Grades are used within this report to indicate how urgently we think action needs to be taken in relation to a specific aspect of community life. The grades are awarded in part on the basis of how the area is doing relative to the rest of the UK. Grades are presented on a scale of A to E. In order to calculate each grade we took into account three factors:

- how well Somerset is doing in this area compared to similar areas;
- our local research and knowledge of particular issues affecting Somerset;
- the views of our stakeholders, including partner organisations, grantees, and local communities.

We considered 10 national themes in researching this report; some of these are reported on together in Vital Signs.

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**METHODOLOGY**

Our research for Vital Signs consisted of several strands. We reviewed statistical data, reports and consultations from charities, local authorities and national government. We supplemented this research with a community survey of community leaders across the county. We explored the emerging themes in more detail at three focus groups in different areas of the county: Frome (Mendip), Taunton Halcon (Taunton Deane) and Brushford (West Somerset). These involved community members and those working within voluntary organisations. Taken together our research revealed the community priorities for local giving.
Vital Signs is a landmark for Somerset Community Foundation. There are upwards of 2,000 charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises in Somerset providing essential services to our communities. As charities face a steep rise in demand for their services, and the extent of the Foundation’s community investment exceeds £500,000 annually, this report provides Somerset’s first ever guide to the difference local giving can make in addressing hidden needs.

Vital Signs shines a light on Somerset, reflecting both the many strengths we can build on in this beautiful county and the complex social and structural challenges. These continue to affect the most isolated and vulnerable people in our communities. We have blended hard statistics and facts about social need with the voices of community members to identify where community-led responses can make life better.

Undoubtedly, the majority of us in Somerset enjoy a good quality of life. We have high employment, thriving communities, and a terrific environment. However, there is a significant level of need hidden beneath the surface. For example, the 34% attainment gap at GCSE level between children from poorer backgrounds and their peers, the striking fact that the number of ‘fuel poor’ households has increased to nearly 30,000 this year, and research showing that 1 in 6 older people in the county say they have insufficient social contact and feel socially isolated.

The good news is that many of the answers lie within our communities. In our community consultation, people overwhelmingly told us that we need to build on the strength of the community here. In our view, strong communities are this county’s greatest asset, and local philanthropy – reaching thousands of community groups supporting community action – changes outcomes for people experiencing the biggest challenges.

Enjoy the wealth of information in this report, then get in touch with us to tell us what you think. We look forward to hearing from you.

JUSTIN SARGENT,
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
So

meret’s Vital Signs Scorecard: Things are going well, but we can make them better

Somerset is a county full of culture, stunning environment, and a rich heritage, ranging from the ancient mists of Avalon to Glastonbury Festival. We boast spectacular buildings, a wealth of talent in artistic fields such as folk music and pottery, and spectacular, unspoilt countryside. But access is an issue in our rural county. Remote locations and poor transport means that the opportunities culture and the outdoors have to offer, with the health and wellbeing benefits that can result, are not consistently accessible by the entire population.

In the arts, culture and heritage, the highest proportion of voluntary and community sector respondents to our community consultation told us the situation was ‘OK’. Thinking about Somerset’s environment, the majority said that “Things are going well, but we can make them better”. Their concerns were:

- people in Somerset have to travel too far to access cultural amenities and this is a major barrier for those without access to transport;
- preserving access to village halls and other local venues is essential at a time of funding cuts;
- litter, fly-tipping and dog waste remain issues of concerns within communities: many have responded with community litter patrols and other initiatives.

“Somerset has a rich artistic and cultural heritage but is increasingly reliant on voluntary support… It’s important to maintain local venues such as village halls.”

COMMUNITY LEADER, VITAL SIGNS SURVEY

Of 6 areas in the South West, Somerset is ranked lowest for access to cultural amenities

Despite this, take up is broad – at the last count 25,000 people were taking part in arts projects, largely at a grassroots level

There are 9,200 jobs in the arts, culture and recreation industry in Somerset

Tourism is worth 1.3bn to the county creating 35,000 jobs

Somerset Day is on May 11th each year

Air quality in West Somerset is in the top 10% of areas in England

West Somerset is ranked the 5th most beautiful natural area in England

Fly tipping incidents per population in Mendip are more than twice as high as in any other Somerset district
A simple and effective way to make a difference:

- **Enabling access for all.** Grants to community organisations working with people in disadvantaged parts of Somerset’s towns allow people a chance to access the resources of the countryside.

- **Supporting volunteering projects.** Studies have shown that taking part in volunteering and conservation activities is good for mental and physical health as well as benefitting the environment.

- **Funding community arts.** Community music projects can instil a sense of pride and ambition in children. Arts initiatives are also a proven way of getting more vulnerable people to participate and bring people of different ages together.

- **Preserving the heritage of Somerset.** Local conservation and heritage projects are often run by volunteers.

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**“Arts and sports activities can be the glue…”**

VITAL SIGNS FOCUS GROUP MEMBER

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**WHITEBALL TUNNEL COMMUNITY THEATRE PROJECT**

Somerset Community Foundation manages funds on behalf of philanthropists who understand the value of arts and heritage events to build community spirit. The Whiteball Tunnel project was an exciting cultural event which brought together school children and older people to celebrate the engineering heritage of the nineteenth century Whiteball railway tunnel. The inter-generational workshops encouraged greater understanding of different age groups for each other, and increased pride and interest in the local community.

“I have seen people in the street who are in the show, and we greet each other warmly. I feel a part of this community; a sense of belonging”.

PROJECT PARTICIPANT

Image: iVistaphotography
Somerset schools are good and improving, but there is still a striking gap in educational outcomes between children from poor backgrounds and their more affluent classmates. This gap – significantly wider in Somerset than in other parts of the country – starts at an early age and grows wider by the time children leave school.

The skills level of the wider population is another issue where action is needed. The proportion of Somerset pupils going into Higher Education and the numbers of adults with higher level skills are lower than the national average.

In our consultation, community leaders said that the situation with education and learning was “OK, but could be improved”. Whilst many respondents were complimentary about the efforts of Somerset’s schools, they said more needed to be done to:

■ tackle disengagement of disadvantaged children;
■ prepare young people with the right skills for work;
■ improve adults’ digital skills – seen as essential in today’s world.

Where you live and attend school does seem to affect what opportunities are available and increases inequality. Schools have a lot to do and I think would benefit from more outside help to increase opportunities. COMMUNITY LEADER, VITAL SIGNS SURVEY

61% of children not in receipt of free school meals attained 5 A*-C GCSE grades including English and Maths in 2015 – in line with national averages

But... only 27% of children eligible for free school meals achieved the same level – a much wider gap than the national average

And... only 13% of children who are looked after by the local authority (in care) achieved this

Only 39% of pupils from state-funded schools and colleges went on to higher education compared with the national average of 48%

91% of all schools in Somerset are judged to be good or better

Somerset is in the top 10 local authorities in England for the proportion of rural schools
A simple and effective way to make a difference:

✔ Build young people’s confidence and aspirations. Mentoring projects build young people’s confidence in their own abilities and raise their aspiration to succeed. They improve discipline, focus and motivation in the classroom which leads to better exam results.

✔ Supporting projects that help young people who have disengaged with school. Projects that use music, sports and arts are often very effective at helping disadvantaged young people re-engage with their education and their community.

✔ Improving social and employability skills. Volunteering projects have been shown to improve young people’s employability skills as well as doing good for wider society.

✔ Help adults into work. Community projects that deliver literacy, numeracy, IT and vocational skills for adults can particularly benefit those furthest from the labour market. These skills help equip them for work and increase employability.

“Schools don’t put things on for children as there is no transport at the end of the day.”

COMMUNITY LEADER, VITAL SIGNS SURVEY

RAISING ASPIRATIONS

In 2011, the trustees of a local charitable trust identified that they wanted to support the education of young people in Street, Somerset. Community Foundation developed a pilot community mentoring project at Crispin School, matching volunteers from local businesses with young people in school years 7 and above. Over 150 mentors have now been recruited and trained to support young people. With their help, young people have improved self-esteem, confidence, and increased aspirations for their future.

“I used to care so much what people thought of me that I would take time off sick from school as I was so worried. Mentoring has given me so much confidence, encouraged me to put myself forward for things and try things I’ve never done before.”
Tackling Disadvantage and Exclusion

The ‘rurality’ factor creates a double jeopardy in terms of jobs, education and transport barriers as well as lack of exposure to opportunities, role models and aspiration.

COMMUNITY LEADER, VITAL SIGNS SURVEY

For the majority, Somerset is an affluent county but just out of sight, there is need and inequality. Whilst the most deprived neighbourhoods are found within the county’s larger urban areas, there are significant pockets of disadvantage in market towns, villages and hamlets hidden from national statistics. The voluntary sector is uniquely placed to make a difference to these issues by working at a neighbourhood level where they can reach people that are too often overlooked.

Our consultation revealed that most community leaders felt the situation was “OK, but could be improved”. Concerns expressed were:

- poor affordability and availability of housing especially for young people who are not able to access the housing ladder;
- many homes in the county are not fit for purpose or are hard to heat (and there are poor conditions for many);
- a rise in ‘sofa surfing’: people staying with friends and family for long periods. These are the hidden homeless.

West Somerset is judged the worst place in the country in terms of social mobility: 324th out of 324 local authority districts

But… has a very high score in life satisfaction, coming 19 out of 252 authorities in England. Rural areas tend to have higher levels of wellbeing than urban areas

1 in 3 young people with care backgrounds will experience homelessness

There are 29,663 fuel poor households in Somerset, an increase of just under 3,000 households on the previous year’s figure

The median house price in Somerset is 7.2 times the median earnings in the county, compared to 6.7 times for England as a whole

Life expectancy at birth for men in the most disadvantaged areas of Somerset is 78 years, compared to 83 years in the most advantaged

Children living in overcrowded homes are up to 10 times more likely to contract meningitis and three times more likely to have respiratory problems than their peers
A simple and effective way to make a difference:

✔ Offering every child a chance. Local giving can ensure that the circumstances you are born into do not determine the rest of your life. Charities provide chances for young people to raise their self-esteem, life skills and aspirations through mentoring, training and personal development.

✔ Providing practical support for families. Advice to households on low incomes on how to reduce their energy bills can make a real difference to standards of living. This involves negotiations on the best deals with energy providers, and also how to insulate homes to make them more fuel efficient.

✔ Reducing youth homelessness. Voluntary sector organisations working with young people have specialists who give advice about emergency accommodation and other services when families break down.

While Somerset is generally quite well off, there is considerable inequality across the county. Fuel poverty is very high in rural areas such as Exmoor but child poverty and food bank usage are relatively high in some urban areas.

COMMUNITY LEADER, VITAL SIGNS SURVEY

TAUNTON ASSOCIATION FOR THE HOMELESS
The former Mayor of Taunton, Dave Durden, set up the Deane Dragons Legacy Fund with Somerset Community Foundation in 2014. One of the small grants awarded was to Taunton Association for the Homeless for their ‘Growing Roots’ project. The project offers clients an opportunity to extend their skills in gardening and horticulture in the charity’s allotments and work towards a qualification.
Mental health issues could be treated far better in this area – the problem seems to be growing but resources to match this trend are not there.

COMMUNITY LEADER, VITAL SIGNS SURVEY

The majority of Somerset residents enjoy good health and a reasonable life expectancy but there are areas of concern. The number of people aged 80 and over living in Somerset has increased by a quarter over the last 15 years putting additional pressures on health and social care services, as well as unpaid carers. Over 23,000 women and 9,500 men aged 65 or older now live alone, and loneliness is closely linked with poor mental and physical health. Mental wellbeing is a growing concern for people of all ages and the rural nature of Somerset's society can compound the effects by increasing isolation from essential services based in larger towns. The majority of respondents to our community leaders' survey rated the situation with mental and physical health in Somerset “The situation is OK”. They were concerned about:

- lack of early stage support to promote wellbeing in the county, particularly for children and young people;
- the continuation of services that encourage a healthy lifestyle, such as sports participation and healthy eating;
- the accessibility of services for all, not just those who can afford it or who have easy access to transport.

Somerset’s Vital Signs Scorecard:
The situation is OK, but could be improved

Hospital admissions for self-harm by young people are 50% higher than national averages

3 children in every classroom have a clinically diagnosable mental health condition

Only 29% of primary aged children in Somerset reported high self-esteem, compared to 38% nationally

3 in 10 adults in Somerset rate their happiness as very high, better than the national average

But... 6.2% have depression, higher than the national average of 5.8%

9,100 people in Somerset are estimated to have dementia, of whom 150 are aged under 65

There are over 58,000 unpaid carers supporting family and friends, many experiencing their own health problems

29.7% of adults in the county eat a healthy and balanced diet, slightly higher than the national average, but 24% of Somerset adults are classified as obese.
A simple and effective way to make a difference:

✓ Ensuring people get the support they need. Community groups use a variety of approaches to provide all-round support to people with health conditions, rather than just focusing solely on their diagnosis, often intervening at an early stage to prevent a condition worsening, or supporting long-term, sustained recovery.

✓ Educating society about mental illness. Philanthropy has been behind many recent campaigns to raise awareness of the needs of people with mental health problems. Charities in Somerset are changing attitudes by working with local schools and community groups.

✓ Encouraging healthy lifestyles. Grassroots sports and leisure organisations working across our county can get people of all ages fit and active. Charities are skilled at teaching young people how to cook healthy food.

People have pride, but they don’t know how to cook. Kids should be helped to know how to cook and eat healthily.

COMMUNITY MEMBER, VITAL SIGNS FOCUS GROUP

SOUTH SOMERSET MIND
In 2013, a local philanthropist wanted to do more to promote the mental wellbeing of young people in the area where he lives. He has a fund with Somerset Community Foundation, which introduced him to South Somerset MIND. Their project, Youth Matters, offers drop in support for young people in Mendip. The project provides an easily-accessible and consistent service for young people who are struggling with depression and anxiety and often do not know where to go to for help. As a result of the project, the young people now report increased confidence and self-esteem, along with an improved ability to manage their emotions.
Half of Somerset's population lives in small rural towns, villages and hamlets. Tranquil and beautiful, they attract many people in retirement as well as acting as holiday destinations. But rural life can hide a number of challenges for these communities. For children, young people, the very old, those with poor health and those on low incomes, living rurally can magnify the daily challenges that they face. This is often the result of poor access to services, and limited public transport.

The majority of community leaders who responded to our survey stated how highly they valued the peace and beauty of the countryside. They also felt that the situation with rural living could be improved. They were concerned that:

- young people struggle to access education or training, or find employment;
- rural housing has become unaffordable for too many people on low incomes;
- vulnerable people without their own car are becoming more isolated from essential services and their local community.

“Our transport infrastructure is getting worse and house prices do not encourage first time buyers.”

COMMUNITY LEADER, VITAL SIGNS SURVEY

Areas in South Somerset and West Somerset have the highest levels of digital exclusion in the county

1 in 3 second homes in the county are in West Somerset

1 in 9 rural households do not have access to a car

In West Somerset, starter home prices are almost 9 times the average earnings figure

4% of rural households have no central heating

West Somerset has the highest level of personal well-being in Somerset

But... has also been ranked the worst area of England for social mobility

The top issue of concern for rural young people aged 18–25 is lack of transport
A simple and effective way to make a difference:

- **Improving access to key services.** Supporting the establishment of small scale, community-run transport schemes allows people to access doctors’ surgeries shops and other essential services.
- **Innovating rural care and support.** Delivering care to older people in rural areas requires new ways of working and close collaboration between organisations.
- **Strengthening rural communities.** Bringing different generations together is as pressing in rural communities as it is in more urban ones.
- **Investing in rural assets.** Village halls, playing fields and local community groups are at the heart of rural life. As pubs and post offices close, these local assets need support to sustain vibrant rural communities.

The overall message from the US and UK is that we can and should do more around meeting the philanthropic needs of rural communities.

JESSICA SELLICK, RESEARCHER, ROSE REGENERATION, FOLLOWING AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE PHILANTHROPY CAN PLAY IN RURAL AREAS

EXMOOR COMMUNITY TRUST FUND

The Exmoor Community Trust Fund was created following the sale of the Exmoor Community Trust’s Computer Centre at Winsford in 2013. The proceeds of the sale were transferred to Somerset Community Foundation to create the new fund which provides grants to community projects benefitting people residing within Exmoor National Park boundaries, and in particular projects addressing the advancement of education and the provision of facilities for recreation and leisure pursuits. One such grant was made to Dulverton & District Young People’s Project which plays a valuable role in a community affected by rural disadvantage, providing activities and education in a safe and fun environment.
People in Somerset feel rooted in the community and most have a strong sense of belonging here. Residents have pride in their area – particularly in its environment, heritage, and community spirit – and are more likely to be actively involved in unpaid voluntary work than in other parts of England. Challenges remain in ensuring that the most vulnerable, especially younger people and families, older people and those suffering ill health or disability receive the support they need.

Most people who took part in our community consultation said that community cohesion was strong ‘but we can make it better’. They expressed concerns about:

- vulnerable older people who are lonely and isolated;
- future funding cuts, which means access to funds for voluntary organisations holding together community cohesion is uncertain;
- lack of activities for young people leading to anti-social behaviour.

“We need to ensure that lonely and isolated people and communities are not ignored – neither should the many who help these people be denied assistance to help in their efforts.”

COMMUNITY LEADER, VITAL SIGNS SURVEY

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**Somerset’s Vital Signs Scorecard:**
Things are going well, but we can make them better

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**Stronger Communities**

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**Over 2,000** charities are registered in Somerset and there are hundreds more informal groups

**Just over 3,000** people have a second address in Somerset for the purposes of holidays

**1 in 7** Somerset households contain someone aged 65 or older living alone

**3 out of 10** people in Somerset have given unpaid help to a charity or voluntary group at least once a month, and around four in ten in the past year.

**More than 40%** of Year 6 pupils in Somerset (aged 10–11) said they felt afraid of going to school at least sometimes because of bullying

**About 1 in 6** older people in Somerset say they have insufficient social contact and feel socially isolated

**£488,633** was awarded to **233 groups** by Somerset Community Foundation in 2015/16

**5%** of Somerset’s child population are affected by domestic violence
A simple and effective way to make a difference:

✓ Supporting lonely and isolated people. Research shows that loneliness can be as bad for your health as smoking. Local volunteers are uniquely placed to provide regular and sustainable support to people experiencing loneliness.

✓ Investing directly in voluntary organisations and infrastructure support. Our local organisations need the capacity and capability to match their aspirations.

✓ Support the growing number of social enterprises. These benefit from social investment, business mentoring, or simply from the decision to choose to buy from them.

✓ Nurturing community relationships. The make-up of our towns and villages is changing as a result of population shift. Activities arranged by community centres and village halls build a sense of belonging, and connect people of different ages and ethnicities.

“ If we can bring people together within communities, we can probably address a lot of the problems. Give people the power to find solutions to their needs.

VITAL SIGNS FOCUS GROUP MEMBER

SUPER SATURDAYS, LANGPORT
National funder Comic Relief partners with Somerset Community Foundation to target its small grants programme for grassroots groups in Somerset. In 2016, the Comic Relief fund awarded £1,500 to support a monthly Saturday activity club for children in rural Langport.

When the group received a Comic Relief grant they were able to develop monthly circus skills sessions which now regularly attract up to 60 children. Friendships have been formed across social groups and children and their parents report an increased sense of belonging to the local community.
So

merset’s Vital Signs Scorecard:
Things aren’t going well.
We should take action as soon as possible

As one of the most rural parts of the country, many people in Somerset rely on their cars to get about. For the minority without a car this can present particular problems – especially for vulnerable people and those in very remote areas – as publicly provided transport in rural areas requires subsidy, meaning that services are under threat. Many areas of Somerset are served by community transport organisations, offering a degree of flexibility tailored to their clients’ needs, but they too are supported by subsidies. In some villages there are very local community car schemes led by volunteers using their own vehicles, but coverage is patchy.

Concerns about transport were clear in our community consultation, where voluntary sector leaders judged the situation “Things aren’t going well”. Issues identified were:

- bus transport routes are often geared around particular shopping or school routes and do not allow for any out of the ordinary trips, which impacts on people’s access to employment or college courses;
- where public transport does exist, its cost prevents young people and families on low incomes from using it;
- there is a lack of reach and maintenance of green transport routes, including footpaths and cycle routes.

There is no bus service at weekends so young people are dependent on others to travel out of the village, reducing access to facilities and events.

COMMUNITY LEADER, VITAL SIGNS SURVEY

75% of older people without access to a car are women living alone. Many have outlived their partner

In parts of Exmoor, households are 40 minutes by public transport from their nearest food store and 50 minutes from their GP

1 in 9 households in rural areas do not have access to a car or van

The number 1 dislike about living in Somerset for young people: lack of transport

More than 50% of people over 80 find it difficult to travel to a hospital

There are 24 community car schemes operating in Somerset villages
A simple and effective way to make a difference:

✔ Support the start-up of local community run car services. Community run transport initiatives are an effective means of ensuring that people can access hospitals and GPs as well as leisure and recreation activities. At least 24 such schemes are registered in the County with more operating at an informal level. These schemes rely on a vital network of local drivers who volunteer their time.

✔ Subsidise services so they can be provided locally. If transport is poor, services such as health advice, youth clubs and lunch clubs can be provided to villages via satellite projects. This is an area of strength for the voluntary sector but requires upfront support to get the infrastructure in place (often a minibus) and grants to keep running.

✔ Stimulate self-help within communities to reduce the need to travel. Local residents themselves are in the best place to determine the solutions to meet their needs. Community halls, village festivals, newsletters and local websites enable people to get involved in community campaigns and make a difference.

Families must run two cars in order for both parents to get to work...if one of these has trouble the family collapses.

COMMUNITY TRANSPORT FUND
Thanks to a donation of £4,500 from a private individual, Somerset Community Foundation was able to provide support to six small transport groups serving vulnerable and isolated individuals in rural areas of Somerset, including Shipham, Wedmore and Corfe. Typically, these organisations help around 50 local residents each year making multiple journeys to attend medical appointments, go to the shops, attend activities and classes or visit friends and family. Many schemes provide a service where volunteers stay with their passengers throughout the trip, for example to help with shopping or wait at the hospital or doctor’s surgery, offering support and assistance beyond the scope of a commercial transport operator. They provide a real lifeline to people who would otherwise be at risk of becoming socially isolated and vulnerable to increasing loss of independence, a lower quality of life and poor health.
Work and the Local Economy

Childcare is an issue… if you’re on a low paid wage or benefit you can’t afford to pay. If you’re a single parent you would have to be earning a lot to cover the cost.

PARENT, VITAL SIGNS FOCUS GROUP, TAUNTON

Unemployment rates in Somerset are low at 3.8% (year to March 2016) compared to 5.1% nationally

More than four in five Somerset businesses cite attitude towards work as one of the most important considerations in recruiting young people

31.4% of economically inactive people want a job, compared to 24.6% nationally

20% of the working population of Somerset are employed in “elementary” or “operative” jobs compared to 16% in the rest of the South West

4.4% of young people aged 16–18 in Somerset are not in employment, education or training, lower than the national figure of 4.7%

Gross pay is 10% lower in Somerset compared to the rest of Great Britain, equivalent to £50 a week

A low income family pays over £1,200 a year more than a better-off family for basic goods and services

14.1% of Somerset’s children, equivalent to 13,000 individuals, are defined by the Government as living in poverty

3,930 16–24 yr olds claimed benefit in July 2016

Somerset’s economy is one of small and medium sized business, and rates of self-employment are higher than in other areas. Perhaps as a result, our economy has remained relatively strong in the face of recent economic challenges. Since 2012 it has grown at a faster rate than neighbouring areas and the UK as a whole, but is widely recognised as a low wage economy. We need the workers of the future to possess the right personal and vocational skills for sectors with the highest growth potential, such as engineering, and the resilience to deal with future uncertainty in the local and national economy.

Voluntary sector leaders in our consultation judged the situation with regards to work and employment overall “The situation is OK”, but there were some clear concerns:

- most work opportunities are in towns meaning people living in rural areas need reliable transport;
- jobs in the county tend to be lower skilled and traditionally pay low wages meaning that in-work poverty is affecting increasing numbers of families with young children;
- high childcare costs act as a barrier for those on low incomes returning to work.

Somerset’s Vital Signs Scorecard:
The situation is OK, but could be improved

Somerset’s economy is one of small and medium sized business, and rates of self-employment are higher than in other areas. Perhaps as a result, our economy has remained relatively strong in the face of recent economic challenges. Since 2012 it has grown at a faster rate than neighbouring areas and the UK as a whole, but is widely recognised as a low wage economy. We need the workers of the future to possess the right personal and vocational skills for sectors with the highest growth potential, such as engineering, and the resilience to deal with future uncertainty in the local and national economy.

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- jobs in the county tend to be lower skilled and traditionally pay low wages meaning that in-work poverty is affecting increasing numbers of families with young children;
- high childcare costs act as a barrier for those on low incomes returning to work.
A simple and effective way to make a difference:

- **Supporting people into work.** Charities are experts at providing help to people out of work, equipping them with the key skills, encouragement and motivation they need to regain a foothold in employment.

- **Investing in new social enterprises.** These provide practical employment and work experience to the most vulnerable in society, delivering social, economic and often environmental benefits to Somerset.

- **Improving employability skills for young people.** Mentoring encourages ambition and enterprise, and volunteering and group activities develop leadership, essential attributes for employability according to business experts.

- **Enabling access to affordable childcare.** The difficulty of finding affordable childcare is one that stops many young parents returning to work. Supporting affordable childcare, for example sustaining small rural pre-schools, can remove a major barrier to employment for low income and rural families.

**ON YOUR BIKE**

The Clarke Willmott, Summerfield and C&JP Funds, managed by Somerset Community Foundation, have supported On Your Bike – a Taunton based social enterprise which trains and supports long term unemployed people by offering them voluntary work placements refurbishing unwanted bikes. We awarded them a grant of £6,000 in 2015 to strengthen their core capacity. For young people, long term unemployment is particularly problematic and On Your Bike has already shown how improvements in confidence and public engagement can help long-term unemployed people develop skills that lead to jobs with local employers.

“OYB helped bridge a gap when I lacked a sense of purpose. My time there enabled me to reflect on what it was I wanted to do and to focus on achieving it.”

COMMUNITY LEADER, VITAL SIGNS SURVEY
Brushford, West Somerset

Brushford is a small rural village in West Somerset of about 500 people. People living there have very limited access to amenities and services. Focus group members said the priorities for community philanthropy should be:

- Rural Isolation
- Housing
- Education and Learning

Those attending our focus group told us that Brushford was a wonderful place to live – for most. They told us about a silent minority who were struggling, and living almost on the edge of the system.

People who are struggling are isolated. And they are living cheek by jowl with multi-millionaires.”

It’s a fragile life. The village agents scheme covers the area but it’s the most sparsely populated in England.”

Families must run two cars in order for both parents to get to work...if one of these has trouble the family collapses.”

The unaffordability of housing is splitting up families and destroying their connection with local areas. At the same time, plans to develop new housing seem not to meet the needs of local people.

There are families whose children would like to live here but can never do so. Also families have never put themselves on the housing list as they think there is no point. Officers therefore say they is no one on the housing list from these areas!"

Young people don’t [try to access social housing]. They are fearful that if they do they will get housing in Taunton and they can never come back to Brushford.”

People reported there are few opportunities available at a local level for young people to engage in positive activities. Children travel great distances to school and depend on supportive parents to do anything extra.

Young people are hidden, we only ever see them piling onto the buses to go to school and spilling out at the other end and never see them in between.”

We have no youth club, or youth activities in the area. There is one in Dulverton but not out in the villages.”

Schools don’t put things on for children as there is no transport at the end of the day.”

Our conversation with the people of Somerset took the form of three focus groups with local residents, volunteers and community leaders, alongside our community survey. The feedback and comments cited here reflect the views and opinions of local people. They give us a snapshot of their feelings about their community. This is what life in Somerset feels like for them.
2 HALCON, TAUNTON DEANE

Halcon is an urban community with a population of about 1,600 people and includes neighbourhoods that are amongst the most disadvantaged in England. Focus group members said the priorities for community philanthropy should be:

- Strengthening communities
- Fairness
- Education and Learning

People taking part in our focus group from Halcon expressed frustration that their area is being stigmatised by the rest of the county. They believe in their area, are proud of it and are clear the answer to meeting the community’s needs lies within. Solutions should be offered by local people for local people.

"The strength of the community down here is so strong. People need to come and see what it is like here. We’re not credited when there’s good news."

"Our estate is not perfect...no estate is perfect...no village is perfect...but we’re not being given the chance to show what it is like."

People in Halcon are worried about children whose basic needs are not being met and about families where parents struggle to get back into work because of the cost of childcare.

"Children are not eating properly – children are shoplifting, staying at friends because they are not being looked after properly at home."

"We need more breakfast clubs and brunch club in the school holidays."

"The cost of childcare is more than I would earn."

Members of the focus group reported a lack of opportunities to develop skills for work through appropriate education services for adults, with a frustration that many courses are only funded for limited attempts to achieve a qualification.

"There is a need for maths, English, IT courses for adults."

"People need practical courses like learning to drive, construction skills, security work or the construction card."

3 FROME, MENDIP

Frome is a market town with a population of 27,000. It has areas of affluence alongside pockets of deprivation with one neighbourhood within the 20% most deprived in England. Focus group members said the priorities for philanthropy should be:

- Fairness
- Stronger Communities
- Housing

Focus group members told us about growing numbers of families in the area whose basic needs would not be met without the food bank and other voluntary services.

"If you see Frome you think it’s very affluent but there are particular areas where people are caught in cycles of deprivation."

"Income inequality affects all other areas."

People in Frome reported a segmented community with divisions between rich and poor. They are concerned this inequality may become worse due to national and international developments, and believe inner resources must be built to combat an uncertain future.

"We need to generate a sense of belonging and community in each neighbourhood area."

"Migrant workers, who contribute so much in so many ways to our community, need to feel more welcomed than they could be in the months and years ahead."

The cost of housing prevents young people and those living on benefits from being able to live in the town. This has a knock on impact on their ability to find work, especially if they don’t have their own transport.

"Housing is a big issue...people can’t live near their job but can’t get in or out because of poor transport."

"Enable access to housing...those without a supportive family are falling through the net."

"If you’re single and under 35 and claim housing benefit you’re only going to get £69 a week and I don’t know if you’ve looked at the rents in Frome recently...."
We have been providing a simpler and more effective way for donors to make a lasting difference in Somerset since 2002. We now manage over 70 grant and loan funds.

By working with individuals, families and businesses we increase the impact of local philanthropy, creating more vibrant and inclusive communities in our county.

In 2015/16 we awarded £488,633 to 233 voluntary sector groups from our regular grants programmes and invested £45,450 in social enterprises working to make Somerset a better place to live.

To discuss how we can work together to address the issues raised in this document and strengthen your community to transform lives throughout Somerset, please contact Justin Sargent, Somerset Community Foundation Chief Executive, on 01749 344949 or email justin.sargent@somersetcf.org.uk.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Somerset’s Vital Signs 2016 was written by Tessa Hibbert for Somerset Community Foundation. Vital Signs is a unique guide to local philanthropy, produced by Community Foundations up and down the country.

Somerset Intelligence is a website that brings together a wealth of knowledge about the local area and is quoted extensively throughout this report. Thank you to the Somerset Intelligence team at Somerset County Council for their advice and support for Vital Signs. www.somersetintelligence.org.uk

Vital Signs Advisory Committee

An advisory committee of sector leaders across private, public and third sector organisations was convened to advise and comment on the report. Thanks are due to: Rupert Cox, Christina Gray, Katherine Nolan, Malcolm Riches, Keeley Rudd, Mike Smith and David Taylor. The advisory committee was chaired by Judith North. Thank you to Brushford Parish Hall, Fair Frome and Halcon Link Centre for hosting our focus groups.

We hope you’ve enjoyed reading the wealth of information in this ‘Vital Signs’ report.

Alongside this report, we have published our first ‘Vital Impact’ report which we hope you will enjoy and help you understand better how Somerset Community Foundation is helping to create vibrant and inclusive communities, and transform people’s lives in our wonderful county.
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Administrator  Kirsty Campbell

Written by:
Tessa Hibbert for
Somerset Community Foundation

Designed by:
Andelli Design

Contact us:
Yeoman House,
The Royal Bath & West Showground,
Shepton Mallet,
Somerset BA4 6QN
Tel: 01749 344949
Email: info@somersetcf.org.uk
Website: www.somersetcf.org.uk

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