

SHEPTON MALLET TOWN COUNCIL

| | |
|---------|----------------------------------|
| Meeting | Full Council, Item 10.6 |
| Date | 1 st December 2020 |
| Author | District Councillors |
| Subject | Update from District Councillors |

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

To receive written reports from Councillor Kennedy and Councillor Inchley

2.0 Report to Shepton Mallet Town Council on Mendip District Council activity

Councillor C Inchley and G Kennedy

Garfield is now the portfolio holder for Local Plan and Planning Policy and holds a seat in Mendip's Cabinet, and Chris is vice-chair of the Scrutiny Committee and is currently acting chair as the chair recently resigned.

4.0 COUNCIL HOMES

Mendip District Council has committed to work hard to deliver on its corporate plan to make Mendip fairer, greener and protecting our local communities. One major change in this administration is a plan to deliver socially affordable rented housing. This administration wishes to reverse the trend of the past 20 years when social housing has not been a priority either here in Mendip or nationally.

Under the previous administration at Mendip they made a bid to government for grants to bring land owned by the District Council into use through the Land Release Fund. Four sites were identified: one in Frome, two in Street and one in Glastonbury. Outline plans to develop these 4 sites - not just sell them off - is under active consideration. The plan is to build roughly half "affordable" and half social rented homes to start to deal with a housing crisis where 2 million people are on national housing waiting lists. If successful this initiative could produce 144 social rented homes.

Garfield and Chris have held meetings to make sure Shepton gets it's fair share of social and affordable housing and officers are working up future plans.

4.0 CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Mendip has adopted the Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy which aims to make Somerset carbon neutral by 2030. The strategy wants to tackle actions that are creating climate change as well as building in measures that build resilience from the impacts from climatic change.

There are nine strands to the strategy:

Energy - our current and future use

Transport - how we can change habits
Built environment - where and how we live and work
Business and industry - reducing use of non-renewable resources
Natural Environment - how we can protect
Farming and Food - what where and how we feed ourselves
Water - risks of flooding and drought
Waste – how we handle our waste
Communicate - how to engage with people to improve living choices

The Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy is just the first stage in an ongoing commitment to address protection of our environment.

5.0 PHOSPHATES AND PLANNING

Garfield is dealing with the recent issue of phosphates leaching into The Levels and our important moorlands. We in Shepton are directly affected since our water run off is in the catchment area that spills into these world heritage sites. Hence many planning applications have had to be frozen awaiting decisions on how this contamination can be addressed.

The problem is county-wide. Somerset West and Taunton (SWAT) District Council are taking the lead and trying to understand what is, and is not, affected, and whether retrospective planning decisions could be impacted. We are not working on this alone but in joint legal partnership with the three other DCs and SCC. Consultants have been brought in to work on how we can deal with Natural England's concerns about these unacceptable levels of phosphates run-off.

Around 7000 houses at various stages in the planning process are affected across the Somerset County Council footprint. Our commitment to a high level of protection of our important world-class natural environments is driving our reluctance to allow planning approval to go ahead until solutions are found to address these phosphate run-off issues.

6.0 LOCAL PLAN PART 2 ADDITIONAL HEARINGS

Hearings have been scheduled for 24th to 26th November and 1st to 4th December. Fuller details are on the Mendip DC website. Each day's hearings will be posted on YouTube. Making these hearings available as a livestream proved impossible to deliver despite Garfield's efforts to try to make this happen.

These are the key issues that hit problems in the first attempt (in Summer 2019) to get the Local Plan Part 2 accepted:

- a. MDC judged to have not addressed gypsy sites in Moorlands
- b. Growth requested (500 houses) in the contentious NE corner of Mendip next to Midsomer Norton – inspector was not satisfied that we have not gone for development there and we were being encouraged to push back against the squabbles with BANES and the adjoining communities.
- c. Our green spaces mapping was questioned and substantially rejected
- d. Inspector wanting 600 houses per year

7.0 RESPONSE TO RECENT PLANNING WHITE PAPER

In the Mendip response to the recent government White Paper (submitted on 31 October) it was agreed that planning does need to be updated but not at the expense of drawing influence and control of planning to central government. There are uncertainties surrounding Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans in the White Paper - and the anticipated end of section 106 and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is of considerable concern since we really have no assurances of what might replace these instruments. Raising the threshold of when developers are obliged to pay for community benefits like affordable housing from 10 homes to 50 or 60 is of very great concern.

8.0 SOCIAL DEPRIVATION

Chris has held a series of meetings and hearings on social deprivation in Mendip. This work has seen Mendip launch a campaign to improve the quality of housing to reduce fuel poverty. An £80,000 project has been launched for people to provide information on how to access grants or get low costs loans to improve property.

9.0 PANDEMIC SUPPORT

During the pandemic Mendip has supported business, paying out £30m and this work has received much praise. As councillors, we have dealt with some 'difficult' cases that didn't quite match the government's criteria. In many of these cases we have managed to get money to businesses in Shepton who were in real need. At this challenging time, Mendip has also paid people on the lowest income £150 to assist in covering their council tax bills.

The District Council has lost income through this pandemic with a shortfall expected to be around £1.4m. Initially the government said it would do whatever it takes and fully reimburse councils. Regrettably they reneged on this promise and the losses of income and the additional costs of supporting our citizens through these very challenging times has left a hole in the council finances. Despite this, Mendip continues to deliver its services and will continue to support business.

10.0 REORGANISATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SOMERSET

Whether Unitary goes ahead at all, or what form it may take, now rests with Robert Jenrick MP, at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in Westminster. Meanwhile a majority of County Councillors including our Shepton representative have voted to try to cancel next year's SCC election.

The administration at Mendip DC sees this as an unprecedented and anti-democratic move. MDC views this as a means to try to avoid the risk of a change of control while the present SCC administration is continuing to actively promote their own version of a Unitary Authority.

Councillor E Hobbs

- 11.0** Edric is working on mapping bridleways and footpaths in the area with a view to improving connectivity to Shepton, specifically from Pilton via East Compton and from Doulting. We are also still looking at joining Evercreech and the Bath and West via two paths to the Cannards Grave area. Progress is slow but we are getting there. The Strawberry Line ecology report for the cutting by the council offices is in hand and I visited the site with the arboriculturist a couple of weeks ago. This part of the multiuser path project is being handled by greenways who Mendip have contracted to work on the project for the next year