

Parish Councils – Annual Report 2021 District Councillors Pannell and Smerdon

Of course the past year has been dominated by Covid. It has impacted deeply on the council in two ways: Firstly by transforming the way we work - almost everyone has been working from home to reduce exposure to the virus. We have had to suspend some services which brought us into direct contact with the public, including site visits for planning. SHDC also supported community efforts in caring for the vulnerable etc. Secondly considerable staff time had to be switched to administering and paying out Govt. grants to businesses impacted by the lockdowns:

From March 2020 to March 2021 SHDC paid out £42,425,000 to 3,691 businesses through the Government Mandatory Grants, with a further £2,309,000 to 317 businesses through a Local Discretionary Scheme (Govt funded). From November onwards during the recent lockdown period SHDC has paid out £18,234,527 through the payment of 9,233 Mandatory Grants, and a further 971 grants totalling £1,221,115 through the Local Discretionary scheme

The total paid up to this April since March 2020 is £64,189,642, and officers are still processing and paying Lockdown Grants. Now a new scheme has started of Recovery Grants for businesses opening up again after the latest lockdown, particularly those in the hospitality sector etc.

One contentious issue is the payment of grants to second home owners who have registered their properties for Business Rates. While paying out nothing in Council Tax, and benefiting from Small Business Rate relief those in the South Hams have received well over £10m in grants, even if they have suffered little or no financial loss. This Business Rate loophole is something the Council has been lobbying the Govt. hard on and we have recently heard that the Govt. intends to tighten the regulations so that these homes have to be run as proper businesses and be available for hire over a longer period in the year.

One of the longer-lasting impacts of Covid may be that more staff work flexibly, from home more often, thus reducing the demand on office space at Follaton House. Will we look for an alternative in the long run? We don't know – it also depends on the possibility of the Govt. wanting Devon to adopt a Unitary Authority model, either covering all of the county or in two or three areas. It is quite likely that Torbay may be included in any reorganisation.

Another issue SHDC has been grappling with is Climate Change and Biodiversity. The Council has now set aside more than £500,000 for work on this and continues to look at schemes which will further this work. Each Councillor has been allocated a fund of £3,000 to award in grants which fit the objectives.