

## **Local Community Network Meeting Notes**

Meeting Title: Local Community Network - Shepton

Date: Thursday, 11 January 2024

Time: 7pm

Location: Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cannards Grave Road, Shepton Mallet BA4 5BT

Chaired by: Philip Ham (Chair)

### **LCN core membership attendance:**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Representing</b>
Barry Clarke	Somerset Council
Bente Height	Somerset Council
Edric Hobbs	Somerset Council
Martin Lovell	Somerset Council
Tony Robbins	Somerset Council
Batcombe Parish Council	
Chilcompton Parish Council	
Coleford Parish Council	
Croscombe Parish Council	
Evercreech Parish Council	
Holcombe Parish Council	
Pilton Parish Council	

Shepton Mallet Town Council

Ston Easton Parish Council

**Officer attendance:**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Representing</b>
Tim Cook, Locality Manager	Somerset Council
Terena Isaacs, Locality Officer	Somerset Council
Ally Laing, Member Communications	Somerset Council
Andrew Turner, Exmoor Highways Pilot	Somerset Council
Helen Bowen, Democratic Services	Somerset Council
Kate Hellard, LCN Officer	Somerset Council

## Summary of discussion:

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

Item 19: **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Councillor Barry Reed.

Item 20: **Declarations of Interest**

All Somerset Councillors declared an interest in the financial position of the Somerset Council.

Item 21: **Notes from the Previous Meeting**

The notes from the meeting held on 18 October 2023 were proposed by Councillor Martin Lovell and seconded by Councillor Barry Clarke and were unanimously agreed.

Item 22: **Update on Somerset Council's current financial position -  
Q&A**

Somerset Councillor Liz Leyshon gave an update on Somerset Council's current financial position. She mentioned the following:

- The main cause has been the increased cost of Adult Social Care.
- If a Section 114 was to be issued (effectively declaring the Council bankrupt) a Government commissioner would cut all non-statutory services.
- Covid caused many people to become prematurely frail which has caused a large increase in the use of domiciliary care. The weekly care costs have increased exponentially.
- Somerset Council has to set a balanced budget and will use reserves to help with this. They can only be used once, after which more savings will need to be made. Looking at non-statutory services and an increase in Council Tax to the maximum permitted.
- The Capitalization program will assist and many savings to be made in the back office.
- The selling of commercial investments will take a number of years.

- Other savings will include ceasing the CCTV service, closing Council owned toilets, closing visitor centres, horticultural nurseries, 5 waste disposal sites and cuts to highway maintenance.
- There is currently a public consultation underway on the proposed budget.
- Regeneration monies from levelling up are ring-fenced and will be delivered, but the Council cannot afford any overspend so the projects are being re-scoped.

Questions were invited from attendees. These included:

Q Property investments were made as there were likely to be a bigger return. What is the point in selling them now?

A When the investments were purchased in commercial property, the basic revenue support grant from government reduced greatly. There was much business experience within the councils. Since Covid and the changes in the high street, some investments are better than others, some more speculative than others. The sales are not being done in a hurry and as there are a number of types of disposals – commercial investments, specialists, own offices, disposal of assets and asset devolution – where assets are to be devolved to town and parish councils.

Q Why has there been a rush to devolve services to the Parish Councils? What about the issue of double funding? If a Town or Parish Council take over a service, tax payers will be paying for these services twice – via Council Tax to the Somerset Council and also to the Parish Council.

A This hasn't been rushed. When at Mendip District Council, we looked at a lot of asset devolution and it was very complicated. The more I look at a Council asset there seems to be a good reason for them remaining with the Council, as they are unable to be used in a way that benefits or raises money for a parish. Tax payers would not really be paying double for certain services.

Q The redundancy programme doesn't seem to be moving forward?

A Tiers 1-3 were looked at last year and we lost 29 post equating to over 430 years of local government experience. We are now working on Tier 4 and there will be a programme from

1st April 2024 for more.

Q Why are there still so many vacancies within the Council with so many redundancies still needed?

A It will be the post that will be made redundant, not the person.

Q Regarding the devolved services, many Parish Councils would not be able to afford to take these on or know how to set their precepts to cover the service provision?

A We need to work with the Town councils to ensure they are precepting enough. Not so worried about the village parishes as it is unlikely that they will be taking on many of the services.

Q Where will the money come from for 2025/26 budget?

A The Council will have to be a lot smaller.

Item 23: **Public Question Time**

No public questions or statements were made.

Item 24: **Discussion on Highways and Transport issues**

Highways Officer Andrew Turner spoke about issues and pressures facing the Highways services. He gave details of a trial that was run in the Exmoor LCN and explained that some of the initiatives from Exmoor could easily transfer to other LCN areas. One of these was the development of a Highway Steward. Details provided included:

- A single, skilled operative with a vehicle and tools tasked for an LCN or cluster of parishes to do minor highway maintenance.
- Work would include such things as blocked drains, cutting back overhanging vegetation and grass cutting.
- Wiltshire saw an 80% reduction in contact made to the highway authority when introduced there.
- The cost is £50k per year which includes the Steward, vehicle, tools and overheads.
- Kier is very keen to develop and support the scheme.
- One steward could be shared across an LCN area.
- There would be a minimum of sign up of 1 year to the scheme.

Kate Hellard suggested a Teams meeting be arranged for Parishes to learn more about the scheme and those interested could align and share the cost between them. Andrew Turner also offered to share contacts with the Exmoor communities that have experience of the Highway Steward scheme. It was suggested that people from the Exmoor LCN Highways sub group could also join the Teams meeting. She offered her help to support and assist if the Shepton LCN wished to also set up a similar sub group.

In response to a question regarding what services Somerset Council Highways would continue to be provided, Andrew Turner advised that it would depend on the financial budgetary decisions that were currently being made. One done, he would confirm this to the LCN. He also confirmed that Keir were happy to manage the additional workforce that the Steward scheme would entail and provide the necessary vehicles and equipment. The discussion topic then changed to the recent flooding that had occurred in the Shepton Mallet area.

Shepton Mallet Parish Councillor Matt Harrison shared some pictures and history of the flooding and said that after Storm Alex hit in 2020, Mendip District Council prepared a flood defence report which had only just been signed off that day – 11 January 2024. He said it need to be implemented urgently.

The Chair then invited two residents of Berryman Close to share their experiences of the flooding with the LCN, and how it was continuing to affect and disrupt their lives. They gave harrowing and moving accounts of the night of the flood and the subsequent difficulties they were facing for the clean-up and repairs to the damaged buildings and property. The Chair thanked them for sharing their story with the LCN.

Somerset Councillor Edric Hobbs, who had helped the residents with the clean up and logistics in the subsequent days, questioned whether there was an emergency contingency plan for situations like this, and if there was, why it had not been implemented? Tim Cook from Somerset Council responded that there would be a lot that the Council and Rivers Authority could learn from this. He spoke about an online reporting tool that

everyone affected should use as it would help provide essential statistics. There would be community drop in events with various agencies attending and emergency planning workshops for Parish and Town Councils to help with community resilience. He would share contact information with the LCN.

Parish Councillor Tom Killen was concerned about the lack of an emergency plan as a great deal of work had been done previously by Mendip District Council in 2013/14 to put a detailed plan together. He encouraged Councillor Hobbs to investigate its whereabouts.

After further discussion the LCN agreed that the time for talking was over and what was needed was urgent implementation of the flood defence strategy and practical help for those affected now. Tim Cook advised he would look at the strategy report but that a flood sub group may be a good idea. Kate Hellard would arrange another meeting for the authors of the flood defence strategy report and representatives from other relevant organisations to get this underway.

Item 25: **Item suggestions for future meetings**

Due to the lateness of the hour, this agenda item was not discussed.

Item 26: **Dates of future meetings**

Due to the lateness of the hour, this agenda item was not discussed.

Contact officer for meeting: LCN Team [lcn@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:lcn@somerset.gov.uk)