

## Local Community Network Meeting Notes

Meeting Title: Local Community Network - Chard and Blackdowns

Date: Wednesday, 17 January 2024

Time: 7.00 pm - 8.45 pm

Location: Tatworth Memorial Hall, Kents Road, South Chard TA20 2QA

Chaired by: Keith Read (West Hatch Parish Council) (Chair)

### LCN core membership attendance:

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Representing</b>
Jason Baker	Somerset Council
Sarah Wakefield (Vice-Chair)	Somerset Council
Mark Palmer	Neroche Grouped Council
Garry Shortland	Chard Town Council
Gareth Hughs (Clerk)	Chard Town Council
Ian Firth	Churchstanton Parish Council
Ken Pearson	Churchstanton Parish Council
Julie Wardle (Clerk)	Churchstanton Parish Council
Mike Canham	Otterford Parish Council
Richard Harper	Ruishton & Thornfalcon Parish Council
Colin Fisher	Stoke St Mary Parish Council
David Peake	Tatworth & Forton Parish Council
Christine Heal	Tatworth & Forton Parish Council
Les Matthey	Tatworth & Forton Parish Council
Peter Chapple	Tatworth & Forton Parish Council
Keith Read (Chair)	West Hatch Parish Council
Caroline Matthews	PCSO, Avon & Somerset Police

## Officer attendance:

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Representing</b>
Tim Cook	Somerset Council / LCN
Beth Poole	Somerset Council / LCN
Nivil Lonakutty	Somerset Council / ICT
Becky Sanders	Somerset Council / Democratic Services

## Other attendees:

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Representing</b>
David Bell	Public (also Chard Resilience Group)
Theo Butt Philip	Somerset Council (Lead Member for Transformation and Human Resources)

## Virtual attendees:

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Representing</b>
Anne Hunt (Clerk)	Combe St Nicholas Parish Council
Andy Grant	Hatch Beauchamp Parish Council
Heather Bryant (Clerk)	Ruishton & Thornfalcon Parish Council
Kevin Dyer	
Kate Hellard	Somerset Council / LCN
Ally Laing	Somerset Council

## Summary of discussion:

### **Agenda Summary of key points of discussion and outcome: Action by: item:**

#### Item 17: **Apologies for Absence**

An apology for absence was received from Sheila Read and Councillor Jenny Kenton.

#### Item 18: **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest from Somerset Council Councillors present at the meeting.

Item 19: **Notes from the Previous Meeting**

The notes of the previous meeting held on 23 October 2023 were agreed as correct record by those present.

Item 20: **Update on Somerset Council's current financial position - Q & A**

Cllr Theo Butt-Philip (Lead Member for Transformation and Human Resources) introduced himself and provided a brief overview and update on the financial position of Somerset Council.

He noted the authority needed to reduce spending as there was a projected overspend in the current year and pressure to close a forecast £100million budget gap for the coming financial year. He noted the Leader had asked parishes to look at some of the non-statutory services which may get reduced or cease and for parishes to consider if they may wish to take on some of those services at a local level if valued in their parish. Somerset Council would need to seriously look at what services it could continue to provide into the future, and there were some difficult decisions to be made.

In more recent weeks the Council had been able to publish some savings options, but there would be no decisions made until the meeting of Full Council on 20 February 2024. He explained the Council legally has to set a balanced budget each year and it also legally had to provide a certain level of care. However there were many existing services which the authority was not under obligation to provide and some of these may need to stop in the future.

During a question and answer session, Cllr Theo Butt Philip (Lead Member for Transformation and Human Resources), Kate Hellard (Service Manager LCNs) and Cllr Sarah Wakefield (Associate Lead Member for Commercial Investment & Risk) provided some responses to points of detail. A summary of some of the points and responses are provided below:

- *Understand that restructuring is underway – what's*

*happening and how will this affect the LCNs?*

Internal consultation on the restructuring of the Partnerships and Localities service was currently taking place and due to close shortly. As a service we are looking at how can deliver savings, and going forwards it was possible that the LCNs may be funded under the role of Public Health. The role of the LCNs was unlikely to fundamentally change in the near future and a good lead in time would be needed before doing a major review of their purpose and geography.

- *Regarding the budget savings – what timeframes are we working to in the near future?*

The 2024-25 budget will be considered, agreed and set at the meeting of Full Council on 20 February 2024, but assurances were also needed from central government regarding the raised Council Tax Increase and capitalisation direction no later than March.

- *What is the plan if government don't agree to the 10% increase in Council Tax or the capitalisation direction request?*

Need government to agree to at least one of the options if not both, but in theory if they don't agree then a Section 114 notice would be declared. The government would then likely put in Commissioners who will tell us what to do to make the budget balance, and its likely we would be told to sell more assets.

- *My parish, which is very small, is setting its precept tomorrow. Believe Kier (contractor) will be setting a parish tariff / price list – is there any more information about this? Also regarding selling and disposal of assets – will there be any options for transfers of Somerset Council assets?*

Understand that Kier are doing a price list for parishes but this may not be available for another month or two. All Somerset Council assets are being reviewed individually and some will need to be sold.

- *Is there an option for a Parish Council to increase its precept and then give the money to Somerset Council to continue delivering a specific service to / within a parish?.*

Different models for service delivery are being looked at including a steward type model e.g Highway Stewards (Highway Stewards were explained in more detail at item 7 on the agenda).

- *The social care that Somerset Council provides – is that just for Somerset people? – What happens if a Dorset resident receives care in a Somerset Care Home?*

Care funded by Somerset Council is for Somerset residents. If a Dorset resident is placed in a Somerset Care Home then in theory it would be funded by Dorset Council.

- *Without the Highways price list for parishes from Kier and details of other service charges it is very difficult for clerks as they don't know any costs. Are there any suggested ways forward in the interim?*

Acknowledged and noted. Could look at the list of suggested savings as circulated by the Leader and see which, if any, are services which are most valued locally and could possibly be provided by the parish in the future. A parish could increase its precept and set money aside in case required for something going forward if wished. Unfortunately Somerset Council is not legally required to provide some services valued by parishes.

- *Just to say our parish has managed to achieve some projects regarding hedges and ditches at a cheaper cost and quicker than could be delivered by Highways.*

Acknowledged and noted.

- *Have any predictions been made about if Somerset Council is allowed to increase Council Tax by 10% how many years would it be before the Council might break even?*

Somerset Council will need to be a very different organisation going forwards with fewer staff, and to carefully consider what it can afford going forwards. Personal thoughts are unless something is done about the cost of care then local government might collapse in the future – think something will be done either by how local government is funded or revising the list of statutory services to be provided by councils. Parishes could raise precepts to deliver projects in a more local way.

- *A parish could decide to take on a lot, a neighbouring parish may decide to do nothing, or several parishes could act collectively or as together as this LCN. However it is difficult for parishes to know what to do.*

Comment noted. Acknowledge may be uneven service across Somerset going forwards.

- *Parishes need to look after parish money, and our parish are careful to make sure don't spend on projects or services that should be delivered by Somerset Council. What is the target? – where do Somerset Council want to be in terms of budget and services?*

Somerset Council is required to set a balanced budget each year. The authority needs to rationalise its assets and buildings. The Government are making the authority sell assets that were purchased for income.

- *What is the worst-case scenario – what does it look like? What will communities do?*

The situation at Birmingham is probably an example of worst-case scenario – looking at selling many of its assets to see what funding can be raised, and commissioners sent into the authority for five years. In Somerset, there can be discussions with communities about statutory minimums for service delivery. For example – requirement for provision of a library service but not necessarily having to provide a library building.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Butt-Philip for attending the meeting and answering questions.

Item 21: **Actions from last meeting**

There were no actions noted from the last meeting.

Item 22: **Public Question Time**

There were no questions raised at Public Question Time.

Item 23: **Discussion**

Kate Hellard (Service Manager LCNs) provided a brief presentation to give an overview of the concept and work that could be undertaken by a Highway Steward from April if parishes were interested in buying into the scheme. The steward would be employed by the Highways contractor (Kier) – sick pay, risk assessments, equipment and insurance etc would be the responsibility of Kier. She advised the cost for a single full-time steward was approximately £50k per year – a parish doesn't have to have a whole steward and the steward could be split between a cluster of parishes but this would need to be a geographical cluster to reduce costs.

Note – the presentation slides for this meeting can be viewed at the end of the printed minutes pack or online at:

<https://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s23509/LCNpresentationJan2024.pdf>

There was then a short breakout session regarding what can we do / want to do locally regarding asset and service devolution. The Chair referred to the savings options (dated 5 January 2024) as circulated to Clerks from Cllr Bill Revans (Leader of the Council). Each table was asked to briefly look at the options and to consider the discussion points:

- (a) What are the opportunities and risks?
- (b) What information do we have and what do we need?
- (c) How can we work together to achieve agreed actions?

Following the breakout session, each group was asked to briefly feedback key comments for each of the discussion points, and comments included (including additional comments made on

flipcharts):

### **Group 1**

#### Opportunities

- Easier access to decision makers at Somerset Council
- Speed limits on local roads - extensions to 30mph and 40mph limits
- Clearance of roads (flood debris)

#### Information

- Costs of purchasing a service or signposting to activities
- What are Somerset Council actually going to continue to do? Need this information as soon as possible.

#### Working Together

- With other parishes e.g to have a Highway Steward.
- With other organisations including Somerset Council

### **Group 2**

#### Opportunities

- Highway stewards

#### Information

- Similar comments to group 1 – need information.

#### Working Together

- Need confirmation of what Somerset Council will continue to do. Timeframes for budgets and precepts is very short.

### **Group 3**

#### General comments

- Generally very disappointed with lack of useful intel on costs / precept requirements.
- Lengthsman / Highway Steward
  - Insufficient scope (no pothole work), often the work required would be outside the remit of a steward.
  - No allowance for delivery / management / capacity within Parish Council (part time clerk)
  - Insufficient local knowledge by contractors
- Flytipping / street cleansing
  - How will recycling centre closures be handles?
  - Flytipping is already a problem – will parish councils be expected to manage?



## **Group 4**

### General comments

- Not keen on the Highways Steward idea – would rather employ own person and get trained to the required standard. Major problems are with potholes rather than general tidying up.

The Chairman noted that as this had only been a brief discussion item – all points noted on the flip charts would also be included in the notes from the meeting.

### Item 24: **Formation of workgroups**

The Chair noted that following discussion at the previous meeting about initial priorities and the formation of working groups – there were two clear areas proposed for working groups:

- 1) Transport and Highways
- 2) Environment and Conservation

The Chair invited anyone in the room who wished to be on the working groups to put their names forward to officers or for any other volunteers to email the LCN team at [chardandblackdownslcn@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:chardandblackdownslcn@somerset.gov.uk)

Several of those present volunteered to be on the Environment and Conservation Working Group.

**ACTION:** Volunteers to be on the Transport and Highways Working Group and / or the Environment and Conservation Working Group of the Chard & Blackdowns LCN, please make contact with the LCN team at [chardandblackdownslcn@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:chardandblackdownslcn@somerset.gov.uk)

### Item 25: **Dates of future meetings**

The date of the next meeting of the Chard and Blackdowns LCN was noted as Wednesday 13 March 2024 at a venue to be confirmed.

Provisional future dates beyond March are:

- Wednesday 1 May 2024
- Wednesday 3 July 2024

The Chairman reminded everyone about suggesting venues for future meetings, noting that good wifi was essential.

Contact officer for the meeting – LCN team:

[lcn@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:lcn@somerset.gov.uk)