

Social Needs Assessment For Somerset

1st Edition, 2008



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Foreword

While Somerset appears at first glance to be a prosperous county with a high quality of life, there is clear evidence in this report that there are significant levels of poverty, deprivation and need in local communities, but they are largely hidden.

The overall picture presented by the Government's Indices of Multiple Deprivation is that Somerset has only 14 local areas ("Super Output Areas") within the 20% most deprived areas in England. Most represent deprived areas with 'inner city' characteristics, but this masks the hidden deprivation that is typical of rural areas, where relatively small numbers of disadvantaged households live within generally affluent communities.

There are a wide variety of issues facing people of all ages and backgrounds across the whole county. Some of the major issues are summarised in the table below:

Key Issues	Key Facts
Significant numbers of households on low wages and/or dependent on state benefits or tax credits	One-third of enquiries handled by local Citizen Advice Bureaus are about debt
Education and skill levels amongst adults are below national and regional averages	More than 25% of adults in Somerset have no formal qualifications
An ageing population, with high numbers of older people	33% of men and 51% of women aged over 85 live on their own
Poor access to services in rural areas	13,000 households in rural areas do not have access to a car
A lack of affordable housing	In 2006, average house prices were up to 20 times the average local wage
A disproportionate fear of crime	Crime figures are lower than national averages and dropping, but fear of crime is consistent with national averages

In addition, trends show that there are emerging issues for the county:

- Climate change and an increasing risk of flooding
- Increasing pressures on health services and care provision as the proportion of older people in the county increases
- Increasing levels of debt

Over and above these issues, the impact of a national and global economic downturn has yet to be realised both in terms of its impact upon the most vulnerable sections of the community and also upon the voluntary sector.

The role the voluntary and community sector can play

Local voluntary and community organisations can play a vitally important role in meeting the needs in local communities. They offer a flexible way to deliver support where it is most needed, with a minimum of bureaucracy,

There are hundreds of local charities and voluntary groups working across Somerset, supported by thousands of volunteers.

Local voluntary and community organisations can:

- Have impact beyond their scale
- Reach people whose voices are never heard
- Develop and pilot innovative projects
- Achieve multiple impacts from a single intervention
- Promote active citizenship through volunteering and philanthropy
- Improve the quality of community life
- Be demand-led and responsive to the emerging environment
- Advocate, lobby and influence policy on behalf of vulnerable groups
- Help to meet key local outcomes
- Act as a gateway to local services

Support for the voluntary and community sector

Local organisations in Somerset can use relatively small amounts of money to make a big impact. However, the voluntary and community sector in Somerset is relatively under-funded: if it is to reach its potential, its capacity must be strengthened.

Somerset does not attract large amounts of money from central Government schemes, but the sector needs better and more consistent access to sources of funding – and to non-financial support too.

Private individuals can find it difficult to locate small organisations working in the field in which they are interested; conversely, businesses are often swamped with requests for support so that their response can be, at best, ad hoc.

Smaller community groups are particularly at risk when funding is scarce. The continuing efforts required to raise quite small sums of money becomes demoralising for volunteers who want to focus on helping people in need. Access to a small amount of funding can make a big difference, but these groups often do not know where to find it. In addition, the growing trend away from grants towards contracts for providing services excludes these smaller groups.

The voluntary and community sector needs to promote itself better, to demonstrate more clearly how its work contributes to local strategic priorities, and how local communities benefit. It needs support to increase levels of networking, collaboration and partnership working in the sector.

The role of Community Foundations

Community Foundations combine knowledge of the local voluntary and community sector with simple grant processes to help private donors, companies, trusts and statutory agencies to target grants that make a genuine difference to the lives of local people. They also have a strategic vision for their area which helps to develop and sustain local community organisations.

Community Foundations have the capacity to reach small groups operating in towns and villages. Their applications systems are simple to use and their staff understand the context in which local organisations are working, and they often provide non-financial support and advice to groups. At the same time Community Foundations act as the vital link between donors and local need, connecting donors with causes and communities that they care about and enabling them to achieve far more than they ever could by themselves.

Somerset Community Foundation can target funds at the small groups which hold communities together in the county, and help to identify organisations for which a small grant can make a huge difference

Introduction

Welcome to the first edition of our Social Needs Assessment. We hope you find this helpful in understanding the issues facing Somerset's communities today and how the voluntary sector can help make a difference to improve people's quality of life and enhance community life for all of us.

The aims of this report are:

- To raise the profile of social needs in Somerset
- To guide the Somerset Community Foundation's grant-making
- To help donors and community leaders decide how and where they can make an impact.

This report is divided into 7 major themes, which we believe cover the breadth of issues that Somerset's communities face. This report does not however, attempt to cover all of the challenges and opportunities that Somerset face. For example economic development and biodiversity targets fall largely outside the remit of the Somerset Community Foundation.

Each chapter offers an analysis of the major issues, drawing on the most available statistics and evidence possible. Each year we will update the report with new evidence.

At the end of the chapters is a list of ways that the local voluntary sector can make a difference. Again this is not necessarily a comprehensive list, but it does indicate the diversity of responses that the sector is capable of delivering in response to complex problems, from lobbying for policy change to delivering grassroots services. Only by supporting a range of projects in a coordinated fashion can we really make an impact.

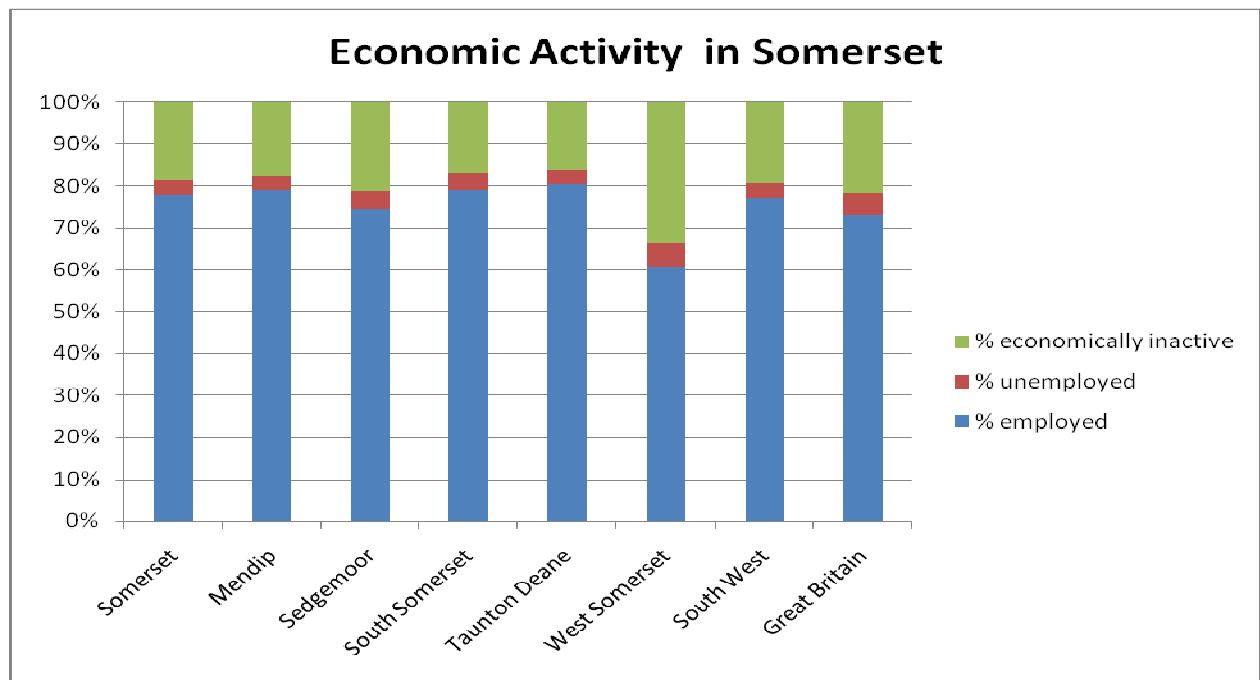
We have deliberately avoided a geographical approach, as this tends to mask the fact that many issues are widespread and affect many people across the county. However we have identified 'hotspots' where we feel this is justified.

Using this report at a platform, we will start to develop deeper analysis of key issues, either at the request of a donor with a specific interest, or because we wish to champion a particular issue ourselves.

INCOME AND POVERTY IN SOMERSET

Despite high levels of employment, Somerset is a low wage county: in 2007 the average weekly wage in Somerset was £487.80, which is £62.00 below the national average of £549.80.

Overall, 78.6% of people of working age are employed in Somerset (ONS Labour Market Survey May 07). This compares well with national and regional averages of 73.9% and 77.5% respectively. There are relatively small numbers of people defined as economically inactive: students, claimants of incapacity benefits, carers and those who have taken early retirement.



This healthy picture is somewhat undermined by the proportions of people working in low wage sectors of the economy. 21.8% of employed people in Somerset work in the least skilled occupations, compared with a national proportion of 18.7%. Only 12.5% are managers and senior officials, compared with a national average of 15%.

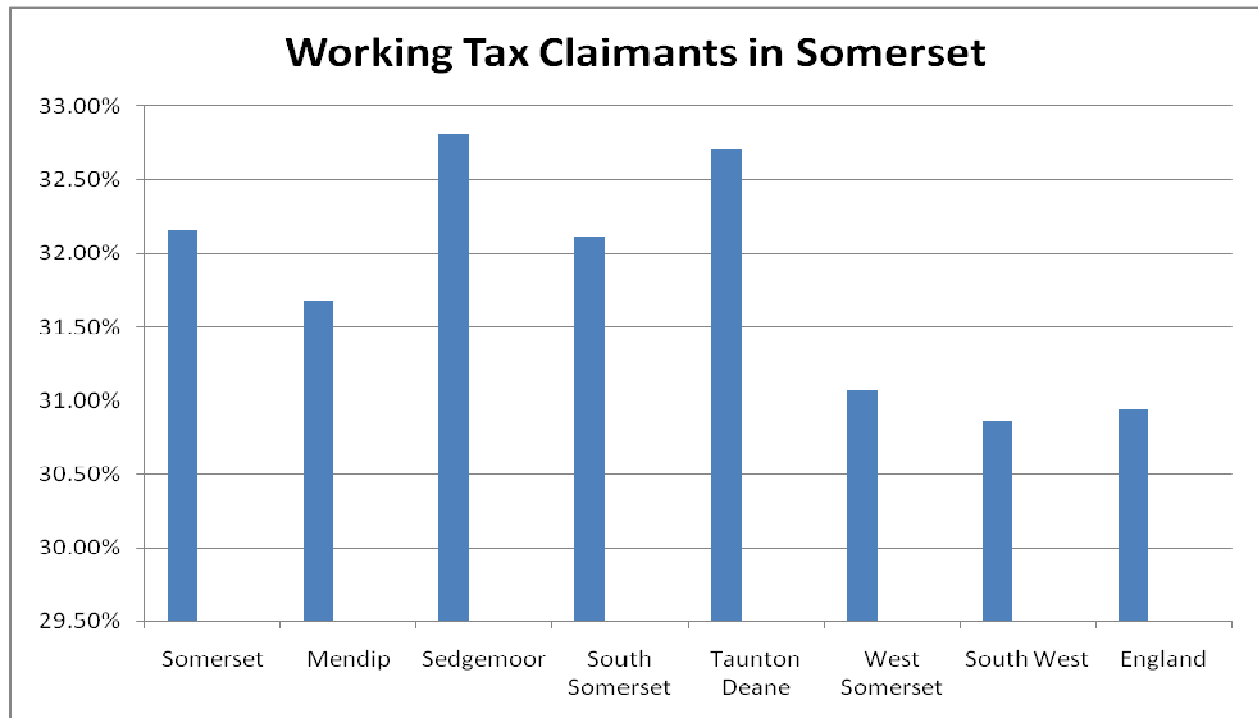
“When you live here and get into debt it’s the price you pay for living rurally and much lower wages... I would much rather stay here but have to accept the money I earn is low. There is much less choice of jobs – we both work in the hospitality trade because there isn’t much else unless we want to drive a long distance out of the village.”

Family of five, Somerset Voices

Very nearly one third of all households in Somerset that are headed by people of working age are claiming tax credit.

As a consequence of low wages, significant numbers of people are claiming Working Tax Credit (WTC) WTC is paid to working people on low wages. It can take account whether a member of the family is disabled, and some childcare costs. In total, 48,900 families in

Somerset are claiming tax credits (HMRC December 2007): this represents approximately a third of all eligible families in the county, and means that 81,600 children in Somerset are growing up in families claiming tax credits. The graph below shows the proportion of claimants by district in comparison with the national and regional averages.



The Government acknowledges that only approximately 75% of eligible families are claiming WTC, based on figures for 2002-03. In Somerset this may well be an underestimate, not only because the take-up of benefits is generally lower in rural areas, but also because of the higher than average number of people who are self-employed. While people who are self-employed are not prevented from claiming WTC, it is generally accepted that the process is more complicated.

11.1% of people of working age are self-employed in Somerset, compared with a national average of 8%.

High levels of self-employment in rural areas do not necessarily indicate an entrepreneurial and thriving community. Although self-employment can be a life-style choice, for many people in rural areas it has become a necessary option. Not only do many people have to travel significant distances to find employment, but wages are also low. Self-employment brings with it considerable uncertainty of income.

A quarter of all pensioners in Somerset are claiming pension credit.

There are 27,760 claimants of pension credit in Somerset, according to Department for Work and Pensions figures for May 2007. This is another benefit which is widely recognised as being under-claimed. Despite the significant numbers of people who have chosen to retire to Somerset, it is clear that many elderly people are living on very low incomes.

Advice services provide assistance every year to around 1 in every 10 Somerset families.

To help ensure that people on low wages secure the support available to lift them out of poverty, it is important that they have access to a good network of advice services. Somerset has a Citizens' Advice Bureau in Mendip, Sedgemoor, South Somerset and Taunton Deane, and an independent advice service in West Somerset. All of them are fully accredited. A number of these agencies offer outreach services to smaller towns within their catchment areas, a mobile facility to reach villages, and advice sessions at GP surgeries.

Around a third of all enquiries dealt with by Somerset's advice agencies are about debt.

People living on low wages are vulnerable to even small fluctuations in either their income or expenditure, and can easily find debts getting out of control. In rural parts of the county a car is essential to get to work:

"If you are in a rural area you have to have a car as public transport is just not available... You are always going to have a car that is going to break down as you can't afford anything new."

Single mum with two daughters and a 15 year-old Skoda, Somerset Voices

Many families struggle to find the £30 to £40 a week it costs to keep a vehicle on the road, whereas in urban areas families in debt may decide they can manage without a car. This situation is exacerbated by recent increases in fuel prices.

Advice agencies bring £14.5M a year into Somerset.

The success of advice services in helping people secure their entitlement to benefits and tax credits makes a significant contribution to the local economy, as well as illustrating the extent to which people miss out on benefits to which they are entitled.

People living in rural areas are less likely to claim their benefits than those in urban areas. An advice service operated by Mendip CAB in GP surgeries is on target to bring in £500,000 in successful new benefit claims in 2007-08, with the staffing equivalent of just one full-time post.

Fuel Poverty is affecting ever increasing numbers of Somerset residents.

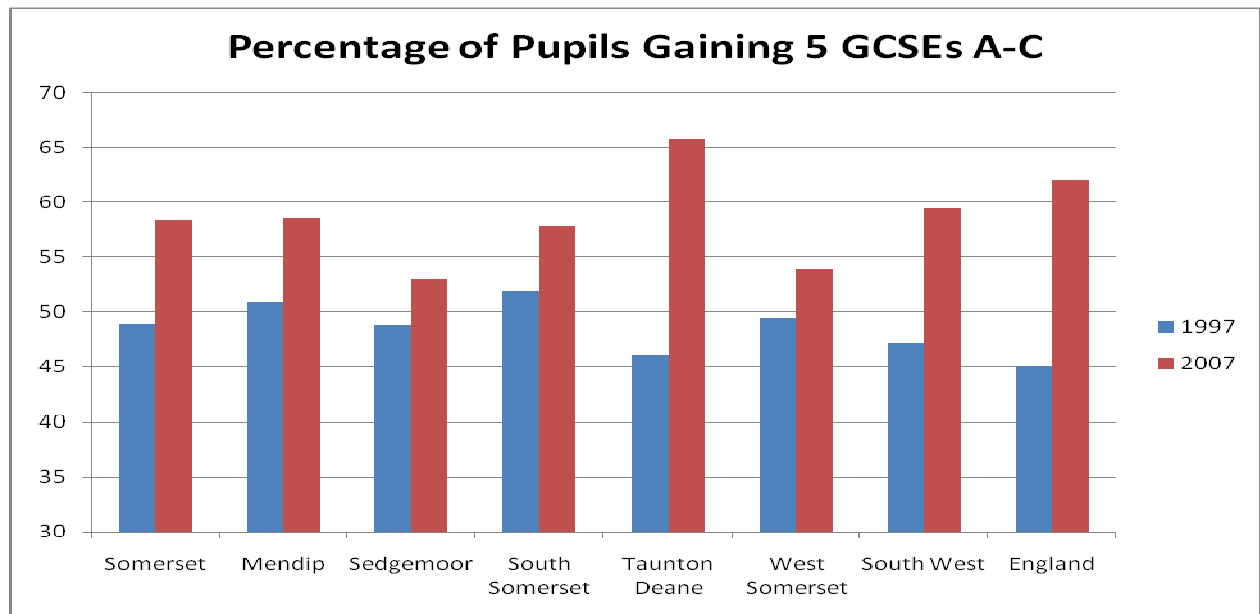
Households having to spend 10% or more of their income on energy bills are deemed to be suffering fuel poverty. Recent rises in energy bills have raised concerns that up to a quarter of the population could be classed as fuel poor in the 2008/09 winter.

The role that voluntary and community groups can play

- Citizens' Advice and other independent advice agencies can help people to secure their entitlement to state benefits, tax credits and other financial support such as 'Warmfront Grants'.
- Credit unions can help people avoid loan sharks and the debt spiral through offering low-cost loans and encouraging good saving habits
- Local development trusts can support self-employed people through a mix of business start-up advice and small 'incubation' units
- Social enterprises can create local jobs in areas where these are scarce
- Charities and small community groups can offer volunteering opportunities which may lead to employment
- Specialist debt advice services can help people negotiate with their creditors and manage their money more effectively
- Money management projects can promote financial literacy so that people can manage better on low incomes

EDUCATION AND SKILLS FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS IN SOMERSET

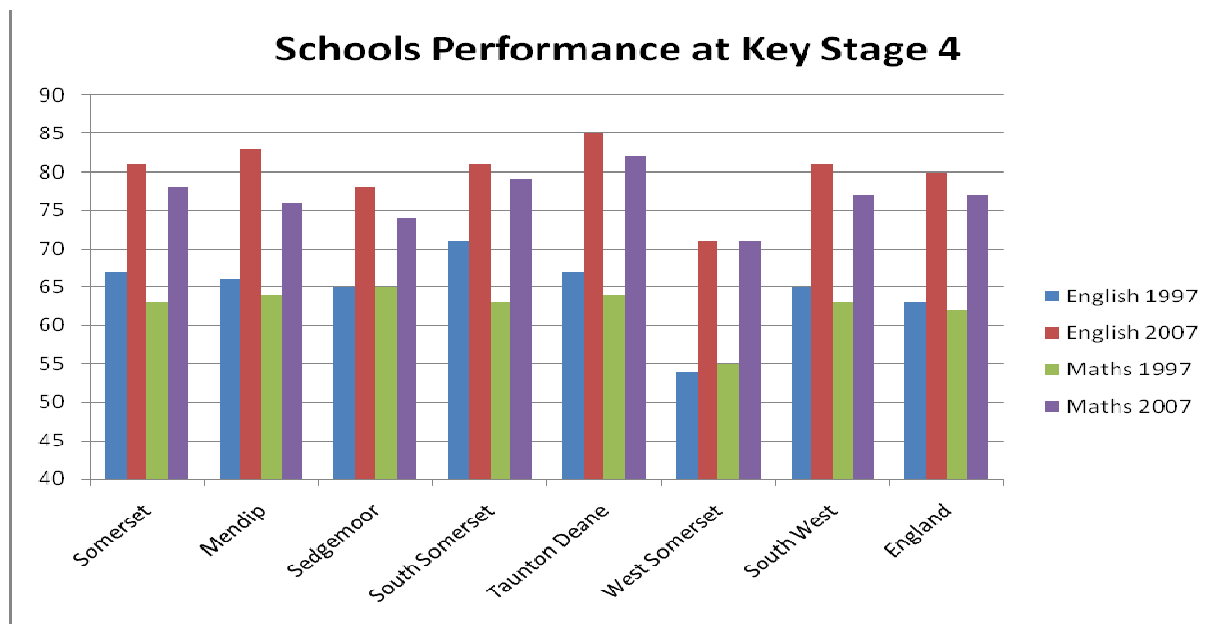
With the exception of some individual schools overall GCSE attainment rates in Somerset were below the regional and national averages in 2007, most notably in Sedgemoor and West Somerset.



“All the travelling they have to do [to secondary school] makes it difficult for the children to achieve a reasonable academic standard.”

91 year-old great-grandmother, Somerset Voices

Performance at Key Stage 4 (Age 11) tests for English and Maths is similar, with the county performing very close to the national and regional average. The results for West Somerset are poor, although they represent an improvement on the position in 1997



“The travelling was nearly killing her, two changes and hours a day spent on the bus, loads of homework when she finally arrived home, she was really going backwards.”

Single mother of three, Somerset Voices

Many pupils stay in education and training beyond 16, but there is a tendency for young people to drop out of training at 17.

At 4.8%, the proportion of young people (16-19) who disengage from employment and education is well below the national and regional averages. However, there is evidence that young people are dropping out of training at 17. The Learning and Skills Council, in their review of demand and supply for learning in the county in 2004, suggests that this may be the product of the low skills and low wage economy which allows young people without qualifications to find work. The same report highlights particular concerns:

- 72.4% of 19 year olds who have left care are not in employment, education or training
- Some young people in rural areas find it virtually impossible to attend training because of the inadequate public transport service
- The seasonal fluctuation in the rate of unemployment among young people in West Somerset suggests that they want to work, but there are simply no jobs available in the winter months

Somerset has a lower population of graduates than the rest of the country.

Only 24.1% of the population in Somerset is qualified to degree level or above, compared with 27.4% of the population of Great Britain. The lower proportion of graduates in Somerset is a matter for concern, given the increasing emphasis on developing high skill jobs within the UK economy.

Approximately four out of every five young people who leave Somerset to go to university do not return to the county.

While the reasons why so few young people return to Somerset after they graduate are unknown, low wages and high housing costs must be contributing factors as the level of student debt rises. On average students on a three year course now graduate with a debt of £17,500.

The prospect of debt may also act as a disincentive to young people from Somerset considering going to university. Somerset does not have a university and its colleges only offer a limited number of degree level courses, so the option of living at home as a university student in order to reduce borrowing is not open to young people in the county.

More than a quarter of Somerset residents aged 16 - 74 have no qualifications at all.

2001 census data shows that 27.6% of those aged 16 – 74 in Somerset had no qualifications: this reflects the large numbers of people employed in what have traditionally been low-skilled sectors of the economy. The Department for Education and Skills' "Skills for Life Survey" in 2003 found that in Somerset, 65% of the population did not achieve level 2 in literacy skills – 10% more than the average for England as a whole. 75% of Somerset residents did not achieve level 2 in numeracy skills, which is comparable with figures for England.

Many employees in Somerset have limited access to skills development opportunities.

Somerset's economy is dominated by small and medium enterprises: 84% of businesses in the county employ fewer than ten people. National research shows that few small businesses have training budgets or training and development strategies.

Youth services in Somerset are recognised as being of a high standard, but there is evidence that they do not reach some of the most vulnerable young people.

Somerset Youth Service was described as "outstanding" in a recent Ofsted review, and it has a history of working well with the voluntary youth sector. Working with voluntary sector organisations, it has a good track record of reaching young people in the county.

However, youth services still struggle to reach isolated young people. A survey of 'looked after' young people found that they were particularly isolated as they are frequently moved away from networks of friends. Young disabled people also face particular problems mixing socially unless their family are able to transport them to activities, as transport is not provided for the majority of activities for young people.

Unstructured play is recognised as an important element in a child's development, but fewer children in Somerset now have the opportunity to do so.

A recent survey by Play England revealed that only 2 in 10 children regularly played outside in the streets and spaces where they lived. This compared with the 7 in 10 adults surveyed who recalled that they played out as children on a daily basis. More traffic, less open space,

real and perceived dangers from crime, changes in family life and new patterns of work are all causes. As a consequence, children and young people suffer increasing obesity, anti-social behaviour and mental health problems.

Recent research by Somerset Play Partnership found that 75% of respondents do not believe that children get enough opportunity to engage in risky play.

While parents were largely considered to be responsible for the problems children face in engaging in risky play, fear of litigation leads Local Authorities and Parish Councils which own play areas to try to minimise risk. This leads to designs for play areas which are bland and unexciting and which consequently are not well-used, particularly by older children who have greater choice over where they play.

“Children need and want to take risks when they play. Play provision aims to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities. In doing this play provision aims to manage the level of risk so that children are not exposed to the unacceptable risks of death or serious injury”.

Taunton Deane Play Partnership

Good practice now encourages both children and adults to be involved in the design of play areas in order to create an attractive facility.

The quality of much outdoor play provision in Somerset is no better than fair.

All the District Councils in Somerset have recently prepared a play strategy which includes an audit of play provision in their area. Overall the surveys have found that the extent of play provision in the county is reasonable, but the majority of sites were described as ‘fair’ or ‘average’ with an absence of natural features such as trees and streams, and the elimination of risk.

The role that voluntary and community groups can play

- Wheels to Work schemes can help young people in rural areas to take up a job or attend training
- Voluntary youth groups can engage some of the most disaffected young people in a mix of positive activities which will, over time, lead to accreditation
- Locally-based community organisations can help those with poor literacy and numeracy to re-engage with learning and build their skills, through providing informal learning opportunities in familiar, non-threatening surroundings
- After-school and holiday playschemes, and adventure playgrounds, can provide children with more opportunities for adventurous play
- Mobile play facilities can take creative and exciting play opportunities into small rural communities which lack such facilities
- Volunteering opportunities can support individuals to build their confidence and their communication and team-working skills, which help with employability

- Specific courses designed for people who have particular needs, such as IT for older people or practical English for migrant workers, can help them gain skills for employment and for life
- Specialist support to children with special needs and for young people who have been in care

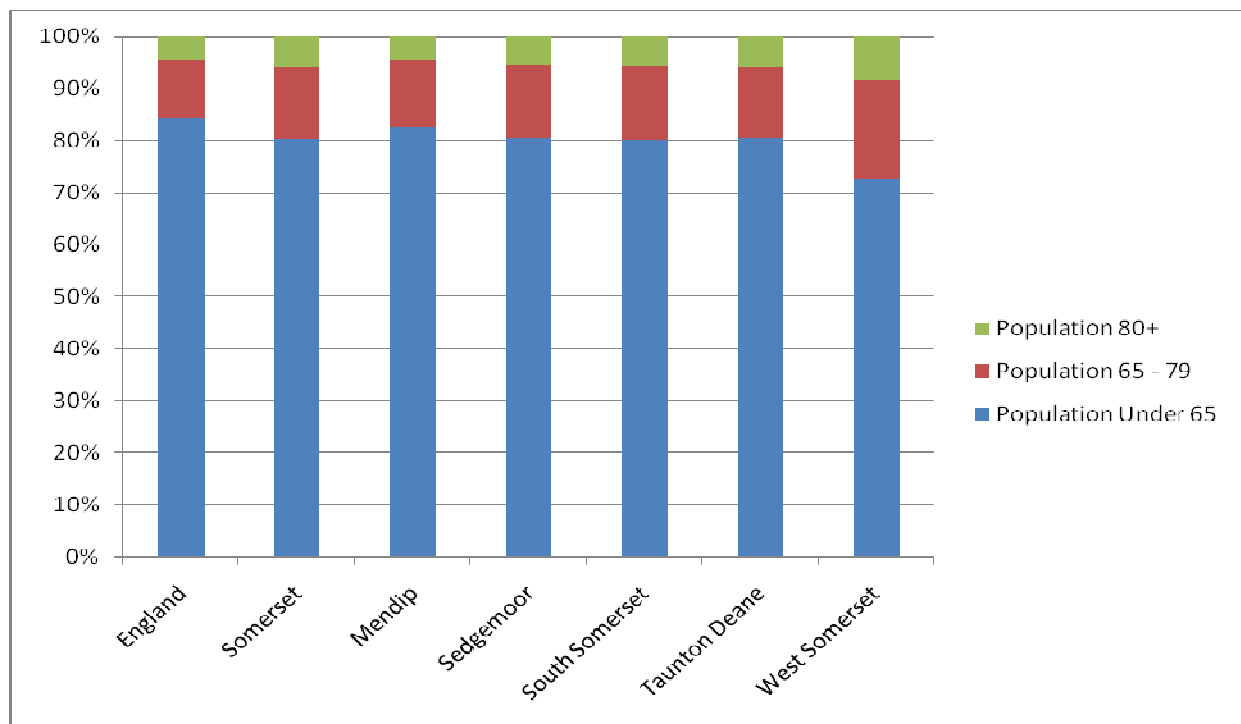
HEALTH IN SOMERSET

The people of Somerset are generally healthy and have greater than average life expectancy, with women continuing to live longer than men.

People born in Somerset in 1998/2000 are expected to live to 77 (male) and 81 (female) years of age. Average life expectancy in rural areas tends to be higher than urban areas. For example life expectancy across the whole of Sedgemoor is 79.9 years, but only 75.7 years in Bridgwater.

Very nearly one person in every five residents of Somerset is over 65 years old, and this proportion is set to increase in years to come.

These figures have two important consequences: a significantly larger population of older people, and substantial numbers of people living with limiting long-term illnesses.



The proportion of older people in Somerset is set to rise steadily in coming years. Not only is there a general rise in the age of the UK population as people live longer, but in Somerset there is a net migration of older people as they relocate to the county on retirement. The balance of the population will also be tipped by younger people leaving the county to attend university and seek better paid employment.

- 28% of all households are pensioner households across the county. The national average is 23%
- Somerset's population of those aged over 85 is expected to rise by over 15,000 people by 2028
- 33% of men and 51% of women aged over 85 in Somerset live on their own

There is a long-term trend of rising demands for domiciliary and residential care services. It is estimated that by 2031 the cost of providing care for elderly people in will increase by 148% compared with expenditure in 1996.

Although the cost of providing care to elderly people is projected to rise sharply, the planning assumption is that a greater proportion of the cost will fall upon individuals rather than the public purse. This could leave many elderly people struggling to cope, particularly considering that already more than a quarter of pensioners in Somerset are claiming pension tax credit.

Many older people living on fixed incomes struggle to maintain their homes.

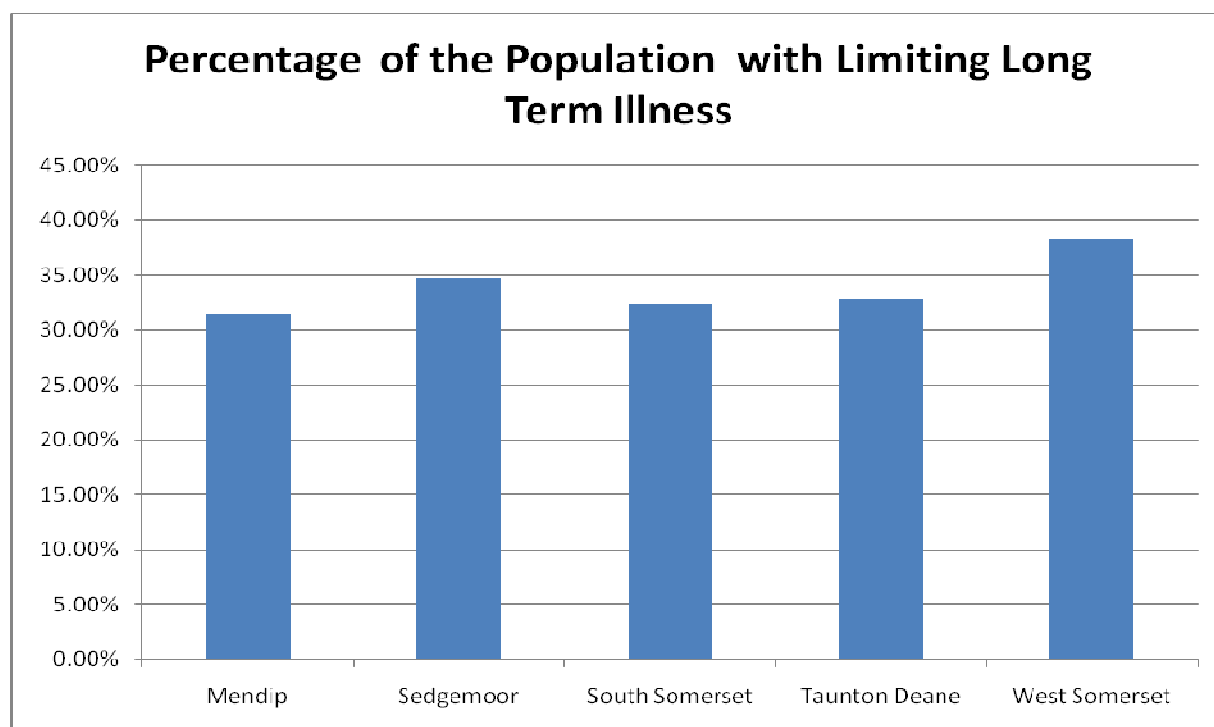
As people become less physically active, their ability to care for their own homes and gardens declines. Even small jobs can be beyond them, yet many older people are fearful that they will be exploited by unscrupulous workmen.

“Many [older] people feel that they would not need to move into care if they could get repairs and adaptation work to their homes completed... [They] welcome care and repair services for privately owned homes and reliable handyman services.”

‘Excluded Older People’, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2005

33% of households in Somerset have one or more person with a limiting long-term illness.

The other consequence of increased longevity is that rising numbers are living with a limiting long-term illness, health problems, or disability which limits their daily activities or the work they can do.



The proportion of households claiming Disability Living Allowance is higher in the urban wards of Somerset compared with the claims from rural wards. However it is not possible to establish whether this reflects the incidence of eligibility, or awareness of the availability of benefits.

According to the 2001 census, there are over 50,000 unpaid carers in Somerset although only around 6,000 receive Carers Allowance.

Ill health impacts on the whole family, as partners, parents and children take on caring roles. This represents 10.1% of the population, around the national average. Around 30% of carers provide 20 hours or more of care a week. In a recent survey by Somerset Community Council, the demands of caring for family and others was found to be second highest cause of stress among women.

Census data also revealed that there are around 950 young carers in the county.

Coronary heart disease is the largest cause of death in Somerset.

The rate of death from coronary heart disease among those aged 65 – 74 in Somerset is greater than that for the whole of the South West. West Somerset has a significantly lower rate of deaths from coronary heart disease in the 65 – 74 age group.

Within the South West, rates for some cancers, notably malignant melanoma and prostate cancer, are significantly above those for the rest of England, although the actual numbers are quite low. This is also the case in Somerset specifically.

Throughout the region, access to health care is limited, reflecting the rural nature of the South West.

The NHS hospitals in the county will not provide transport for patients attending appointments unless there is a medical reason. However, the County Council Community Services Directorate operates a volunteer driver scheme to help residents attend social care services.

"I don't go to the doctor's unless one of us is seriously ill. They are in the town and there is all the bother of getting there and back... I have to walk over two miles there and back with a sick child and maybe in the rain."

Mother with a large family and no transport, Somerset Voices

The Community Transport Services which operate within Somerset, including some Dial-a-Ride Services, often find themselves having to fill the gap in transporting elderly and disabled people who do not qualify on health grounds to medical appointments.

More than one in three people in Somerset suffer psychological distress.

An NHS-funded study looking at mental health in Somerset in 2001 found that the prevalence of psychiatric morbidity in Somerset is higher than would be expected from the national studies. It also found that only 1 in 5 of those surveyed who showed symptoms of psychological distress had consulted their GP. The survey confirmed that there is still

significant stigma towards mental health problems and that this acts as a barrier to seeking help.

The number of suicides and undetermined injuries in Somerset is higher than the regional average.

The Commission for Rural Communities notes that the high suicide rate among young men in rural communities is an indicator of stress. Although not all suicides in Somerset are in rural areas, rural isolation can be a contributory factor.

The problems which have affected farming over the last ten years have resulted in mental health problems:

"I think there is a lot of 'quiet stress' in farming now with all the difficulties we have faced over the last ten years... the mental health problems of farmers are to a large extent masked by their need for independence."

Somerset Voices

The role that voluntary and community groups can play

- Carer support schemes can provide respite for carers (including young carers) and reduce the stress and isolation that many of them experience
- Community transport, dial-a-ride and car share schemes can enable people to access health services more easily
- Self-help groups can support people with mental health problems or specific medical conditions
- University of the Third Age (U3A) groups can help older people to remain active, through providing learning opportunities and friendship
- Voluntary counselling services can support people contemplating suicide or through other crises
- Healthy living projects can help people adopt better diets and eat less expensively and/or promote physical exercise

ACCESS TO SERVICES IN SOMERSET

Somerset has a low population density (1.44 persons per hectare) and much of the county can be characterised as rural.

The problems faced by rural communities are increasingly well documented.

Rural policy, and studies of factors creating deprivation, includes issues of isolation and access to services. Access factors include the location of food shops, post offices, GP surgeries, primary schools and petrol stations. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2007 identified that access to services was a particular issue for many communities in Somerset and across the South West. The majority of the county has low levels of access to services.

Key services are vital to sustaining the quality of life in rural areas. The Rural Advocate, in his Report of 2007, discussed the importance of access to key services, particularly for people in rural areas. He commented that people were concerned about:

- the physical loss of key services
- the contributions that local services make to the vitality and sense of community in rural areas, for example as meeting places:

In a rural county like Somerset, the majority of residents are heavily dependent on a car to get around: over 60% of all journeys for work are made by car.

- 60.1% of journeys to work are made by someone driving a car or van, and a further 6% as a passenger
- 17.1% of journeys are on foot or by bicycle
- Only 2.5% of journeys are made by bus or train

The apparent difficulties in travelling to work are also probably reflected in the fact that 12.2% of Somerset residents, according to the 2001 census, work from home. There is a particular impact on young people in rural areas who cannot get a job without access to a motor vehicle but cannot afford a vehicle until they have a job.

Despite the dominance of transport by the car, 17.6% of households in Somerset do not have access to one. Around half of these are households with dependent children.

	Somerset	Mendip	Sedgemoor	South Somerset	Taunton Deane	West Somerset
% of households without a car	17.6	16.5	18.7	16	19.2	19.2

In rural areas the proportion of families without a car is lower than urban areas reflecting the vital importance of private transport for people in rural areas. However as average wages tend to be lower in rural areas, this can have a major impact upon households budgets.

There are over 300 village halls in Somerset that play a vital role in community life.

74% of villages in rural Somerset had a village hall in 2000. Village halls provide a focus for community activity as well as offering a wide range of services and events. For villages with no shop or school, the village hall is usually the sole focus of community activity and saves residents from driving to neighbouring towns for activity and entertainment. A number need capital investment for refurbishment or replacement: research shows that after such work, bookings and income increase significantly and result in greater sustainability.

All village halls are run by voluntary management committees, who need to keep up-to-date with the complex regulatory requirements for community buildings. The Rural Community Council for Somerset employs a Village Halls Advisor to support them.

In 2000, the majority of Somerset's rural parishes were without a Post Office, a Primary School, a youth group, a food shop, a doctor's surgery, a petrol station, and a cash point.

The last consistent and authoritative data about the extent of rural services in Somerset is the Rural Services Survey 2000. This gives information about the percentage of rural households within particular distances of a defined set of key services. This data focuses only on rural parishes: comparable data about the urban areas in Somerset is not available.

The survey shows that in Somerset in 2000:

- 97% of parishes had no cashpoint
- 86% of parishes had no petrol station
- 84% of parishes had no doctor's surgery
- 75% of parishes had no food shop
- 57% of parishes had no primary school
- 54% of parishes had no Post Office
- 28% of parishes had no pub
- 26% of parishes had no village hall
-

This situation for rural parishes has undoubtedly deteriorated over the last eight years.

At least 30 Post Office branches in Somerset are under threat of closure.

Only seven of these are to be replaced by outreach services. Two of the threatened branches (Bicknoller and Bradford-on-Tone) are joint community shops and Post Offices that have had funding under ViRSA (the Villages Retail Services Association) and investment from their local communities.

The report of the Rural Advocate 2007 describes how concern about the erosion of key services has been dominated by fears of the future of local Post Offices.

"It is really important for me and others to be able to go to the Post Office. It is such an important source of help in rural areas".

Single mum aged 41, Somerset Voices

The number of village shops in Somerset is declining.

Anecdotally, village shop numbers have decreased over the past four to five years. There is evidence that shop closures will further increase with Post Office closures, because of the financial inter-dependency between Post Office and shop. Home deliveries from supermarkets are also impacting on local shop viability, although perhaps to a lesser degree.

The loss of the community Post Office or shop impacts disproportionately on older members of rural communities, those with young children and those without easy use of a car. Even where home delivery is available, the social aspect is not there.

Village pubs in Somerset are closing.

Pubs can often provide village meeting places. However, CAMRA (the Campaign for Real Ale) has said that 57 pubs nationally are forced to close every month as the price differential between pubs and supermarkets widens. Village pubs nationally are closing at the rate of four per week, according to a recent programme on Radio 4. In Somerset, there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence about the loss of village pubs which results in a further loss of opportunities for informal socialising and meeting places for people in rural communities.

The closure of village primary schools threatens the fragile interdependence of facilities in rural communities in Somerset.

It is difficult to assess the actual numbers of school closures in the county since 2000: while new schools have been built in a number of locations, this has often been in order to merge two village schools onto a new site in a different village. The loss of the local school can threaten other services, such as the playgroup in the village hall and consequently the village hall itself, and local shops, as parents will use the services, playgroups and shops in the village in which the school is located. There can also be a less tangible loss of social capital in rural communities, as children are more dispersed and so less able to play locally with their school friends.

"I think that it is a very important aspect of a village to have a good and active Primary School. If the children are going to grow up with any identity of the village you have got to start them off in the Primary School, getting other community organisations and the church involved as well."

School governor, Somerset Voices

The small number of cash points in villages seems to have declined further since 2000.

There is anecdotal evidence that the small number of cash points has declined further since 2000, as more people use supermarkets with cash points and cash back facilities. This practice creates financial exclusion for those without their own transport who find it increasingly difficult to get to supermarkets and larger retail centres. In addition, the conditions of Post Office closures do not allow the introduction, within a year, of Post Office services which were not in place before the closure (it impacts adversely on the Post Master's compensation payment if this rule is broken). This includes ATMs, Pay Points, and selling stamps in the shop.

Young people in rural areas in Somerset face particular problems in accessing opportunities.

Young people in rural areas have to travel long distances to secondary school. This not only gives them a long working day, but can also affect their ability to attend after-school activities:

"I don't really like going to Minehead [to Secondary School] – it is such a long bus journey. I find it hard... to be able to stay to anything after school as both mum and dad work and don't finish till after 5.30."

15 year-old, Somerset Voices

Although activities for children and young people were identified in the top three most important priorities for improvement in the Quality of Life Survey 2006, 65% of parishes did not have a youth group in 2000.

The role that voluntary and community groups can play

- Community-run village shops, post offices and pubs, run as social enterprises, can continue to provide access to vital services for local people
- Village halls, as well as their established role in supporting village activities and life, can be a focal point for the local delivery of services, including GP surgery sessions, advice outreach sessions, and post office sessions
- Pre-school groups in rural areas can enable young children to play and learn together in a stimulating environment and give isolated parents the opportunity for mutual support
- Community transport and dial-a-ride schemes can enable people in rural areas to get the services they need
- Village car schemes can help people on low incomes who cannot afford to run a car, and also benefit the environment
- Parish plans can bring communities together to develop facilities that meet local needs: statistics from May 2006 show that plans had been produced by 40 Somerset villages, with a further 12 in process and 15 planned for the following year
- Voluntary groups based in market towns can provide access to services through running outreach sessions in neighbouring villages

HOUSING IN SOMERSET

The South West is the most unaffordable place in the UK to buy a home.

The housing problem in the South West is often described as a “housing time bomb”. House prices are 4% higher than the national average, while average earnings are 12% below. A recently published Hometrack report states that 40% of young workers in the South West are unable to afford to buy a house, compared with a national average of 28%.

The economic health of Somerset requires lower and middle income earners to be able to find affordable homes, so that there is a balanced workforce for the county. The needs of Somerset’s ageing population also place a range of demands on the five District Housing Authorities, particularly in West Somerset.

By the end of 2006, average house prices in Somerset were 8.1 times the average wage. Across England as whole the ratio is 6.9.

	Average house price Dec 06	Increase over 12 months	Affordability ratio (price/wages)
England and Wales	£207,573	9%	6.9
South West	£216,999	9%	8.0
Somerset	£208,863	12%	8.1
Mendip	£205,099	3%	7.5
Sedgemoor	£201,334	15%	7.8
South Somerset	£210,029	12%	8.7
Taunton Deane	£205,374	1%	7.9
West Somerset	£223,361	3%	8.3

The highest house prices in the county are in West Somerset. In many parts of the district house prices are more than 10 times the average wage, and in some parishes are more than 20 times the average wage. 50% of the population lives in the 5% most deprived areas for housing in the country.

House prices continued to rise through much of 2007 but during 2008 there has been a well documented slow down in the housing market and falling prices although there were signs of a slow-down by the end of the year. However the general shortage of housing is expected to prevent any dramatic fall in house prices. Even if the affordability ratio were to decline, the tightening of credit for high risk borrowers is unlikely to put many people on low wages in a position to buy a house

“The chance of buying is so remote now – the prices are so high it doesn’t give someone in my position or youngsters wanting to buy a chance. You get the people from towns or London coming in and they have sold their properties there for astronomical prices and they come down here and they are prepared to pay high prices, forcing them up out of reach of local people.”

Divorcee living with her elderly father, Somerset Voices

The Office of National Statistics predicts a high level of household growth for Somerset over the next 20 years (to 2026).

The Department for Communities and Local Government projections for Somerset suggest that by 2026, South Somerset alone will need to accommodate 19,000 more households.

The figures below demonstrate the levels of housing need in Somerset: figures are drawn from local housing strategies.

<u>District</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Applicants looking for social housing</u>
West Somerset	2005	1276
W Somerset	2000	901
Mendip	2003	2,233
South Somerset	2004	3,500
Taunton Deane	2005	2,343
Sedgemoor	2002	1,863

These figures are a reflection of housing needs in each district. They do not reflect the levels of actual homelessness: considerable research shows that many homeless people do not approach the Local Authorities for a wide range of reasons.

The large number of second homes in some parts of Somerset place greater stress on both affordability and housing demand.

There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence nationally which shows how second home ownership makes housing less and less affordable for local people. In West Somerset, 6.3% of the total housing stock is second homes. This is 14th in the national league table of second home ownership. In some villages on Exmoor, the rate is as high as 20%.

Affordable housing is both a strategic issue for Local Authorities, and a local issue for residents in Somerset. The majority of interviewees in the Somerset Voices report in 2003 saw it as a “crucial matter that needs to be addressed”, particularly to ensure local sustainability. With the loss of social housing stock through the Right to Buy scheme, there is a real concern about the lack of affordability for local young people and young families

who are likely to be earning low, local, wages. In Taunton Deane alone, approximately 4000 homes have been sold since 1979 through the Right to Buy scheme.

“There is definitely a lack of the old style council house – I think it was a mistake selling those off without replacing them... The thing is that houses for first time buyers if they can afford them are just so small for such a high price they are just not big enough to bring a family up in.”

Mother of four living in tied accommodation, Somerset Voices

Affordable housing for local people is seen as making an important contribution to the local infrastructure because residents are more likely to use local shops and other community-based services. There are provisions in the Local Government Act 2003 for levying up to 90% of the full tax rate on second homes. This has been widely adopted across Somerset, and the additional revenues are used to fund a range of schemes, both housing and non-housing.

The overall amount of private rented sector housing stock in Somerset is low, and a significant proportion of it is of a low standard.

8% of Somerset’s housing stock is available for private rent, with a further 6% rented by social landlords such as housing associations.

The data about housing conditions is collected on a district basis, and different methodologies are used. A review of recent District Housing Strategies and House Condition Surveys shows that:

- 13.1% of private housing stock in Mendip was in a state of disrepair
- Only 61% of the privately rented housing in Mendip had central heating
- 8.1% of private rented sector housing in Sedgemoor was in serious disrepair

Anecdotal data details how people who live in private rented sector housing tend to be those on low incomes, elderly indigenous residents, and young local people who are unable to afford to buy their own homes. Unfit housing is often cold, draughty and damp, and so poses particular challenges for older people:

- 21% of unfit housing in West Somerset is occupied by households aged 60+ on low incomes
- 20% of the unfit housing in South Somerset is occupied by households aged over 74
- 70% of households in South Somerset occupied by people over 60 need immediate improvements to their homes
- 37.8% of vulnerable households in Taunton Deane live in accommodation that does not meet the decent homes standard

The role that voluntary and community groups can play

- Volunteer-led schemes can help older people to live independently in their own homes for longer, through carrying out basic house and garden maintenance
- Housing advice projects can help people to put pressure on landlords to carry out repairs and maintain properties in good condition
- Housing associations can build more housing for rent and operate shared ownership schemes
- Self-build projects can help local people in housing need to build their own properties
- Housing surveys and consultations organised by local voluntary organisations can bring local voices into policy and strategy

THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT IN SOMERSET

Somerset enjoys a high quality environment: maintaining that quality is important to local people and to visitors, but the challenge will be to manage the tension between the benefits of preserving the natural and built environment and meeting some of the needs and demands of its residents.

Somerset's countryside includes three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and part of a National Park. Its built environment is no less beautiful, and includes 523 Scheduled Ancient Monuments and 11,500 buildings of special architectural or historic interest.

Among residents' main priorities for improvement are roads and pavements, better public transport, and more affordable decent housing. The likely effect of better roads and more frequent public transport will be an increase in traffic. Traffic in the South West is already rising faster than the national average and the Department of Transport predicts that this will continue: this will result in detrimental effects on air quality and road congestion. Housing development can be a contentious issue at local level: people understand the need for more decent affordable housing, but are rarely content for it to happen in their locality.

"My parents wanted to retire and we wanted to build a house in the paddock here. The biggest objector was the church because it was next door to the vicarage... They said there would be too many cars coming out [of] the road and it would add to the traffic at the junction."

Farmer's wife, Somerset Voices

20% of Somerset residents feel that their neighbourhood has got worse over the last two years.

Although 64% felt their neighbourhood had not changed much, more felt it had got worse (20%) than better (7%). Anti-social behaviour, fear of crime (rather than actual crime levels) litter, dog excrement and street cleaning are key factors that affect people's perceptions. 45% of Somerset residents are very satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live: those with a rural lifestyle and the over 65 year-olds were slightly more satisfied on average.

Local initiatives which increase community pride through involving residents in keeping streets and open spaces clean and attractive can make a big difference to how people feel about where they live.

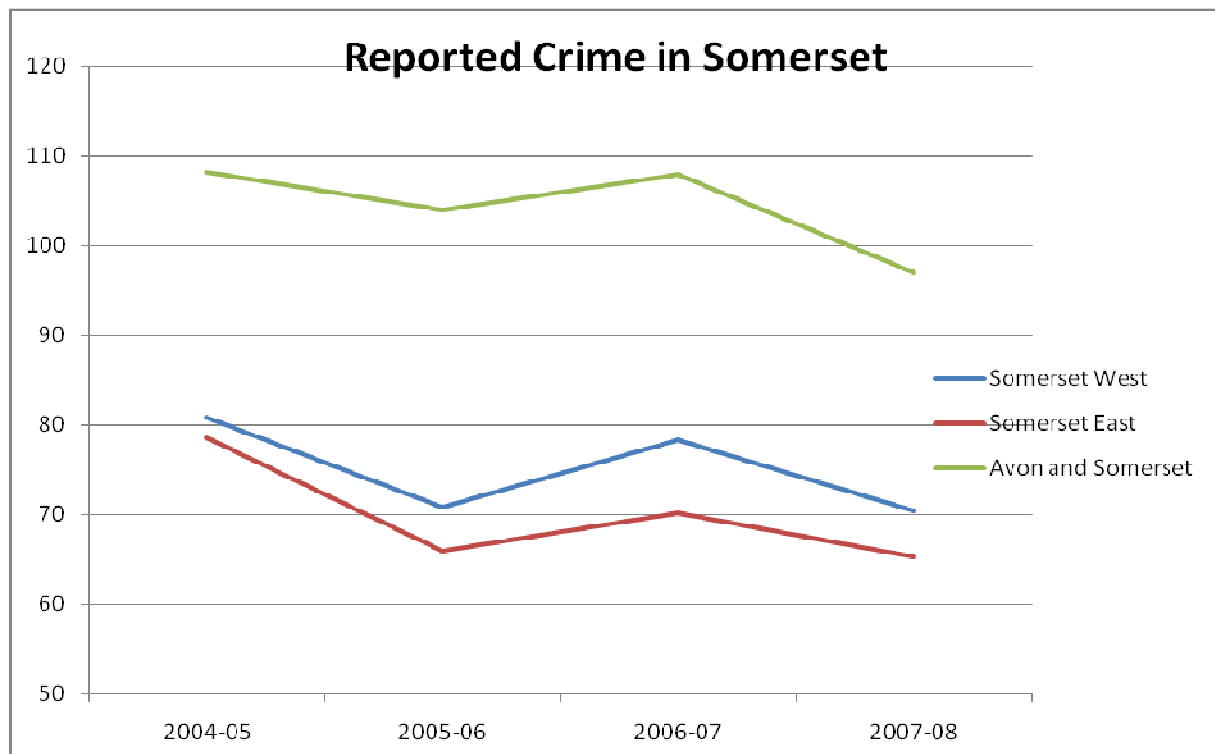
Climate change is the most important pressure on the environment in Somerset, and brings an increased risk of flooding to parts of the county.

The average annual temperature in the South West is predicted to be between 1.5 and 4.5 degrees warmer by 2080, and the frequency and severity of flooding is predicted to increase with climate change. Much of Somerset is low-lying: particular areas already at risk of flooding include the Levels and Moors, Taunton and Bridgwater, and this risk will increase.

The immediate responsibility in any flooding crisis will rest with Local Authorities, but local voluntary groups will play an important role in supporting vulnerable individuals within their localities. They will also be vital in providing the 'social glue' that brings communities together and helps them to confront shared environmental disasters.

Although Somerset is a safe place to live, with crime figures lower than the national average and dropping, fear of crime is disproportionately high in the county.

Monthly figures show that levels of crime in the county are lower than last year, and are lower than those for the overall Avon and Somerset constabulary. The total crime per 1000 of the population in 2007-08 was 64.5 in Somerset West and 59.8 in Somerset East.



However, fear of crime is around the national average. In the Somerset Influence Panel Survey of 2004, 23% of respondents felt more afraid of crime in their neighbourhood than two years previously, and 27% thought that crime had increased. In the Quality of Life Survey of 2006, only 56% of Somerset residents said that they feel safe going out after dark.

"In the summer they are always having fights [at the pub]... Although I don't hear much up here I do get nervous especially if I hear a noise late at night. A lot of older people up here say to me that they wouldn't go out at night in the summer."

Widow, Somerset Voices

The media has a huge influence on perceptions of crime levels and fear of crime. While it is important to acknowledge that a small amount of fear has a place in people's lives to ensure they protect themselves from harm, community strategies for all districts in Somerset agree that these high levels of fear of crime need to be addressed and reduced. Removing abandoned vehicles and graffiti, installing better lighting in public places and traffic calming

measures on busy roads will help increase people's confidence in the safety of their environment. Community-based initiatives, including neighbourhood watch schemes and property protection projects, also have an important role to play.

Somerset has comparatively high incidences of racial harassment and rates are increasing.

In a national risk assessment, Somerset emerged as the county with the eighth highest risk of racial harassment, despite ethnic minorities accounting for only 2.7% of the population in the 2001 census. The majority of race hate crime is verbal abuse, physical assaults or threats and intimidation, with most of these crimes taking place in Yeovil, Taunton, Bridgwater and Frome. Recent consultations for Taunton Deane and South Somerset's community strategies reveal significant increases in race hate crimes against those working in late-night takeaways.

Other marginalised groups, such as Gypsies and Travellers, and gays, lesbians and transgender individuals also experience hate crimes. Law enforcement agencies have responsibility for dealing with all such crimes.

The estimated cost of domestic violence in Somerset is approximately £13,000,000.

Crime Concern research estimates the minimum cost of domestic abuse at an average of £60 – 90 per household. This means that in Somerset, the estimated cost of domestic violence is around £13 million.

Research says that domestic violence is frequently hidden, under-reported and under-recorded. It also shows that on average a woman will be assaulted by her partner or ex-partner 35 times before reporting it to the police. In 2003-04 the four Somerset women's refuges housed 175 women but had to refuse admission to a further 509.

Late-night economy crime as a result of alcohol and/or drugs is a problem in Somerset towns.

The lack of leisure and cultural activities for young adults in Somerset contributes to the levels of late-night anti-social behaviour and assault. This is likely to be similar in many other parts of the South West. Admissions data for Musgrove Park Hospital's A&E Department shows a big increase over the Friday to Sunday period, and assault admissions data shows a significant rise between 9pm and 3am.

Community concerns about drug use in Somerset are higher than the actual figures for drug use.

In the Somerset Influence Panel Survey of 2004, over 65% of respondents felt that illegal drugs were easily available in their area. However, when asked whether they had seen any evidence of drug use in their neighbourhood in the last year, over 70% said that they had not. While recreational drug use clearly exists in the county, the Home Office estimates that there are only 2700 problematic drug users in Somerset: this represents .005% of the population.

However, problematic drug users account for 31% of crimes in Somerset, and arrest referral information indicates that 65% of those arrested have heroin and/or crack addiction in their profiles. This is consistent with the regional and national picture.

Drug treatment facilities in Somerset are limited. Education initiatives and diversionary activities for young people are also needed.

The role that voluntary and community groups can play

- Neighbourhood Watch and property protection projects can decrease residents' fears of property crime
- Environmental projects can increase community pride by involving residents in keeping streets and open spaces clean and attractive
- Young people's projects can build more understanding of and respect for diverse communities, and help prevent anti-social behaviour
- Inter-generational projects can build more understanding and integration between young people and older people, and reduce older people's fears of anti-social behaviour and crime
- Women's groups and domestic violence projects can provide support for those suffering abuse and encourage them to report it
- Black and minority ethnic groups can help people from those communities to come together to find the courage to report racist incidents, and build understanding across cultural boundaries
- Community support projects can help families coping with members who have problems with drugs and alcohol

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS IN SOMERSET

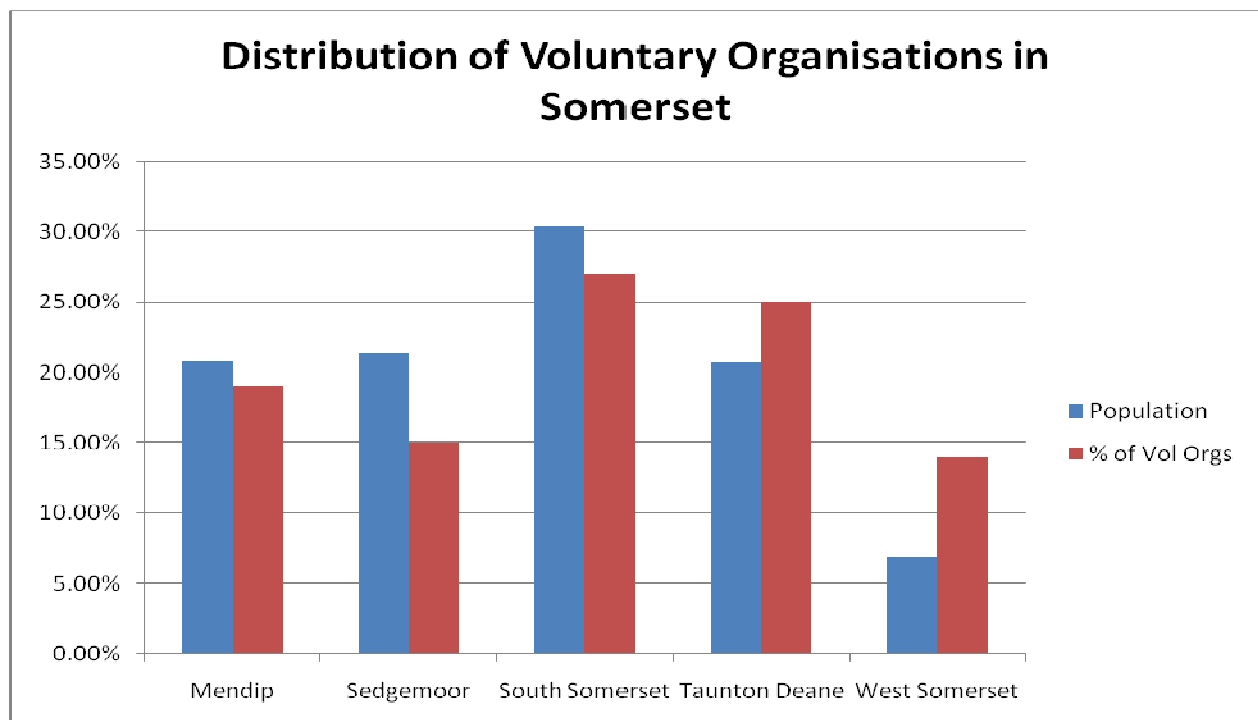
There are at least 1200-1400 voluntary and community organisations in Somerset,

The South West Forum's snapshot of 2007, in its document 'Investing for Inclusion – an agenda for action', states that the region has at least 52,000 voluntary and community organisations, including over 17,500 general charities. This is the third highest of any English region, and the highest number per head of population, at 4.3 per 1000, of all English regions.

There is no comprehensive list of voluntary and community organisations in Somerset and numbers are hard to calculate, but reports and surveys over the last nine years have come up with figures that suggest at least 1400 and possibly twice as many. Many small local groups are not known outside their immediate area and not easily captured in surveys.

There are areas in Somerset with a strong voluntary and community sector, and others much less so.

About one third of Somerset's voluntary and community organisations operate on a county-wide basis. There is a concentration of voluntary and community organisations, including branches of nationals, in Taunton and Yeovil; otherwise they are predominantly rural in nature.



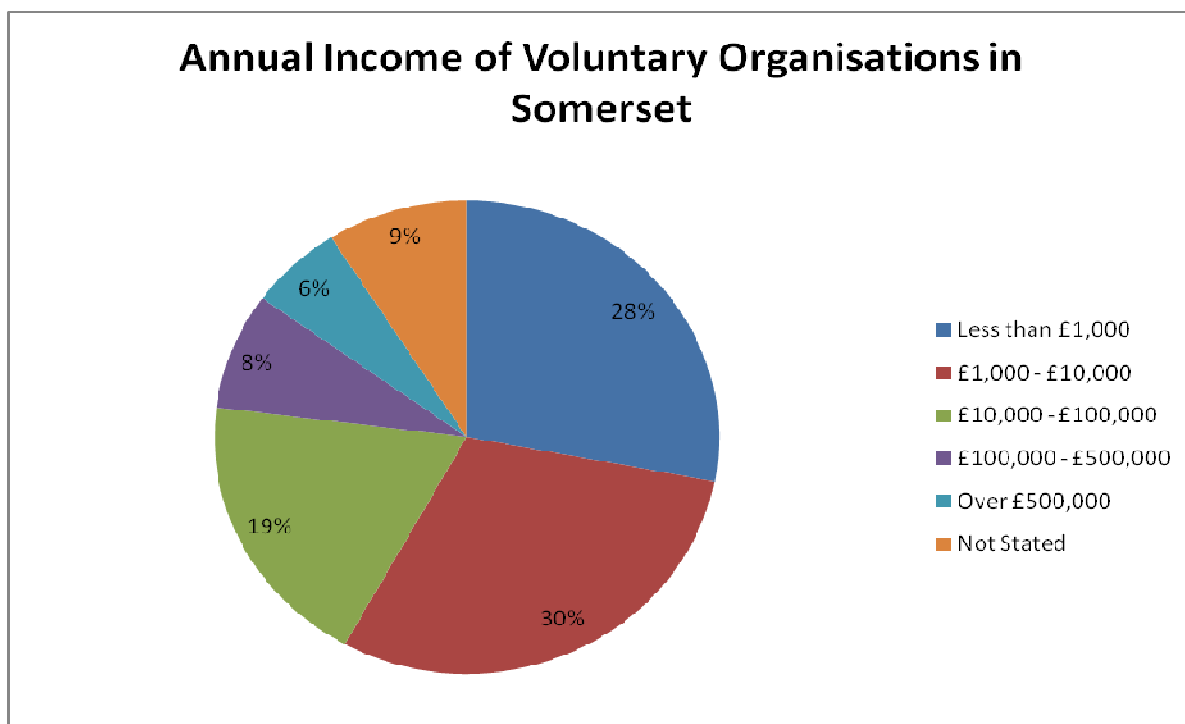
West Somerset and Taunton Deane have an above-average number of voluntary organisations, in the case of the latter possibly because as the administrative centre of the county it plays host to many of the county-wide bodies. Sedgemoor has a significantly lower number of voluntary organisations.

Voluntary and community organisations in Somerset can be divided into four main groupings:

1. **Small local groups** without paid staff, operating within a parish, town or village. There are hundreds of these across Somerset: many of them see themselves as just part of the community, and do not identify with the label 'community organisation'.
2. **Organisations** that operate within districts. There is a big 'cultural gap' between those which are small and do not aspire to grow and those which have adopted a culture of growth and development, including a move towards paid staff.
3. **Somerset-wide organisations.** Many of these provide services directly or through affiliated branches.
4. **National organisations** which operate in Somerset.

58% of voluntary and community organisations in Somerset have an annual income of under £10,000.

This is about the national average: national research published in the Voluntary Sector Almanac 2006 shows that 56% of all charities had an annual income of less than £10,000. It is worth noting that nationally, almost 50% of all donations go to less than 0.5% of charities.



Rural voluntary and community groups in Somerset face particular challenges.

Rural groups tend to be very small, informal, and geographically isolated. National research shows that they are less likely to network with other groups and frequently sceptical of the benefits of a 'shared voice' and the advantages of partnership working. They have a lower

capacity than urban groups in identifying and bidding for funding, and are less likely to be aware of their economic as well as their social impact. They are also more resistant to what they see as 'interference' or bureaucracy. Where house prices are high and fewer younger people can afford to live locally, rural groups report great difficulties in recruiting and retaining new, younger, volunteers.

About 4000 people are employed by Somerset's voluntary and community organisations.

Contrary to popular belief, many voluntary and community organisations employ paid staff: 54,000 are employed by general charities in the South West. The figure for Somerset is rather low, and reflects the county's large numbers of very small groups run entirely by volunteers.

Despite a commitment to training and developing staff, many organisations are so short of funding that it is not possible to do so.

There are at least 35,000 individual volunteers in Somerset: this represents at least 8.6% of those aged over 16, a lower rate than the South West average.

Formal volunteering, defined as giving help through groups, clubs and societies, and informal volunteering, defined as giving unpaid help to an individual, are particularly high in the South West: the Department of Communities and Local Government's Citizenship Survey of 2005 found that 47% of adult respondents had formally volunteered in the preceding year and 71% had done so informally. 33% said that they participated in formal volunteering once a month: Somerset's figure of 8.6% is likely to be comparable to this, but there are undoubtedly large numbers of people volunteering informally, particularly in rural areas.

National trends suggest that levels of volunteering are falling. The recent consultation for South Somerset's community sustainability strategy confirms that there is a shortage of volunteer capacity across the district. Somerset has four small Volunteer Centres hosted by larger voluntary organisations. The role of Volunteer Centres is to encourage volunteering, match volunteers with local volunteering opportunities, and support local organisations using volunteers to provide a positive experience. In order to increase the number of volunteers in Somerset, especially for rural groups which are particularly reliant on volunteers, more investment needs to be made in Volunteer Centres.

There are fewer support organisations for the voluntary and community sector in Somerset than in other counties in the South West.

The role of generalist support organisations for the voluntary and community sector is a vital one: they provide information, advice and practical support for local groups, training and resources, and a channel for consultation and representation for the sector. Most other counties in the region have several Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) covering each district, often with a volunteer centre attached.

Somerset has four organisations in all districts except Sedgemoor, all of them operating on a part-time basis. Black and minority ethnic groups are able to access specialist support from Somerset Racial Equality Council (SREC), and children and young people's groups can do so from the Children and Young People's Partnership in Somerset (CHYPPS).

The strengths and value of voluntary and community organisations

Central Government is increasingly recognising and placing more emphasis on the value and key role that the voluntary and community sector – or the Third Sector – can play:

“A vibrant, diverse and independent Third Sector is a vital part of a fair and enterprising society. It can help communities to be more cohesive and inclusive, and help individuals to have more say over issues that affect them.”

Cabinet Office, Briefing for Local Strategic Partnerships

Social and environmental benefits

Across Somerset, voluntary and community organisations are responding effectively and quickly to local needs, involving the community at a variety of different levels and leading change, for example

- Community transport schemes are connecting rural residents with the services they need
- Credit unions are enabling local people to save and borrow small manageable sums of money which they probably could not do via a high street bank
- Pre-school groups and University of the Third Age groups are offering opportunities for lifelong learning across the age spectrum
- Environmental groups are encouraging composting and recycling
- Town partnerships are taking forward community plans that have been developed by local people

Economic benefits

Voluntary and community organisations are also contributing to the economy across Somerset.

- Like businesses, they are spending money on goods and services locally
- In addition to employing around 4000 people, some of their volunteers are gaining skills which can lead to employment

- They are attracting investment: fundraising from regional and national initiatives and charitable trusts in order to support their activities brings sizeable sums of money into Somerset
- The work of advice centres has considerable impact on the economy: over the period 2005-06, the five citizens' advice bureaux managed £16.3 million of debt for clients and brought an additional £14.5 million into the county.

The challenges for voluntary and community organisations

Voluntary and community organisations in Somerset face four main challenges.

1. Lack of funding

The level of funding for the sector nationally is decreasing, and some evidence suggests that the situation in the South West is more serious than in other regions. There are a number of possible reasons for this, including: the ending of a number of central Government funding programmes; Local Authorities coming under more financial pressure; fewer large grant-making trusts in the region; and the move away from grants towards contracting and procurement.

“Whether intended or not, one of the consequences of the policy shift towards the procurement of public services from the Third Sector on a full cost basis has been the widespread retreat by cash-strapped Local Authorities from their grants programmes in favour of larger contracts.”

Funding the Third Sector in the South West 2007

This lack of funding is a greater issue for Somerset than generally across the South West, possibly because there is no large-scale funding through European or central Government schemes. There is also a lower capacity to fundraise: data from the Community Fund (now the Big Lottery Fund) shows that there were fewer applications from organisations in Somerset than in other counties in the region. CVSs, traditionally the main providers of fundraising advice and support to the sector as a whole, are well-placed to do this in Somerset but do not have sufficient resources to meet demand.

“Interviewees complained that although they had come into the job/volunteering position to help people in their community – the real work of the organisation – they seemed to spend large amounts of time scrabbling for funding to pay for such things as transport, telephone, purchase of computer etc... Small local groups obtained the funding to continue by organising local fundraising events. Some interviewees felt that these were getting harder to organise as the membership of the group got older and the number of active volunteers declined.”

Voluntary Sector Development in Somerset, 2002

2. Lack of resources and expertise to raise awareness of their activities and what they achieve

Low levels of funding are also compounded by a lack of understanding of the nature of the voluntary and community sector, and the common belief that everyone working in the sector

is a volunteer. The local voluntary sector has a low profile: almost 50% of charitable giving nationally goes to less than 0.4% of all charities. In Somerset, the local voluntary sector lacks the ability to market itself:

“There does not seem to be as much awareness in Somerset as there is in other counties in the region of the voluntary and community sector’s actual and potential contribution to the economic and social regeneration of market towns and disadvantaged rural communities – as employers, providers of training places, or as businesses providing goods and services.”

Voluntary Sector Development in Somerset, 2002

This leads to a gap: local donors are keen to support local causes but do not know how to do so, and the lack of a single representative voice for the voluntary and community sector has made it difficult for statutory bodies to engage with it. Championing and promoting the sector, particularly at district level, to encourage understanding of the value of the sector and the need to support it, is one of the roles of CVSs and other support organisations.

3. Skills gaps and shortages

The Workforce Development Plan for the voluntary and community sector in the South West reports skills gaps and shortages in the paid workforce, and a shortage of volunteers and Trustees. Many Trustees are older people, and it is becoming more difficult to replace them as people are anxious about increasing legislation and their possible personal liability. Somerset’s voluntary and community sector faces the same problems as that of the rest of the region.

4. Patchy collaboration and networking

Many voluntary and community organisations in Somerset are isolated, particularly those in rural areas. They need support to access resources and information, but often do not network, collaborate, share information or work in partnership. National research shows that many small rural groups network only out of necessity, and larger ones do not always coordinate and share information.

This lack of collaboration and networking results in a sector in Somerset that is to some extent lagging behind most other parts of the region in responding to new and emerging opportunities and agendas for the sector: partnership working across sectors to deliver innovative services in response to local needs; social enterprise activity; and decreasing duplication to better deliver services.

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