

Somerset County Council Report to Shepton Mallet Town Council meeting

Children and Young People's Services

Somerset's Children and Young People's Services have been rated as "Good" across the board in a review of the service by national regulator Ofsted.

Ofsted inspectors visited Somerset County Council in July 2022 and looked in detail at the work of the Council with those in care, care leavers and children and families with a social worker.

Judgements were made on the impact of leaders on social work practice, the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, and overall effectiveness.

Ofsted found: "The Council is committed to driving up standards for Somerset's children and is rightly proud of the significant progress it has made since the last inspection in 2017."

Ofsted were particularly impressed with the Council's commitment to listening to children and families to improve services, reporting: "Leaders ensure that children are extensively engaged to help shape the future of children's services. They also consult widely and receive regular feedback, not only from children, but also from families and partner agencies. They use this to understand effectively the impact of services and to inform future service development."

Finance Update

The County Council budget is under very considerable pressure due to a number of factors:

- National picture of inflation affecting particularly energy costs, contract costs and pay awards. The County Council's energy bill, before increases, was £4.2million and is expected to increase by up to £5million per annum.
- Lasting effects of the pandemic on adults and children who now need more support from Social Care, but Councils will not receive any further Covid grants from Government.
- A 'hot' labour market with difficulties of recruitment in key areas of Council statutory responsibilities including social care, legal and planning.
- Local Government Reorganisation – the move to a single Somerset Council – with considerable pressures on staff to reduce projected overspends at this time of additional work to prepare the structure of the new Council.

All the four District Councils and the County Council are working on their current year budgets to ensure the best possible outturn, which in turn will lead to a better position for the first year's budget of Somerset Council without exhausting all the reserves built up over many years.

There is however no underestimate of the challenge ahead for the next two years with every avenue being thoroughly explored to keep all five councils, and the one Unitary Council after 1st April 2023, financially afloat.

Insight and collaboration at Somerset Climate Business Summit 2022

More than sixty local businesses joined the Somerset Business Climate Summit 2022 held at Queens College in Taunton on Wednesday 21st September.

Delegates heard from other Somerset businesses how they have successfully reduced their carbon footprints while deriving other benefits and reduced costs in their business. The speakers provided insights on a wide range of topics relating to how businesses can reach carbon net-zero and take steps to be more sustainable and environmentally friendly.

Guest speakers from businesses of different sizes and industries, including Thatcher's Cider, My Carbon Coach, The Field Works, South West Manufacturing Advisory Service, Trees for Good Causes, and New Leaf Design, a recently certified B Corp business, discussed topics including advice on the easiest ways for businesses to cut carbon, what Net Zero means, the journey to B Corp, and sustainable agriculture and manufacturing.

Health

Somerset County Council's Public Health Nursing (Health Visiting and School Nursing) team has been rated as 'Good' across all sections in a recent review of the service by inspectors at the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

The service provides community care, delivered by health visitors and school nurses across the county of Somerset and this inspection marks their first since its transfer from the NHS to Somerset County Council's Public Health in 2019.

Inspectors observed staff demonstrating a caring and responsive approach with parents and young people and reported: "Staff treated children and young people with compassion and kindness, respected their privacy and dignity and took account of their individual needs. They provided emotional support to children and young people, families and carers. Parents told us staff were very attentive and would give them as much time as they needed. During observed interaction we saw they helped, comforted, supported and provided reassurance."

The report also recognised the efforts of the workforce to maintain high quality care and safeguarding, commenting on their ability to understand how to protect children and young people from abuse.

Suicide prevention in Somerset

Suicide affects everybody, and there is not a community in Somerset which has not been touched. Somerset County Council, together with partners, helped to raise awareness of suicide at a 'Walk For A Life' event on Saturday 8th October.

The event was supported by partners including Somerset Foundation Trust, Open Mental Health and Stepladder.

Recycling

The most recent figures chart continued progress, boosted by Somerset residents embracing the expanded Recycle More kerbside collections.

Overall, Somerset recycled and reused 149,980 tonnes, pushing its recycling rate up from 52.4% to 56.2%, the highest it has ever been.

That equates to saving 133,000 tonnes of carbon saved – the same as taking 51,409 cars off the road for a year – and is up 10,000 tonnes on the previous year's figures.

Tonnages of plastics have soared to 5,771, up from 4,359, thanks in large part to the inclusion of plastic pots, tubs and trays in Recycle More kerbside collections.

An impressive 97.2% of material stayed in the UK to be turned into new products and packaging, including 99.4% of plastics.

These impressive figures are down to the excellent kerbside sorting by Somerset's residents. The more materials are correctly sorted into the right container, the less contaminated our recycling is and the easier it is to get recycled closer to home.

Local Community Networks (LCNs)

A consultation regarding the development of the much-anticipated Local Community Networks (LCNs) took place from 1st September to 17th October. In addition a conference took place at Westlands Yeovil to which representatives from parish, town and city councils were invited. Robin Horton and I attended representing Shepton Mallet. The presentations included valuable insight from the experience of Buckinghamshire and Cornwall Councils, both established unitary authorities.

Somerset Council will cover a very large geographical area and so needs local committees of the council where voices can be heard, partners brought together, and decisions taken with the benefit of local knowledge and experience.

The consultation sought the views of parish, town and city councils, partner organisations and individuals on the function, form and name for LCNs. When fully collated responses will form an important part of the recommendations for the Somerset County Council Executive and Full Council.

I take this opportunity to thank the Town Clerk, our members of staff and all Shepton Mallet Town Council members who took part in this consultation.

Somerset's economic future

Residents, businesses and other groups are being asked to have their say on what the economic future holds for Somerset.

Somerset County Council, Mendip District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, Somerset West and Taunton Council and South Somerset District Council have jointly commissioned the Somerset Economic Futures project.

From April 2023, the five councils will be replaced by the new unitary Somerset Council and this engagement is seen as a foundational piece of work to develop evidence and insight into our economic future in advance of preparing an economic strategy for the new organisation.

Some of the key questions being asked include:

- What roles does Somerset play within the economy of the wider region and how?

- How might our county's vulnerability to climate change affect its future economic development?
- How might its rural character affect how we promote social mobility?
- How might social changes impact Somerset such as trends in homeworking?

Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND)

Somerset County Council, NHS Somerset and Somerset Parent Carer Forum invited families as well as school leads, education, and health professionals to join an online seminar on 26th October to help shape the future of Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) in Somerset.

The partnership is currently in the process of developing a Somerset SEND strategy for the next three years. This will outline the focus areas and action points that will inform us to develop our services.

The partnership has identified five 'working themes', each informed by feedback from families:

- Listening, hearing, and responding
- Working together and co-ordinating
- Getting help as early as possible
- Accessing to the right support and provision

Trees

A consultation has been carried out among experts and non-experts alike, including people who deal with trees in their work every day, to those who walk the dog in a woodland occasionally. Residents and communities across Somerset were invited to take part.

The results of the consultation will inform a long-term Tree Strategy for Somerset to ensure planting and woodland management is fit for the future and supports the area's ecology, landscape and its residents.

The four District Councils (Somerset West and Taunton, Mendip, Sedgemoor, and South Somerset) and Somerset County Council are working with consultants Evolving Forest, and stakeholders The Woodland Trust, Somerset Local Nature Partnership, the Environment Agency, The Forestry Commission, Quantock Hills AONB, Exmoor National Park and Somerset Wildlife Trust, to help develop the strategy.

Growing, protecting and restoring Somerset's trees and woodlands will be the focus, as these measures will help reduce carbon emissions, encourage biodiversity and nature recovery, grow our sustainable timber market, and improve people's health and wellbeing.

Since the last Shepton Mallet Town Full Council meeting, the following items of Somerset County Council work have also come forward:

Council Tax Support Scheme Consultation

A consultation on council tax support for the new unitary Somerset Council has been launched. This is the first major consultation for the new Somerset Council and it proposes that the lowest income households across Somerset get 100% council tax relief.

Somerset's four district councils currently offer varying levels of council tax support. The proposed changes would harmonise support for working-age people on low incomes across the county and come into effect on 1 April 2023, with the creation of the new Council.

The future of council services in Somerset

Somerset residents have been encouraged to join a new Customer Panel and help shape the future of council services.

From April 2023, the new unitary Somerset Council will deliver all council services to all communities from waste collection and adult social care to housing, benefits and parks.

The Customer Panel is being established to ensure residents are at the heart of those services. No specific skills are required, all you need is a willingness to take part in three research topics each year and provide honest and constructive feedback. Panel members will have the chance to take part in online surveys, one-to-one interviews, usability tests and discussion groups.

Cost-of-Living Crisis

Somerset County Council has welcomed the launch of Somerset Community Foundation's Somerset Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal and has contributed an initial £50,000 donation to support the launch of the appeal.

Public Transport

As fuel prices spiral during the ongoing cost-of-living crisis Somerset County Council and Somerset Bus Partnership are joining forces to encourage people to use bus services more.

The campaign aims to highlight that with households under financial pressure buses have never been more relevant, offering a cheaper travel alternative and the chance to save on fuel and vehicle maintenance costs, while at the same time protecting the environment by helping to cut congestion and reducing your carbon footprint.

Following the withdrawal of the government's Bus Recovery Grant, bus operators are currently weighing up the viability of routes in Somerset, and one of the key factors operators will use in assessing viability is the number of passengers on each route.

Bus use in Somerset is slowly climbing again but is currently at about 70 per cent of levels compared to pre-Covid.

Climate Summit

Somerset businesses are being urged to play their part in combating the climate emergency – with a conference offering insight into practical steps they can take to become more sustainable.

The Somerset Business Climate Summit 2022 took place at Queens College in Taunton on Wednesday 21st September.

The Summit highlighted best practice and raised awareness of the opportunities and challenges for businesses as we shift toward a low carbon economy.

Tackling violence against women and girls

Somerset County Council and North Somerset Council have jointly secured an additional £317,694 from the Home Office Safer Streets Fund to continue to make public spaces and streets safer for women and girls.

Arts and culture strategy

Specialist partners have been appointed to help develop a five-year cultural strategy for the new Somerset Council that comes into being in April 2023.

Key aims and objectives of the strategy include:

- To raise awareness and promote the role that culture and creativity can play in enriching communities and improving the quality of life, health, wellbeing and the local economy for Somerset residents, local businesses and visitors.
- To make sure that a cultural identity for arts and culture in Somerset is at the heart of the new authority's strategic plans.
- To identify new job opportunities in culture and the creative industries and raise the profile of the county's vibrant creative sector.

Somerset County Council Chief Executive

Duncan Sharkey is the new Chief Executive of Somerset County Council, then the new Somerset Council from April next year. Duncan has been in post since 3rd October 2022. This appointment means the leadership is in place to move forward with developing the new Council ready to deliver services from 1st April 2023. Duncan comes from a similar role at Windsor and Maidenhead Council, a well-established Unitary Authority.

Broadband Infrastructure

There has recently been correspondence among elected members of Shepton Mallet Town Council about the current Broadband Infrastructure project, including concern expressed about the status of the contract with Truespeed.

Elected members of the County Council for the affected areas, which include this County Council division, received briefing as per this link [CDS terminates Truespeed contracts - Connecting Devon and Somerset](#) on 21st July 2022, two days after the last SMTC meeting, which was the also the last occasion when I reported to SMTC members. We have received no update since this briefing and we will have noticed no obvious interruption in Truespeed's presence in Shepton Mallet meantime which might indicate that the project has been left in any sense "in the air". If we receive a further briefing that changes that I will keep SMTC members informed.

Martin Lovell

01/11/2022