	Tension
Connecting to a direct and concrete need, such as flood prevention.	Failing to engage stakeholders if they view a topic as not relevant to them.	Broadening a thematic topic to encourage long-term actions vs. keeping a topic narrow and directly relevant.
Being able to impact directly on the area through facilitation, funding and relevant networks.	Not convening all relevant stakeholders or not having the resources to impact on the issue.	LCNs creating thematic working groups around any area of interest vs. limiting to issues where the Council has direct control.
Having Link Officers and officers based in services supporting working groups.	Where working groups duplicate or overlap with existing forums.	Enabling an LCN to create a thematic working group vs. supporting existing thematic networks and bodies.
Clusters of parish councils working together on issues of common interest.	Parishes not working with each other.	LCNs being viewed as the primary forum for parishes vs. supporting organic parish clusters forming.

One aspect of LCNs evidenced as working particularly well were the working groups, with these being both within LCN and cross-LCN. The thematic nature of these groups helped engage interest though interest was also dependent on people feeling there would be impact from participation. Some questions are raised by the evidence:

- Can cross-LCN discussions facilitate the creation of working groups at sub-Somerset level (for example, reflecting a health neighbourhood or a flood catchment area)?
- How can the Council, parishes, VCFSEs and other stakeholders best collaborate on thematic working – such as working groups or public meetings - to reduce overlaps?

With LCN working groups and some LCN main meetings, the needs of parishes to connect and network are well met. However, in other thematic and geographic areas, parishes find their interests do not drive the agenda and prefer to work in organic clusters (at least some of which pre-date the LCNs).

- Should the LCN be a forum for parish clusters rather than individual parishes?
- Could parishes be supported to share knowledge through online fora as well as in-person events?

- Should LCNs convene or support separate meetings / clusters for different kinds of parishes (for example, size or shared interest)?
- Could the Link Officer role be used to support thematic networks and parish clusters in place apart from the LCN?

Resilience and emergency prevention came up as a topic of interest for many stakeholders, particularly unitary and parish councillors. It is a concept that is linked with emergency planning and [the Government's reliance programme](#). However, resilience is also linked with how communities cope with a range of shocks, from cost-of-living to pandemic, and with the resilience of families and individuals. There is an open question as to whether this could offer an opportunity to encourage a broader engagement with aspects such as climate change, social capital, poverty reduction, or whether such broadening would be found as irrelevant for those simply wanting to prevent flooding.

A similar concept is found in the [Building Blocks of Health](#), as set out by the Health Foundation. Here, health is related to broader things that determine it than lifestyle and disease, including income, housing, food, and more. For example, if a family can't afford to live close-by relatives and have to move away, they lose networks of support, this is likely to make their lives more stressed, which then impacts on their wellbeing, which then leads to health issues, which in turn will create more challenges for themselves and their children. Aspects of health were of evident interest to VCFSEs and a focus of many active community networks in Somerset. Again, there is a question over whether the breadth of this framework would risk losing engagement from those interested in immediate health impacts.

It is an open question whether LCNs would benefit from sitting within these kinds of frameworks, giving them a clearer direction and linkage into the Council. There is a broader question about whether LCNs should mainly be a place where the community defines and acts on priorities, or whether they are more a forum that links the community into the council on key activities and priorities:

- Should a broad framework such as resilience or health be used as a focus for LCNs?
- Should working groups be introduced as standard for every LCN in the themes of health and wellbeing and emergency response, alongside a working group on transport and travel?
- Should consultative Council processes automatically involve LCNs, such as budget setting, community funding, and public consultations?

## 7.2. How Somerset Council can best support our Elected Members in their community leadership and champion role.

In looking at what helps and hinder councillors, there were connections to wider reflections on the councillor role in [the 21st Century Councillor](#). The blurring of roles with limited resources and policy focussed on place-based activity was evidenced in both bodies of research. However, there is – for councillors at least - not a recognition of their skills and knowledge as a key partner in this blurred way of working. Along the same lines, there is broadly an expectation of collaborative working in place with multiple partner organisations and stakeholders, which the LCNs have aimed to support. The 21st Century Councillor describes an aspirational picture that may be achievable in Somerset, even with the tensions and gaps in needs evidenced in the review.

**Table 7.2 What helps and hinders elected members in their role, and the tensions faced.**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Information shared proactively with councillors, enabling effective community leadership.	"Think local member" not implemented; Councillors finding it difficult to gain access to the right Council officer.	Investing time in engaging councillors vs demands on time from core service delivery.
Valuing the knowledge and experience of councillors as key partners for the Council.	Councillors, particularly at parish level, viewed as "amateurs" despite professional expertise.	Investing time in engaging councillors vs demands on time from core service delivery.
Councillors valuing cross-partner working in place.	Political demands to be seen as being responsible for any positive action; political factionalism.	Benefits of local partnerships and working as a team vs. political interests and alliances.

Valuing of the role of Council members is critical to the success in engaging communities. For parish councillors, their challenge to be valued in their role within the Council is arguably even greater. Yet, as with unitary councillors, many are elected representatives - community leaders - with a role in acting for their community. Increasingly, as parish precepts increase, they may also be responsible for budgets that have a considerable impact in place.

Some tensions, such as limited time and resources and sometimes the inability of councillors to effect the change their constituents want to see, are common to all in Somerset council. There are, for unitary councillors, also tensions around how to navigate party political demands that are particular to the councillor role.

The main elements of discussion around support for Council members does not view them as acting on their own. How Council members, officers, and partners work in place is critical (see Section 7.6), as is the existence of officers with linking roles into Council departments and the building of stable working relationships (see Section 7.4).

## 7.3. How Somerset Council can support communities to become more self-reliant with reduced need to call on statutory services

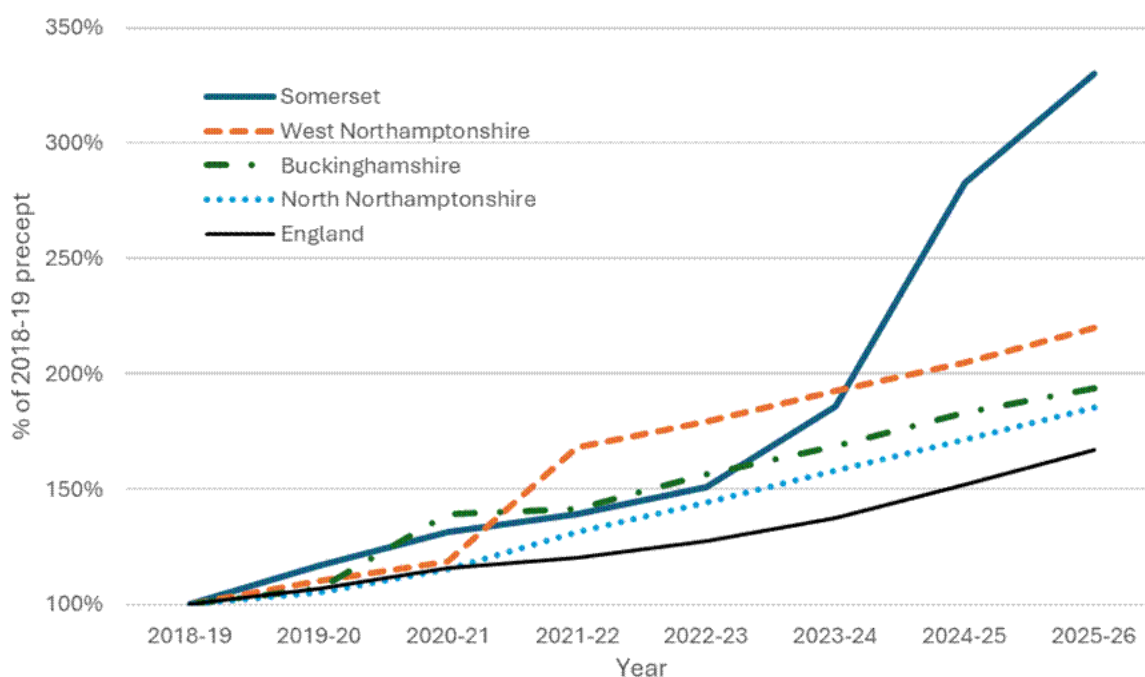
In order to answer this question, we need to look at what the Council does directly to support communities to become more self-reliant, alongside other public services, and its work alongside place-based partners, being parishes, and VCFSEs.

### 7.3.1 Working with Parishes

The unitary transition resulted in substantial devolution of services from the new unitary authority to parishes, creating dramatic financial impacts. Bridgwater Town Council's precept increased by 160% and Taunton Town Council's by 170% following the shift to the Council as a county unitary in 2023. Taunton Parish Council now has the highest annual budget of any parish council in the country, at £6.5 million in 2025/26, reflecting the pattern of parishes taking on significant service portfolios and assets with correspondingly large precepts.

For smaller parish councils, the impact was different but equally challenging. Whilst they didn't experience the dramatic service transfers of larger parishes, they faced increased expectations for community engagement and local service delivery within the new unitary framework, often with minimal capacity.

**Figure 7.3.1 Increase in parish precepts in a selection of new unitary authorities (and their precursor authorities) and England, 2018-19 to 2025-26**



As Figure 7.3.1 shows, precepts have increased in the Somerset unitary area by 330% above 2018 levels. By comparison, in the heavily parished unitary of West Northamptonshire, formed in 2021 after a financial crisis, precepts increased by 220% in that time. Parishes in Somerset have been through a transformation that is exceptional.

This increase in precept is an outlier, leaving the average level of Band D parish precept in Somerset at £182 per year, second only to Cornwall (at £185pa) and just ahead of Wiltshire (at £181pa), and above twice the average for England. After the financial crisis, parishes have stepped up to take on assets and services. However, if the increase in precepts continues rising then in 2026-27 Somerset would be expected to have the highest parish precept demand on residents of any local authority. There is also a risk of inequity in devolution roll-out, in that some parishes may be able to sustain increased precepts whilst others will not, losing assets and services as a result. There was some concern from participants that the transfer of assets to parishes had resulted in a degree of parochialism, as the assets were no longer held on behalf of a wider area by the local authority. This said, there were good examples of working between parishes, through joint funding, in parish clusters, and through thematic working (see Sections 6.1.3 and 6.3.1).

There is a perception in parishes and in the Council that the process of devolution has often been 'done to' parishes rather than be developed with them (see Section 6.3.1). Shifting to a model of devolution that is more around a conversation, discussing expectations and outcomes, is evidently a preferred direction of travel for officers and members at both unitary and parish scale. However, there remains a capacity issue for the Council in proactively having these conversations.

There is potential within the devolution process discussion around social value and long-term outcomes, as one officer suggested:

All we can manage to do ... is to go out and mow the grass. Whereas a parish council, should they so wish, could take that asset on, turn that into [a] community garden, gather the community once a week for a gardening club to look after it, thereby combating loneliness (SCO3)

However, there is also a question over whether joint working agreements can also be negotiated such that a small parish council that can't take on a large asset can say, for example, 'we think in our area this park is our flagship for us, can we come in and plant bulbs?' (SCO1). This suggests a greater complexity in working but one that would benefit provision and long-term sustainability.

A cooperative way of working around devolution with clear frameworks is [recognised as good practice](#) by the LGA, with Cornwall's devolution process cited as best practice. In exploring the data on parishes, it was evident that not only are Cornwall and Wiltshire close to Somerset geographically, the profile of their parishes in terms of budget size and capacity are also closer to Somerset than any other local authorities. This provides an opportunity to partner with these unitaries around best practices in working with parishes, ranging from the very small to an increasing number with budgets of £1million and over.

Good practice is also emerging in Somerset around upskilling the parish sector. The facilitation of training in LCNs attended by parish councillors and clerks has been successful (see Section 6.1.1) whilst other training has been offered aiming to enable parishes to work with statutory processes. This complements the training provided by the Somerset Association of Local Councils (SALC), which is a key strategic partner for the Council across this area. Communications with parishes have also emerged as being increasingly effective. This is not to say that there are not still needs around training and communication, but that there are successful elements to draw upon within the area.

There is a challenge in the increasing autonomy of the larger parishes in Somerset. These councils are providing more services and have responsibility for more assets, raising questions over how this relationship will develop. That citizens are struggling to differentiate between what larger parishes provide and what the Council provides suggests a need for clearer communication from the Council around its services. However, it may also imply that parishes could become a recognised first port of call for citizens with any query, with staff supported to directly engage and resolve issues rather than citizens finding themselves referred on. This would rely on a much closer working relationship between councils on issues, which is discussed further in Section 7.9.1.

**Table 7.3.1 What helps and hinders devolution, funding and autonomy, and the tensions faced.**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Devolution or partnership as a conversation about long-term value and what is sustainable within resources for both authorities.	Devolution undertaken as a cost-saving exercise for Somerset council.	Collaboration in an equitable conversation vs. Uncertainty and complexity in outcomes with a jointly negotiated process.
Flexible parish clusters for joined working and LCNs providing information, networking, and training.	Geographies or themes that are not relevant to the work of the parish, lack of buy-in from the Council into LCNs.	Flexibility in providing an 'offer' to parishes based on scale and need vs. Capacity to customise support.
Clear contact points for parish clerks and councillors to raise issues and gain a response.	Standard customer service mechanisms and a reliance on informal contacts.	Responsiveness to parishes vs. Managing demand so Council officers do not become overwhelmed.

There are several questions arising from the research:

- **Adjusting to capacity:** Can the Council have a differentiated approach to parishes, based on their capacity, with potentially very different mechanisms, from devolution to partnership to keeping informed?
- **Progressive devolution:** Could incremental approaches build trust and demonstrate capability—starting with modest devolution and expanding based on demonstrated success? How should the success or otherwise of devolution be evaluated?
- **Equity considerations:** How can devolution avoid widening disparities between affluent communities that can fund services through precepts and deprived communities that cannot?

Alongside these questions are ones that speak to a wider shift in the relationship between the Council and parishes:

- **Convening clusters:** Can the Council support the convening of parishes to share collaborate and co-sponsor services and assets?
- **Dotted lines:** Should there be a Council executive member with an explicit role to advocate for the interests of parishes?

- **Consistent or one-stop partnership:** Should the Council look to instil a common approach to parishes that is consistent across services, or should there be an initial one-stop point of contact to provide the underpinning of the partnership?

On this last point, there is substantial good practice available, but in the very good review from [the Local Government Association](#), one particular point of practice is worth quoting at length given the consistent message from parish clerks:

The interviews we have undertaken have highlighted the importance in this context of a single point of contact, or gateway team, into principal council. This has several positive impacts:

- it can provide signposting to responsible officers in the council.
- it is important for accountability – a gatekeeper for the overall principles and ways of working agreed to support the overall policy outreach.
- A single point of contact can help to negotiate a cross-cutting arrangement that meets the approval criteria. It is this role that provides the practical work to bring principles and statements of intent to life.

Given the role of Link Officers as connectors into the Council and convenors of LCNs, which operate as successful forums for parishes in several places, there is a question over whether they could perform this role. Working alongside SALC, Link Officers could become more embedded in supporting the working of parishes and their capacity to include and enable work in places.

Alternative options include having engagement officers based in a department handle contact with parishes amongst other local stakeholders, which would provide a direct link; or, having a dedicated contact team or ‘priority lane’ within existing customer service functions. However, these latter options would not provide an advocacy role within the Council nor direct support in place, which would need to be fulfilled through other functions.

### 7.3.2 Working with VCFSEs

For the VCFSE sector, findings reiterated those expressed in the [2024 Spark Somerset report](#) into collaboration between the VCFSE and Public Sector. There was an evident need for greater trust and stability in funding, particularly for the infrastructure organisations that are critical for the VCFSE sector. There was also a call for greater recognition of services already in place, particularly smaller services, rather than recreating or duplicating what was already there.

The building of trust with the VCFSE sector [has been found to rely on](#) gradually strengthening relationships so understanding between organisations develops and building sustainably with appreciation for capacity and the need for support. This understanding needs the Council to appreciate the different roles, capacities, and ways of working that give VCFSEs their value within the community and how these are distinct from the work of public services.

**Table 7.3.2 What helps and hinders supporting the community sector, and the tensions faced?**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Infrastructure organisations providing scaffolding: governance support, funding advice, training, volunteer coordination.	Infrastructure organisations struggling with unreliable funding, insufficient valuing of what is already in place.	Large-scale short-term commissions vs Tiered funding models and stable funding streams.
Peer learning networks: enabling practitioners to share solutions; giving time to understand places and form relationships.	Failing to value long-term and complex impacts of community development by VCFSEs. Not supporting learning across the system.	Clear measurement of value vs. more complex forms of value. Asking VCFSEs to fit existing structures vs. Supporting more organic networks:
Strong connections between VCFSEs in place so people are referred to the right places; time to understand needs and form relationships.	'Information overload' in place; the instability of the VCFSE sector meaning 'who does what' changes too quickly.	Enabling relationships and stability at arms length vs. Investing in directly commissioned delivery.
Shared understanding around the working relationship. Building up stable contacts with VCFSEs.	Trust / confidence deficit flowing both ways; not accommodating different scales and capacities of VCFSE.	Commissioner / provider relationship vs. Building collaborative relationships.

There was a clear ask for an easier process for small grant funding, whether through a place-based route such as LCNs, parishes, or local VCFSE partner, or via an easier centralised process. The [small sparks process](#) would be one potential model, though this would require a budget commitment.

VCFSEs also expressed a wish to move away from commissioning to more stable funding models that enabled more certainty and freedom to deliver outcomes while maintaining appropriate accountability. Here, devolved budgets to places and multi-year voluntary sector grants were preferred options. There are experiences within the Council of more collaborative partnerships between the Council and VCFSEs, not based on the commissioning model.

In prioritising working with communities to support their autonomy and resilience, there is a challenge faced by all public services in valuing long-term impact over short-term delivery (PBS1/2/4). The value the Council places on preventative approaches is mixed (see Section 6.5.1), with some good practice but it not being evidenced more broadly through measures of social value financial equivalents and long-term benefits. One option would be to work alongside VCFSE partners, such as Spark Somerset, to more closely embed different forms of value (such as building social and relational capital) into commissioning processes.

The need to reflect and adjust over time speaks to perhaps the main tension in the position of the Council. There is tension between the Council's need to control and assess what work is done in place, with the reflection done within the Council, and the need for work in place to organically develop, with the reflection done alongside those in the community.

There were particular questions around information and communication:

- How can relationships with partner organisations be best used to enable the flow of information, particularly for people who would not go directly to the Council for information?
- Can an 'any door is the right door' approach be enabled for communication, so that people landing on the Council, VCFSE, or public service sites can find routes through to relevant services in their area?

The research prompted several other questions around the sustaining of a healthy VCFSE sector in Somerset:

- **Increasing VCFSE capacity:** Spark Somerset and other infrastructure providers are key to supporting VCFSE capacity, with an expressed need for sustainable resourcing and collaborative partnership. These partnerships could support shared insight, learning and collaboration across places. How can this best be enabled?
- **Valuing existing assets and relationships:** How can the Council ensure that relationships and knowledge held by existing VCFSE organisations and infrastructure are properly valued, preventing duplication or disruption of existing networks, alongside being a source of intelligence and connective support for the Council?
- **Measuring what matters:** How can the value of community capacity be demonstrated beyond simple quantitative outputs? What ways of understanding capture relationship-building, confidence-growing and community cohesion-strengthening?
- **Building mutual trust to allow autonomy:** The building of trust appears essential to enable community innovation and autonomy while managing risks, transferring resources and control in a way that both VCFSEs and the Council find sustainable. What is the best way to build this trust?

As part of this activity, there are questions on whether LCNs and Link Officers can act to:

- Support processes of small grant-giving.
- Support skills-sharing.
- Support mutual understanding and knowledge building about what is in place.
- Enable networking of VCFSEs in place and the building of trusting relationships.

### 7.3.3 Working directly with the community

‘We help communities identify what they already have and how to mobilise it. The capacity is already there; it just needs unlocking’ (VCF10).

‘If you start by asking what’s wrong, you get a long list of problems and everyone feels defeated. If you start by asking what’s strong, what’s working, what people care about, you get energy and possibility’ (FG VCF).

For some VCFSEs, the Council’s work with communities is disruptive more than supportive. For the Council, community development work has created positive outcomes and increased capacity. This work will be continuing, both broadly and for Link Officers, as the brief for this review states; ‘Public Health colleagues are clear that asset-based and participatory community development, delivered through our LCN Officer team, is fundamental to achieving their objectives and improving our primary prevention offer’.

To summarise VCFSE views on good community development, it requires:

- Long-term commitment and patience to gain outcomes.
- Starting from community priorities.
- Enabling not delivering.
- Understanding and working with relationships.
- Reflecting and adjusting over time to meet community need.

Long-term commitment implies that the Council should enable stability in what is provided. This raises a question of how the place-based officer roles, such as the Link Officer role, can be made more stable and subject to less turnover given funding constraints and wider pressures.

Reflecting community priorities is a challenge for any organisation coming into a place with funding for community development and a set of desired outcomes. If the model of Asset Based Community Development is carried through, then this suggests a need to “trust the process” rather than seek to define what activities are desirable. For Link Officers, this also raises a question over how they might balance taking priorities from community relationships back into processes such as the LCN, alongside taking Somerset priorities (for example, consultations) out into the community.

Enabling rather than delivering speaks to a tension within the Link Officer role. Link Officers help deliver LCNs, and whilst they enable working groups, these thematic networks are very much part of the LCN structure. There is a question over the extent Link Officers focus could or should also enable networks acting on issues outside of those structured by Somerset council. One possible area of work might be seen in the work of the Trussell Trust and their Change Leadership Programme ([see their strategy report, p.17](#)). This new initiative seeks to train leaders who seek to create change in their communities and more broadly. Link Officers could similarly focus on developing a leadership path through LCNs and strengthen the capacity of local representation for the parish sector.

In understanding relationships and power, perhaps the most critical one for Link Officers and other council officers in places is how bodies such as the Council are perceived. Some Link Officers spoke about needing to remove their Council “badge” when working in community, but this was not held by all in the role. There is a tension between the role of the Council as

a large statutory body and its working with communities that for some participants made the space more appropriate for VCFSEs.

**Table 7.3.3 What helps and hinders community development, and the tensions faced?**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Asset-based approaches: starting from understanding community strengths and what is already in place before creating new roles.	Tendency to impose consistent structures and networks that can risk destabilising or duplicating what is already in place.	Consistency and confidence in provision vs. Supporting organic work within places.
Enabling volunteering through direct involvement alongside Council services and supporting community activity.	Lack of flexibility in processes to accommodate volunteering; overly demanding governance and compliance requirements.	Security in processes around HR, Finance, Health & Safety vs. Accommodating a level of risk to enable activity.
Connecting and linking roles within and across communities to support mutually beneficial collaboration.	Failing to contribute linkage roles at the right level or duplicating existing networks.	Prioritising linkages between the Council and communities vs. prioritising linkages within communities.

The broader question raised here is whether the nature of community development as can be instituted directly by the Council will always fulfil a different role to that instituted by small VCFSEs. Simply put, both the local authority and local groups may make a positive contribution to community development, but will do it differently given their different cultures, structures, and power relationships to the community. The valuing of community development work within the Council suggests a clear strategic aim. A framing valuing that emphasised its role around resilience and health might support a broader transformation in approach for the Council.

There was also an expressed need to evidencing the benefits of community development, such as through embedding measures of social value and long-term financial savings to both the Council and the wider public (see Section 6.5.1). Whilst this is part of [Somerset Council's procurement policy](#) it was not evidently part of conversations around how the Council valued its own work with communities. Section 3.1.2 illustrated different ways that value can be measured in relation to VCFSE activities, which are far wider than economic value, but all relate to what would be of value to the Council's aims. This framework could also be applied to the Council's work with communities and is returned to in Section 8.

A final point should be made about the role of volunteering, which is integral to the work of VCFSEs and the informal activity in communities. There were some tensions evidenced around health and safety, part of a wider tension around accommodating risk when facilitating community activity. However, the Council's direct recruitment of volunteers and support for local groups around the public realm has been largely successful. Its importance as part of community development needs to be underlined. The involvement of citizens in active roles supporting their community and the building of relationships in place all have value in building community resilience and wellbeing.

## 7.4. How and where it is appropriate to increase community participation to inform service strategy, development and delivery.

The primary tensions evidenced here were in relation to the need to have roles that connected the council to community and the resourcing of these roles. Without officers whose primary focus was engaging communities, the pressures of delivering core services meant it was unlikely there would be a reliable route into the Council through officers responsible for delivery, particularly where their role was not itself community facing. This connected to another tension between the prioritisation of engagement and allocating resources to it, and the prioritisation of delivering the core service.

**Table 7.4 What helps and hinders increasing community participation, and the tensions faced?**

What helps	What hinders	Tension
Officers within council services with community relationship building roles.	Lack of resources to fund roles; need to focus on specialists in core delivery; engagement not being a priority.	Recruiting those with skills for core delivery vs. Skills for engaging community.
Council members who engage with the community.	Lack of engagement with councillors by officers.	Investing time in engaging councillors vs. Demands on time from core service delivery.
Forming trusting working relationships.	Staff churn and changes reducing the ability to form relationships.	Stability and certainty vs. Change and precarity.

The resolution of these kinds of tensions is not immediately apparent. Whilst external funding has been found for posts that support the linking of citizens to the council (SCO2), this kind of funding is precarious. Whilst partner organisations themselves link the council to the broader community, it is only roles within council and embedded within council services that have been cited as enabling the critical links to services (SCO9, LLO). Both councillors and officers are dependent upon effective linkages within the council, and to their individual relationships with staff built up over time, alongside their broader capacity to navigate the system (SCM2). This raises several questions:

- Could the impact of community engagement on mid- to long-term core workloads support the case for funding community engagement roles?
- Is there potential for creating engagement roles through pooling resources across Council services or with partner organisations?
- What role could technology play in supporting community engagement, for example in translating technical service processes into plain English?

The resolution to this brief point also rests on several other areas, from networks and working in place (Sections 7.1 and 7.6) to the broader approach of the Council to community engagement (Section 7.9).

## 7.5. How Somerset Council can hear the voices of those who are not traditionally heard through council mechanisms to ensure we can tackle inequality.

Currently the LCNs are struggling in some areas to involve those who are not often heard through council mechanisms. There are also concerns that when people speak, they are not necessarily listened to. The process of devolution to communities also However, there are options to build on current good practice.

**Table 7.5 What helps and hinders building relationships with communities, and the tensions faced**

What helps	What hinders	Tension
Community involvement supported by informality, involvement, impact.	Formal and bureaucratic language, focus on 'stakeholders'	LCNs as a forum for stakeholders vs. LCNs as a public space for community voice.
Link Officers forming inclusive relationships with the public through VCFSE networks.	Lack of capacity to connect and lack of impact when the public does attend.	Link Officers supporting inclusion of the public vs. supporting the networking of LCN stakeholders.
Involving a range of partners, particularly Council members and Link Officers, at an early stage.	Involvement at too late a stage in the process for the consultation to make a meaningful change.	Control over process vs. consultation 'in the wild'.
Training and sharing best practice.	Specialist language ('jargon'), overly complex and long consultations, inexperienced research practices.	Supporting professional development and good practice vs. Time and resource pressures on departments.

### *LCNs as places of community inclusion*

If LCNs are to be “establishing effective local community engagement and influence” along with promoting “enhanced participation in democracy, active community decision making and scrutiny” as set out in the [Terms of Reference](#) then it seems their appearance should be quite different that they are currently, if by ‘community’ it is meant the ordinary public. As a provocation the questions could be asked:

- What would an LCN so that ordinary people felt like it was a space and a process they owned?
- Could LCN meetings or working groups be held at public events or in public spaces to increase visibility and access?

The SWAP audit raised the underrepresentation of minority and smaller groups in LCNs as an issue of concern. It is very unlikely that LCNs in their current form would enable attendance from underrepresented groups, being more likely to benefit those who are already active in communities (see Mansuri and Rao, 2013, pp1-14). Whilst the SWAP audit gave examples from other authorities on their measurement of inclusion, these were not

demonstrations of inclusion. The potential key mechanisms of inclusion are relationship building and peer-network building.

The activities by LCN Link Officers to build relationships between people in VCFSE groups and the LCN and Council activities helped link people who were not engaged with council processes. This work to actively form connections has been found to be an effective way to increase public participation from a diverse group. Other mechanisms that could be used include setting up processes that explicitly give voice to people not currently taking part in mainstream conversations. For example, setting up an [inequality commission](#) to give local people a voice, explore the barriers preventing people from reaching their potential, learn from evidence and experts, and make recommendations to the system.

The involvement of the public in LCN meetings is another potential route to inclusion. This suggests that at least some LCN meetings should be different in character, being more informal and open to impactful participation and activity - a very different structure to the 'core membership' stakeholder model.

With sufficient capacity, LCN Link Officers could facilitate peer networks amongst underrepresented groups that would further support involvement. This could mean that the LCN activities are scrutinised, informed by, or co-produced with groups of people who don't typically get involved in this community governance. Facilitated peer-networks are a crucial part of the HDRC project and co-design (see Appendix ii). Connecting the LCNs with co-design work and community research would open up the possibility of the platform having working groups that shaped the design of local activities and services. This may be appropriate for the Council and for larger parishes expanding into youth working, employment services and wellbeing. It would also support the direct involvement of residents with lived experience as active participants in co-design, distinct from but alongside the involvement of VCFSEs and parishes.

It is an open question whether LCN meetings would be an appropriate forum for broad community involvement. It may be that rather, thematic meetings (see Section 7.1.2) and consultation processes (see below) would be more appropriate places for this kind of peer-network and relationship building.

If LCNs are to focus more on being a forum for stakeholders, such as parishes and VCFSEs, then the extent to which these organisations carry a wide and deep flow of viewpoints from their constituencies will determine whether the LCNs themselves are inclusive. In the most recent debates on community empowerment, parishes have been placed as important platforms for the community voice. This neglects that, as covered in 7.3.1 above, they are increasingly vehicles for the community to *do*, not just *speak*. It also leaves open the question of how much they do form the community voice. Some parish councillors and clerks may be effective delegates from communities, having done the work of convening, listening and involving. Some may represent the interests of their constituency only through their own viewpoint and everyday friendships. The latter might be a good reflection of the broad community but may well not speak to the needs of people less connected, marginalised, or simply in different circles from the people who typically act on behalf of parishes or VCFSEs.

To support the work of partner organisations in including the voices and involvement of those not traditionally heard the Council could seek to share best practice and upskill partners along with staff in place-based roles.

There was evidence of improving practice around consultations in the Council, but this appeared inconsistent and uncoordinated. These issues are common to local government consultations and addressed by [LGA guidance](#). There are both tensions and opportunities around this area:

- How can statutory consultations be held at an early enough stage for citizen input to be meaningful whilst ensuring that the full process follows legislation?
- Could the HDRC programme capacity support the upskilling of officers who undertake consultations in research and engagement skills?
- Could Link Officers, either as a cohort or particular officers, be upskilled in consultation best practice and act as advisors alongside supporting the piloting and communication of consultations?
- How can the knowledge and connections of Council members be best utilised in informing and communicating consultations?
- How can services be supported to explore their needs around learning from the experience of citizens and supported to gain the evidence and insight required to improve?

## 7.6. How Somerset Council services and community representatives can communicate and collaborate.

The question around communication and collaborative work connects widely with the research. This section reflects on place-based working covered in Section 6.2.2 and the evidence on communication in Section 6.4.2.

**Table 7.6.1 What helps and hinders communication and collaboration, and the tensions faced**

What helps	What hinders	Tension
Coordination and cross-team working.	Siloed working and inward looking services.	Business As Usual vs. collaborative effort.
Information shared between partner organisations.	Siloed working and inward looking services.	Prioritising council communication vs. acting as a conduit for partners.
Clear and accessible information about standard processes.	Complex and jargon heavy processes; frequent change to processes.	Time spent producing communication materials vs. Time spent delivering services.

### *Communication between the Council and community representatives*

With regard to communication with community representatives, there are a number of questions pointing to best practice:

- Can lessons be learnt from emergency response that can be transferred more generally to how information is cascaded and communicated?
- Could a place-based version of the Transform Family View 'data lake' enable all partners to see who is doing what within a place and who is the relevant contact?
- How can the Council officers be enabled to provide information online that would effectively support community representatives?
- How can Council officers and members be enabled to give clear and transparent information about what is happening in places?

Whilst some of these may be answered through a combination of other networking and collaboration, changes reflecting these points may be helpful to improve communication. There is, as noted above, a tension between Council officers relaying information from the Council, and being a conduit for information from partners.

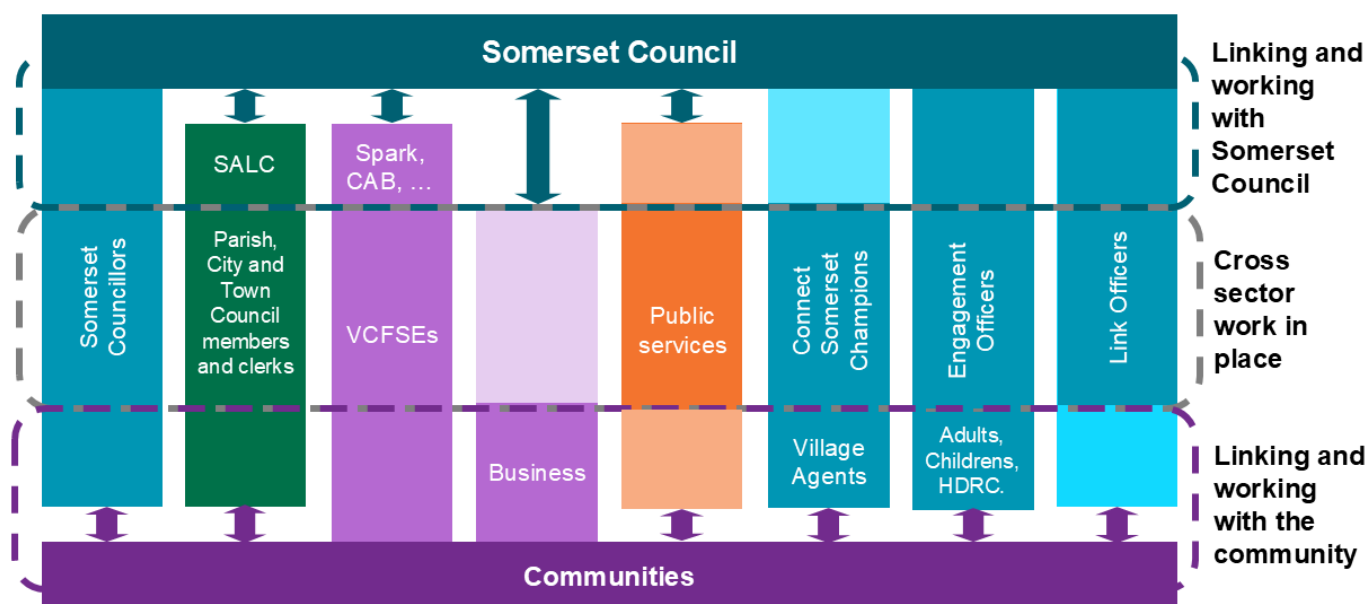
### *Collaboration between Somerset Council and community representatives*

As Figure 7.6 indicates, the involvement of different stakeholders in place varies. Broadly, Council members engage directly with Somerset Council alongside a strong focus on working with communities. Parish members and clerks work closely with communities and, to a lesser extent, Somerset Council. Link Officers are a mirror to that, being a link into the Council with less focus on working with communities (though see Section 7.3.3). 'Engagement Officers' are officers working in departments who connect with communities

but do not typically work within them (with exceptions). Public services, such as the police and NHS, work in parts with both the Council and communities. All of these bodies are significantly involved in cross-sector work in place.

Some Council officers have a specific focus on work with communities, including public health, adult and children’s services. All have different aims and connections to council departments. VCFSEs and businesses are partly located within communities with their focus being mainly focussed on their sector rather than cross-sector working in place or working directly with the Council. Some VCFSE posts are funded by the Council, including Connect Somerset Champions.

**Figure 7.6 Partners working in place**



There have been place-based teams working in the former Districts, such as locality teams, where officers were ‘working together to support joint aims. (LLO9). The similar ‘team of teams’ approach is currently used around health-based provision:

It doesn't matter what the outcome is you're looking to deliver or the cohort of people that you're looking after or serving, it's a culture and a way of working and a leadership approach that is helping people feel that they are all part of a team (PBS1)

Several other examples of collaboration building practice within Somerset were given:

- Case-focussed working, both information sharing and practical working together.
- Broader thematic working on place-based issues.
- Thematic cross-sector networking events.
- Cross-team working days to build understanding between teams.
- Cross-team networks to share best practice around working with particular sectors.

Where these opportunities can be facilitated, they will increase the ability of teams to work together in places.

The development of Family Hubs offers potential for new centres of place-based information sharing and relationship building to be founded. The vision of making these centres where staff from across public services, the Council and VCFSE could collaborate would naturally enable better cross-organisation working in place alongside saving resources (PBS4; VCF4; SCO4). However, such potential changes raise questions over how similar place-based working can be effectively supported in rural places where there is no clear physical centre available (SCO4) and how to ensure that the ecology of smaller VCFSEs is strengthened by local hubs rather than marginalised and disrupted (PBS3; see also 7.3.2).

**Table 7.6.2 What helps and hinders cross-organisation / partner working in place, and the tensions faced**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Bringing together cross-sector partners around specific issues (homelessness, ASB, flooding).	Across non-aligned boundaries (4-6-12-18), making coordination difficult.	Flexibility to work across different boundaries vs. time and resources to engage with different structures.
Combining multiple specialisms and different connections in a place, enabling the sharing of knowledge and understanding.	Concerns over the motivations of stakeholders and imbalances in power.	The need to 'just get on and do it' vs. the need to take time building relationships and understanding.
Stakeholders who connect and work across organisational boundaries, being double-hatted or with broad areas of work.	Stakeholders siloed within organisations and teams, with no routine connection outside their area.	Double-hatted stakeholders / officers vs. Clarity and consistency in role. Building cross-partner and cross-team working vs. Time and resource.
Building trust through shared challenge (flooding, emergency response).	Preventing collaboration; resources protected rather than shared; communication breakdowns.	Managed control vs collaborative responsiveness: being open to uncertain challenges as partners.

Beyond the pooling of spaces and working is the pooling of budgets. From jointly funded roles to the shifting of budgets from acute response in one service to preventative work in another, place-based working offers the potential for greater flexibility and impact. Here, policy platforms such as [Total Place 2.0](#) offer a roadmap towards greater collaboration that would build on the many good initiatives happening in Somerset (for examples, see Section 6.2.1 and Appendix iv). At the other end of the scale one approach that emerged was the potential value of small discretionary funds enabling quick local problem-solving without lengthy bureaucratic processes. As one Council officer explained, such resources can facilitate the relational work that underpins effective community engagement:

It might be there's a small pot of money ... I find that a little pot of money can go a long way if you can just go, "Oh, don't worry. You need a bit of money to meet or to have a discussion. ... Well, we'll fund tea and coffees so that people come together." (SCO7)

This observation highlights how modest investments in enabling conversations—rather than only funding major projects—can create the conditions for collaborative problem-solving and relationship-building that more formal governance structures often struggle to achieve.

## 7.7. Articulating effectively the space within which this work fits, in particular between ICB and Connect Somerset's work.

The development of cross-team neighbourhood health working with the ICB (see Section 3.2.3) and the evolving work of Connect Somerset are happening alongside the review of the Council's work with communities and transformation programmes. As set out in Section 7.1 and 7.3.2, it will be necessary to have a clear understanding of what the aims of LCNs and Link Officers are, and consideration of the activity and direction of partners, to establish the relationship between these structures and roles and the cross-partner work in health, early years and families, and more.

The research evidenced how some Council officers tend to work across departmental and stakeholder boundaries; for example, Link Officers and those based in Public Health tended to be 'the glue bringing things together' (SCO11). Councillors also fulfilled this function of linking across stakeholders in place. Good cross-partner working in place would support the work of both Council members and the Council to fit well with partner organisations. Consideration should be given to how Council officers in cross-sector roles, either jointly funded or where Council officers are in roles that naturally work with multiple stakeholders, can best network and share information to effectively link and coordinate with partner organisations.

With regard to more strategic work, it is evident that there needs to be greater collaboration between partners to enable good working with communities. This would require power-sharing and recognition of contribution, letting go of 'my patch' and 'building stronger relationships across organisations' (PBS1; SCO1; SCO7). For example, jointly funded transformation work could help break down silos, facilitate conversations, and enable collaboration at the senior level. Cross-partner meetings can agree to shift responsibilities within and across services. Agreed principles and ways of working were argued to be important by several interviewees. This was because the difference in organisational structures and processes are unlikely to be removed, but a broad common understanding and practice could develop with some shared aims.

Processes of forming cross-sector aims have been carried out in a number of places. The [Sheffield City Goals](#) were formed out of workshops, listening conversations, and a survey. This created an ongoing shared platform for discussing collaboration that has become increasingly embedded in the work of different stakeholders. This has not been a straightforward process and the take up of the City Goals and related work by the VCFSE sector in Sheffield has been critical to its continuation.

What is evident is the process of coordination and collaboration must happen at every level. Given different priorities and interests this will inevitably be difficult work. However, interviewees were clear that it would be more effective, more efficient, and lead to better outcomes. There is the potential for shared investment in community development, engagement infrastructure and neighbourhood-level capacity - which would strengthen the implementation of changes across partners and help address some of the capacity and sustainability challenges identified elsewhere in this review.

## 7.8. How language is and could be defined in this space

The review brief notes that:

words and phrases relating to how our relationships with communities are used differently in different contexts or interchangeably, without common agreement about what is meant – e.g. community engagement and participation, co-design and co production, neighbourhoods, localities, communities, prevention, early help, early intervention. Clarity and consistency are needed. (see Appendix v)

The siloed nature of national Government, with multiple cultures and political drives, produces often contradictory definitions and recommendations. The current move to highlight neighbourhoods is a case in point, as what a ‘neighbourhood’ is depends on whether it is being used as shorthand for a the area meeting the needs and capacity of a service or administrative unit, or an area with some shared built or population characteristic, or how people themselves define where they live, see Table 7.8 below. In Somerset, the term neighbourhood will also be meaningless for many citizens in rural areas, where ‘village’ and ‘place’ are more relevant (see [the Public First research](#)).

The difficulty in seeking to define language is that each stakeholder - even or especially within a local authority - has different policy drivers and communities of practice. The wish to communicate across siloes will always be in tension with the everyday practice of being a professional in a particular (even broad) field. There are options to enable shared conversations:

- Ensuring that terms are explained in everyday language when used.
- Officers in engagement roles translating jargon into everyday language.
- Moving away from terms that might be misunderstood in communications.

Artificial intelligence has enabled the production of Plain English and Easy Read documents at a fraction of the cost of traditional methods (for example, [Swindon Borough Council's Simply Readable](#)). With standard AI tools such as Microsoft Copilot, the simplification and summarising of complex terminology could help in the process of communication of concepts to the public. It also has the potential to support a more standardised form of concrete, everyday communication across services, removing or explaining policy jargon. This might be supported by a shared programme across services and partners around what jargon to particularly avoid.

This move away from jargon to everyday language has gained prominence in the practice of social care. Here, words like ‘refused to engage’ and ‘engagement’ are questioned and alternatives are proposed that remember people are equal human beings, such as ‘decided not to do it’ and ‘building relationships’ (Shannon, 2025). The move away from jargon could also include a move towards language that valued building relationships between the Council and communities as equal partners.

To conclude, multiple concepts could be reviewed to explore their use across services and the potential for common definitions. However, “clarity and consistency” can only be achieved through cross-stakeholder discussions. In this, it is an open question of whether this is best done through linkage between people in specific roles, or through developing a

shared glossary, or to seek to move away from jargon and towards more concrete simple wording.

**Table 7.8 How ‘neighbourhoods’ are used by different bodies present in Somerset**

Policy area and department / initiative	Programme	What a neighbourhood is:	Population (apx.)
Health (NHS England)	Integrated Neighbourhood Team (INT)	An area size where teams from different health services can be brought together and help people in a joined-up way	~50,000
Planning (MHCLG)	Neighbourhood Plan Area	An area with a shared character, from a village to a big town, where people agree how builders and developers should work	1,000 - 60,000
Policing (Home Office)	<a href="#">Neighbourhood Policing Team</a>	An area size where a team of police can be brought together to work alongside local people	10,000 - 50,000
Regeneration (MHCLG)	<a href="#">Plan for Neighbourhoods</a>	A town	20,000 – 100,000
Urban planning (Local Government)	15 minute neighbourhoods	The area that a person could get to by walking 15 minutes (in a city or town)	10,000 - 50,000
Devolution Bill (MHCLG)	Neighbourhood governance	An area that can make decisions over some things the council provides or does	5,000 - 50,000
Regeneration (MHCLG)	<a href="#">Pride in Place neighbourhoods</a>	An area defined by statistics at first and then by thinking about how money would be best spent in the communities covered.	5,000 - 15,000
Social Care (Adults)	Local Area Coordination (LAC)	The area that one community worker can work in to make a difference to older people	8,000 – 12,000
Sheffield neighbourhoods	<a href="#">Citizen mapping</a>	The area that people think that they live their lives in (in a city)	~4,000
Neighbourhood representation	<a href="#">Neighbourhood parliaments</a>	The area where people have neighbours	~150

## 7.9 How engagement activity can develop to meet the needs of Somerset Council services.

### 7.9.1 Changing how Somerset Council enables participation.

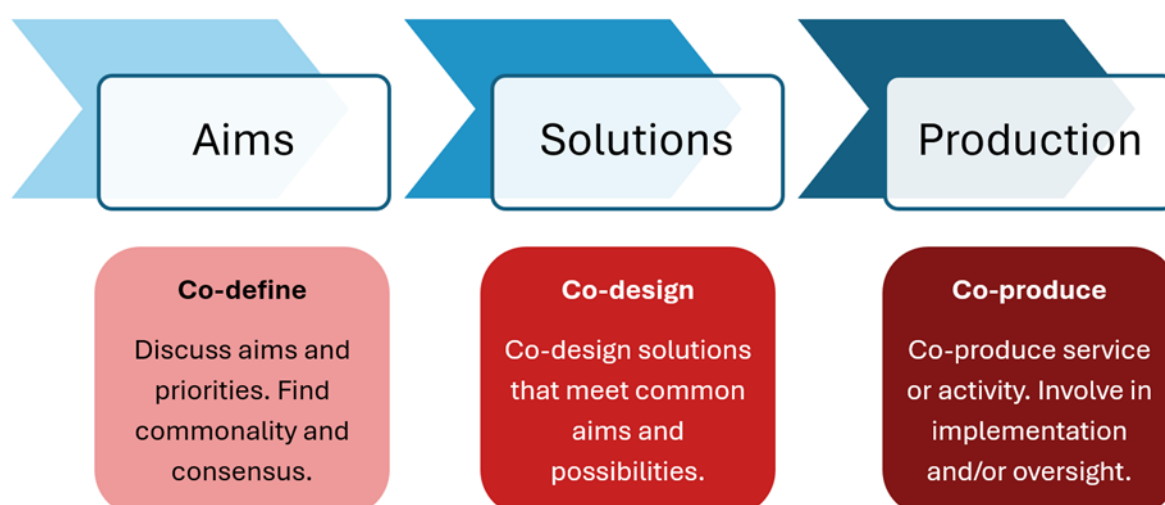
In a study of council officers in public engagement roles, Escobar (2025) evidenced:

participatory governance not as an accomplishment, but as a contested, fragile, and evolving assemblage that takes constant political work; and that there can be more scope for manoeuvre than it is often assumed.

The role of Council officers tasked with engagement and linking communities must be valued as important in the process of a culture change towards the Council working with and engaging communities. However, what the most appropriate roles are is an open question. Each department will have its own approach and needs, different relationships and networks to connect and develop. Following Escobar, one potential solution is to have 'engagement champions', being 'democratic professionals' who advocate for engagement and are networked across the Council. This could be a cross-council network of officers committed to sharing good practice around engagement and creating a culture-shift oriented towards residents. However, it should be noted that what good engagement looks like will differ across different kinds of services; whilst both can support good community outcomes operational services have a very different character to children's services.

If people are not involved at a point where they might discuss the aims and solutions but simply have a decision over a proposed solution where a strong preference has already been formed, then they have been consulted but not really engaged or involved. That there has been greater outreach and good practice on some consultations suggests that there are not council-wide obstacles to good practice. However, it is likely that some of the pressures faced across the council, around financial pressures and capacity, also impacted on implementing consultations that followed good practice.

**Figure 7.9 Points of citizen involvement in the policy formation and implementation**



This suggests a need for a consultation protocol or framework to guide consultation and engagement work in the authority (for example, [the Consultation and Engagement protocol](#) of the West-Yorkshire Mayoral Authority). As part of this, attention would need to be paid to the legality of consultation where that applied. The upskilling of staff engaged in consultations would support this process, potentially via HDRC.

More broadly, whilst there are a number of forms of democratic innovation that would deepen and widen discussion around the shape of services, the presence of the HDRC model offers a funded model for embedding good practice. Given some services are evidently seeking to have deeper conversations with service users to better understand their needs, mechanisms such as HDRC appear important. Some officers are seeking to create better solutions alongside users. This again suggests a change in culture.

The benefits of involving all of those affected by a service in its design and delivery are evident. A range of ideas can be brought in and fresh solutions discussed. Services become better suited to needs. Citizens can be supported and involved and empowered to meet those needs. The potential is the integration of community insight and lived experience into governance, resource allocation and service redesign as standard practice. This could be done through explicit 'learning loops' bridging engagement activity and organisational change.

The processes of co-defining, co-designing and co-production are also important because they imply an openness to ideas from partner organisations and officers alongside citizens:

I can see the solution, but it's like, okay, so do I have any power? Where do I put my thought of something that could be improved, and how do I have my power in helping fix that solution? ... where can I feel that my idea, my idea for a solution, can be taken seriously and that I can have agency in offering myself up to say, "I can help fix that" (PBS3)

Opening up the design and shape of services can also allow staff to be part of that shaping and find themselves as an active partner in creating and innovating. There are tensions and demands with greater autonomy and participation, less certainty and more risk. Given the challenges the Council faces, encouraging an openness to innovation would be a positive.

Whilst there is potential, there is also a need to be explicit about which types of decisions are genuinely open to collaboration (and who will be included in that collaboration), which are advisory, and which remain the responsibility of Council members or officers. This clarity can help manage expectations and reduce the risk of communities or partners investing time without confidence that their input will meaningfully shape outcomes.

### **7.9.2 The role of the Link Officer.**

The role of Link Officers is one of the strands that runs through this review. To recap, there are several potentially critical roles they could perform:

- A facilitator of place-based geographical and thematic stakeholder networks.
- An enabler of connections between Council members and place-based officers and different Council services.
- A facilitator of parish networks and key contact point for parishes into Council services.

- An enabler of citizen inclusion and involvement, supporting engagement and development of leadership and peer-support towards participation in local governance and thematic networks.
- An enabler of citizen research and co-design with departments, deepening engagement beyond consultation whilst supporting the continuation of the HDRC principles and ways of working.

Discussions with Link Officers evidenced how the linking role into Council was felt to be both what defined their role as distinct from others and a source of continual challenge. Their role as a place-based points of contact was appreciated by Council officers involved in community engagement and councillors. Their role as LCN and working group facilitators was evidently necessary for the success of these structures. Their role working directly with communities around inclusion and participation was less well evidenced but was evidently an important and productive aspect of work for some Link Officers.

**Table 7.9.2 What helps and hinders Link Officers working, and the tensions faced**

Help	Hinder	Tension
Providing single contact points for the Council and supporting other place-based partners.	Under-resourced and not consistently supported by Council departments.	Responsive engagement with Link Officer vs Council officer workload and core delivery.
Engagement of stakeholders and a wish to make the LCN work.	Disengagement and the need to continue facilitating despite the LCN struggling.	Persisting with a model vs Withdrawing and changing tack.
Connecting with the community at multiple points, across different stakeholders and with ordinary members of the public.	Being too thinly spread to be effective.	Having a broad and deep engagement with community vs Risk that brief will not be fulfilled.

The Link Officer role has had a relatively high rate of turnover, partly related to the initial restructure, where staff were reallocated to roles regardless of interest in that specific role. However, as the SWAP audit notes, the remuneration for the Link Officer role is around 20% less per year than similar roles in other authorities. This indicates a gap between the demands of the role and the resources allocated to fund the role.

The primary tension articulated by Link Officers was around the extent of the role in terms of responsibilities and geography. If the role of the Link Officer is to strengthen in terms of working with communities and retain links with stakeholders, there needs to be sufficient resources to reduce the geographic area they are responsible for (i.e. to have more officers in Link Officer roles). If there are not resources to fund Link Officers to reduce the geographic area they cover, then a decision will need to be made on their priority focus. In either case, and whatever the priority, this role will need to be enabled through some of the good practice cited above.

## 7.10 Options for further embedding the Building Blocks of Health objectives into the practice and service delivery of Strategic Partnership and wider council working

The Building Blocks of Health approach suggests several points that resonate with questions arising from the review stage. The 7 elements for embedding the Building Blocks of Health within the work of a local authority are set out below with reference to the findings of the research.

**Table 7.10 Suggestions emerging from the review relating to the 7 elements for embedding the Building Blocks of Health**

<b>1. Leadership and momentum</b>	Leadership is necessary to any transformation, and the questions raised by the review indicate the need for leadership in driving coherent change.
<b>2. Focus and strategy</b>	The review has evidenced a need for a focus, to the LCNs and Link Officers specifically, but also for the wider Council. There is a need for greater cohesion. The health and wellbeing of Somerset residents, and resilience of communities, is a potentially strong framework to orient Council activity. It also raises the potential of closer alignment and joint working with the Integrated Care Board and VCFSE partners under a shared framework.
<b>3. Partnerships</b>	To further embed the Building Blocks of Health, each LCN could have a Health and Wellbeing working group set up as standard. This would be an opportunity to explore co-design methods or build partnerships in place, partly depending on how this would align with and amplify existing health networks.
<b>4. Community collaboration (Co-design)</b>	The HDRC principles and way of working offer a model that should be explored for wider work, not just around co-design but also community consultation and participation more broadly.
<b>5. Evidence-based communications to build support</b>	Communications are a challenge but the recommendation to remove jargon aligns with the Building Blocks of Health approach. The “Every Door is a Right Door” approach is perhaps most aligned with embedding health in its widest sense, connecting residents to the services they need whether arriving at the Council or partners.
<b>6. Evidence-based action and action-based evidence</b>	There is sector leading expertise available through health partners, Spark Somerset, HDRC and Adult Services. The need to enable robust but nuanced evaluation is essential to demonstrating the value of prevention and ensuring adaptation and improvement.
<b>7. Anchor institutions</b>	The Council is an anchor institution but also one that holds connections with many anchor institutions, across the voluntary and parish sectors. The primary challenge will be in connecting the narrative of wider determinants of health to the varied priorities of stakeholders. It may be that the two frameworks of Health and Wellbeing and Emergency Resilience might complement here, with the latter finding most resonance with parishes and the former with many VCFSEs. The two frameworks themselves have overlapping links that would be stronger together.

## 8. Conclusions

I've been around for a long time, and you think you can see what the answer is. You can see these quick wins. You can see where the opportunities are. You can see whether the resistance is. You can see it all. And it seems to me; the answers are out there. They've been out there forever, and it's just how the system supports those things to happen and to work.

(Public service employee)

One of the first things that tends to go when you're firefighting and just trying to do what's on your desk is the proactive engagement conversations, keeping people up to date, reaching out to see how we can work in partnership because you haven't got the time to build those relationships.

(Somerset Council officer)

The findings set out in this report are the results of a comprehensive research phase, part of a review into how the Council works with communities. The findings include different viewpoints on what should be changed and different experiences of what is happening now. These views illustrate broad challenges and tensions around the Council's work with communities. The research has identified commonalities across stakeholders: a lack of resources and time to meet aspirations, change and instability. The research has also identified opportunities: possibilities that suggest the next phase of the review will be able to find ways to make solutions work.

Different stakeholders had distinct viewpoints on their perceptions of the Council and what they wanted from the Council.

**VCFSEs** wanted the Council to understand what is already in a place and to work to build on that rather than introducing new organisations or structures. VCFSEs wanted stable funding to give them confidence, as part of building a trusted working relationship.

Some **parishes** just wanted the Council to get out of the way, others viewed their work as separate from the Council, others appreciated support from the Council to network and learn. Many officers and councillors from parishes expressed a need to have someone in the Council to communicate with in a timely way, to get information or resolve an issue.

**Public services** wanted to find ways to work together, recognising the effectiveness of collaboration and the efficiencies it brings. Public services valued LCNs as a well organised space for conversation but wanted clarity on who and what they are for.

The key tensions evidenced are between:

1. the Council working in places – villages, towns, neighbourhoods – **versus** working at the unitary scale;
2. being flexible in meeting the needs of different places and stakeholders **versus** being consistent to provide clarity and confidence for stakeholders;
3. being responsive to needs **versus** managing demand that is beyond the resources of the Council to meet;
4. the need for short-term impacts **versus** planning for the long-term.

Table E1 below summarises for each of these tensions the core findings from the research, the questions arising and key suggestions set out in Chapter 7.

**Table E1 Core findings, questions and key suggestions**

Core Tension	Evidence from Research	Related Questions	Key Suggestions
Being in a place vs. Working at scale	<p>The Council is engaging effectively at the strategic level and with stakeholders in place. There is less successful engagement with small VCFSEs, organic networks and communities. Here, relationships of trust need to be built up. The vesting of the Council and subsequent financial crisis led to many links with community being broken - District Council roles oriented towards working with communities were lost alongside a churn of staff and teams.</p>	<p>Should Local Community Networks (LCNs) focus on being a voice for community or a forum for stakeholders? How can the Council work better with small organisations? How does the Council build human-scale relationships across a strategic-scale authority? Should there be more resource and service devolution to trusted partners? Can the methodology of HDRC be extended to deepen mechanisms of community engagement?</p>	<p>Follow good practice on collaborative governance and develop a good understanding of what relationships LCNs are aiming to strengthen. View officers and councillors in place as a partnership. Utilise existing good practice in the Council, such as HDRC and the integration of data. Create a cross-Council network of officers who engage or work with communities.</p>
Flexibility vs. Consistency	<p>The Council's approach to communities is fragmented and inconsistent. Information on local issues and services is fragmented across the Council and partners. Language around community work varies between stakeholders and communities of practice. Link Officers do everything from research to emergency planning. Thematic and organic networks are valued for their responsiveness, as LCNs are valued for their structured nature. Geographic boundaries are mismatched.</p>	<p>Should the Council aim for greater coherence or retain different approaches? Can "any door be the right door" for information about services? Can the Council use everyday language and, if so, what meaning might be lost? Should the Link Officer role remain broad and flexible or be more specific? Should LCNs become more standardised or more diverse? Should more organic, flexible networks be used to accommodate different geographies and needs?</p>	<p>Explore the use of frameworks such as around resilience and health to create a coherent narrative and direction. Use plain English and Easy Read principles to explain what is meant by terms such as 'engagement'. Review the role of the Link Officer. Explore the use of cross-partner roles to enable greater collaboration and flexibility, towards the principles of Total Place 2.0.</p>

Core Tension	Evidence from Research	Related Questions	Key Suggestions
<b>Responsive collaboration vs. Managed control</b>	<p>Parishes are increasingly important but with no clear route into the Council as a valued partner. Excellent collaborative work is being done in Somerset but the protection of ‘patches’ and preferred models is also a feature. There are many examples of good practice but little activity that is handing resources to communities and trusting their judgement. More conversations are needed and more resources shared to make the best of work in places. There needs to be a balance between responsiveness and managing demand, with officer workloads limiting capacity to work with communities.</p>	<p>How can the Council be more responsive and collaborative with parishes within current resources? Could more resources be pooled, roles and leadership shared, with common principles (and who would be accountable)? How much is the Council willing to hand over resources and step back? How can officers, councillors and partners work together in place as an informed, mutually supportive team? How can sector-leading practice be used within resource limits and links to wider strategic authorities?</p>	<p>Use LGA good practice in the devolution process. Explore knowledge sharing with Cornwall and Wilshire around support for the parish sector. Consider instituting a single point of contact, or gateway team, for parishes. Consider pooling resources across services to create shared engagement functions for specialist services. Follow good practice on collaborative governance and build trust with the VCFSE sector. Involve partners and citizens at the start of processes and in meaningful conversations.</p>
<b>Short-term vs. Long-term</b>	<p>Financial pressures reduce incentives to invest in long-term outcomes. The speed of devolution and the need for immediate impact has harmed relationship building. Relationship-based work is complex and takes time but pressures demand quick delivery.</p>	<p>How can long-term and complex impacts of working with communities, both in social and financial value, be better evaluated and demonstrated? How should devolution be carried out within capacity. Is there a need to reimagine local financing?</p>	<p>Embed social value and a broad range of related outcomes, including long-term financial impact, in the evaluation of services. Explore how activities contribute to different forms of value and how this can be valued within processes.</p>

As this concluding chapter raises many questions, it will return to the matter of best practice to explore what answers to these questions might look like. The values set out in Section 3.1.2 are here considered in turn, exploring whether the work of the Council with communities aligns with these values.

1.     ◀ **Saving money and making efficiencies.** There were immediate benefits evidenced from engaging stakeholders (see the case of the cross-LCN Active Travel group in Appendix iii) alongside a strong narrative around efficiencies generated by cross-partner working. However, the work with parishes and VCFSEs demonstrated a sometimes siloed and short-term approach. To align with this value requires the valuing long-term savings and including the cost implications for partner organisations in calculations of cost-benefit.
2.     ▼ **Recognition and Appreciation.** VCFSE partners often feel their goodwill is exploited, with the relationship described as extractive rather than reciprocal. Parishes, Link Officers and Council members can also feel at the margins, struggling to find a way into the Council and not finding themselves recognised as key partners. Alignment would need a step-change in how the work of stakeholders is appreciated and included.
3.     ▼ **Diverse Outcomes.** The activity of the Council is broad, covering statutory services, the public realm, resilience and health work, and so on. It is therefore surprising that the measures of what the Council does are narrow, with no evident measures of Social Value (despite it being a key part of Council contracting) nor assessment of impact on social and relational capital. Alignment requires an understanding of the broader impact of Council assets and services, otherwise their value may be misjudged.
4.     ◀ **Community Ownership.** Here, there was a mixed picture. The devolution of assets has proceeded at a fast pace, though this has not satisfied the demand from some stakeholders whilst overwhelming others. A lack of capacity, at least until recently, has prevented a balanced conversation that reflects need and capacity. Alignment here means building trust between Council and community partners to grow confidence in handover.
5.     ▼ **Shaping Policy and Services.** Here, pockets of good practice, such as Somerset HDRC and in some consultations, emphasise the distance to travel in fully involving citizens and stakeholders across the range of policy formation and implementation. There are challenges in terms of both culture and capacity. Alignment here means co-defining, co-designing, and co-delivering, involving the knowledge and energy of communities.
6.     ▼ **Growing Inclusive Culture.** LCNs struggle in some areas to maintain attendance from core stakeholders and structures of engagement are generally dominated by residents who have resources to participate. The Council is candid in its reasoning in some areas, which is valued, but perceived to be opaque in others. Alignment here means including different kinds of stakeholders through holding different kinds of meetings and events, using outreach and connections, and using clear language.
7.     ◀ **Amplifying Value.** Somerset evidences a range of best practice around cross-partner collaboration on complex issues, from health to homelessness to troubled families. This supports the amplifying of value. However, misalignments in culture and priorities hamper collective effort. Further, there are concerns from VCFSEs that the value of what is already in place is neglected. Alignment means closely understanding what is good and strong in Somerset and its places, and how actions can reinforce these.

## Acknowledgements

The report authors would like to give thanks to all those who kindly gave up their time to respond to the survey, attend focus groups, and take part in interviews. The authors also thank Somerset Council officers who kindly supported this process, and in particular Kate Hellard and Chris Phillips. Thanks also go to the reference group members: Cllr Dawn Johnson, Cllr Theo Butt-Phillip, Cllr Steven Pugsley, Sara Skirton and Alison Bell. Special thanks also goes to Michelle Brooks, Sean Dromgoole and James Moore for their assistance with place-based focus groups. Thanks to the British Academy for support with the value typology and to the Somerset Social Prescribing Collaborative for their draft framework. This report has also greatly benefited from the comments of Max Wide and Paul White, part of the review team. All omissions and errors remain the authors own.

## Use of AI in this report

The report authors wish to make clear that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been used to support the process of research, analysis and writing. Agentic AI was used to perform web-searches, summarise interviews and documents, and to perform initial evaluations of data. AI tools were only used where they met GDPR standards and where data would not be used for the training of models. The AI models used were Claude, Google Gemini, and Perplexity. Whilst AI has been used, the authors are keenly aware of the limitations of such tools and they were used only to support rather than lead the process. The research, writing and analysis presented in this report is the authors own work.

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# Appendix I LCN Background Information

Summary of Somerset Council's 18 Local Community Networks (LCNs)

No.	Local Community Network Name	Attendance at last recorded AGM	Key Areas/Towns	Parishes and households
1	Avalon and The Poldens	24 (6 SCM, 5 SCO, 10 CPT, 2 VCF)	Glastonbury area	23 parishes, population of 34800
2	Bridgwater	12 (2 SCM, 3 SCO, 2 CPT, 5 VCF)	Bridgwater	2 parishes, population of 41100
3	Burnham	22 (3 SCM, 5 SCO, 11 CPT, 2 VCF, 1 PBS)	Burnham-on-Sea area	12 parishes, population of 36200
4	Chard and Blackdowns	8 (1 SCM, 2 SCO, 3 CPT, 2 VCF)	Chard	19 parishes, population of 25600
5	Cheddar and Axbridge	24 (5 SCM, 3 SCO, 6 CPT, 7 VCF, 1 PBS)	Cheddar, Axbridge	10 parishes, population of 17600
6	Crewkerne and Ilminster	26 (5 SCM, 6 SCO, 12 CPT)	Crewkerne, Ilminster	33 parishes, population of 33100
7	Dowsborough	27 (3 SCM, 5 SCO, 18 CPT)	Cannington, Wembdon	16 parishes, population of 13700
8	Exmoor	30 (2 SCM, 2 SCO, 23 CPT, 2 VCF, 1 PSB)	Exmoor area	22 parishes, population of 7900
9	Hestercombe	17 (3 SCM, 4 SCO, 9 CPT, 1 VCF)	North Petherton	8 parishes, population of 20900
10	Levels and Moors	32 (7 SCM, 4 SCO, 19 CPT, 1 VCF, 1 PBS)	Somerton, Langport	32 parishes, population of 33600
11	Minehead and Watchet	29 (5 SCM, 3 SCO, 17 CPT, 4 VCF)	Minehead, Watchet	16 parishes, population of 27200
12	Shepton	25 (6 SCM, 5 SCO, 9 CPT)	Shepton Mallet	10 parishes, population of 27800
13	South East Somerset	28 (3 SCM, 4 SCO, 20 CPT)	Wincanton	35 parishes, population of 30000
14	Taunton	35 (7 SCM, 2 SCO, 8 CPT, 10 VCF)	Taunton	7 parishes, population of 74000
15	Vale of Frome	18 (2 SCM, 3 SCO, 10 CPT, 3 VCF)	Frome area	18 parishes, population of 37800
16	Wellington and Wiveliscombe	22 (3 SCM, 3 SCO, 10 CPT, 6 VCF)	Wellington, Wiveliscombe	16 parishes, population of 27200
17	Wells and Rural	23 (4 SCM, 4 SCO, 11 CPT, 2 VCF)	Wells	11 parishes, population of 20300
18	Yeovil	15 (2 SCM, 2 SCO, 9 CPT, 1 VCF, 1 PBS)	Yeovil	21 parishes, population of 65700

## Appendix ii Somerset HDRC Case Study

The Somerset Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) is a five-year collaboration between Somerset Council, the University of West England and Spark Somerset, aiming to embed community involvement across various layers of participation. It is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research.

The HDRC aims for an equal partnership with the VCFSE sector and works to a set of principles that guides practice. These principles, co-produced with council staff and communities, look to provide a framework for defining and enacting meaningful community engagement across various Somerset Council teams.

**Figure ii** LCN Link Officers at a training day with HDRC on community research



Lived Experience Advisory Partnership (LEAP) groups guide the service design, with community voices embedded at every step, from communication to participatory research to making recommendations. The approach allows for early intervention in the decision-making process, moving away from past practices where decisions were already made before community consultation. As an officer involves states, the call is:

come and co-design or ultimately co-produce this work with us, really help us to make sure it has an impact on you as a community but also, it benefits the council.

The project seeks to support skills development and create develop resources with Somerset Council, VCFSEs, and residents. The ambition is that HDRC can support the Council to become a learning organisation that engages with residents at every step, with the skills and resources remaining in the organisation after project completion.

## Somerset HDRC Principles

### Public Involvement

1. Harness the expertise in Somerset communities to co-produce research with the public, including under-served communities.
2. Apply a test and learn approach to identify what works in different communities and geographical areas.
3. Create opportunities for different levels of involvement with the HDRC and throughout the research cycle.

### Collaboration and integration

4. To build and sustain collaborations between organisations and between council functions.
5. To produce research that builds on community voices and supports integration and improvement across the system, including with external agencies and VCFSE partners.

### Infrastructure and resources

6. Develop systems and processes that will streamline the design, delivery and use of research and knowledge exchange across the organisations and between partners.
7. Establish research ethics and governance, risk management, data management, data sharing and responsible research and innovation processes to support external bidding to leverage funding for social innovation.

### Culture and capacity building

8. Develop a culture of being research active and engaged with communities across the organisation.
9. Embed the application of evidence co-produced with communities to council decision making.
10. Create ongoing incentives to do and use research throughout the organisation.
11. Provide training and development opportunities for staff to both do and use research in their roles.
12. Design career pathways that incentivise these skills.
13. Establish research governance processes.
14. Mainstream the functions within the HDRC in Somerset staff roles to ensure long-term sustainability of the capacity it creates.

### Communication and dissemination

15. Ensure that research and innovation findings, both locally produced and from other sources, are accessible and reach audiences locally, regionally and nationally.

## Appendix iii LCN Working groups

What was evident from the research was the success of thematic working in forming networks across bodies. This was particularly in relation to work around highways and transport. For many smaller parishes this area of activity was a key priority, given road closures in a rural area can mean long detours and lack of easy access to places. Positive feedback was given on responsiveness, problem-solving, and direct engagement with Council officers and contractors (e.g. Kier). The Highways Department has officers who are 'public-facing', having a role of public engagement. For them, there was a clear value in engagement and co-working with parishes and VCFSE groups:

The Highway Subgroup has made a concerted effort to understand the specific needs and priorities of local communities, which has led to more meaningful conversations and collaborative decision-making.

The Council's Transport Department has also engaged successfully with LCNs, particularly around Active-Travel. The cross-LCN Active-Travel group has prompted changes in how community groups and the department work together, including using different technology and easier processes (see below).

Thematic working helps engage stakeholders when the geographically bounded and thematically broad conversations of LCNs are less relevant.

A caveat has to be made in that, as with any group, where the focus and interest of active sub-group members was on a particular aspect, this could be found off-putting for those who had a different focus (SCM6; VCF5). An effort towards including different interests and including broad ideas in the sub-groups would potentially improve their engagement.

### **The Somerset-wide Active Travel working group**

Whilst thematic working-groups in place were important, Somerset-wide working groups allowed working groups from LCNs to feed up into a strategic process. Reflecting on the part happenstance of its formation is important.

A Council officer spoke about how this cross-Somerset network formed out of a mutual interest to have a wider group; .it was a bit of the LCN's and there were lots of different people saying "yes, we want to do Active-Travel stuff", and a bit of our capacity in as we can't support 18 LCN's with regular meetings because we've got basically half of a person to do that and that's way too much. But also a bit of, "well actually, we want a consistent approach across all [areas] and we want to come back with some consensus". We don't just want lots of different views because that doesn't help us and I don't think that helps communities either.

'So, we brought together a local community networks group where we meet with them once a month .... It's a sharing of information and sharing of practical approaches and sharing of ideas. So it's not about the council sitting there and saying "we are going to do this what do you think" it's a bit more of a "how can we move stuff forwards together and what have you got that you can come and show us that you're doing as well as us showing you where we might want to go and getting your advice on it."

'A good example of that is that at the last meeting we had one group come forward with a presentation about the mapping software that they have been using to work out where their paths are going to go and that has really helped both us inform our approach to working with our communities but also other community groups thinking about "well we could do something like that as well" .... So just bringing people together that are interested in the same thing and using their variety of experiences to kind of feed off each other has been really successful.

'It hasn't reached its full development yet. It's still growing. It's still changing. But I think what we've started to build is people helping themselves and people using each other to help themselves. ... There have been pressure groups in certain towns trying to ... cajole us into doing more but they would come at it from a very singular focus. What we were trying to ... do was say "you have this very singular focus but actually there are other people in your community that have a different idea that have a different focus and actually if you can take on board a bit of their thinking and they can take on board a bit of your thinking we'll probably move forwards together better than if we meet with you separately and you have your very singular [foci],"

**"I was having a conversation with Department of Transport [and] I was explaining this particular approach that we've been doing. The liaison officer [said] "well do you share that, that's really good practice, have you shared that with other authorities?" and I've gone "well, isn't everyone doing this", and he said "no not everyone is doing this, this is different, this is new" ...**

## Appendix iv Cross-partner working enabling prevention

A police officer gave a compelling example of the benefits of cross-partner working in place. It is presented here as an example of the value of preventative work.

“A kid is committing crime. ... He's running drugs for county lines. We're really really worried that he's been exploited. Nobody knows where he is and so on.

“It starts with the child not going to school. We got the agencies together and we tried to unpick what had gone wrong in this particular case. ... The reason the child wasn't going to school is because his mum couldn't afford the school uniform [and] didn't have a washing machine and was living on the bread line in terms of her ability to enable him to go to school.

“So, the solution was that he just didn't bother going to school. And because he wasn't going to school then he was vulnerable in terms of being exploited. He was offered brand new trainers and a new bike, and he thought, Yeah, I have some of that because all I got to do is go and drop that parcel off at a particular address. Why wouldn't you?”. So, he's taken those things and all of a sudden now he's committing offenses and antisocial behaviour.

“So, bring those agencies together ... purchase of a washing machine, purchase of school uniform, got him back into school on a kind of action plan and stuff, problem solved.

“If we go back to the old way of policing ... we'd be happy that we'd nicked him, we put him into the system, the youth justice system. Everything's fine. We don't need to worry anymore. Its job sorted. That is not dealing with the underlying issues.

“So, what we're trying to do is get agencies around the room to deal with the underlying issue where, yeah, we need to dismantle the county lines network. That's the police's job. Housing needs to sort out the debt issue ... School needs to sort out the truancy issue and ... and by doing that we're preventing it rather than dealing with the symptoms.”

## Appendix v Review Brief

The Council sought independent external support to:

1.1.1 Provide an insight into National policy and best practice relating to the role of a unitary council in supporting the growth of resilient and sustainable communities, community development and participatory practices.

1.1.2 Engage with a range of stakeholders including Somerset Councillors, representatives of local VCFSE partners, Health, Police and other statutory colleagues, Somerset Council staff and City, Town and Parish Councillors and clerks to understand and collate aspirations, expectations and challenges regarding a current approach and future development.

1.1.3 Co-produce a framework for Somerset Council which identifies opportunities to build, evaluate and continuously improve, an effective programme of community development and engagement.

1.1.4 Build on work already started with a range of council services and colleagues to strengthen our relationship with our communities.

1.1.5 Examine different approaches to supporting the development of more resilient communities, to support self-help and as part of a wider prevention strategy

1.1.6 Consider how Somerset Council services make best use of engagement opportunities to help shape and frame service delivery, policies and strategies.

1.1.7 Result in a report, with a series of recommendations and an achievable action plan to be reported and agreed through Somerset Council's governance process.

Background was given in the brief, which provides context for the review:

2.1 Prior to Vesting Day, each of the predecessor councils in Somerset had different approaches for and definitions of community engagement and development, with significant variations in resourcing.

2.2 Government expectation of potential new unitary authorities is that community engagement is hardwired into their plans. These areas are looking to existing unitary councils, including Somerset Council, to understand experiences and learning. One key learning point is that local authorities need to 'mean it' when they commit to localism.

2.3 Somerset Council's LGR programme had as a flagship project the introduction of Local Community Networks (LCNs). One of the main objectives was to ensure that the new unitary authority did not lose its local connections and that communities retained the ability to influence decisions that mattered most locally, through convening a range of stakeholders including VCFSE, Health and Police colleagues alongside City Town and Parish Councils. This aligned with a commitment to work more closely with City, Town and Parish Councils through a programme of parish development and to progress local devolution opportunities.

2.4 LCNs were 'stood up' in June 2023, however this was with a temporary officer support team in place, which led to inconsistency in resourcing and corporate 'buy in', significant staff turnover and a focus on servicing formal meetings at the expense of the informal engagement and local partnership working.

2.5 Based on pre-Vesting Day consultation and extensive consideration of ‘natural’ communities, it was decided that there would be 18 LCN areas. It was accepted that LCNs would not be coterminous with PCN or Member Division boundaries as it was more important to reflect geographies that people could relate to. The intention was to work across boundaries with an ethos of ‘lines not walls’. This has resulted in many Members needing to engage with more than one and sometimes several LCNs. It is important that our approaches support Members in their community leadership role.

2.6 The Council committed to a review of LCNs at the two-year point. A pressing driver is that the effectiveness of LCNs as the primary vehicle for community engagement is being challenged by a range of stakeholders, internal and external, and for a range of reasons, including differing assumptions of what LCNs are actually about. There is a need to fully understand why they work in some areas but not others, and if improvements can be made or if different engagement approaches are needed, potentially tailored to particular localities. The LGA Peer Challenge highlighted the need to further define the role and purpose of LCNs.

2.7 In addition to supporting the main LCN meetings, the Link Officer team are developing:

- their role as the first point of contact for local VCFSE and parishes.
- wider parish liaison.
- their role in supporting emergency planning both in terms of pre-emptive support for communities to be prepared and in the event of an emergency (with an emerging role building on their local knowledge and relationships).
- and supporting services such as planning, transport and highways to engage with communities.
- Utilising local assets and mobilising resources.

2.8 The LCN team has worked closely with Public Health colleagues through the early stages of the HDRC programme and are key partners in the Building Blocks for Health Partnership; supporting local communities to positively affect specific building blocks that matter to them; build participatory research and evaluation opportunities to capture lived experience and the voice of residents; utilise data effectively triangulating perception; lived experience (qualitative data) and quantitative data on any given topic; and enabling community voice to inform service development and delivery.

2.9 Rather than just looking at LCNs as a mechanism for engagement, consideration needs to be given to the role of the Council’s community engagement and development functions building on and informing the development of these functions.

2.10 Public Health colleagues are clear that asset-based and participatory community development, delivered through our LCN Officer team, is fundamental to achieving their objectives and improving our primary prevention offer. This potential has not yet been fully explored with all services.

2.11 Since vesting day there have also been significant changes within national policy frameworks that are running alongside this work; Children’s Social Care Reform and proposed changes to the Integrated Care Board resulting in local initiatives including Connect Somerset and Neighbourhood Boards soon to be convened by the ICB and existing primary care networks (of which there are 13).

2.12 The Strategic Partnerships service area of Somerset Council also supports engagement with the VCFSE, working to a Memorandum of Understanding agreed between the VCFSE, through Spark Somerset the local infrastructure organisation, the ICB and Somerset Council.

### 3. The Purpose of the Review:

3.1 The Council does not yet have an overarching, coherent strategy for community engagement and development, and how we work in place with communities and partners. Different service areas have different approaches and mechanisms, quite often involving the same stakeholders. This makes it difficult to see and clearly articulate the objectives of the various activities and how they all fit together.

3.2 Words and phrases relating to how our relationships with communities are used differently in different contexts or interchangeably, without common agreement about what is meant – e.g. community engagement and participation, co-design and co-production, neighbourhoods, localities, communities, prevention, early help, early intervention. Clarity and consistency are needed.

3.3 It is intended that this review will report, consider and make recommendations, considering best practice on:

3.3.1 How we can best engage with our communities, be it through communities of interest/experience or geography, (considering the effectiveness of current approaches, including LCNs, and improvements / new approaches we can pursue);

3.3.2 How we best support our Elected Members in their community leadership and champion role;

3.3.3 How we support communities to become more self-reliant with reduced need to call on statutory services;

3.3.4 How and where it is appropriate to increase community participation to inform service strategy, development and delivery.

3.3.5 How we hear the voices of those who are not traditionally heard through council mechanisms to ensure we can tackle inequality.

3.4 It is also anticipated this work will:

3.4.1 Establish clear objectives in terms of the intended relationship between Somerset Council services and community representatives with a focus on communication and collaboration.

3.4.2 Enable us to articulate effectively the space within which this work fits, in particular between ICB and Connect Somerset's work.

3.4.3 Define the language appropriate to the space.

3.4.4 Support the development of engagement activity that meets the needs of Somerset Council services.

3.4.5 Further embed the Building Blocks of Health objectives into the practice and service delivery of Strategic Partnership and wider council working.

4. The review will not:

4.1 Include review of structural or operational arrangements for delivering services in localities, noting that this is part of a wider piece which this review will be cognisant of, and will ultimately feed into.

4.2 Focus on individuals or families; it is about building our relationships with and understanding of the needs and aspirations of communities.

## Appendix vi Definitions and Key Terms

Throughout this report, these terms are used to maintain consistency and clarity. The research recognises that some concepts—particularly 'community', 'engagement', and 'neighbourhood'—carry different meanings for different stakeholders. Discussion on how to handle these differences in definitions is in Section 7.8.

### Organisational Terms

**Parishes** is used in this report to refer generally to a city, parish or town council. A particular group of councils may be referred to where relevant, such as 'town councils'.

**LCN** is the abbreviation for Local Community Networks, Somerset Council's primary neighbourhood governance structure comprising 18 geographic areas.

**PCN** is the abbreviation for Primary Care Networks, NHS neighbourhood structures of which there are 13 in Somerset.

**ICB** is the abbreviation for Integrated Care Board, the statutory NHS organisation responsible for planning and commissioning health services.

**VCFSE** refers to Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise organisations,

which range from big charities to small informal support groups.

**Connect Somerset** is a partnership initiative bringing together community, health, and local authority services to improve services for families and young people.

**Building Blocks of Health** is a framework developed through the Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) programme that sets out the range of things supporting people's health.

**SWAP Audit** refers to an audit commissioned by Somerset Council to provide assurance that LCNs deliver opportunities for community engagement and development between Somerset Council, residents and partners.

### Research Terms

**Participants** are any person who has responded to the survey or communicated with the research team where notes were made on discussion.

**Respondent codes** are used throughout the analysis to attribute findings to specific

stakeholder groups whilst maintaining anonymity: SCO (Somerset Council Officers), SCM (Somerset Council Members), LLO (LCN Link Officers), CTP (City, Town, or Parish Councils), VCF (Voluntary, Community and Faith sector), PBS (Place-Based Stakeholders).

### Analytical Framework

**Issue** - A problem or dysfunction in current practice; something that is not

working well or causing difficulties. Issues describe what is wrong now.

**Need** - A requirement or essential condition for improvement; what must be present or addressed for progress. Needs describe what is missing or required.

**Tension** - A conflict, contradiction, or competing priority; situations where different valid perspectives or requirements pull in opposite directions. Tensions describe friction points requiring careful navigation.

## Core Concepts

**Neighbourhood** – A ‘Neighbourhood’ may be something defined by the Council or a public service with a border. It can also refer to something defined by ordinary people as the place where they live, work, or have a connection to. In a rural context the word ‘neighbourhood’ makes less sense than a ‘village’ or ‘parish’ but is often used in the same way.

**Community Engagement** - The process by which organisations involve ordinary people in shaping what services the organisation delivers and how.

Engagement encompasses a spectrum from being transparent about what the organisation is doing to giving ordinary people the power to make decisions. Different methods of engagement are appropriate to different contexts and suit different people.

**Community Development** - An approach focused on building the skills and confidence of ordinary people to think about what they need and meet those needs together. Community development recognises and builds on existing community strengths (“what’s strong”) rather than focusing primarily on deficits or needs (“what’s wrong”).

**Community-led** – Organisations based in the community and ordinary people have

**Design Challenge** - A question or problem space requiring creative solution; opportunities for intervention framed as “How might we...” Challenges describe areas for co-design.

**Solution** - A proposed action, approach, or intervention; what could be done to address issues, needs, or tensions. Solutions describe potential remedies.

decision-making authority over a budget, activity or service. They will usually be supported by external organisations and public services but those bodies do not set the agenda or have the final say.

**Co-design** - Where people who are affected by or otherwise involved in an issue work together as equal partners to think about how a service, policy, or project should be designed. Co-design involves sharing power and knowledge throughout the design process.

**Co-production** – People who rely on a service or activity and people who are there to support the service or activity work together as partners. This recognises that to get good outcomes any service relies not just on the ‘provider’ but the ‘service user’ as well, so a partnership approach that recognises everyone’s contribution is more effective. Co-production is more than design and means making a service or activity happen.

**Devolution** - The transfer of powers, responsibilities, and resources from central to local government, or from principal authorities to neighbourhood-level bodies such as parishes. Devolution may include statutory powers, budgets, assets, or decision-making authority.

**Double Devolution** - The principle that devolution should extend beyond combined authorities and unitary councils to community level. This is seen as important for giving power to communities but can also carry risks, for example the devolution of playing fields without the resources to look after them.

**Prevention** - Prevention aims to reduce the future need for services by helping people before they even know they need help. For example, giving a budget to a group of older people so they can form a knitting group supports social connections that then reduce the harm caused by loneliness.

**Social Prescribing** – A social prescriber will find out what matters to a person and suggest what might help. This includes suggesting self-help, connecting to friendship networks, or to an activity, support offer or resource in the community. Social prescribers can be professionals or people in a voluntary community role.

**Early Help** - Support provided before crisis or a statutory service involvement becomes necessary. Early help looks to spot identify people who might be at risk or offer an open door for someone worried about an issue in an accessible way. Early help is usually provided in the community.

**Early Intervention** - Targeted support provided at first signs of need or risk, aimed at preventing escalation and improving outcomes. Early intervention still happens before specialist statutory support is needed.

**Preventative Value** - The long-term economic and social benefits achieved through prevention and early intervention, including reduced demand on statutory services, improved outcomes, and enhanced community resilience.

**Asset-based Approaches** - Methods that focus on what is strong in a community - working with community strengths, skills, networks, and resources. This is in contrast to approaches that look at what is 'wrong' first - deficits or problems. Asset-based approaches build on what communities have and in doing this focus on community-led solutions.

**Participatory Practice** - Approaches that actively involve ordinary people in research, evaluation, decision-making, and service design. Participatory practice values people's ordinary life experiences and judgement alongside professional expertise.

**Transformational Leadership** - Leadership approaches focused on inspiring and enabling change across a system, empowering others, and building cultures where people are brought together within and across organisations. This is in contrast to leadership styles that are focussed on managing existing systems and processes.

## Appendix vii Survey questions

The survey was an open link sent through Somerset Council staff networks and to senior staff at the Council. It was disseminated via the Council's communication to parishes and also via SALC. It was disseminated to VCFSE partners by Spark Somerset. It was sent to all those who had been recorded as having attended an LCN meeting. The response rate is therefore unknown.

The survey questions generally worked well. However, a fairly high proportion of respondents did not understand the move through to the appreciative enquiry stage of the questionnaire. The questions around what was successful, unsuccessful, and 'quick-wins' gained most engagement and useful responses.

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**This questionnaire is gathering reflections on this topic from a range of a wide range of different people in Somerset who have experience in community development and engagement. This includes: councillors and staff at Somerset Council, city, parishes; people who work in public services; community groups and social enterprises; and, business owners. ...**

**In this questionnaire community engagement means where Somerset Council has conversations or works together with residents to shape what the Council does. Community development is where Somerset Council supports residents to work together and meet their own needs. Community engagement and development will often involve Somerset Council working alongside other public services, local councils, voluntary organisations, and local enterprises.**

1. Thinking of the last couple of years, has there been an example of Somerset Council successfully engaging with or developing communities?
2. Thinking of the last couple of years, has there been an example of Somerset Council being unsuccessful in engaging with or developing communities?
3. What do you think are the key reasons behind this success, or lack of it?

**Let's imagine it is 5 years from now and Somerset Council is supporting excellent community development and engagement. There are good conversations between the Council, partners, and communities. There is more joint working with communities and supporting the community to meet its own needs. If you thought of an example where the Somerset Council got it right, think of this success happening all the time.**

4. In this positive future, what change has there been to Somerset Council's mechanisms of community development or engagement?
5. Has there been a change to how Somerset Council works overall to make this positive future happen?
6. In this positive future, what has changed in your role and how you work? What needed to stay the same?
7. Do you feel there is something that Somerset Council could do right now to get better community development or engagement (a 'quick win') and, if so, what is it?
8. Have you any other comments on how Somerset Council could or should work with communities?