

County Councillor's Letter for December 2016

It can hardly have escaped anybody's attention that there is an increasing problem with the current National Health Service (NHS) and with all the ancillary services and expanded human resources that are being programmed in the immediate future to comprise the fully integrated Sustainability and Transformation Programme (STP), which I covered in overall terms in my last letter. It seems that the Government having failed to recognise the huge shortfall in funding necessary to underwrite and achieve this huge and highly complex programme in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Autumn Statement, have now realised that the entire structure is steadily approaching collapse. Therefore there is now permission for Councils to raise the previous social care 2 % extra precept on their Council Tax to 3% for the next two years only. Two percent in council tax raises about £3.8 million (m) so the three percent will raise about £5.7m. This sum will not even touch the amounts of money necessary to start mitigating the impacts, as the living wage, cost of living and wage rises more than consume it before it hits the front line of demand. The big conundrum now is do Councils increase the precept by this amount in addition to the necessary usual permitted increase of 1.99%, and raise the Council Tax for the Unitary Councils and County Councils by 4.99 %, which inevitably will cause much public comment and consternation . In the case of Somerset County Council , given the necessary additional precept of 1.25% for the Somerset Rivers Authority, it would mean a 6.24% increase, disregarding the impacts of the offtake of any of the District and Parish Council precept demands. This would be politically toxic in an election year, but the money has to found somehow and the current Government funding is completely inadequate. However, if the full efficiencies and redirection of NHS, integrated personal care and facilities, ancillary GP, medical and pharmaceutical backup could be properly implemented via the STP the overall concept could in time prove financially viable but time is not on our side and the human and material resources are not available, currently diminishing or unaffordable. With the enormous unquantified complexities of Brexit soon to be in progress, and likely to consume most of the Governmental administrative functions and machinery for at least the next two years, any intensive focus on these internal difficulties will be difficult to achieve. It is welcome news therefore, that the contract has been signed with New Dimensions by the Somerset County Council for the transfer of the future operation and administration of the Learning Difficulties Provider Service (LDPS) .This new social enterprise will provide the following in scope services; 1. Long term residential care, 2. Residential short breaks, 3. Crisis support, 4. Supported living 5.Domiciliary care 6. Day time support and 7. Employment support. The bid from " Dimensions" is forecast to provide a lower long term overall cost than the cost of the current service provided by Somerset County Council (SCC) but in the early years of the contract there is higher profile of cost while the service modernises and undergoes transition to the new systems. The new enterprise is expected to begin operating the regulated services at the beginning of April 2017, after the Care Quality Commission (CQC) has registered each of the services which it will be providing. The new organisation is being set up under a Joint Implementation Board led by co- chairmen, one from Dimensions and the other being the Head of Adult Services in the SCC The months leading up to the target date are being used for familiarisation of all future staff in both sets of operational procedures and the detailed study of the hundreds of responses to major consultation exercises undertaken since the original decision taken on the 5th February 2014.

The ramifications and the importance and enshrined conditions of this contract cannot be overstated as it has to provide a better service to our entitled customers and the SCC must at all times have open monitoring access to all levels of Dimension's performance and standards. There is another piece of good news on this front as following a successful bid, the Government has given the SCC a grant of £1m to assist in housing provision for the LDPS and a further £240k for conversion and modification of existing facilities to make them more user friendly. So perhaps the Country wide message is being received and there is some recognition of the urgency of adequate funding. The SCC is also bidding for funding to train the next generation of children's social workers. In January 2017 the SCC will find out if the Government will fund the "Step up to Social Work Program" for the second time. The program encourages any one with experience of working with children and young people to train for social work, and 28 are currently being supported in the regional partnership of 6 local authorities. The aim is to expand the number to 66 in order to mitigate the national shortage of social workers by focusing on the retention of the existing numbers and growing the quantity and quality of our own trained staff, currently about 60% of requirements, through various learning and development opportunities. The first group of these students are reaching the end of their in-house training and will be starting their careers in the spring of 2017.

Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) the largest superfast broadband program in the UK signed a £62.1m contract with ultrafast Broadband provider Gigaclear to deliver a network to an additional 35,225 to the hardest to reach homes and businesses in the region by 2019. This will provide the largest fibre to premise program in the UK and will be able to access speeds of up to 1 giga bytes per second (gbps), transforming the ways of working, cutting costs and increasing business without compromising their locations. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) entered into an agreement to fund the program by approving tenders for 6 lots of the program on the 30th November 2016 which entailed DCMS paying £24.4m, SCC £ 1.480m, LEP £ 9.5m. It is assumed that the balance of the funding is comprised of the matched funding stated when the council contributions were authorised. It is clear the importance that the Government is placing on this form of productivity generation given the latest funding announcements. The SCC is not liable for any further amounts unless separately agreed between CDS and a supplier. The contract has been drafted by the CDS independent legal advisors in close consultation with Broadband Development UK (BDUK), the national broadband authority. The implications of this are that the SCC accepts the responsibility of the obligations of the contracting authority given its current leadership of the LEP. All district councils with the exception of South Somerset signed up to and contributed their required share of the necessary funding which therefore at that time attracted matched finding from BDUK. When for the second time the opportunity was given to SSDC to sign up to the BDUK scheme and commit £ 640,000 (k) of funding and thus attract a similar matching amount for the scheme, there was a split vote by the Council members and the result was a resolution to not contribute but leave the entire sum ready to spend until many indeterminate imponderable factors about the expenditure of the money became more clearly guaranteed in the future. The presentation by BDUK representatives could give no surety about firstly, the area that it would actually benefit, secondly, if the money would actually be spent on the installation of broad band or end up being used for administrative or other costs or finally the possibility recouping of any of the money in the event of failure. To the majority it was a contract that was inherently unsafe and thus represented an unacceptable risk for the expenditure of public money.

In declining to contribute, the matched funding offer lapsed. The present situation is that the money is still available and a further decision will be made concerning its release in February. However the current feeling is that the South Somerset District as a non- contributing entity will be very much last in the line for the completion of the 95% target area of the superfast broadband implementation.

At present 36 schools in the Heart of the South West (HotSW) LEP benefit from the input of the Enterprise Advisor Network (EAN) which matches schools with businesses and aims to improve careers provision for young people. Additional funding is being provided by the Careers and Enterprise Company ,Devon County Council, Somerset County Council, Plymouth City Council, and Torbay Development Agency to enable a further 27 schools to have this service. This means that 60% of schools in the area will have a volunteer business mentor known as an Enterprise Advisor. 6 Special Schools have also been invited to take part. The contractor providing this service is CDS, the acronym is undefined as far as I can find out, either in the information or indeed on the application web site. The funding was secured by HotSW and though the cost of providing these volunteers is not quantified it must be a valuable addition to the progress of leaving students contemplating future employment to have some indication what openings there are, or which are emerging and which could be of interest and benefit . I think it would be especially valuable for other students as they formulate their GCSE profiles and the approaches to the life in the working world. However two aspects do strike me, one is the word volunteer so I am assuming the expenditure is for expenses only, and what has happened to the Careers Master/Mistress who used to be the “in house” advisor for appropriate streams of study to students and parents being privy to the abilities developing interests of the students concerned.

Yours

Derek Yeomans

County Councillor for Curry Rivel and Longport

District Councillor for Burrow Hill