

Mendip District Council Report to Shepton Mallet Town Council

Report 1- From Cllr Kennedy

Poll / referendum on Unitary

The 4 district councils that are due to be subsumed into a single or a two unitary local authority have all agreed to support an independently conducted poll to ask all constituents what outcome they would wish to be governed by for at least the next generation. The cost of conducting this democratic outreach is equivalent to the cost of a postage stamp per resident.

Please have your say.

It's not only your democratic right to decide between these two options, but it will shape the future of how services are to be delivered from schools and roads, to house building and environmental protection. Neither option is perfect and this change in how local government is about to be transformed is being imposed from Westminster and ultimately decided by Robert Jenrick, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

There are substantial implications for our town and parish since many services that were managed locally will become more distant. We will be invited to take on facilities that we collectively feel would be better managed by the town. However there are pitfalls to watch out for, including being given control of services or facilities but denied the associated devolution of the resources (financial and management burden) that should by rights accompany them. This is exactly what has happened in Wiltshire and Cornwall when they switched to a Unitary authority. There will also be a very substantial loss in local representation as only a fraction of councillors will make the transition to a single county-wide Unitary authority if it is based on the same geographic footprint as the existing Somerset County Council.

We already have had many facilities dropped by the higher authorities where SMTC has had to pick up the costs or stand by and just accept a loss of service to our community. This includes the substantial contribution we at the Town Council have been forced to make to surface Town Street and the Market Square, despite the fact that SCC owns all of the road and paved area. In addition, our floral displays were dropped by Mendip District Council, our library has been saved by a financial commitment by this Town Council, all arts funding was scrapped by Somerset County Council and Mendip District Council (but has recently been partially reinstated by MDC), bridge repairs had to be paid for in full by SMTC on a footpath owned by SCC otherwise our residents could not use a longstanding safe route in our town. Citizens Advice funding and Youth Services were slashed by SCC and again the town stepped in to keep these vital facilities going for the most vulnerable in our community.

Responsibility for Collett Park was taken over by this Town Council some decades ago since our lovely Green Flag park was being mismanaged by Mendip District Council. We may face similar issues with other facilities including West Shepton Playing Fields and I, with others, am lobbying for a masterplan to be resourced by MDC for West Shepton to benefit future generations. I have also agreed as Portfolio Holder at Mendip to green light a new separate up to date masterplan for Shepton (mainly focussed on the centre) that will be used to attract government "Levelling Up" funding working with our MP and others to ensure that this will bring benefit to our town.

Garfield Kennedy
Portfolio Holder, Planning and Development Management
Mendip District Council

Report 2 – From Cllr Inchley

The last year the District Council has had to alter its corporate priorities to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most important element to this has been to save lives with the District Council offices with the help of its staff to deliver over 14,000 vaccinations to residents.

Mendip District Council has helped many of our residents who have met financial problems with support with council tax and benefits. Mendip has also supplied food parcels to those in need.

Mendip has made sure anybody that needs a roof should have one through this pandemic, Mendip traditionally has had a good reputation for homelessness prevention

Mendip has also supported the local economy distributing £57 million worth of business grants. It has also deferred payment for council tax and over 1400 people have extended their payment period to ease their financial position. Mendip has also helped 3500 people who could not afford their council tax, with hardship payments which amounts to nearly £200,000 worth of support.

The District Council has also appointed consultants to deliver the Shepton Mallet masterplan. This is to help regenerate the areas in and around the town centre looking at access to the town centre and also how we can develop the Commercial Road cafe sites.

In the interim the District Council has funded the hoardings that should be erected to allow the arts project to go in front of the Commercial Road café.

I have also been involved in scrutinising Mendip's Creative Strategy. This is looking at the arts in a holistic way and making sure that our town gets its fair share of the £40,000 initial sum.

As previously mentioned Mendip is looking at an economic strategy to lead us out of the coronavirus pandemic. Mendip are looking to implement a tourism strategy along with the creative strategy, there are plans to create a Logistics Academy to improve skills. Mendip District Council has implemented an apprenticeships Scheme which has seen local young people develop their skills working at Mendip.

Mendip will be applying for to the levelling up funds after our masterplan has been agreed to seek resources to make our town more economically attractive.

In the last quarter complaints about the council's performance has reduced whilst praise has increased.

Myself and councillor Kennedy continue to hold discussions about the cycle way from Millennium way through to West Shepton playing fields and we hope to make progress in the coming year.

We are looking to produce a plan for West Shepton playing fields and hope in the unitary debate Shepton Town council will proceed to take the playing fields over whilst securing some financial assistance.

Finally, the District Council have agreed to hold a poll into the new unitary arrangements whilst asking the Secretary of State to hold any decision until the results are known.

My personal opinion on this matter, as I've previously expressed is that the stronger Somerset is the least worst option, but I fear the long term combined authority that will probably contain Devon, Dorset and whatever the Somerset arrangements is, will not be in Shepton's long terms interest