

County Councillor's Letter for July 2016

It is almost unbelievable that it is just over one month since the announcement of the Brexit vote and during that short time there has been a daily kaleidoscopic whirligig of leadership and numerous ministerial changes, political and personal challenges and attacks which will undeniably damage the previous reasonably ordered political structure in England and possibly the continued existence of United Kingdom itself. The summer holiday of the House of Commons from the 21st of this month to the 5th of September should reduce the governmental clamour, but the ongoing battles in the opposition are likely to rumble on until the end of the recess period before there will be a clear stable shadow administration in place. However, the situation around the world is no better; America has yet the election battle between Donald J. Trump and Hillary Clinton to witness, judge and vote for the person who is to be the 45th President of the USA in November this year. Given the Cleveland Ohio Republican Convention that has just passed and the Democratic one that began on the 25th of July and is already mired in deep political controversy with major resignations and disputation over the selection of the presidential candidate it promises to be a unedifying spectacle and far from a "good clean fight". It has to be remembering that whoever is successful in that election will become the most powerful leader in the world and be responsible for making hugely important decisions in what I believe could be the pivotal next four years. All over Europe the increasing number of random attacks by so called Isis group are likely to proliferate as that group recognises that there are Head of Government elections in Federal Germany and France next year and the difficulties in Turkey could easily result in the breaking of the fragile concordat stabilising the flow of refugees to Greece currently agreed with the embattled and increasingly entrenched President currently ruling the Country by decree and emergency powers. Any breach of this agreement would inevitably exert increased pressure on those elections by "right of centre parties" and could destabilise the administrations of the two major nations in the EU which would only aid malign forces.

It is not clear if the departures of George Osborne from the role of Chancellor of the Exchequer and Greg Clarke from the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) who were the two main protagonists of the Devolution programme will make any difference to the current designed structures. The outlook of the new Chancellor Phillip Hammond and Sajid Javid at DCLG will be carefully studied by all the bodies involved with the current Devolution plans for the "Heart of the South West" (HotSW). The County Council and the South Somerset District Council along with all the other partners in the bid have agreed to continue the negotiations leading to a possible devolution agreement as a non-mayoral Combined Authority (CA) with all its possibilities, along with all the concomitant responsibilities and undertakings. Therefore after the recess the final shape of all the schemes will presumably be firmly set by the new incumbents for the ensuing 3 years. If Devolution is decided to be the option by HotSW under the then operating conditions, there will have to be independent full council votes by each of the partners to ratify and finally commit to the scheme and all will have to be in agreement.

As the costs of all forms of care rise and as the current structure of giving personal care budgets to eligible claimants is now fully in place, it is clear that the preponderance of the younger generation are exercising freedom of choice to spend their funds on non-council provision for their provision of services. This is very much the case in the Somerset County Council's (SCCs) currently "in house" provider, the Learning Disability Provider Service (LDPS) where there is an increasingly aging group within the 900 or so eligible for this service. It is clear that without change this "in house" service would have become increasingly ineffective, inefficient and structurally inflexible, and the current budgetary overspend of over 10% of a £10million budget was unsustainable. Therefore it has been decided to transfer the management of the LDPS to a "not for profit company" Dimensions UK which will secure the long term sustainability of the services, be more flexible, enabled to set up new services more quickly and at the same time be able to offer the support that younger people are seeking. The aim is that by next spring the new service will be supporting the entire group with long term residential care, supported living, home care, crisis and employment support. About 1000 staff will transfer to the new enterprise but retain their membership of the Local Government Pension Scheme. It is inevitable that there some users of the present scheme and some of the staff transferring who are unhappy about the changes and every effort will be made to keep disruption to the minimum.. The LDPS is currently commissioned by the SCC and the Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and approval for the award of this contract was approved by both, subject to satisfactory financial agreement between the two parties to the contract.

It is a very welcome piece of news that under the SCCs Special Educational Needs and Disabilities programme (SEND - an inherent part of Learning Difficulties), the first ever Young People's Champions who worked with the SCC's Engagement and Participation Team, are heading to university. This pioneering scheme instituted by the SCC, provides work experience for young people giving them the opportunity to shape the services they and others receive. Ellen Collard and Shane Dangar, were the first two champions selected in 2015, and have worked with the Participation Officer in the SCC to ensure that the voices of other children and young people are heard. Among other things their input has helped;

- a. To create the "Unstoppables" – a forum that gives children and young people with SEND the chance to have their say on things that matter to them.
- b. Developed "online" modules that raise the awareness of SEND and the SEND reforms for SCC Staff.
- c. Produced videos that give families and children a chance to talk about SEND.

Two new Champions have been selected for this year as Ellen goes off to Cardiff to study Medicine and Shane goes to Lincoln University to study SEND and Inclusion. However I have concerns that really worthwhile successful concepts and initiatives such as this, which will motivate youngsters to take full advantage of the facilities and opportunities available to them under the SEND program are not degraded or lost when the "in house" work is contracted out to "not for profit" companies, inevitable though this option seems to be under current funding pressures.

All contractual agreements between the SCC and outside bodies have until recently been the responsibility of Southwest One (SW1), an offshoot of International Business Machines (IBM) which was engaged about 7 years ago to run the entire administration facility including the Information technology (IT), procurement and purchasing of the SCC with very considerable projected economies in costs and staffing. Large numbers of county staff were

“seconded” to work and be paid in SW1, but not transferred. It has to be said that the history of this contract has not been a happy one almost from the outset, There were difficulties with the IT, the savings were not achieved and in the end the majority of the seconded staff had to be reabsorbed back into the council, and over time the relationship became increasing acrimonious and in some cases adversarial, and instead of producing financial returns as predicted, began to involve the SCC in major costs through disputes and litigation. As a result the SCC is terminating this partnership at the end of this year by agreement, a year before the recognised break point at 7 years into a 10 year contract. All the services that that remain currently with SW1 are being returned the SCC. This includes the need to replace the current IT. This background information is to highlight that the procurement of contractual agreements has recently been audited by the South West Audit Partnership (SWAP) and found it to be inadequate. This aspect has only very recently been reinstated under the control of the SCC and is being urgently revised but still needs improvement, and the matter was a topic of considerable discussion at the SCC Audit Committee this week. In the light of the foregoing comments it will be essential therefore to ensure that that this contract with Dimensions UK which will underwrite a major portion of the SCC’s statutory duty of care is most carefully drafted and that every safeguard is incorporated including provision for a contractually agreed performance monitoring. At all costs a repetition of the SW1 contract has to be avoided, as in that case too there was in the end was only one viable applicant.

Yours

Derek Yeomans

County Councillor for Curry Rivel and Langport

District Councillor for Burrow Hill